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Women's Election in Genesis

Iqra Ahar

Trinity College, Hartford Connecticut

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Women's Election in Genesis

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Women in the Old Testament are not so fraught with development. However, when taking a closer look at the text, it is the women behind the scenes who are the most active in moving forward the narrative. While their textual life span is limited, each woman plays an integral part in her generation: May that be advising her husband or seeking to fulfill the destiny (both present and future successes of her family), women have unbeknownst found themselves in a favored position by God.

Sarah and Rebekah are two such examples of traditional Matriarchs – important and powerful people – first introduced in Genesis and are at the center of discussion in this paper. It is their faith and dedication to bring the first covenant to fruit and ensuring its continuation that lends them such a prominent place by God. While the Bible's direct purpose is in no way to impose or preach a patriarchal society, it provides an important insight into the patriarchal workings or values of that period, and how women had to fulfill their callings from within the confines of patriarchal society, thus earning them an empowered position. Whereas the tools used by these women can be misleading for modern audiences, they deem value, courage, and loyalty in upholding of faith for the earlier audience.

Sarah and Rebekah, characterized by their husbands' love and their shared responsibility in God's covenant, allow us a look into a more subtle, yet strong leading position. Their roles as a mother and a guiding partner, while might not be as powerful for the modern audience, was integral to the making of the nation of Israel. Hence, it is important to analyze these characters from the standpoint of the provided context to understand the status they held and what made them so favorable in the eyes of God. Further allowing for differentiation between their role as

strong versus empowered women. While the terms “strong” and empowered” are often used interchangeably to describe resilient women who have made a breakthrough provided their limited role, there is a subtle difference in the meanings. A strong woman is one with the ability to overcome obstacles, whereas an empowered woman can actively shape her own destiny and make meaningful contributions to her society. This essay will focus not just on Sarah and Rebekah’s inner strength but also their sense of agency and control over their own life. It is their ability to make choices and take actions that align with their goals which will shape the Bible. Hence, it is important to acknowledge this difference to better understand the stories and role of women in Genesis.

This paper will focus on analyzing the characters of Sarah and Rebekah in relation to their partners and observe the vital role they play in (both the present and the future) election and redemption to bring into the light the remarkable standing these women had in a society that was male dominated. These are the stories of strong-willed women who tackled their failures and simultaneously took an empowering role by utilizing their function in shaping and moving the history of religion we know.

The Elected Pairs

The Old Testament is the story of election: the notion that God favors some individuals over the others. While the election of women on the surface is rare, they have often been given a prominent position in relation to the elected man with whom they then share power and responsibility. Genesis, the first book placed in the Old Testament, is filled with such elected pairs – the patriarchs and matriarchs – who then carry with them the responsibility to fulfill God’s command to humanity: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1, 28). This is followed by a covenant found in Genesis 12-17 with Abraham, promising him protection, and blessing his

descendants who God promises to multiply like the stars in the sky (Gen 12, 1-3). Thus, the initial call falls on the pair, instead of just Abraham, where Sarah now has an integral share and a role to play in fulfilling God's promise to Abraham.

Sarah's special place in Genesis is made evident through her protection by God in Genesis 12 and Genesis 20 when Abraham's cowardice lends him to offering Sarah to Pharaoh of Egypt and Abimelech of Gerar. Sarah's place is then further fortified with God's direct mention of Sarah in the everlasting covenant with Abraham where God blesses her and states that she shall give rise to nations (Gen 15, 15-18). This election is central to only Sarah who is barren, yet God decides to choose and wait on her over Hagar's child with Abraham in Genesis 16. Another important observation that can be made is the structural parallel in God's speech to Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 17. God's speech addressed to Abraham and Sarah starts with a common phrase. This can be seen from the similarity between "As for you" (Gen 17, 9), addressed to Abraham, and "As for Sarah your wife..." (Gen 17, 15), addressed to Sarah. This parallel, both in structural position and content (self-commitment to God), is important in the proposed equality in status of both Abraham and Sarah in God's order. Abraham (Gen 17, 5) and Sarah's (Gen 17, 15) renaming from Abram and Sarai is another parallel noted. This, according to Schneider, places Sarah in the same category as Abraham and makes her maternity as important as Abraham's paternity (Schneider, 2004, p.58). Schneider, in his book, *Sarah: Mother of Nations*, allows Sarah back her rightful place in biblical history by recognizing such little yet vital details in construction of her character. While the full equality in status between Abraham and Sarah is still ambiguous, certain patterns in the texts allow us to believe in God's extension of covenant with Abraham to Sarah – who is then made an important character in fulfilling and assuring the future as promised by God.

