



More than Matriarchs: Women in the Book of Genesis

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Women of Genesis

Genesis is a book about beginnings. In Hebrew, the word בְּרֵאשִׁית, or *bereshit*, can mean more than just *in the beginning*. It could mean *on high, at the head, when he began, or at the start*. Regardless, the text is essentially about the people who would help create three of the world's largest religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This exhibit is about the women of that text.

According to tradition, there are four Matriarchs, or mothers of the tribes of Israel. These are Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. While this label is important to signify the role of these women in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it creates a sense of hierarchy that allows for the exclusion of other Women in the Book of Genesis. Instead, all women in the book of Genesis are important, regardless of their role as mothers.

Looking specifically at the women, we see an interesting point of view that might not be seen from a normative perspective. This exhibit grew out of the work of students in a class with the same name, and most of the cases were planned by them. As a result, many of the cases are from a specific point of view from the students of Baker University.

Special thanks to the students of Baker University that helped assemble this exhibit:

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Seldom Discussed Women

The women on the North wall represent figures that have small roles in the text or have lives outside of the book of Genesis. Theologians have a long history of creating stories based on characters that are barely mentioned in the text; however, many of these women are no longer discussed and are waiting to be discovered again.

Case 1. The Torah Scroll and Lillith

Case Designed by Anna Hobbs

On the right is a Torah scroll turned to the book of Genesis. It contains the first five books of the Bible in Hebrew and would have been written on kosher animal skin. The scroll itself would have been kept in an ark at the front of a synagogue. In various Jewish services, pieces of the Torah would be read until the entire Torah is finished every year.

A popular Jewish legend is of Adam's first wife. Depicted on the top left is a man and two women. One of the women appears to be in an embrace with the man, while the other woman is set apart. The lone woman may be looking back at the couple (Adam and Eve). She is Lillith, the first wife of Adam who left the Garden of Eden because she refused to submit to him. Later on, Lillith sees Adam and Eve together in the Garden and feels jealous of Eve. The image of the woman looking back suggests a hint of regret felt by Lillith upon her expulsion from the Garden.

Below is one of the Bible translations that directly references Lillith in Isaiah chapter 34, verse 14. The chapter describes YHWH's Day of Judgment, and claims Lillith will return to Israel with her children and make a home there. This verse gives clues to the fact that Lillith was often

depicted as the mother of demons, who would steal the babies of Adam, an explanation for infant death.

Case 2. Eve

Case Designed by Brittney Harmon

Eve in Hebrew means *living one* or *source of life* and *Adam* means *human* or *clay*. As a masculine noun, *adam* means *man* or *mankind*, usually in a collective context as in *humankind*. This allows the reader to pay special attention to the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, through the context that Adam and Eve represented all of humankind and the source of life for the future of the world. The text in the center is a Hexaglot Bible that shows the names of Adam and Eve in six different languages.

Knowing that Adam and Eve are to shape the future world of humankind, theology has used their story to reinforce normative gender roles. These include women depicted solely as caregivers, mothers, and submissive and men as providers, dominant, and leaders. In the Bible on the far right and the one on the far left, the illustrations show Eve as submissive to Adam, reinforcing this interpretation of distinct gender roles.

Case 3. Sarah

Case Designed by Caleb Lee

Sarah is quite possibly the most important woman in Judaism and is the first woman to receive the title Matriarch. Reading her story and focusing on her life changes the way you view her husband Abraham. In two occasions she is convinced by Abraham to lie to rulers to say

that she is his sister (Genesis 12 and 20). In both cases, Abraham gains wealth from the trickery. In the text depicted on the left Sarah is being instructed to say that she is his sister. Abraham feared that she was too beautiful, and as a result this image emphasizes her beauty by making him much older than her, although they are near the same age.

The text on the right depicts the angels of the Lord, who will destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, meeting with Abraham. In this story Sarah overhears that she will give birth to a son even though she is so old. Considering that she has been barren her entire life, she laughs when she hears this. As a result, her son is named Isaac, which is Hebrew for *she laughs*. After Abraham is instructed to sacrifice this son, we never hear from her again.

Case 4. Hagar/Hajar

Case Designed by Abdullah Alrashed

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is found in both the Bible and the Qur'an. The story is almost the same in both holy books. The characters have the same names and the same relationships to each other. In both books, Sarah and Abraham are married, Hagar is Sarah's servant, and Ishmael is Abraham's first child. On the left, there is a Qur'an in Arabic and below it a Qur'an in English. Both are turned to Surah 2:136, that explains that Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael are prophets in Islam.

Muslims believe that the oldest son Ishmael deserved the blessing and that Hagar and Ishmael settled near the holiest shrine, the Kaba, where a place was built for them by Abraham. The Bible on the right depicts the scene where

Sarah casts out Hagar and Ishmael from their home, in order to keep the blessing for Isaac.

Case 5. Rebekah

Case Designed by Emi Kniffen

Rebekah, perhaps best known for being the “trickster” of Genesis, was a woman who knew what she wanted and how to get it. This determination began during Rebekah’s second mention in the Bible, Genesis 24. Rebekah overheard Abraham’s servant describing the type of wife he was told to find for Isaac, and set out to be that woman.

