

Joseph H.H. Weiler

New York University School of Law

e-mail: weilersoffice@nyu.edu

ORCID: 0000-0002-9655-8417

LOVE AND MARRIAGE: REVISITING PATRIARCHY AND MATRIARCHY IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Abstract

The article deals with various patterns of marriage relationships which were depicted in the Old Testament (Book of Genesis). Three types of marriages are distinguished there based, *inter alia*, upon the love relationships of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Those patterns are founded upon the realism of the Bible narrative which provides for different, sometimes difficult and “loveless”, relationships among the couples. The article also argues that gender was not always determinative of the functional and even public role of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs where, for example, Rebecca, not Isaac, is in all but name the veritable “Patriarch”.

KEYWORDS

matriarchat, patriarchat, marriage, Bible, Old Testament

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

matriarchat, patriarchat, małżeństwo, Biblia, Stary Testament

1. INTRODUCTION

It is quite common in contemporary treatments of patriarchy in conjugal relations to consider that narrative of the original Patriarchs as the “original sin” or perhaps originating sin – both reflective and, because of the hugely important normative role the Bible has played in Western civilization until recent times, constitutive of an enduring model. The hallmarks of this model are varied and well known: Male-female hierarchy, sharp and fixed role differentiation where Pater represents power, worldliness, and notably is responsible for the destiny of the family, while Mater is softer, domestic, and responsible for nurturing sons and daughters who will reassume these roles in adulthood. At a more abstract level, subject-object, active-passive, public-private, masculine-feminine, etc. stand as proxies for patriarchy and at a more crude level it is a model in which wives are “given” in matrimony by their fathers or “taken” by their husbands as objects to be owned. Even in modern Hebrew, as a legacy of this patriarchy, the word for ‘husband’ is *Baal* – ‘owner’. When a woman says: ‘My husband’ she is saying ‘My owner’. The most common expression, even in contemporary usage, for ‘My wife’ is ‘My woman’. And it should not surprise us that the noun *Baal* (‘husband’) couples, too (albeit somewhat archaically), as a verb for the sexual act and that this particular verb can typically be used only by the male. Wives, if not chattels, in furtherance of dynastic interests, become baby production machines whose primary function is to continue the (male) line. The affective dimension of the relationship – seeing that frequently the marriage is “fixed” – is expected to play a secondary role (the real love interest of the husband is often outside the marriage, and that of the wife is rarely considered, or when it is, is considered scandalous).

Second, though there has been a growing and varied literature which has focused on female subjects in the Bible in general and in the Genesis narrative in particular, there is still a tendency to regard the institution of marriage as presented in the story of the Avot and Imahot – belonging to the same genus and structure, differentiated mainly by the personality of the protagonists. This tendency is enhanced by the tradition of harmonizing and leveling the patriarchal narrative, notably through the liturgy where Avot and Imahot are at times mentioned together, in the same breath and with no normative differentiation. However, it is still the case that in the most important prayers, like the Shmoneh Esreh (the 18), the central prayer in all three daily devotions, the reference is to Patriarchs alone – The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and it is only in progressive Jewish communities that this liturgy has been changed to include the Matriarchs, too.

The Genesis narrative of the House of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has not only reflected as well as constituted patriarchal models and general attitude to the institution of marriage and gender roles but has also played a legitimating function when these spilled over into the world of Halakha and the more subtle

forms of normative Judaism. Maase Avot, Siman LeBanim – the ways of the fathers are sign for the sons.

As attitudes towards gender roles have evolved in modernity even within Orthodoxy – notably in the 20th century – and the critique of patriarchy and its origins in biblical religion have grown, a rich apologetic literature has developed the hallmarks of which have been attempts to valorize the role of women with the traditional model.

This essay tries in some ways to walk between the drops. Perhaps I can explain what it is I am not trying to do. I am certainly not trying to explore and expose even further the patriarchal dimensions of the Genesis narrative. There is a large literature, some illuminating, some tendentious. It is equally not my purpose to contribute to the apologetic literature in the sense described above.