Once Sarah passes, the future of Israel is handed to Rebekah and Isaac. The placement of genealogy, as narrated to Abraham in Genesis 22 right after Isaac has been saved, becomes important in the sense that it is connected to God's promise to Abraham. Besides Rebekah being the first female child to be mentioned in biblical genealogy (Jeansonne, 1990, pg. 55), her placement here early on sets the divine promise in flow from Abraham to Isaac. As noted by Frymer-Kensky, this is proof that Isaac will carry on the covenant, and baby Rebekah (Rivka) will be the child of destiny – the agent of the promise. Kensky then further insists on how the birth notice illuminates Rebekah's destiny by being mentioned just before Sarah's death (Gen 23, 1-2): portraying how Rebekah will carry on Sarah's role (Frymer-Kensky, 2002, pg.6). This union, according to Rosen, is further fortified under a marriage made in heaven, which she writes about it in her midrash as a perfect solution from the point of view of Isaac, the near sacrificed man, who must marry Rebekah, the water bringer and hence the life giver (Buchmann & Spiegel, 1994, pg. 23).

Furthermore, Rebekah and Isaac's union under divine ordination is supported by Abraham's servant claim who states that God led him to Rebekah as a wife for Isaac (Gen 24,42-45). This hence points towards Rebekah's election in relation to Isaac and affirms the power that she would hold during her married life in rearranging the order by which her sons should receive their father, Abraham's, blessing. Rebekah, like Sarah, is presented as the perfect wife for Isaac and the rightful matriarch to support the fulfillment of the covenant.

Resilient Matriarchs and The Moral Implications

Sarah and Rebekah's stories are full of parallel narratives that share accounts of resilience under the patriarchal framework they faced. A parallel incident that follows both Sarah and

Rebekah's narrative is their husbands' claim of them as their sisters so they can be spared from being killed by foreigners who eye their wife's beauty. Such repetition and synoptic similarity in Gen 12:10-20, 20:1-18 and 26:1-12 makes us question the relationship and whether Sarah and Rebekah possessed any power to defy their husbands' plan for them. The wife's silence and agreement to enter the place of another man is often misinterpreted for their compliance. But again, is it really compliance? If looked closely, it is also the acceptance of their sacrificial role to change the course of the event. In Genesis 20:5 Sarah was not silent; she admitted to being Abraham's sister to Abimelech as he tells God. Though the mention is small, we observe an acquiescence of the tragic heroine Sarah with her husband in order to save his life. Hence like other biblical women, we observe Sarah making an ultimate sacrifice for her husband.

When faced with danger, these two Matriarchs are observed to risk their lives – may that be for bringing peace or setting political alliances straight. Their silence plays into the portrayal of the patriarchal oppressive ideology. It is also a carefully observed force that looks beyond the present to assure a future. The act, furthermore, shows the matriarch's selflessness: how family objectives mattered more to them than their individual value. Hence, their act of silence can be translated into their courage and strength in a society that limits and suppresses female agency. Torresan argues that silence in the Old Testament is a “lively force” that besides depicting negative facts opens “large spiritual horizons” (Torresan, 2003).

The argument here is by no means in support of the objectification of biblical women in the Old Testament; rather, it attempts to deconstruct and re-centralize it on the characteristics that truly mattered in the election of these female characters. While there is a lesson in the acts of heroism by Sarah and Rebekah, there is also a continuous challenge to observe past the provided

surface. An awareness of the matriarchs' background and their exercised abilities within it thus allows us to put their resilience into higher value and observe them in a new light.

Barrenness and Motherhood

Like every leader, both Sarah and Rebekah had to undergo a thorny path to fulfill God's command and to live up to their faith which in the first place got them elected. Besides having to work within the confines of the patriarchal structure, the matriarchs must overpower some troublesome revelations and then forge their way through with deceptive tools to establish their place and assure God's blessing. This section will aim to analyze the troublesome factors and revelations before and after the matriarch's entered motherhood, at the center of which was their barrenness.

Many biblical women had this problem including Sarah, through age, and Rachel, through infertility. Now, the question arises: if these women are barren then how are they supposed to give rise to nations? Fulfill God's commandment? This is exactly the place where the conflict arises and achieving this promise drives most of the plot of Genesis. Nevertheless, barrenness is not conceived as a sin and instead can be inducted as a sign of God's work. This the God himself addresses. It is his direct intervention and acknowledgment thereof that allows the formerly barren women Sarah (Gen 21, 1-2) and Rebekah (Gen 25, 21) to conceive.

