

the interaction of the narrator's and the reader's subjectivities. Not unlike the story told by Potiphar's wife, my version of the stories in the Jacob cycle may be warped, skewed by my feminist and critical concerns. But, on the other hand, the anonymous biblical narrator wages for Joseph's innocence. In siding with Joseph, the narrator embraces the ideological structure which Joseph serves, namely, the male desire for an exclusive bond between men. On the question of family lineage or on the subject of human relationships, the position of the biblical narrator is no more "neutral" than that of the feminist reader.

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THE LITERARY CHARACTERIZATION OF MOTHERS AND SEXUAL POLITICS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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The impact of the Hebrew Bible on the present state of sexual politics has been universally recognized by feminist critics.¹ Nevertheless, few of them went beyond the actiological myth of Genesis 2-3 to demonstrate the patriarchal conception of the Bible.² The story of woman's creation from man and his subsequent victimization by her is unquestionably one of the most influential stories in Western literary tradition, but it is not the only biblical story that addresses the power-structured relations between men and women. It is indeed astonishing that the recent spate of feminist literary critiques has not yet produced a single consistent analysis of the literary strategies deployed by the biblical narrative to promote its patriarchal ideology.³ As a part of a forthcoming comprehensive study of the literary strategies of biblical patriarchy, whose major goal is to analyze the ideological determinants of female characters in the Hebrew Bible, the present study focuses on the biblical characterization of the mother figure.

Although certain female biblical characters create the impression that "the story belongs" to them and to "chance" as Phyllis Trible asserts, they are for the most part a product of biblical patriarchal legislation.⁴

¹ "Sexual politics" refers to the power-structured relations between men and women and more specifically to the economic, social, and ideological arrangements whereby males have traditionally controlled females. This definition is based on Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Ballantine, 1969) 31-81. "Biblical sexual politics" refers to the ways in which the Bible promotes the idea of woman's subordination to man.

² "Patriarchy" and all its derivative forms refer here to the ideological and social system based on the subordination of women and younger males to adult males.

³ Mary Daly's *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973) employs a philosophical method in exposing and analyzing the patriarchal underpinnings of Judeo-Christian tradition. Judith Oechshorn's *The Female Experience and the Nature of the Divine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) uses mostly historical and theological perspectives.

⁴ Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 178. Trible attempts to highlight suppressed evidence for what appears to be woman's point of view in the Hebrew Bible, ignoring the patriarchal determinants of this point of view. For

The "legislative" aspect of female characterization is not unique to the biblical narrative. As feminist critics have demonstrated, patriarchal didacticism informs most classical literary works revolving around woman, including the supposedly descriptive ones. Since until very recently the literary scene was dominated by male authors, it is not surprising that the female characters reveal more about the wishful thinking, fears, aspirations, and prejudices of their male creators than about women's authentic lives. Concluding a story about a clandestine love affair with the heroine's suicide (i.e., *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary*), for example, reflects the author's attitude to adultery as much as, if not more than, it reflects historical reality.⁵ As Wayne Booth has demonstrated, an "objective" or "neutral" reflection of reality in literature is nothing more than an artistic illusion.⁶ The author's point of view determines the ideological framework of the story even when it seems to be altogether absent from it.

The fact is that the ideological aspect prevails in all literary characterization. The ascription of motivation, thought, action, and word to a certain character constitutes an indirect means of authorial judgment which exists even in what appears to be the most neutral and objective tale. The "pragmatic" level of the literary narrative pertaining to the author-reader relationship is inherent in the very nature of the literary composition;⁷ it is especially obtrusive in the biblical narrative, which is patently didactic.⁸ Yet while the monotheistic didacticism of the biblical

example, she considers the book of Ruth as a story that extols woman's initiative and independence in a man's world (p. 166). She ignores the fact that Ruth does not act independently but complies strictly with the patriarchal ethos which enjoins woman to remain eternally faithful to her husband and his family. Ruth renounces her own culture and heritage, in order to follow her mother-in-law, Naomi, the mother of her husband, not just any woman. Ruth is extolled for the patronymic and patrilineal continuity of her dead husband's family. She sacrifices her own freedom and identity in order to perpetuate the identity of her late husband and father-in-law.

⁵ It is impossible to offer an exhaustive list of feminist works dealing with literary images of women as expressions of a male world view. Some of the best examples include Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, 3-30; Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, (trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley; New York: Vintage, 1952) 224-300. On myths and narratives reflecting male fears see H. R. Hays, *The Dangerous Sex—The Myth of Feminine Evil* (New York: Putnam and Sons, 1964); on female literary stereotypes see Mary Ellman, *Thinking About Women* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1968).

⁶ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

⁷ The term "pragmatic" is borrowed from Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973).

⁸ This is not the place to go into the thorny issue of biblical didactic strategies and techniques of authorial judgment. Despite pervasive scholarly disagreement, some progress has been made in this area. See for example Meir Sternberg and Menahem Perry, "Hamelek be'mabat ironi" [The King through Ironic Eyes], *Hasifrut* 1:2 (Summer 1968) 263-92; Boaz Arpali, "Zehtrut; sipur migra" [Attention; a Biblical Story], *Hasifrut* 2:3 (August

narrative has been largely recognized, its patriarchal ideology has been practically ignored. Thus, for example, it has been widely established that the motif of the miraculous conception of a barren woman in the Bible implies that Yahweh is the sole proprietor and master of human life, which fits well the biblical monotheistic framework. As we shall see, there is also at work a patriarchal ideology, which is closely related to the hierarchical conception of monotheism.⁹

In a thoroughly didactic and economical book like the Bible, it is practically impossible to find pure descriptions. The female characters depicted in the biblical tale are ideologically contrived as much as their male counterparts, and no more than the latter they constitute to a large degree role models. But whereas the male role models are mostly judged in terms of their relations with Yahweh, the female role models are mostly evaluated in terms of their relations with men.

In what follows we shall examine the patriarchal determinants of the biblical characterization of the mother figure. This examination will be based on a comparative study of the annunciation type-scenes and a comparative study of father and mother figures and the power-structured relations between them.

The biblical annunciation type-scene consists of three major thematic components: the initial barrenness of the wife, a divine promise of future conception, and the birth of a son.¹⁰ While these components function largely as constants, the actual scenes vary in narrative span and complexity. As Robert Alter points out, the deflections from the standard structure are not coincidental; they function often as foreshadowing techniques alluding to future events in the life of the future son.¹¹ For our purpose, the most significant variations pertain to the role of the potential mother in the annunciation type-scene; these variations, as we shall see next, constitute a consistently increasing emphasis on the potential mother as the true heroine of the annunciation type-scene.

