Female In Genesis Essay, Research Paper

The Intimidating Female in Genesis

In the narrative in the book of Genesis, there are two main objectives. The first is a general goal to create a complex world designed for ideal human existence according to divinely legislated principles. The second is God’s desire to establish a great nation within this world. According to the narrative, God aims to achieve these goals by constructing frameworks for his goals and then enlisting carious humans to help see them to fruition. However, as amply demonstrated in Genesis, the human variable is volatile and frequently confronts God with instances of insubordination.

As a Collective human element, women in Genesis often appear as obstacles to these broad-overriding goals through nonfulfillment of their particular roles in the divine scheme. From the Garden of Eden right through to the story of Joseph, women, as wives, mothers, and daughters, are typically unreliable, inadequate, deceitful or, simply by virtue of their womanhood, an outright liability, and they frequently threaten to undermine God’s will as it is expressed in the opening book of the Bible.

God’s first instruction to a human being occurs during the initial telling of the creation story in Genesis. Adam and Eve have the mutual responsibility to “be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it”(1:28). However, it is really the second narrative, detailing the creation of man and woman that establishes God’s structure of the world. In this structure, Eden is created for the first man, Adam, who has one basic function, to work and guard Eden (2:15), and only one prohibition, to abstain from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (2:16).

Starting right from Genesis, in this additional description of the Eden story, tension already arises between Eve, the first biblical woman (ironically, created specifically to complete the Eden habitat for Adam), and the divine process. Duped by the serpent, she not only succumbs and eats the forbidden fruit, but also encourages Adam to join her, thereby causing their expulsion. Thus, God is forces to confront human intractability from the very beginning of his quest, and the first instance comes from a woman, the very creature created to solidify Edenic perfection.

God had intended Eden to be a self-contained universe, a paradise for Adam where he would live comfortably without toil or hardship. By disobeying, and then including Adam in her crime, Eve indirectly causes his punishment: a life that requires him to labor for his sustenance. Eve was created to be her husband’s helpmate (2:20); instead she turns out to be a catalyst for his demise and the cause of humankind’s expulsion from the Edenic Utopia. In the creation story, the satisfaction of both God and human are at stake. God aims to realize his will in the world, and the happiness and the content of humanity hinge on God’s ability to realize his plan. Eve is created to complete Eden. But, instead of conforming to God’s plan, she is a stumbling block to the construction of the divinely conceived universe.

The idea that God is striving to create an ideal world recurs in Genesis. And in many instances, as in the case of Eve, it is a woman who impedes the fulfillment of God’s vision. However, disobedient actions are not always the mode of obstruction. Sara and Rachel threaten God’s plan with their infertility. Although the text does not explicitly blame the matriarchs for their inability to conceive, they are involuntarily liable for not propagating. In every instance, it is the matriarchs, rather than their husbands or God, who are passively the physical barriers to conception. God, the narrative explains, opens wombs when he so chooses. But closed wombs are never stated to be the result of God’s initiative. And, even if conception is perceived as God’s intervention, it is significant that infertility in the text is always a result of women’s, rather than men’s, faulty anatomical equipment, making infertility an inescapable female problem.

Propagation is a central these in Genesis. In the Noah story, which is God’s attempt to reconstruct the world after the first few generations of humankind have proven incorrigible, God commands Noah “to be fruitful and multiply” (9:1) immediately after Noah emerges from the ark. Clearly, the production of offspring is integral to the divine conception of this world, just as it was in Genesis 1. And later in Genesis, when God sets out to build his chosen people, part of his blessing to Abraham is to make his offspring as abundant as “the dust of the earth” (13:16). In fact, the blessing of fruitfulness was “given to Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Calloway 15). Women are the obvious vessels necessary for the realization of the blessing. Thus, any women who does not conceive is in direct opposition to both God’s desire to populate the world in general through Noah and his descendants, and his aspiration to see his select nation proliferate. And culpability is not an issue. The narrative voice in Genesis is objective. The biblical tone ascribes neither guilt nor vindication, despite the desperate pleas of many of these women for children. Fertility is the divine right of the male establishment, and barren women are the material obstacles to the acquisition of this divine inheritance. The text does not dwell explicitly on the significance of barrenness. Instead, barrenness is presented as a straightforward problem, much like a technical glitch that requires either a major or a minor repair.