In this essay I will explore some aspects of the conjugal relationships between the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob, Leah and Rachel¹. I would like to suggest that they are all, of course, situated within a patriarchal framework, but not only are they not an expression of a monolithic image or ideal type of marriage and gender roles within marriage, but in fact in key and defining respects, both affective and structural, they represent very distinct models. Not only distinct but remarkably realistic.

2. ABRAHAM AND SARAH – THE LOVELESS MARRIAGE?

Arguably, the story of this marriage sets the model for Patriarchy. In the unfolding narrative Sarah is very secondary to Abraham both in terms of life story as well as theologically. Notably whereas, as we shall see, the affective dimension of the relationship plays a role in the narrative of Isaac and Jacob with their respective wives, by contrast, there is no allusion in the text to any tenderness or love in the relationship of Abraham and Sarah. Indeed, in the various episodes when their conjugal life is at issue, there are some subtle hints in the text that it may well have been a loveless marriage.

The beginnings are not auspicious. The matching of Isaac with the formidable Rebekah and of Jacob with Rachel and Leah are the subject of considerable preparation, planning, enterprise and, as we shall see, eventual romantic attachment. Of Sarah it is simply said:

Now these are the generations of Terah: Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot. And Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees. And Abram and Nahor took them wives: the name of Abram's

¹ All biblical translations were drawn from *The Holy Bible. King James Version*, Zeiset 2020, but the analysis is based on the original Hebrew.

wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah, and the father of Iscah. But Sarai was barren; she had no child (Gen. 11:27–30).

Very little romance here. It could be that Sarah's infertility explains Abraham's subsequent coldness to her, but it is worth recording that both Rebekah and Rachel were initially barren, and this did not dampen the love and passion of their spouses.

The next we hear of the private life of Abraham and Sarah takes place when, as a result of famine in the land, Abraham goes to Egypt. Sarah is of outstanding beauty and Abraham is fearful that he will be killed so that she could be given to someone else. So he beseeches her to pretend to be his sister. And indeed she is taken in concubinage to the King who only later discovers her real status and returns her to Abraham. It is not surprising that some of the commentators condemn Abraham for this episode. His action is less than noble. There is, however, textual reason to believe that his fear was not fanciful. Had he not used the ruse, Sarah could still be in concubinage minus a husband. So, perhaps, we should not be too hasty in our moral condemnation of someone whom starvation forced to a foreign land and culture and who was struggling to survive. Isaac was forced to use the same ruse, and no one doubts his affective relationship and commitment to Rebekah. We can only speculate as to Sarah's consent to this scheme: Affection? Obedience? No other option? Each and all are possible. It is typical that in an Abrahamcentric biblical narrative no attention is paid to Sarah's inner emotional world in this instance.

There is, however, a textual nuance in the narrative which may be revealing as regards the relationship of Abraham and Sarah. Here is the relevant text:

And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land. And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon: Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive. Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee. And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair. The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh: and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house (Gen. 12:10–15).

What I find striking is the phrase: "Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon" and in particular the words "I know that thou art".

It would be, surely, more natural to say: "Behold now, thou art a fair woman" etc., or "Behold now, we know that thou art a fair woman" etc.

But why does Abraham, married already for a long time to this beautiful woman, have to tell her: "I know that thou art". Has he not whispered that in her ear a thousand times before? The answer in my view is simple: Evidently not.

(And it is possible to read the original Hebrew, and it has been read as such by several commentators, to read “Behold, now I know that thou art a fair woman” – now, for the first time). There is little by way of textual inflection that escapes the medieval commentators, principal among them Rashi. His explanation is given a theological twist – as a sign of Abrham’s piety who, until that time, did not notice Sarah’s beauty.

But when we take the prosaic circumstances of the marriage, the absence of any indication of endearment (the only time the text directly attributes love to Abraham, is for his son Isaac), we can take this turn of phrase as a sign of conjugal estrangement or, at least, affective coldness. Abraham actually needs to tell Sarah that, in fact, he is aware of her beauty. Indeed, does not the whole plea of Abraham to Sarah suggest something other than a shared life and the bonds of love and commitment? Something far more formal?

There is a second episode which points in a similar direction and even adds something.

The following six verses from Gen. 16:1–6 (a mere 96 words in the original Hebrew) are a typical example of the packed nature of biblical narrative, high drama and intense emotion conveyed in the minimalist manner.