The first biblical annunciation type-scene is preceded by Yahweh's direct address to the potential father, Abraham, regarding the future conception of his barren wife, Sarai, "And God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her

1970) 580-97; Meir Sternberg, "Mivneh bahazara basipur hamiqra" [The Structure of Repetition in the Biblical Story], *Hasifrut* 25 (October 1977) 110-50; Yair Hoffman "Bein Convensta lestrategia" [Between Convention and Strategy], *Hasifrut* 28 (April 1979) 88-99.

⁹ For the relationship of patriarchalism to hierarchical monotheism see Rosemary R. Ruether, *New Woman New Earth* (New York: Seabury, 1975) 1-35. See also Oehshorn, *The Female Experience*, 181-238.

¹⁰ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981). For an explanation of the biblical type-scene in general, see pp. 47-52.

¹¹ Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene" *Prooftexts* 3/2 (May 1983) 115-30.

name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; I will bless her, and she shall be the mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (Gen 17:15-16).¹² Although Sarai's status and thereby her fate are discussed in this dialogue, she is referred to in the third person.

Yahweh blesses Sarai in her absence and changes her name through her husband. The act of naming signifies a recognition of identity, an endowment of new essence and being, and it also implies that the namer has authority over the named. Yahweh changes Abram's name to Abraham (17:5) in his direct dialogue with him, yet the names of his wife and his son, which are also determined by Yahweh, are to be given to Abraham, who represents God's authority as husband and father. More importantly, the blessing of Sarai and the change in her name are preceded by a restatement of Yahweh's covenant with Abraham. The transformation of the barren Sarai into a fertile Sarah is a logical and necessary procedure required by Yahweh's commitment to Abraham: "And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly. . . . Behold the covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17:2, 4). Furthermore, the text emphasized that it is Abraham (and not Sarah) who is the true recipient of the promised son: "and I shall also give you a son from her." Verse 19 repeats this emphasis: ". . . and also Sarah your wife is bearing *you* a son. . . ." The son is to be born *to* and *for* (*lê*) Abraham *by* Sarah. Sarah's status as primarily the *means* of reproduction, the instrument through which God will keep his promise to Abraham, cannot be gainsaid.

In the annunciation type-scene itself Abraham continues to occupy center stage. The scene opens with an introductory verse that leaves no doubt about the actual addressee of Yahweh: "And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day" (18:1). When the three messengers arrive at the tent, Abraham, the generous and hospitable host, invites the guests to rest and refresh themselves, while instructing Sarah, who is inside the tent, to prepare cakes for the men. Sarah's function in this context is no different from that of Abraham's servant, who is enjoined to prepare a calf for the meal. Unlike Abraham, who is implicitly praised for his generosity and eagerness to please his guests, Sarah, who is not privy to what is happening outside the tent, receives no credit for her work, since she functions as her husband's adjunct. Throughout the meal Sarah shows no interest in the guests. The text repeats the fact that Sarah remains inside the tent in Abraham's response to the messengers' query concerning her whereabouts (18:9). This

repetition is not coincidental; it emphasizes Sarah's absence from this fateful scene and, in contrast, Abraham's central role in it. Instead of becoming actively involved in the conversation Sarah eavesdrops on her husband and guests "at the tent door behind him" [Abraham] (v 10). Once again, although Sarah is the subject of Yahweh's address, she is referred to in the third person while her husband functions as the actual addressee: "Yahweh said, 'I shall surely return to you when the season comes round and Sarah your wife shall have a son'" (v 10).¹³ Even when Sarah is reprimanded for laughing to herself in disbelief, she is addressed through her husband. Only when she denies having laughed, does Yahweh speak directly to her, "saying, 'No, but you did laugh'" (v 15). Yahweh's only direct reference to Sarah takes the form of an implicit accusation.

The juxtaposition of the husband and the wife in this scene enhances the attributes of the former and the drawbacks of the latter. Abraham's activity outside the tent is contrasted with Sarah's passivity. Seventeen verbs predicate Abraham's dedication to his guests. The verbs "run" and "hasten" are repeated twice. Sarah, on the other hand, is the subject of four verbs, none of which demonstrates a high level of exertion: to hear, laugh, deny, and fear. Although there is reason to believe that Sarah obeyed her husband's instructions and, like a good housewife, baked cakes for the guests, the text does not mention this fact explicitly. Sarah emerges from the scene as confined, passive, cowardly, deceptive, and above all untrusting of Yahweh's omnipotence.¹⁴ Sarah's participation in the annunciation type-scene amounts to a troublesome interference. She is not only inferior to Abraham in the literary sense, as a secondary character, but in a moral and spiritual sense as well. If the text is trying to establish a correlation between Yahweh's benevolence and the uprightness of his subjects, it is clear that the manifestation of this benevolence, namely, the annunciation type-scene, is related causally to the man's demeanor and concessively to the woman's. The implication is that Yahweh violates nature's rules and gives the barren woman a child because of her husband's magnanimity and despite her pettiness. But the fulfillment of the divine promise does not follow the annunciation in the narrative sequence; instead, it is postponed until chap. 21, which opens with a characteristic formula: "And the Lord remembered Sarah" (Gen 21:1). The interpolated narrative material refers to Abraham's intercession in behalf of the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, the destruction of the iniquitous cities by Yahweh (chap. 19) and the episode in Gerar in which

¹³ "Kā'ēt hayyā," is translated by RSV "in the spring." Here I use the Jewish Publication Society version (Philadelphia, 1955).

¹⁴ Although Abraham too laughs at the prospect of having a child in his old age (Gen 17:17), Yahweh does not rebuke him for his faithlessness but instead reassures him that the promise will be realized.

¹² This and all the following quotations are based on the *Revised Standard Version* with occasional revisions, unless otherwise stated.

Abraham presents his wife as his sister (chap. 20). Sarah is absent from chap. 19, which dramatizes Abraham's compassion and altruism. In chap. 20, she appears as a passive object of sexual possession, taken by Abimelech, King of Gerar, and narrowly saved from committing adultery by the direct intervention of Yahweh.