The text on the left shows Rebekah veiling herself after the servant takes her to meet Isaac. The images in the center and right show Rebekah helping her favorite son Jacob trick his father Isaac in order to obtain the blessing meant for the older son Esau. This action is what scholars often point to when they give her the label “trickster.”

Case 6. Leah and Rachel

Case Designed by Caitlyn Lawson

Leah and Rachel were the two wives of Jacob, the son Isaac. There was a sibling rivalry between Rachel and Leah. Rachel was who Jacob originally wanted to marry however he ended up being married to Leah first. Rachel was described as beautiful in the Bible which was what attracted Jacob to her. This was how the sibling rivalry began. The center text shows the two sisters together. Tradition usually upholds

Rachel as the most loved and more important sister, which is why the text on the left depicts both sisters, but only mentions Jacob meeting Rachel.

Leah wanted Jacob's affection and Rachel struggled to bare any children. Leah ended up having six of Jacob's children, eight if you count the children that she had through surrogacy from Zilpah. Rachel only had two, four if you the kids that she had through surrogacy from Bilhah. In one of the more interesting scenes depicted on the right, Rachel steals her father's idols and takes them with her. In response, he hunts the family down to retrieve them, but cannot find them because Rachel is sitting on the idols. Rachel was buried on the side of the road in what is now Bethlehem. Leah was buried in a tomb next to the other major matriarchs.

Case 7. Bilhah and Zilpah

Bilhah and Zilpah were the handmaidens of Rachel and Leah who also acted as mothers to the tribes of Israel. However, they somehow get excluded from the list of matriarchs and from many discussions of Genesis altogether. When reading the text in Hebrew, it is hard to discern when the two are described as servants, handmaidens, or as secondary wives.

The King James Bible on the right depicts the family tree of Jacob and shows how complicated the tribe of Israel is. Notice that Bilhah and Zilpah are connected to the tree but have a different status according to the shapes surrounding their names. The image on the left depicts two different scenes with Bilhah and Zilpah present and connected to Leah and Rachel. The top scene shows the famous mandrake episode of Genesis 30, where Rachel trades a

night with Jacob for mandrake root, which supposedly increases fertility. Bilhah and Zilpah are in the left of the scene. In the image below, the entire family is traveling with Jacob.

Case 8. Dinah

Case Designed by Jessie Holmes

Dinah is the only daughter of Jacob that whose name we know. In Genesis 34, the family settles outside of the city of Shechem. The prince of the city sees Dinah, “longs” for her, and forces himself on her. Without a word for rape in Hebrew, many scholars and theologians have debated whether or not it was truly rape. However, it is pretty obvious when reading the text. On the left, is a Bible turned to Genesis 34.

In response to the “defiling” of their sister, some of her brothers devise a plot to take revenge. To marry Dinah, the prince agrees that all men of Shechem should be circumcised. While they were recovering from the surgery, Simeon and Levi killed all the men of the city and captured all their women and children as slaves. The text on the right depicts the murder and pillaging done by the two brothers. As a result of their actions, the tribes of Levi and Simeon are not allowed to inherit land in Israel.

Case 9. Tamar

No one can quite explain why Tamar’s story is found in the middle of a story about Joseph. Joseph’s story begins in Genesis 37 and then continues in Genesis 39, but Tamar’s

story is between in Genesis 38 with nothing to do with Joseph. After her husband and brother-in-law are killed, she has no one to give her an heir. As a result, she convinces their father, Judah, into sleeping with her.

To do this she has to dress in a disguise and take something he owns in order to ensure that her child will receive inheritance. When she veils herself, he thinks she is a prostitute, even though prostitutes were not allowed to veil in this time period. The picture on the left depicts a veiled Tamar. The text on the right shows the entire story with her encounter with Judah on the bottom; her revealing that she has his ring and staff at the top right and the birth of her sons below.

Case 10. Mrs. Potiphar

The Joseph story is one of the most popular in all of Genesis, even inspiring a Broadway play. When Joseph is sold into slavery, his master is an official of the Pharaoh's court in Egypt named Potiphar. Although Potiphar is described as a eunuch, he has a wife that attempts to seduce Joseph when he is away.

According to Islamic tradition, she literally cannot help herself because Joseph is so beautiful; however, if Potiphar was truly a eunuch, she might want to sleep with Joseph because she cannot have children with her husband. The picture on the left is the famous scene where she attempts to pull him in bed, and while he flees she takes his clothes. On the right shows her presenting his clothes to Potiphar and accusing him of rape, which will cause him to be placed in jail.

For Further Reading

Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis, by Tammi Schneider. (2008)

Sarah: Mother of Nations, by Tammi Schneider. (2004)

Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories, by Tikva Frymer-Kensky. (2004)

Sacred Withness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible, by Susanne Scholz. (2010)

Women's Bible Commentary, by Carol Newsom, ed. (2012)

Rediscovering Eve, by Carol Meyers. (1992)

Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk, by Delores Williams. (1995)

Texts of Terror, Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives, by Phyllis Trible. (1985)

Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible, by Alice Ogden Bellis. (2007)

A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters, by Susan Niditch. (2000)

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