Now Sarai Abram’s wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. And Sarai Abram’s wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife. And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes. And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the Lord judge between me and thee. But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face.

The text speaks for itself and seems to be self-explanatory. But there is one extraordinary phrase. In response to the changed attitude of Hagar, Sarah takes her plaint to Abraham:

And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes.

This makes sense. But then she goes on to say something that makes, at face value, a little less sense:

[t]he Lord judge between me and thee.

Why should the Lord judge between Sarah and Abraham? Should she not have said “The Lord judge between me and her?”. And what was so grave that the Lord had to be called upon?

Note another subtlety of the text: The admirable King James renders Hagar's attitude as "despise". This is, perhaps, an over-translation of the Hebrew 'vaTekal'. More accurate, though less elegant, would be to say: "She [Sarah] became lighter, less worthy, in the eyes of Hagar". By contrast, King James under-translates Sarah's reaction: She *dealt hardly* with Hagar. So hardly, that the pregnant handmaid fled to the desert. In fact, the Hebrew text is 'VaTeaneah' – which in today's Hebrew connotes torture and in biblical Hebrew often connotes sexual abuse: When Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, is raped by Shechem (Gen. 34:1–2), that very phrase is used. Perhaps the translator, uncomfortable with Sarah's conduct towards her erstwhile handmaid, sought himself to finesse the episode by exaggerating the misconduct of Hagar and by lightening the misconduct of Sarah.

What can explain, then, the call upon God to judge a dispute between Sarah and *Abraham* and what can explain the very harsh treatment of Hagar by Sarah?

One possibility is to say that Sarah's complaint was against Abraham's inaction. His failure to prevent or reproach Hagar. But if this is all, would the Lord himself be called in by Sarah to judge between her and Abraham? Would the rights and wrongs not be self-evident and rather trivial for such divine invocation? Does not calling upon the Lord suggest both a much more serious transgression and one that requires the Omniscient, He who knows what is hidden in a man's bowels and heart?

Here, speculatively, is my reconstruction of this episode, one that in my view has both textual and psychological fidelity.

Sarah, despite her beauty, feels affectively and sexually spurned by Abraham. She blames herself, as many women are wont to do in such a situation. Like the spurned Leah, she hopes that a child may open the heart of her husband. But being barren, pathetically, like Rachel, she must resort to her handmaid to give surrogate birth. Except, and this is my leap, Abraham does not simply regard her as a surrogate mother but falls in love with Hagar. She conceives in love. It is this love, which induces Hagar to feel, and to express, a certain lack of respect for Sarah. We do not, after all, read of any similar attitude by the handmaids that were given to Jacob. I speculate that Hagar would neither feel, nor dare to express such feelings, if she did not feel romantic attachment by Abraham, if she did not feel that in his eyes she had become the wife, at least emotionally speaking.

When Sarah comes to Abraham, there is a subtext to her complaint. On the surface – "I have given my maid into thy bosom" and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes. But beneath the surface there is a non-spoken complaint: "And you and I know why and how this has come to be". Hence, the prologue to her complaint: "And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee, and the epilogue: the Lord judge between me and thee, the Lord from whom you cannot and will not dare to deny your complicity".

Abraham's reaction is also telling and consistent with this exegesis. Is there not a bit of "that woman" (the typical reaction of husbands caught in adultery) in

his response: "But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee"? And is Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar, so harsh as to make her flee, so harsh that the narrator uses a word of extreme abuse consistent with disciplining a cheeky maid? Or is it more consistent with a spurned wife taking revenge on her maid who has suddenly become her rival in the most humiliating circumstances?

Let us now examine the next episode from Gen. 18:1–15:

And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day; And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground, And said, My Lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant: Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree: And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts; after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said (...). And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? And the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh.

Towards the end of the passage there are two conversations going on. The Lord speaks directly to Abraham, not to Sarah, and reproaches her for her lack of faith. (In this, of course, she is no different from Abraham, who, too, in Gen. 17:16–17 laughs when told of a pending son, though it is only Sarah's laugh which is reproached in this manner).

And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her. Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear? And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee! And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.