Although Sarah is given full credit for giving birth to Isaac, in chap. 21, the text continues to stress that she is mostly instrumental and that the miracle is performed for Abraham. Verse 2 does not simply state the fact that Sarah bore a son but that "she bore Abraham a son." Verse 3 repeats this idea twice: "Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac." Abraham proceeds to establish his paternal authority over his newborn son, by naming and circumcising him (21:4), while Sarah comments again on the risibility of her belated conception (21:6).

As we noted, the first annunciation type-scene starts with Yahweh's address to Abraham, without being previously solicited by either Abraham or Sarah. In the second annunciation type-scene, Isaac initiates the first move; he pleads with Yahweh in behalf of his barren wife and Yahweh grants his prayer (Gen 25:21). Once again, the wife's conception is attributed to the good relationship of her husband with Yahweh; it is not contingent upon the qualities or actions of the wife. Nevertheless, it is Yahweh's response to Rebekah that the text reports and not his response to Isaac. In response to Rebekah's complaint about her painful pregnancy, Yahweh explains that she is bearing twins and that the younger of the two will prevail over the older. Whereas in the first annunciation type-scene Yahweh discusses the future son with the father, here he shares his prescience with the mother. Another indication of Rebekah's greater involvement in the future of her children occurs in their naming. Whereas in the case of Isaac Yahweh endows Abraham with the exclusive right to name his son, here the children are named by both parents: "The first came forth red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they called his name Esau. Afterward, his brother came forth . . . so his name was called Jacob" (Gen 25:25-26).¹⁵ Unlike Sarah, Rebekah appears at center stage, alongside Isaac. She receives greater recognition from Yahweh as potential mother, and there is not so much as an allusion to a moral discrepancy between the man and his wife, at this point.

The third annunciation type-scene is preceded by a description of the plight and despair of the barren wife. The text presents Rachel as a jealous co-wife, exasperated by the fertility of her rival, Leah. In her despair, Rachel turns to Jacob with an impetuous and largely childish demand: "Give me children, or I shall die" (Gen 30:1). The reader is

¹⁵ The Hebrew in verse 26 reads "and he called his name Jacob," but it does not specify a subject; it is therefore acceptable to render it in the passive form.

expected to sympathize with Jacob's angry response: "Am I in the place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (30:2). Indeed, the previous type-scenes bear Jacob's statement out, for was it not Yahweh who gave Sarah and Rebekah children? Robert Alter suggests a causal connection between Rachel's attitude and the fact that none of her sons became progenitors of the royal seed; he also suggests that Rachel's death following Benjamin's birth may be related to her failure to perceive Yahweh's exclusive control of birth. Yet Rachel's request is not altogether unjustifiable considering the concern that Isaac, for example, shows for his wife in the preceding type-scene. Her petulant demand could be interpreted by a more indulgent husband as, "Why don't you pray for me? Do something, I'm desperate." Jacob's response, however, all but ignores the perlocutionary aspect of Rachel's blatant words. Not only does he fail to share her plight, he chastises her angrily and self-righteously. Jacob's reaction implies that his wife's barrenness is outside his sphere of control; he disclaims all responsibility for his wife's condition. The ensuing list of the sons born to Jacob by other concubines and by Leah intimates that Jacob may not be concerned because his progeny was ensured by other means. Finally, the conventional formula announcing divine intervention appears: "Then God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her and opened her womb" (30:22). The formula differs from both previous formulas of divine intervention. The first formula presents Yahweh's intervention as a fulfillment of a promise: "The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised" (21:1). The second formula presents divine intervention as a direct response to the husband's plea: ". . . the Lord granted his prayer" (25:21). The third formula, however, stresses the fact that Yahweh intervenes in response to Rachel's plight, by repeating that He "remembered her" (*wayyizkōr*) "and hearkened to her" (*wayyisma'*) (30:22). In addition, Rachel, like Leah, reserves the right of naming her sons. Jacob accepts the names given to his sons by his wives with the exception of Benjamin.¹⁶

Although Jacob does not perform a central role in this type-scene, he emerges from it victorious. His treatment of his wife may not be exemplary, but his awe of Yahweh is, and in biblical terms, this is the ultimate benchmark of the evaluation of a male character.

The fourth annunciation type-scene, on the other hand, presents the potential father, Manoah, as something of a schlemiel, whereas his unnamed wife emerges as the clear protagonist of the scene. Manoah is absent when the angel of the Lord appears to his wife and informs her that she is to conceive a son who will be a Nazirite and a national

¹⁶ Jacob changes the name Rachel gives to her second son from *ben-'ôni* ("the son of my sorrow"), to *binjāmin* ("the son of my right hand") (Gen 35:18).

redcemer (Judg 13:3-5). Not only is the woman apprised of the future of her son, but she is given a set of instructions to follow during her pregnancy, implying a close interdependence between the mother's actions and the future son's life. When Manoah hears the news, he entreats the Lord to send his messenger once again. When the angel reappears, it is once again the woman who sees him first, while sitting alone in the field. The open field points up metonymically the woman's independence, just as the tent underscored Sarah's confinement. Similarly, the words "and Manoah arose and went after his wife" (v 11) signify the husband's dependence on his wife. This constitutes a reverse analogy to the posture of Sarah inside the tent behind Abraham (Gen 18:10).

In response to Manoah's repetitious questions, the angel repeats his instructions to the woman, adding nothing at all to what he had previously said to Manoah's wife and to what she had already reported to her husband. Whereas the woman perceives immediately that the messenger is "a man of God" and compares his appearance to the "countenance of an angel of God, very terrible" (Judg 13:6), Manoah treats the divine messenger as a human being, inviting him for a meal. When the angel declines Manoah's invitation, hinting at his divine identity by suggesting that Manoah should use the meal as a burnt offering for the Lord, Manoah misses the hint and proceeds to inquire about the stranger's name, so that "when your words come true, we may honor you" (v 17). This request contrasts with the woman's conscientious and respectful silence (Judg 13:6). Even when the stranger answers enigmatically, pointing out that his name is "wondrous" (or "mysterious"), Manoah remains unaware of the stranger's true identity. Only when he witnesses the miraculous ascent to heaven in the flame of the burnt offering, "Then Manoah knew that he was the angel of the Lord" (v 21). The emphasis on the temporal adverb at the beginning of the sentence adds an additional dash of irony to the satirical presentation of the obtuse husband. But now Manoah panics: "We shall surely die, for we have seen God" (v 22). Once again, Manoah's wife demonstrates her superior intelligence by pointing out the futility of showing miracles to people who had been singled out for death. The text vindicates her point of view by following this interchange with the final component of the annunciation type-scene, the fulfillment of the divine promise: "And the woman bore a son and called his name Samson" (v 24). The woman does not bear a son "to" her husband; neither does she consult her husband about their son's name.