Before God's intervention, Sarah is depicted as miserable for children, while Isaac on the other side is observed praying to God for children. It is Sarah's desperation to assure God's covenant that leads her to offer her slave girl Hagar to Abraham to conceive on her behalf (Gen 16, 1-2). However, though God shows tenderness for Hagar and Ishmael, he does not accept Ishmael as the heir. For God, it is Sarah's heir as ordained that will give rise to the nations. So, when Sarah conceived in her presumed barren situation, the child was perceived as a gift from

God. Similarly, Rebekah after twenty years of barrenness was blessed with twins (out of prayer). These were again recognized as gifts from God (Kass, 2003, pg. 378).

From another perspective, the election of the barren Sarah and Rebekah, despite the structural and thematic emphasis in ancient Israel on childbearing and tracing of lineage, can be considered indicative of their importance. Rather than undermining their value, the barrenness can be perceived as a test of faith for the elected women. As outlined by Davidson, the progression from bareness to divine conceiving of heir is not meant to undervalue the women but to show that God's covenant does not survive on its own by nature but is upheld by faith and God's intervention (Davidson, 2007, pg.455). Thus, the bareness serves as a lesson. It is only through trials and many years of both doubt and faith-like struggles of patriarchs that the matriarchs are rewarded.

Women's Vital Role in Election and Redemption

At the beginning of Sarah and Rebekah's narrative both are described as gracious, kind, and untouched figures (defined by their bareness); however, as the narrative progresses, they are soon found taking deceptive tactics to exert their power and accomplish their goals. While Sarah's conspiracy to get rid of her slave Hagar and Rebekah's plan to fool Isaac so that her favored son gets the blessing have attracted negative attention, it is also important to understand the only means they had to fulfill God's plan. As marginalized women constrained under a patriarchal framework, they resort to unpopular tactics that go against societal norms and are hence deemed deviant. However, since they do not serve the purpose of God these tactics are underhanded and become a show of resilient faith.

Motherhood in the context of the biblical world and earlier audience serves as an important window to establishing their place in society and hence should not be overlooked. Since the future of Israel is dependent on the right ordering of the household to succeed, the women are set to fulfill this task of further electing and ensuring redemption (Kass, 2003, pg.402). In this section let us observe Rebekah who is blessed with having the insight to assure that the promised line of descendent goes through the younger one. It is to Rebekah to whom the Lord tells about the nature of the struggle in her womb and how the elder is to serve the younger (Gen 25, 23). And it is due to Isaac's choice of Esau not being favored by God that Rebecca steps in to set everything in order and help Jacob receive the blessing through subversive manners. Besides fulfilling this destiny in Genesis 27, Rebekah further goes to ensure Jacob's future by arguing with him to seek refuge at her brother's place to avoid Jacob being killed by an angry Esau. This further ensures that Rebekah would not lose both her children like Eve in Genesis 4. We observe a significant role played by biblical women in not only election and ensuring God's plan but also ensuring the survival of Israel – which could have been lost if Isaac had blessed Esau against God's election.

Conclusion

Sarah and Rebekah were women of unwavering faith. Despite the conventions of patriarchy that their narratives were written in, these biblical women established themselves a special place in God's sight and further found strength and power from their motherhood. Their ability to utilize their domestic sphere and use subversive methods to serve the purpose of God is proof of their ability that besides rearing offspring adds to their election which is responsible for the rise of nations.

Sarah and Rebekah did not have an easy journey, from being almost handed over to the leaders of other nations due to the cowardice of their husbands or being given the responsibility of providing an offspring in their condition of bareness. While doubt occurred, their faith also prevailed in passing these tests that equaled the one given to patriarchs elected by God. Sarah and Rebekah, thus, emerge as confident and adept women, often on equal standing to men. These traits can be similarly located in other places in Genesis.

While little dialogue is provided to the female figures, they evolve to play a crucial role in the birth of the people of Israel. This can be extended to other female figures of the Bible, from Eve's decision to choose for herself to the actions of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, and Hagar, the women of Genesis demonstrate the agency and influence of women in the patriarchal society of that time. The decisions made by these women have far-reaching consequences and shape history. God's election and sometimes revelations to only these elected women is proof that women were seen as individuals who could make important decisions about their futures, who might be better than men to carry out God's plan and take appropriate steps needed to support God's design for the Israel community. God's trust in these women shows his confidence in their abilities and judgment lending to their election and a role that has often been associated with men. By exploring the role of women in the election process, this paper argues for a deeper understanding of the complex and fascinating world of Genesis.

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