There is a second conversation going on, this time between Abraham and Sarah, when Abraham conveys to Sarah God's displeasure with her lack of faith. Sarah denies that she laughed, but Abraham insists that she did laugh. Why is Abraham so insistent? And why his ire at what would appear to be a reaction very similar to his own when he heard for the first time that they were to have a son?

Let us now read with greater care the circumstances of Sarah's laughter and the circumstances of Abraham's laughter. Abraham laughs because he doubts the *biological* possibility of conception. Sarah introduces a stunning emotional element:

After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?

It is the word *pleasure* that is stunning. Abraham was doubting the possibility of procreation. Sarah doubts the possibility of sex and love. It is not the biological impossibility that makes her laugh, but the affective impossibility that Abraham, the man who failed to see and appreciate her beauty until it threatened his life, the man with whom she had the enigmatic quarrel over Hagar, would suddenly sleep with her, give her pleasure after, according to my reading, a loveless life. Then she adds an allusion to Abraham's age, suggesting in this context not a question of his virility but of his potency or, rather, impotency – at least in her regard. And perhaps Abraham intuits this – hence his ire, hence Sarah's fear. After all, it is not the anger of God that she fears and seeks to quell with her denial – since God could see into her heart. It was Abraham she was afraid of because of the implicit insult to his manhood.

There are two final episodes to mention in this reconstruction. In Gen. 23:1–2 we are abruptly informed of Sarah's death:

And Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old: these were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah died in Kirjatharba; the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan: and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.

It is a common commentary to suggest that she died upon hearing of Isaac's ordeal, Isaac to whom she was so attached and who loved her so much. The announcement of her death comes immediately after the story of the binding, hence the connection. But in our context it is noteworthy that Abraham does not share with Sarah his decision nor discuss it with her after it is over. In discussing Abraham's immediate obedience to the Lord, when commanded to take his son and murder him in sacrifice to God, he is considered classically and famously as the Knight of faith. But his failure to share such decision with his wife and mother of his son is telling, too, as to the place Sarah had in his heart.

Note also in the passage reporting her death, how it is said that Abraham "came" to mourn her. Does this not suggest that he was not by her side at her death? That maybe he was even dwelling elsewhere?

In Gen. 25:1 we learn of Abraham's new wife, taken after Sarah's death:

Then again Abraham took a wife, and her name was Keturah. And she bare him Zimran, and Jokshan, and Medan, and Midian, and Ishbak, and Shuah.

Virility, as we already speculated, evidently was not his problem. If at the time of the announcement of the promise of Isaac, Sarah doubted Abraham's potency,

that would be because it was not manifest in their relationship, not because he was really impotent.

What of the other aspects of their marriage? Loveless it might have been at least in the attitude of Abraham towards Sarah, but the institution of marriage itself provides certain guarantees of dignity and respect for Sarah the Matriarch. It is Sarah's sons (Ishmael is considered hers too) who, alone, will inherit and it is Sarah who is buried in the cave of the Machpelah. Not Keturah (who, incidentally, the Talmud suggests is Hagar!).

3. ISAAC AND REBEKAH: PATRIARCHY REVERSED

The most interesting feature, as we turn to examine the marriage and conjugal life of Isaac and Rebekah, appears to be how dramatically different this relationship is, compared to that of Abraham and Sarah. In some respects it is hard to credit that they are part of the same culture.

The first notable difference is the centrality which the issue of marriage assumes. The brief line, a demi-phrase which sums up the prenuptials and nuptials of Abraham and Sarah – “And Abram and Nahor took them wives: the name of Abram's wife was Sarai” – becomes a full and central part of the story in the case of Isaac and Rebekah. There is an elaborate narrative concerning the search and selection of a spouse for the Isaac. It is, of course, a patriarchic setting. Abraham, the father, decides on the timing and sends his servant to bring back a spouse for Isaac.

And Abraham was old, and well stricken in age: and the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. And Abraham said unto his eldest servant of his house, that ruled over all that he had, Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh: And I will make thee swear by the LORD, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell: But thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac (Gen. 24:1–4).

Second, compared to the virtual anonymity of Sarah and the scant detail the text divulges about her, Rebekah is the veritable protagonist of the prenuptial narrative. It is a rich tale from which we learn legions about her personality.