The thematic and structural parallels between Judges 13 and Genesis 18 highlight the radical shift in the characterization and respective status of the potential mother and father figures. Whereas the hospitality of Abraham is graciously accepted by the three messengers, Manoah's hospitality is rejected. The first scene uses Abraham's hospitality to enhance his uprightness, the latter exposes Manoah's hospitality as maladroitness. In the first scene, Yahweh addresses Sarah indirectly and peripherally; in the

fourth scene God turns to the woman first and only repeats for her husband things already known to her. Sarah emerges from the first scene as a skeptical and parochial housewife, vastly overshadowed by Abraham's magnanimity. Manoah's wife, on the other hand, is perspicacious, sensitive, and devout, outshining her inept husband. Sarah's unnecessary interference in the course of the first annunciation type-scene parallels to a great extent the dispensable contributions of Manoah.

In the next scene, the potential father is pushed even further away from the focus of the story. Hannah, like Rachel, suffers not only from her barrenness but also from the provocations of Peninnah, her fertile rival. But, unlike Rachel, Hannah does not turn to her husband, Elkanah, for help. She decides to address her plea directly to Yahweh. She does not even call on Eli, the priest, who is visibly stationed by the doorposts of the temple; instead she pours out her bitter heart in prayer and directly enlists God's help, by offering to dedicate her future son to his service. This is the first time that the barren woman is shown to turn directly to Yahweh; Rebekah, it will be remembered, turns to Yahweh to complain of her difficult pregnancy, not to entreat him for children. This is also the first time that the type-scene reports in direct speech the barren woman's prayer for children.

Hannah circumvents the authority of both Elkanah and Eli by making a vow to Yahweh on her own initiative. The text implies support for her initiative by pointing out that Elkanah fails to understand his wife's misery (1 Sam 1:8) and by satirizing Eli as an obtuse old man who misinterprets Hannah's chagrin for drunkenness. Sure of his perception, he rebukes the embittered woman with harsh words: "How long will you be drunken? Put away your wine from you" (1:14). But confronted with Hannah's eloquent response, Eli retracts his rash accusation and bids the woman to go in peace, adding: "and the God of Israel grant your petition which you made to him" (1:17). It is not clear whether Eli is promising Yahweh's help or merely expressing his wishful blessings. Either way, Eli remains unaware of Hannah's specific request, which does not add much to his already suspect stature as divine oracle and representative of Yahweh.

Unlike the preceding divine messengers, Eli fails to anticipate the miraculous conception. Whereas the previous messengers anticipate and initiate the annunciation, Eli *reacts* to Hannah's initiative. Furthermore, Eli fails to understand Hannah's plight and, although he reacts favorably to her plea, the text implies that he remains unaware of its specific nature.

Neither does Elkanah, the potential father, understand Hannah's anguish. "And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? Any why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?'" (1 Sam 1:8). Elkanah's repeated questions

indicate his concern for his wife, but at the same time they imply helplessness and a basic lack of understanding for the childless woman. Elkanah's speech functions as ironic self-betrayal; it dramatizes the husband's exaggerated sense of self-importance and his inability to realize that his love cannot compensate for his wife's barrenness. Elkanah's lack of insight into what the Bible presents as woman's greatest tragedy places him in a marginal role within the framework of this drama. Unlike the previous husbands, who came into direct contact with divine emissaries (or, in Jacob's case, spoke on behalf of Yahweh), Elkanah is absent from the scene dramatizing the divine element.

In his capacity as Yahweh's representative, Eli promises Hannah God's help. Fulfilling his role as husband, Elkanah has intercourse with his wife, but neither of these male characters is shown to have any awareness of the special significance of his actions. Both Eli and Elkanah are excluded from the privileged point of view of Hannah, the omniscient narrator, and the implied reader. Juxtaposed with these male foils, Hannah emerges as the incontestable heroine of the scene. Whereas in the case of Sarah the text emphasizes that she bore a son "to Abraham," here the text presents the husband as an auxiliary character: "And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her, and in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of the Lord'" (1 Sam 1:19-20).

If Elkanah may be defined as "Card," the potential father in the final annunciation type-scene functions barely as "ficelle."¹⁷ Gehazi, Elisha's servant, describes him as an old man (2 Kgs 4:14). The text dramatizes him as un insightful and passive. His contribution to the annunciation scene proper is all but marginal. Before the son's birth, the potential father is referred to only in the third person. He is practically excluded from the interaction between the man of God, Elisha, and his wife, who is called "the great woman of Shunem."¹⁸ The Shunammite is the one who goes out of her way to "seize" Elisha, offering him meals whenever he passes through town.¹⁹ Discontent with her sporadic hospitality, she convinces her husband to dedicate a room in their house for Elisha. The text records the woman's suggestion in great detail and omits the husband's reply, thereby underscoring the woman's initiative and, in contrast, the husband's passivity and possibly indifference.

This annunciation type-scene is the first to present the female protagonist as character before focusing on her as a maternal role model.

¹⁷ "Card" refers to a secondary character; "ficelle" to a peripheral one (W. J. Harvey, *Character and the Novel* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1965]).

¹⁸ Here I prefer the King James and the JPS version to the RSV, which renders the Hebrew word *gētôlâ* as "wealthy."

¹⁹ The Hebrew verb *wattahāzeq* is much more expressive than the more figurative translation "urged" (RSV) or "constrained" (KJV and JPS).

