

Women of Strength

The challenge of women in a "patriarchal religion."

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With the emergence of the modern Feminist Movement during this century, the position of women in society has received new attention. The picture is not rosy. Rightly drawing attention to the pain and inequities that women still are forced to bear, feminist writers are correct that such grievous matters need to be addressed and resolved. However, in their view, nothing will change as long as "patriarchal religions" exist. For it is just such systems, they maintain, which force women into subservient and untenable positions. As a result, feminist accusations against patriarchy are forceful, bitter, and uncompromising.

Nevertheless, one might

rightly question feminist insistence that the patriarchal system is the prime cause of all subjugation of women. Even a cursory survey of numerous textual indicators within the Hebrew Bible reveals a consistent pattern depicting matriarchal existence far more positively than feminist materials yet acknowledge.

The Genesis matriarchs were not "wall flowers!"

For example, with Sarah, Abraham's wife, we find that, yes, her physical beauty is recognized. However, it is her strength of character that is emphasized in Genesis. On

different occasions, Abraham asks Sarah's permission or approval before proceeding, rather than commanding her obedience, as one might expect if patriarchy was as oppressive as feminists suggest. Sarah is apparently an appealing woman, for even at advanced age, a foreign ruler desires her for his harem (Genesis 20). Moreover, at a time when having sons was vital, Abraham never abandons his wife even though she was barren for so many years. Furthermore, even Sarah's death and burial is given extended attention in Genesis, including the mention of her age as is done for the patriarchs.

Rebekah, the next matriarch, is also described as having great beauty. But again we

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find the narrative focusing instead on her initiative and vigor. In fact, far more details of Rebekah's life are recorded than of her husband the patriarch. Narrative techniques such as dialogue, narrative pace, genealogical notation, and other literary features suggest the prominence of Rebekah during this time of patriarchy.

The Genesis 22 genealogy lists the children born to Abraham's brother Nahor and his sister-in-law Milcah. Their eight sons are named, but the offspring of these eight sons (the third generation) are included in only two cases. Thus it is arresting to note that Rebekah is the first and only offspring of Bethuel that is named. Yet later, we observe that she also has a brother Laban.

When Eleazar is dispatched by Abraham to find a wife for Isaac, the Genesis narrator paints an extended picture of Rebekah. She arranges for the hospitality of Eleazar both at the city well and at her home. In fact, Abraham grants Eleazar the single exception for release of his responsibility—"if the woman is not willing to come with you" (Genesis 24:8). Surely, if patriarchy was as overbearing as modern feminists decry, Rebekah would have not had the chance to say "no" to Eleazar's request if her

father had determined that she should marry Isaac. Instead, we find that her father hardly says a word throughout.

After marrying Isaac and later becoming pregnant, we find Rebekah in great discomfort. Enough so that she "inquires of the LORD." Notice that she does this herself. "In-

quiring of the LORD" is an important formula in the Hebrew Bible. We find this phrase associated with the Hebrew kings and the great prophets including Moses and Elisha. And here in Genesis, also Rebekah. Moreover, she also receives a personal oracle from *Yahweh*. In fact, this scene in

Genesis 25 is framed in a concentric structure (see box below) which underscores the significance of Rebekah's encounter with God.

Later, when Esau marries

two Hittite women, the text informs us that this was a "grief of mind of Isaac *and Rebekah*" (Gen 26:35, emphasis added). This suggests that Rebekah's



concern was equal to that of her patriarch/husband. Thus we find Rebekah highlighted in Genesis as a woman who could make crucial decisions about her future and whose prayers were acknowledged from heaven, just as were the patriarchs and prophets.

The Genesis matriarchs are not "wall flowers!" It would be unfair to these women to suggest that they bow in unquestioning submission to all men. Rather, though respectful of their husbands, they are intelligent, willful and directive. Nunnally-Cox rightly concludes: "Far from conforming to a traditional servitude, these

Concentric Structure of Genesis 25

- A Isaac was forty years old when he took as wife Rebekah (v. 20)
- B Rebekah was barren; prayer for children answered (20/21)
 - C his wife Rebekah conceived (21)
 - the children struggled together within her (22)
 - D Rebekah asks for—an ORACLE (22)
 - D' Yahweh grants her—an ORACLE (23)
 - C' her days to be delivered were fulfilled (24)
 - and behold, there were twins in her womb (24)
 - B' birth and appearance of Jacob and Esau (25, 26a)
 - A' Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them (26b).¹

women grace the pages of Genesis with their laughter, their sorrows, *their strength, and their power.*²

Nor is this an isolated phenomenon. This positive exposure of women continues throughout the Pentateuch and beyond. The Exodus narratives commence with a concentration of women of intelligence and vitality, including Jochebed, Miriam, Shiprah and Puah (the two midwives), and the Egyptian princess. During the period of the Judges, Deborah and Ruth are also portrayed as bold and influential, with nothing in the text hinting that this was abnormal or surprising. The historical books open with an extensive depiction of Hannah. She is observed making her own decisions regarding Temple worship, even taking her own sacrifice. This becomes even more significant when it is recalled that her husband was a Levite (1 Chronicles 6:33-38).

Abigail, wife of Nabal, embarked on a mission of "solo diplomacy" during a volatile family situation, only later notifying her husband. Another intriguing textual hint in Psalm 68:11 suggests a wider involvement of women in the Hebrew religion than sometimes recognized: "The Lord gave the word; great was the host of those who proclaimed it." The "host" is a *female* company in Hebrew, but only a few trans-

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lations indicate this. The Song of Songs presents full female equality in the marriage relationship. The noble wife and mother of Proverbs 31 is characterized three times as a woman of strength.

Thus, I suggest that yes, feminists have been right to force attention on the ongoing abuse of women by men. But they have been wrong in one of their basic assumptions that Hebrew patriarchy is a prime cause of this long-standing oppression of women. The patriarchal system is a pivotal issue in feminist understanding of female repression. However, the matriarchy actually exhibited within the Hebrew Bible suggests a vastly different perspective than that implied by feminist literature.

A close reading of the Pentateuch and beyond reveals women in roles of strength and influence. Hebrew patriarchy must be allowed to be defined in the light of its original context. And when so done, the details recorded in the Hebrew Bible seem to indicate a rather equitable situation between male and female. This continues up to the time of the Israelite monarchy with even the various household tasks shared equally by both genders. Not only women, but also men such as Abraham, Jacob, and Esau are seen cooking. And both male and female are seen taking care of the animals. Following the establishing of the throne in Israel, the narrative focus dramatically shifts to royal personages and court intrigue. Whereas prior to the monarchy,

women and men were seen in basic equivalence, from this point on the woman slowly disappears in narrative records,



thus fulfilling textually God's earlier warning to Israel through Samuel of the pivotal changes that would occur if Israel insisted on a king.

Feminists are right in demanding redress of the long-accumulating record of the subjugation of women. But they need to rethink the cause of this repression. The matriarchs of the Hebrew Bible are not suppressed women. For, as we have seen, Hebrew women are highlighted in the Pentateuch and beyond with considerable prominence. Indeed, if Sarah and Rebekah and other Hebrew matriarchs could engage modern feminism, would they not chide the simplistic castigation of their vigorous position within Hebrew patriarchy?

¹J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1975), pp. 92-94.

²Janice Nunnally-Cox, *Fore-Mothers: Women of the Bible* (New York: Seabury, 1981), p. 20 (emphasis added).