And the servant took ten camels of the camels of his master, and departed; for all the goods of his master were in his hand: and he arose, and went to Mesopotamia, unto the city of Nahor. And he made his camels to kneel down without the city by a well of water at the time of the evening, even the time that women go out to draw water. And he said O LORD God of my master Abraham, I pray thee, send me good speed this day, and shew kindness unto my master Abraham. Behold, I stand here

by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water: And let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that thou hast shewed kindness unto my master. And it came to pass, before he had done speaking, that, behold, Rebekah came out, who was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, with her pitcher upon her shoulder. And the damsel was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her: and she went down to the well, and filled her pitcher, and came up. And the servant ran to meet her, and said, Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher. And she said, Drink, my lord: and she hastened, and let down her pitcher upon her hand, and gave him drink. And when she had done giving him drink, she said, I will draw water for thy camels also, until they have done drinking. And she hastened, and emptied her pitcher into the trough, and ran again unto the well to draw water, and drew for all his camels (Gen. 24:10–20).

We might be tempted to say that this is so because now that Abraham has been blessed and his destiny to become a father of many nations established, the matter of the spouse of his son is of much greater interest than that of his own spouse. If this were so, we might have expected the same rich detail concerning the spouse(s) of Isaac's son Jacob. But in that case we are back to the scant narrative. We will need, thus, to find another explanation.

Note, too, that the centrality of Rebekah is not just in the story telling. "What if the woman does not consent to follow me to this land?", asks the servant of Abraham. We might have expected that this would be a matter to be settled between Patriarch and Patriarch – i.e. "what if her father does not consent" would have been the more expected question. And yet the text assigns the role to the spouse herself. This, grant me, is quite striking.

Later, when the servant seeks her hand for the son of his distant master, it is, indeed, her father and brother who conventionally answer: "Here is Rebekah before you; take her and go, and let her be a wife to your master's son". But when the moment of truth comes, it is Rebekah herself who becomes mistress of her fate:

And they did eat and drink, he and the men that were with him, and tarried all night; and they rose up in the morning, and he said, Send me away unto my master. And her brother and her mother said, Let the damsel abide with us a few days, at the least ten; after that she shall go. And he said unto them, Hinder me not, seeing the LORD hath prospered my way; send me away that I may go to my master. And they said, We will call the damsel, and enquire at her mouth. And they called Rebekah, and said unto her, Wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go (Gen. 24:54–58).

And then, even more confounding our normal image of classical patriarchy, they bless her and say:

O sister!
May you grow

Into thousands of myriads;
 May your offspring seize
 The gates of their foes (Gen. 24:59).

This is the kind of blessing which the biblical narrative until this point would have induced us to expect would normally be bestowed on a male.

The affective life of Rebekah and Isaac is also dramatically different from that of Abraham and Sarah. Scripture is economical in its domestic relational narration. But the verbal economy cannot hide the depth of feeling and tenderness:

And Rebekah arose, and her damsels, and they rode upon the camels, and followed the man: and the servant took Rebekah, and went his way. And Isaac came from the way of the well Lahairoi; for he dwelt in the south country. And Isaac went out to meditate in the field at the eventide: and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, the camels were coming. And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she lighted off the camel. For she had said unto the servant, What man is this that walketh in the field to meet us? And the servant had said, It is my master: therefore she took a vail, and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all things that he had done. And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death (Gen. 24:61–67).

And it is not just tender, motherlike love. When Isaac moves to Grar and lives among hostiles, copying the questionable example of his illustrious father he also pretends that Rebekah is his sister. But here, too, the context is almost the opposite of that which we saw in the case of Abraham and Sarah. Rebekah does not suffer from lack of sexual attention from Isaac. In fact the deception is discovered when Abimelech, the King of the Philistines, looking out of the window observes Isaac fondling his wife.

And it came to pass, when he had been there a long time, that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out at a window, and saw, and, behold, Isaac was sporting with Rebekah his wife (Gen. 26:8).

The King James translation “sporting” is a bowdlerized reference to the original Hebrew which more expressly uses a term associated with sexual play.

As the narrative progresses, the importance of Rebekah deepens. It is remarkable that when Rebekah bears the twins Esau and Jacob, *it is to her, not to Isaac*, that God reveals himself and informs her that it will be the younger one, Jacob, who is destined to carry on the Covenant.