The actions and speeches of the preceding female characters were mostly motivated by the desire for children or by the prospect of giving birth. These characters were described only in conjunction with the binary theme of barrenness-fertility or with the fate and identity of their prospective sons. In the case of the great woman of Shunem, her character and her relationship with Elisha seem to deserve attention independently of the theme of childlessness. The text insists that the Shunammite's hospitality and generosity stem from her benevolence, not from an ulterior motive. When urged by Elisha to express her needs, in return for her favors, the Shunammite demurs: "I dwell among my own people" is her proud answer (2 Kgs 4:13). Only when Gehazi, Elisha's servant, informs him that the woman "has no son, and her husband is old" (v 14) does the reader realize that the Shunammite is childless. This is the first time that the annunciation type-scene does not attribute childlessness exclusively to woman. The text does not define the woman as "barren" (*āqārâ*) or closed-wombed; on the contrary, by specifying that her husband is old, the text suggests that the man's age may explain the absence of children this time. When Elisha informs her that "at this season, when the time comes round, you shall embrace a son" (2 Kgs 4:16), she is incredulous: "No, my lord, Oh man of God; do not lie to your maidservant" (v 16). By introducing the woman's qualities before the actual annunciation, the narrative establishes a relationship of cause and effect between the episodes. This type-scene is the first to present Yahweh's intervention as *reward for woman's upright conduct*. Hannah conceives, thanks to her ardent prayer to Yahweh; the Shunammite conceives, thanks to her selflessness, benevolence, humility, and loyalty to Yahweh's emissary.

The first type-scene establishes a causal link between the husband's uprightness and the wife's miraculous conception. The text makes it clear that the postmenopausal and barren Sarah conceives not because of her own conduct but thanks to Yahweh's interest in Abraham. The hospitality, generosity, and humility initially ascribed to the potential father are now ascribed to the potential mother. On the other hand, the reticence, passivity, and indifference displayed by the potential mother toward the divine messengers in the first type-scene are transposed to the potential father in the last. It is significant that the text does not stress that the Shunammite bore a son "to" or even *by* her husband; omitting the husband from the final phase of the scene, it states: "But the woman conceived and bore a son about that time the following spring, as Elisha said to her" (v 17).

The passivity of the Shunammite's husband is further dramatized in his reaction to his son's disease and subsequent death. When the boy complains of a severe headache, his father orders a servant to "carry him to his mother" (v 19). When the Shunammite hurries to see Elisha, her

husband, unaware of the disaster, argues: "Why will you go to him today? It is neither new moon nor Sabbath" (v 23). The husband's protestations expose his limited understanding of the events. His criticism of his wife backfires. The husband's unanswered questions function here as irony of self-betrayal. As in Elkanah's case, these questions are potential obstructions rather than accelerating factors in the plot progression toward the happy denouement. Whereas Hannah leaves Elkanah's questions unanswered, the Shunammite responds to her old man's irrelevant arguments with a short "*šālôm*" ("It shall be well" [v 23]).

Yet the husband is not the only character ridiculed by the narrative. I tend to agree with Robert Alter that the narrator of 2 Kings is rather ambivalent toward the figure of Elisha in general.²⁰ In our particular scene, Elisha is not aware that his benefactress is childless and acts in her behalf only after Gehazi apprises him of the situation. Furthermore, when the Shunammite comes to see him concerning her dead son, he is unaware of the disaster and instructs his servant to greet her and ask her if it is well with her, her husband, and her son (v 26). Realizing that the woman is in great distress he admits that the "Lord has hidden it from me, and has not told me" (v 27). Elisha remains in the dark until the Shunammite speaks; but instead of hurrying to the dead boy, he dispatches his servant Gehazi, instructing him to put his staff on the boy's face (similar to the husband who sends the sick boy to his mother with a servant)—a solution that proves later to be ineffective. Only when the woman insists on his personal involvement does Elisha consent to follow her (v 30). The detailed description of Elisha's technical attempts to revive the dead son presents the process of resuscitation as a medical rather than miraculous ordeal. Despite the woman's impeccable conduct and profound piety, Elisha continues to refer to her as "the Shunammite" and sometimes with the more derisive "that Shunammite" (*haššā-nammît hallāz* [v 25]), as if he never condescended to learn her name. But clearly Elisha's attitude is not representative of the narrator's point of view.

The growing recognition of the potential mother figure suggests an ever increasing emphasis within the biblical framework on the institution of motherhood. As Adrienne Rich points out, the social and legal *institution* of motherhood is distinctly different from the personal and psychological aspect of motherhood; the latter refers to "the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children," whereas the

²⁰ Alter suggests that Elisha's lying on the boy and breathing life into his dead body is a parodic allusion to the creation scene in which Yahweh breathes life into the nostrils of the first man. He also points out the satiric judgment implied in Elisha's ursine massacre of the boys who had taunted him for his baldness (2 Kgs 2:23–25). See Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read," 126.

former refers to the mechanism aimed at "ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control."²¹ The institution of motherhood is a powerful patriarchal mechanism. Male control of female reproductive powers in conjunction with patrilineal and monogamous marriage (for the wife), secures the wife as her husband's exclusive property and ensures the continuity of his name and family possessions through patrilineal customs and patrilineal inheritance patterns. The institution of motherhood as defined by the patriarchal system guarantees that both the wife and her children will increase his property during his lifetime and perpetuate his achievements and memory after his death.

The annunciation type-scenes surveyed in this study clearly define motherhood as patriarchal institution, *not* as personal tendency of woman. All the mother figures in these scenes are married wives. There is no instance in the biblical narrative in which an unmarried barren woman is visited by God or divine emissary and miraculously released from her barrenness. This would be unthinkable, since the child born out of wedlock would not be able to carry on his father's lineage and would be ostracized from the community as a "*mamzēr*" (Deut 23:3), while his mother would at best be branded as *zônâ* ("whore"). Yahweh, in the biblical narrative, restricts his interest in barren women to married women and to situations that leave no doubt about the identity of the potential father. What seems to be a sentimental narrative about the happy transition from emptiness to fullness and from failure to victory is a carefully constructed story intended among other things to promote the institution of motherhood. All the narrative details are designed and orchestrated in accordance with this ideological perspective, from the selection of thematic materials to the organization of motifs, dialogue, plot structure, and characterization. The growing emphasis on the figure of the potential mother may be misinterpreted as a growing recognition of the importance of woman's reproductive powers. The fact is that the annunciation type-scene, in its many variations, drives home the opposite message: that woman has no control at all over her reproductive potential. Yahweh, who is often andromorphized in the biblical narrative, has control. Furthermore, all the divine messengers, dispatched to proclaim the imminent miraculous conception, are male figures. The literary constellation of male characters surrounding and determining the fate of the potential mother dramatizes the idea that woman's reproductive potential should be and can be controlled only by men. It is true that the presence of the potential husband progressively decreases in the annunciation type-scene, but his presence is nevertheless essential.