In the case of God’s specific goals for a select nation headed by the patriarch Abraham, Sara’s infertility most severely jeopardizes God’s plan. Not only does she impede the perpetuation of the Abrahamic line, her infertility also prevents the possibility of any progeny inheriting her husband’s legacy and breeds dissension in the House of Abraham. “In Ancient Israel?the primary obligation of a married woman was to bear children for her husband, particularly male children” (Calloway 13). Sara, with her infertility, also falls short of her marital duties and belittles the blessing. It is very difficult for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham if Abraham’s wife does not become pregnant. Sara tries to compensate for her inadequacy with a gesture that seems altruistic: she gives her maidservant, Hagar, to Abraham. But all that does is circumvent her obligation, create rivalry, and produce and Abramic line that is divided and at war throughout the remainder of the book of Genesis. The dynasties of Isaac, the son of Sara eventually does produce, and Ishmael, the son of Hagar, are warring parties not only in Genesis but throughout the entirety of biblical history.

The barrenness of Rachel similarly jeopardizes God’s goals and, more particularly, their family legacy. She endures an infertility crisis not dissimilar to the former travails of her husband’s grandmother. Like Sara, Rachel tries to overcome her inferiority as a barren wife by offering her maidservant in her stead. However, this measure does not alleviate her grief, and the text goes on to describe a transaction wherein Rachel, in the hope of conceiving, haggles with her sister Leah over a plant thought to be an aphrodisiac with fertility powers. Rachel in despair, pleads with Jacob to “Give me children – otherwise I am dead” (30:1).

Despite her willingness to bear children, Rachel presents an obstacle to the value of fertility. Although she does not pose the extreme threat that Sara presented, since Jacob sires children through Leah and his two concubines, her infertility still represents a serious obstacle to both her universal and her particular function as child bearer. Hence, the values in Genesis are contravened by yet another woman who does not conform to the female archetype of fertile mother.

While fertility is an overriding value in God’s human construct that women in Genesis threaten to undermine, women also obstruct the “natural” course of history which God has set in motion as part of his ideal world. After God reconstructs the world through Noah and then begins with Abraham as the forefather of a select nation, the divine element recedes from the world slightly, and a natural historical course begins to play out through the momentum that God has initiated. The first incident in Genesis in which a woman interferes with this momentum involves Rebecca, who intervenes on behalf of her second born son, Jacob. The second involves Leah who heavily veils herself, tricks Jacob, and takes her younger sister’s place under the bridal canopy.

As a result of Rebecca’s manipulative directives, Jacob, the younger son, inherits the divine blessing from Isaac, though it is clear from the text that Jacob’s brother, Esau, had been Isaac’s favored child. Rebecca’s actions are subversive because they result in the violation of the law of primogeniture that seems to have been the standard practice of inheritance in the book of Genesis. And by reassigning the inheritance, Rebecca threatens to destroy the course of event’s God has anticipated en route to the creation of his select nation. While the text shows that Rebecca had received a prophecy that “the older would serve the younger” (25:23), whenever women in Genesis take assertive actions that ramifications, strife always ensues. Just because Rebecca received a prophecy, there is no indication that she was in any position to actively seek its fulfillment. Jacob, as a result of his mother’s initiative, is forced to flee his home for fear that Esau will kill him. The enmity between the brothers endures, and just as Sara’s infertility caused familial dissension, Rebecca’s actions likewise cause divisiveness in the House of Isaac and its descendents. Unlike the instances where the men in Genesis take the fate of their families’ lives into their own hands under explicit direction from God, the rare occasions when women, such as Sara and Rebecca, take assertive action, the result is battles and feuds.

As in the case of infertility, a woman’s inheritance with the divine scheme can be seen as a multiple threat to the thematic framework of Genesis. Rebecca takes assertive, independent action with regard to her family’s development, and this action clearly crosses over the rigid boundaries of the prescribed female role. She also threatens to shake the patriarchal foundations that are so essential to the divine value system in Genesis. Furthermore she does not act exclusively as a wife or mother, but as an agent of change, an actor in the course of history. The unfolding of God’s plan depends on the male actors. God reveals himself to humans and shares his vision of the world with humans. Rebecca steps outside her limited role, becomes a primary actor, manipulates the divinely initiated course of history, and causes fraternal hostility and the jealousy which becomes one of the ongoing plagues for her children and their future generations.