And Isaac intreated the LORD for his wife, because she was barren: and the LORD was intreated of him, and Rebekah his wife conceived. And the children struggled together within her; and she said, If it be so, why am I thus? And she went to enquire of the LORD. And the LORD said unto her, Two nations are in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger (Gen. 25:21–23).

And then, even more stunning but altogether consistent with what we have seen so far, it is Rebekah who establishes the affective relationship with Jacob – the one chosen by God, whereas Isaac loves the hotheaded and wild Esau.

And the boys grew: and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob was a plain man, dwelling in tents. And Isaac loved Esau, because he did eat of his venison: but Rebekah loved Jacob (Gen. 25:26–27).

And then, and by this point it comes as no surprise, it is Rebekah who masterminds and guides Jacob's deception of his father so that the prophecy she heard from God will be fulfilled and then engineers Jacob's departure so that he will escape the wrath of Esau.

And it came to pass, that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see, he called Esau his eldest son, and said unto him, My son: and he said unto him, Behold, here am I. And he said, Behold now, I am old, I know not the day of my death: Now therefore take, I pray thee, thy weapons, thy quiver and thy bow, and go out to the field, and take me some venison; And make me savoury meat, such as I love, and bring it to me, that I may eat; that my soul may bless thee before I die. And Rebekah heard when Isaac spake to Esau his son. And Esau went to the field to hunt for venison, and to bring it. And Rebekah spake unto Jacob her son, saying, Behold, I heard thy father speak unto Esau thy brother, saying, Bring me venison, and make me savoury meat, that I may eat, and bless thee before the LORD before my death. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice according to that which I command thee. Go now to the flock, and fetch me from thence two good kids of the goats; and I will make them savoury meat for thy father, such as he loveth: And thou shalt bring it to thy father, that he may eat, and that he may bless thee before his death. And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, Behold, Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man: My father peradventure will feel me, and I shall seem to him as a deceiver; and I shall bring a curse upon me, and not a blessing. And his mother said unto him, Upon me be thy curse, my son: only obey my voice, and go fetch me them (Gen. 27:1–10).

And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing wherewith his father blessed him: and Esau said in his heart, The days of mourning for my father are at hand; then will I slay my brother Jacob. And these words of Esau her elder son were told to Rebekah: and she sent and called Jacob her younger son, and said unto him, Behold, thy brother Esau, as touching thee, doth comfort himself, purposing to kill thee. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; arise, flee thou to Laban my brother to Haran; And tarry with him a few days, until thy brother's fury turn away; Until thy brother's anger turn away from thee, and he forget that which thou hast done to him: then I will send, and fetch thee from thence: why should I be deprived also of you both in one day? (Gen. 27:41–45).

Most significant in my eyes is the following, seemingly trivial, phrase:

And Rebekah said to Isaac, I am weary of my life because of the daughters of Heth: if Jacob take a wife of the daughters of Heth, such as these which are of the daughters of the land, what good shall my life do me? (Gen. 27:46).

Nota bene: Rebekah has here played the role vis-à-vis Jacob and the patriarchal dynasty that Abraham played vis-à-vis Isaac.

Putting all these elements together enables me to present my thesis in its entirety. Though the formal dimension of Patriarchy is preserved in the Isaac-Rebekah relational narrative, the substance is inverted: In substance Rebekah is Patriarchal and is celebrated as such by the narrative. The voice – which bestows the Blessings and carries the covenant – may be that of Jacob, but the hands, so to speak, are those of Rebekah. Note, that this is not a “Behind every man there is a good woman” thesis. My claim is much more extravagant in the interplay between form and substance: Though formally Rebekah is “being taken” as a wife for Isaac, in fact, as we noted, it turns out to be her sovereign decision and the feel of the narrative including their encounter is as much, if not more, of her taking him to be her husband. Their affective relationship also bucks the trend, where it is Isaac who is the romantic, falling deeply in love, and relationally passive. In fact, there is nothing in the text to indicate whether that love and passion are reciprocated by Rebekah. And then, it is Rebekah who leads the saga, both narratively but also substantively, in engineering the fulfillment of the Covenant.