Tamar, Judah's daughter-in-law, would have been burned at the stake and condemned as a harlot had she tried to procure children outside of her

²¹ *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1976) xv (italics are original).

deceased husband's family (Gen 38:24). The only thing that saves her life and turns her into a biblical heroine is the fact that the man she sleeps with, Judah, is directly related to Er, her deceased husband, who left her with no children. Ruth, too, is extolled as a heroine, thanks to her faithfulness to her deceased husband's patrilineage. What turns her into a biblical heroine is not the fact that she prefers to follow Naomi to the land of Judah rather than to stay in Moab, but the fact that Naomi is her mother-in-law, the mother of Mahlon, her deceased husband who left her childless. She is not merely extolled for her ability to survive physically in adverse circumstances or for her initiative and energy in general, as some would have it, but for her success in finding and marrying a direct relative of Elimelech, her father-in-law, and giving birth to children who would carry on the patrilineage of her deceased husband.²²

Tamar and Ruth achieve the high status of biblical heroines, thanks to their voluntary and active support of the patriarchal institution of the levirate, which insures the patrilineage of a deceased husband.²³ But the biblical narrative is careful *not* to establish too close a link between the interests of patriarchy and woman's sacrifice. On the contrary, the heroine's motivation is normally shown to be self-seeking. Both Ruth and Tamar are shown to fight for their *own* benefit and security; this may of course be an authentic reflection of the patriarchal society that encouraged women to become lawful mothers by elevating the mother's social status.²⁴ At the same time, it constitutes a powerful ideological strategy. By projecting onto woman what man desires most, the biblical narrative creates a powerful role model for women. The image of the childless woman (barren wife or widow) who evolves from vulnerability and emptiness to security and pride by giving birth to sons offers a lesson for all women. It should be ascribed to the imaginative and artistic ingenuity of the biblical narrator that one of the most vital patriarchal concerns is repeatedly presented not as an imposition on woman but as something she herself desires more than anything else.

It must be understood that by insisting on woman's unmitigated desire for children and by making sure that the female characters

²² Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 195-96.

²³ In his compendious and meticulous study of the origins of patriarchy, Robert Briffault points out that "the levirate custom owes its origin to the assimilation of a wife to inheritable property" (p. 776). According to Briffault, there is no real distinction between the biblical justification of the levirate as a means for "building up the brother's house" (Deut 25:5) or "raising seed unto him," and the "economic view which regards the woman as a permanent collective acquisition of the husband's group" (p. 777). Briffault traces the levirate custom "to its original source in the practice of fraternal sexual communism or polyandry" (p. 778). See *The Mothers*, Vol. I (New York: Johnson, reprinted 1927).

²⁴ The social plight of widows and unmarried women is well documented in the Hebrew Bible. See Phyllis Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," *Religion and Sexism* (ed. Rosemary Ruether; New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974) 41-88.

dramatizing this desire are either wives or widows, the biblical narrative promotes a patriarchal ideology; it does not merely offer a psychological insight into the female nature. This becomes clear when we compare the positive mother-figures with the negative ones. The only negative characterization of mothers occurs in the story of the harlots and King Solomon. It is true that this story intends mainly to illustrate Solomon's unmatched wisdom, but at the same time it parodies the mother-figure as unmarried woman. The mother-harlot who crushes her baby son in her sleep and exchanges her dead son for her roommate's baby presents a preposterous prevarication of the standard biblical mother-figure. Her criminal neglect of her baby, her selfishness, her jealousy of the other harlot and the ruthlessness she displays toward the living baby distort the maternal attributes of love, mercy, nurturing, compassion, and tenderness. The true mother on the other hand plays the victim role. Although the text treats her less harshly, she still is far from emerging victorious, or an admirable female role model. The real hero in this story is King Solomon, whose wisdom spares the life of a male baby and restores justice to the precarious world of both females. The absence of lawful husbands from this story implies that the sordid competition over the living baby is directly related to the lack of male authority over the females and their offspring. The message seems to be that when woman gives birth outside of wedlock, there is bound to be trouble. Not only will she suffer, but her baby's life may be jeopardized. Motherhood uncontrolled by man is dangerous and sometimes fatal. King Solomon, who resolves the conflict with breathtaking brilliance, stands for the male master who alone can restore order in a world come undone by woman's unreliable nature and what appears to be her natural tendency to compete against her own sex.

It is interesting that even in this parodic scene, the biblical narrative is consistent in positing the child as woman's greatest desire; this is the most prominent character trait of the biblical mother-figure. Even a harlot's love for her child transcends her possessiveness of her children and hostility toward other women. From this point of view the mother-harlot is not very different from the respectable matriarchs, especially Rachel, whose desire for children seems to override all her other concerns. The negative and positive mother-figures share yet another common property—jealousy of χ and competitiveness against other mothers. The motif of motherhood in the biblical narrative seems to be closely associated with the motif of female rivalry. The mother-harlot who steals her roommate's son away and encourages the king to kill him acts on the same motivation that drove Sarah to drive out Hagar and her son Ishmael (Gen 21:9-10). Rachel too seems to be driven to despair by her jealousy of her fertile sister. The motif of female rivalry is intertwined with the motif of motherhood in the story of Hannah and Peninnah. The fertile Peninnah taunts and humiliates

Hannah for her barrenness (1 Sam 1:16). It is rare to find a biblical narrative presenting mutually supportive mothers. Again, this may reflect an authentic social situation which forced women to compete against each other in their attempt to gain the only thing that endowed them with a modicum of social respectability, namely, motherhood. But this may also be explained as a clever literary strategy in the service of biblical sexual politics. By perpetuating the theme of women's mutual rivalry, especially in a reproductive context, the narrative implies that sisterhood is a precarious alternative to the patriarchal system.

Both the positive and the negative mother-figures are shown to prefer their sons' well-being to their own. The mother-harlot is willing to give up her baby to make sure that he survives. The best consolation offered to Hagar, who has been driven out by Sarah, refers not to herself but to her son: "... and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'What troubles you Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation'" (Gen 21:17-18). This consolation, which focuses exclusively on the future son Ishmael, is presented as the only and the most effective divine response to woman's predicament. Her own physical and emotional anguish is not taken into account. The only problems biblical mothers face concern their children's well-being, and the only solution to their problems is the assurance that their children will survive. Thus the biblical narrative presents as the best palliative for a difficult pregnancy a message concerning the future children. Yahweh's promise to the pregnant Rebekah that she will bear twins seems to put an end to her intolerable pangs (Gen 25:22-24). Rachel's fatal pregnancy is presented as peripheral to the birth of Benjamin. The text that reports the midwife's consolation refers rather elliptically to the mother's fatal pain: "And when she was in her hard labor, the midwife said to her, 'Fear not; for now you will have another son'" (Gen 35:17).²⁵ Rachel's birth pangs are mentioned in a temporal clause, subordinated to the main clause containing the midwife's consolation. The only allusion to the mother's complaint is included in the name she gives her son, just before she dies; "*Ben-oni*" means "son of my sorrow." But even this rare and subtle allusion to woman's protest against her maternal role is subsequently deleted from the biblical record. After Rachel's death, Jacob renames his newborn son "Benjamin," which

²⁵ Eli's daughter-in-law also dies while giving birth and here too the Bible records the midwives' consolation rather than the mother's words: "Fear not, for you have borne a son" (1 Sam 4:20). The name that the dying mother gives her newborn baby *ʾi-kābōd* ("no glory"), also denotes bitterness and despair, but the text interprets the name as a reflection on the national state of affairs and the loss of her husband and her father-in-law. This interpretation is ascribed to the dying woman herself and repeated twice for emphasis (1 Sam 4:21-22).

means in Hebrew "the son of my right arm." The Bible endorses the father's choice, which underscores the idea of powerfulness, in clear preference to the mother's pliancy.

Woman's reluctance to give birth or to assume maternal responsibility for her child is an option that is completely excluded from the represented reality of the Bible. These possibilities do not even appear as subject for criticism as they do in the case of men. Onan, for example, refuses to "raise seed unto his brother Er" and consequently is severely punished by Yahweh (Gen 38:10). David, who shirks responsibility for Bathsheba's baby, is harshly rebuked by Yahweh's emissary, Nathan (2 Samuel 12). But woman is not even shown to be capable of *not* desiring children. To acknowledge woman's disinterest in children would undermine one of the major premises of patriarchal thought: that woman always desires to be a mother. The biblical narrative spares no effort in describing woman's desire for children. Rachel is described as most desperate to give birth: "Give me children, or I shall die" (Gen 30:1). Ironically, Rachel dies not through barrenness but through fertility. Rachel's despair indicates that having children is an asset that supersedes, in her eyes, her status as Jacob's preferred wife. This is emphasized in Hannah's case as well. Despite her awareness of Elkanah's love and devotion for her, Hannah is desperate and bitter over her barrenness. Deftly and effectively, the Bible presents what it values as something women themselves value most.

Mother-figures are portrayed not only as desirous of children but also as protective of their children and relentlessly devoted to them. Whereas conflicts between fathers and children appear as prevalent motifs in the biblical narrative (e.g., Laban versus Rachel and Leah; Jacob versus his sons, especially Simeon and Levi; Saul versus Jonathan and Michal; and David versus Absalom), they almost never appear in the context of mother-child relationship. The closest a mother-figure comes to being portrayed at cross-purposes with her child is Rebekah scheming against Esau, her eldest son. But Rebekah does it out of love for Jacob, rather than out of resentment for Esau.

Maternal protectiveness is normally dramatized when the child's physical survival or well-being is endangered. Examples range from Hagar and Ishmael to the Shunammite and her son. Even prostitutes are depicted as compassionate mothers, as illustrated by the real mother in the story of Solomon's trial. Perhaps the most touching image of the protective mother is embodied by Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah, who zealously guards the bodies of her dead sons from predatory animals and birds (2 Sam 21:10). Surrogate mother figures, like governesses and wet-nurses, are also portrayed primarily as protective. Mephibosheth's governess saves him from death (2 Sam 4:4), and Yehosheba, aunt and wet-nurse, saves the life of Yoash, son of Ahaziah. Only father figures are presented as capable of sacrificing the lives of their children. There is no female counterpart to

Abraham and Jephthah, except the mother who sacrifices her son to save her life (2 Kgs 6:29).

On the other hand, the "maternal instinct" is portrayed as a highly selfish and confined inclination, mostly focused on one's own child. Sarah's concern for her son Isaac is presented as her primary motivation for driving Hagar and Ishmael out (Gen 21:9-10). The harlot who lost her son shows no pity for the son of her friend and prefers to see him dead rather than alive in the arms of her rival (1 Kgs 3:26). In one of the most unnerving narratives, a mother who has agreed to kill and eat another's son during the great hunger in Samaria refuses to sacrifice her own son in her turn, as originally planned (2 Kgs 6:29).

Woman's parenthood in the biblical narrative is largely restricted to reproductive and protective functions. Hagar, Zipporah, the Shunammite, and Rizpah all represent the maternal role in the most rudimentary and, one may venture to say, simplistic forms. When a mother appears to interfere in behalf of her son in a more sophisticated way, for example, to promote his rights over his siblings she must circumvent her husband's authority. Thus, when Rebekah interferes in behalf of Jacob, she does not do so openly, for example, by attempting to convince Isaac that his preference for Esau is not in keeping with Yahweh's will. Rather, she resorts to deception, which indicates that only in this circuitous manner will she be able to prevail over her husband. But while Rebekah takes initiative independently, Bathsheba does not dare intercede with David in behalf of Solomon before Nathan encourages her to do so. Here, too, mother is forced to resort to a bit of histrionics in order to win over the father, the final authority over the fate of her child. The mother may be the decisive factor in giving birth to and preserving the life of her children; but she remains subservient to her husband's authority over her and her children.