More tellingly, there is actual conversation between Rebekah and Jacob, her son, and it is very much in the form of Patriarch speaking to son:

Now therefore, my son, obey my voice; arise, flee thou to Laban my brother to Haran;

“My son” in the direct speech – is what the biblical narrative would have habituated us to expect from father to son, not mother to son. Sarah says to Abraham: “cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac”. But nowhere do we hear of Sarah speaking directly to her son, Isaac, whereas Abraham famously turns to Isaac and says, in the manner, of Rebekah to Jacob:

Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, Father. And he answered: Yes, My son (Gen. 22:7).

It is Rebekah who is to Jacob what Abraham was to Isaac! The Patriarch is Rebekah.

4. JACOB, LEAH AND RACHEL: LOVE, HATRED AND DESTINY

The story of Jacob and his two wives offers yet another commentary on the institution of marriage. At one level these correspond most closely to our notions of traditional patriarchic marriages. It is a polygamous marriage. It is the father, Laban, who gives the daughter’s hand in marriage. They have no say in the matter. It is partially an economic relationship: Jacob works for them, *in toto*, 14 years.

And Laban had two daughters: the name of the elder was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah was tender eyed; but Rachel was beautiful and well favoured. And Jacob loved Rachel; and said, I will serve thee seven years for Rachel thy younger daughter. And Laban said, It is better that I give her to thee, than that I should give her to another man: abide with me. And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her. And Jacob said unto Laban, Give me my wife, for my days are fulfilled, that I may go in unto her. And Laban gathered together all the men of the place, and made a feast. And it came to pass in the evening, that he took Leah his daughter, and brought her to him; and he went in unto her (...). And it came to pass, that in the morning, behold, it was Leah: and he said to Laban, What is this thou hast done unto me? did not I serve with thee for Rachel? wherefore then hast thou beguiled me? And Laban said, It must not be so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Fulfil her week, and we will give thee this also for the service which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years. And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week: and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also (Gen. 29:16–28).

But unlike, say, the Abraham-Sarah narrative, here the biblical text is very attentive to the romantic dimensions of the marriage. The affective relationships are dramatic. On the one hand there is the high romance of Jacob and Rachel: The first encounter, the “knightly” conduct, the sisterly “first kiss”, the falling in love, the deception, the longings, the deep and lifelong enduring love manifest in the long indentureship for the sake of Rachel, her preference at time of danger, lasting till her untimely death when giving birth to Benjamin. This is drama almost bordering on melodrama.

And while he yet spake with them, Rachel came with her father’s sheep; for she kept them. And it came to pass, when Jacob saw Rachel the daughter of Laban his mother’s brother, and the sheep of Laban his mother’s brother, that Jacob went near, and rolled the stone from the well’s mouth, and watered the flock of Laban his mother’s brother. And Jacob kissed Rachel, and lifted up his voice, and wept. And Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s brother, and that he was Rebekah’s son: and she ran and told her father (Gen. 29:9–12).

Things are quite different for her sister. Few biblical protagonists are more touching, tragic and ultimately heroic compared to Leah. In her emotional and conjugal life she is the *par excellence* victim of patriarchy, an instrument of deception in the hands of her father who marries her off to the unsuspecting Jacob. The result is a life long resentment, even hatred, on the part of Jacob towards her. Her death is not recorded, although her burial is – a fact to which I shall return.

Her affective life is summed up in one of the most shocking and moving passages in the Bible:

And Reuben [the firstborn son of Leah] went in the days of wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them unto his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, Give me, I pray thee, of thy son’s mandrakes. And she said unto her, Is it

a small matter that thou hast taken my husband? and wouldest thou take away my son's mandrakes also? And Rachel said, Therefore he shall lie with thee to night for thy son's mandrakes. And Jacob came out of the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, Thou must come in unto me; for surely I have hired thee with my son's mandrakes. And he lay with her that night (Gen. 30:14–16).

It is difficult for one's heart not to grieve for her.

Most interesting in our context is the issue of progeny. As I have already noted, in our classical image of patriarchic marriage, the nuptials are fixed for political or economic reasons, the affective relationship is secondary, and once married the principal function of the wife is to produce a multitude of children, most importantly a male heir.

We have already seen how the biblical narratives of these marriages both confirm and confound this classical image. This is so also in the matter of children. On the one hand the stories do conform to the traditional model: All Matriarchs are intently aware of the function of producing a male heir. When they do not feel they are satisfying expectation in this manner, they introduce their handmaidens as surrogates for them. It is central to the narrative of Abraham and Sarah, to Rebekah, and even Rachel, who is so clearly, demonstrably and at times imperiously favored by Jacob who hates and spurns Leah, feels an intense rivalry with her sister on account of Leah's exceptional fecundity and her barrenness.

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die (Gen. 30:1).

On the other hand here, too, there are nuances to the classical image. The Matriarchs, with the exception of Leah, are barren and end up producing one or two children only. And yet, for example, the affective relationship between Rebekah and Isaac and, notably, Jacob and Rachel, is not shaken on account of the barrenness. Jacob's love for Rachel is independent of her ability to produce children for him. Is that not a somewhat unexpected message from a text which is supposedly entirely and classically patriarchal?

The relationships are also, surprisingly (in terms of our expectations) monogamous. Jacob ends up with a second wife against his will. The Patriarchs, unlike King Solomon or even King David do not multiply their wives even when these are barren and even though Hebrew Scripture allows such. The handmaidens are the result of the initiative of the wives' themselves. In the case of Leah she develops the notion that through her fecundity she will conquer the heart of her husband, but is then offered a cruel lesson.

And when the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb: but Rachel was barren. And Leah conceived, and bare a son, and she called his name Reuben: for she said, Surely the LORD hath looked upon my affliction; now therefore my husband will love me. And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, Because the LORD hath heard I was hated, he hath therefore given me this son also: and she called his

name Simeon. And she conceived again, and bare a son; and said, Now this time will my husband be joined unto me, because I have born him three sons: therefore was his name called Levi. And she conceived again, and bare a son: and she said, Now will I praise the LORD: therefore she called his name Judah; and left bearing (Gen. 29: 31–35).

And God hearkened unto Leah, and she conceived, and bare Jacob the fifth son. And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband: and she called his name Issachar. And Leah conceived again, and bare Jacob the sixth son. And Leah said, God hath endued me with a good dowry; now will my husband dwell with me, because I have born him six sons: and she called his name Zebulun (Gen. 30:17–20).

The results are cruel for her – for she never earns that love and affection from Jacob. But this also constitutes a very sharp textual contraindication to the traditional functional image of patriarchic marriage, according to which we would expect that a woman's worth would be measured by her fecundity.

In the story of Leah and Rachel there is one last twist – indeed twist of the dagger to our normal expectations. Jacob chooses Rachel. Jacob bestows his love on Rachel. Jacob favors Rachel's firstborn, Joseph, over all his other children, and alone among all the grandchildren, it is only Joseph's children who are blessed directly by Jacob. And yet the Scripture chooses Leah. Her death may be unrecorded, a bitter reminder to her secondary affective role in the life of Jacob. There is no record of funeral or mourning. But it is she, not Rachel, who ends up buried alongside the Patriarchs and other Matriarchs in Hebron in the Machpelah cave; even more dramatically, it is of her, through Judah, that eventually Israel's kingdom is established – David being a descendant of Leah, not Rachel. And more dramatically still, the Messiah is designated to issue of Leah line, the son of David (and Judah) rather than the son of Joseph.

5. CONCLUSIONS

If we come to draw some general conclusions, there are three striking features in the biblical narrative in Genesis concerning the institution of marriage as reflected in the stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. The first is the extreme realism in the depiction of the relationships and the obvious eschewing of any “fairytale” heuristic modeling of these relationships.

The second, an expression of this realism, is the diversity of the various elements of marriage and affective relationships. There is no single model of a “successful” marriage. The third is the most interesting: All these relationships evolve within a patriarchic context. But, as we noted, dramatically in the case of Rebekah and in a more nuanced manner elsewhere, the classical image of Patriarchy is

challenged again and again – both in the nature of the relationships themselves (Rebekah) and in the eventual meta history (Leah).

REFERENCES

The Holy Bible. King James Version, Zeiset 2020