It is interesting to note that, whereas mothers are shown to interfere actively in behalf of their sons, they never interfere in behalf of their daughters. The story of Dinah's rape makes no reference to Leah, her mother. The only responsible parties are her father, Jacob (somewhat lamely), and her brothers. The story of Jephthah's daughter does not mention her mother either. The story of the concubine exploited to death by the Benjaminites refers to her father and her master only. Maacah, the mother of Tamar, is absent from the story about her daughter's rape. Aside from the victim, the story mentions only the aggressor, Amnon, the negligent father, David, and the avenger, Absalom, Tamar's brother. By expatiating on mothers who protect or interfere in behalf of their sons, the biblical narrative creates maternal role models which promote the interests of the male rather than the female child. In fact, the biblical narrative tends to define children in general as sons. More precisely, the children that count are all male. Thus, all the annunciation type-scenes

precede the birth of sons. The biblical mothers are usually desirous of sons. This is blatant in the case of Rachel, who demands from Jacob, *hābā fī bānīm* ("give me sons"). The English translation, rendering "sons" as "children," misses this point. The children born to previously barren mothers are all male. Similarly, Tamar and Ruth are rewarded with the birth of sons. When the biblical narrative mentions birth it almost exclusively refers to a male baby. The only exception is Dinah, Leah's daughter. But even here the daughter seems to be short-changed, since hers is the only case in which the Bible omits the etymology of the name (Gen 30:21). The motif of mother-daughter relationship is practically nonexistent in the biblical narrative. Not only is motherhood defined in relation to a lawful husband-father, but it is also determined by the male gender of the child. Furthermore, it can be asserted that the presence of mother-figures in the biblical narrative is often contingent upon the identity and importance of their sons. In other words, the narrative frequently deals with the mother-figure because of its interest in her immediate or future offspring rather than in her own character. Some narratives involving a mother-figure focus mainly on the circumstances leading to the last son's birth. Soon after the birth of the son, the mother-figure is quickly whisked off the stage (Leah, Tamar, Samson's mother, Ruth). Other mothers survive in a few details concerning their protection of their sons, for example, Sarah, Rebekah, the Shunammite and Bathsheba. Sarah manages to drive Hagar and Ishmael away (Genesis 21) shortly before she expires (Gen 23:2). Rebekah disappears from the scene as soon as her protective role is completed, allowing the literary focus to shift from Isaac to Jacob. The Shunammite disappears as soon as her son is resuscitated by Elisha, allowing the focus to shift back to Elisha. And Bathsheba disappears from the text as soon as Solomon's rule is ensured, allowing the focus to shift from David to Solomon.

The literary frame is particularly significant in the case of the annunciation type-scene, because of its unusual emphasis on the mother-figure. Even in these scenes the dramatic climax involves the birth of a son. Additionally, they all start with reference to the father. Even in the later scenes, featuring especially dominant mother-figures, the beginning deals with the father, and the ending with the son. The annunciation scene of Samson opens with an exposition relating first to Manoah and later to his wife: "And there was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah; and his wife was barren and had no children" (Judg 13:2). Although Hannah clearly outlines her husband Elkanah, the annunciation type-scene opens first with reference to the man, presenting the potential mother as his barren co-wife (1 Sam 1:1-2). The Shunammite's story extols the woman's virtues, but still it constitutes only a part of a narrative series revolving around Elisha. Although she prevails over her husband in the annunciation type-scene,

the narrative as a whole is presented as an additional enterprise of the man of God, another aspect of his divine power. This can be seen in the opening verses of the scene: "One day Elisha went on to Shunem, and there lived a great woman who urged (literally, seized) him to eat bread, and so whenever he passed there he would stop (literally, turn) there to eat bread" (2 Kgs 4:8). The Shunammite is introduced in a combined sentence which functions syntactically as a relative clause that refers to Shunem, the place where Elisha used to visit. This strategy is not restricted to the annunciation type-scene; it appears in the story of Tamar and Judah (Gen 38:1-5) and in the story of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 1:1-5). Despite the unquestionably central role played by mother-figures in annunciation type-scenes and in narratives about significant births, the literary frame of the unit, opening and concluding with information regarding male characters, attests to the patriarchal ideology underlying them.

These constraints on the biblical mother-figures explain their literary flatness. None of the biblical mother-figures matches the depth and complexity of father-figures like Abraham, Jacob, Jephthah, and David. Only father figures are shown to experience conflict between, for example, parental love and the exigencies of divine authority (Abraham and Jephthah). Only they demonstrate the complexity of a situation in which a parent is called upon to scold his most beloved son, or to hide his love for fear of sibling revenge (Jacob). Only they exemplify the human conflict between love for and fear of one's own child (David). The parental role played by the father-figure constitutes only one aspect in the character, one that contributes to the depth and many-sidedness of this character. It does not eclipse his other qualities. This is the difference between a multifaceted, well-developed literary character and a type, or a role model. We must conclude that although the procreative context is the only one that allows for a direct communication between woman and Yahweh (or his messenger), and although motherhood is the most exalted female role in the biblical narrative, the biblical mother-figures attain neither the human nor the literary complexity of their male counterparts. The patriarchal framework of the biblical story prevents the mother-figure from becoming a full-fledged *human* role model, while its androcentric perspective confines her to a limited literary role, largely subordinated to the biblical male protagonists.

WHO IS HIDING THE TRUTH? DECEPTIVE WOMEN AND BIBLICAL ANDROCENTRISM

Esther Fuchs

Deceptiveness is a common characteristic of women in the Hebrew Bible. It is a motif that runs through most narratives involving women, both condemnatory and laudatory ones. From Eve to Esther, from Rebekah to Ruth, the characterization of women presents deceptiveness as an almost inescapable feature of femininity. The message that such characterizations convey is explicit in Ecclesiastes: "And I found more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters; he who pleases God escapes her but the sinner is taken by her" (Ecc 7:26).¹ In this exploratory essay, I would like to examine the close association of woman and deceptiveness in the context of power-structured relations between men and women in the Hebrew Bible. My main focus will be on the manner in which the biblical narrative uses literary strategies in order to foster and perpetuate its patriarchal ideology. This essay suggests that the presentation of women as characters who hide the truth reveals not only the extent of the Bible's androcentric bias but also the manner in which the biblical narrative suppresses the truth about woman's subjugation within the patriarchal framework.

One of the things that the biblical text fails to make explicit in its treatment of deceptive acts perpetrated by women is their close relationship to woman's inferior social position and political powerlessness in patriarchal society. Rebekah's deception of the old and blind Isaac does not so much as hint at the wife's powerlessness versus her husband. It does not take into account that deception is Rebekah's only means of granting her preferred son a blessing. The fact is that Isaac, despite his dramatized impotence, is superior to Rebekah in power, yet it is Rebekah who is presented as a powerful woman who outsmarts an ailing old man.²

¹ This and all the following quotations are based on the RSV (1952) unless otherwise indicated.

² For a feminist rehabilitation of Rebekah see Christine Garside Allen, "Who Was Rebekah? 'On Me Be the Curse, My Son,'" *Beyond Androcentrism—New Essays on*