Passive manipulation is more ambiguous but similarly problematic in regard to the first marriage of Jacob. The text explains that it was Laban who “took Leah, his daughter” (29:23) and put her into the marital bed instead of Rachel, the bride of Jacob was expecting. However, whether she willingly, or even complicitly, fulfils Laban’s plan, Leah is nonetheless the key agent in a plan to divert the family history as it is anticipated by the text. For seven years, Jacob toiled for Sara. She was his intended bride. And, as the text later demonstrates, it is Rachel who gives birth to the heir of the Abramic blessing, proving that she is the real matriarch destined to produce the next generation of leadership for God’s select people. However, Leah supplants Rachel and becomes a stumbling block to Jacob’s destined union. Though it is her father who is portrayed as the villain, Leah is not blameless and she receives retribution. She is forever unloved by her husband, and her children are denied the divine blessing. Her role may only be of passive conspirator but she is still the faulty link in this ordained history. And, like Eve, Sara, Rebecca, and Rachel, Leah has the potential to ruin the human universe that God, in Genesis, is painstakingly trying to build.

Leah’s trickery might be overlooked as a daughter’s compliance to a cunning father if it did not indirectly produce one of the most controversial episodes in the book of Genesis: the rape of Dina. Of all the mothers of Jacob’s children, it is Leah who gives birth to Dina. The text suggests that complications arise when divinely ordained roles are tampered with. Leah, the usurper of her sister’s nuptials, is not only weak eyed (20:17) and unloved (29:31) in the text, but also the mother of Jacob’s only daughter, the one that turns out to be a source of family shame and provocation for tribal warfare. These uncomplimentary attributes and associations negatively characterize Leah and allude to her illegal manipulation of God’s blueprint for the course of human history’s development.

While Leah subtly triggers a course of events that threatens the goals and values in Genesis, Dina, in contrast, directly challenges her society by her unconventional behavior and troublesome predicament. Firstly, as it has been noted, a woman’s worth in Genesis is measured by her subservience to her husband and her fertility. “Dina acts contrary to the role expected of her” (Graetz 306). She is neither a wife nor a mother, only a daughter and sister. In patriarchal societies, like the society of Abraham and his descendants, “daughters have value primarily on the marriage market and in their potential to bear children” (Graetz 306). Therefore, Dina, a defiled and unmarried daughter, is not only an affront to the greater divine plan, based on female subordination and fertility, but also a burden to her family because she subverts societal expectations. She is reduced to being damaged goods and brings shame to her entire clan.

The behavioral codes and moral principles in Genesis continually reinforce the patriarchal nature of the society and the carefully defined parameters designated for a female’s contribution. Dina represents still another model of a woman who threatens the Genesis community by her deviant actions. All the women encountered in Genesis are either dwelling or journeying under their father’s or husband’s jurisdictions. They never travel or venture out by themselves under any condition. By going out ” to look over the land” (34:1), Dina, like Rebecca, violates the female role by taking independent action. She transgresses the norm of total subjugation to male dominance. This is threatening to the patriarchal structure, wherein women are restricted to a role of complete subservience.

Then to compound her transgression, she is raped, an incident that not only makes her into a victim, but also a burden to her family. Once violated, her sexual purity is destroyed, her future is doomed, and her family is plunged into disaster. Indeed, following the rape, the annals of Dina’s life are totally absent from the remainder of Genesis. She is mentioned only once more when she enters Egypt with the rest of her family. Whereas her brothers are discussed at great length right through to the conclusion of Genesis, Dina, after losing all her potential worth as a bride, and therefore as a wife and mother, is completely neglected.

However, the aftermath of her rape continues to reverberate. When Dina’s brothers slaughter Shechem, the entire house of Jacob is forced to flee and relocate their encampment. Thus, by rejecting the role of passive female as it is construed in Genesis, and then suffering the results of her assertive action, Dina defies God’s intentions, circumvents societal demands, and throws her family, the family chosen by God to be a blessed nation, into precarious flight. The text of Genesis is s relentless struggle to establish a world in which God’s ideals are realized and fulfilled through his blessed nation. And women, time and again, are a threat to the essential and interwoven values that are always at stake, those that concern God and his plan, and those that are meant to produce an ordained human destiny.

Potiphar’s wife is the last woman in Genesis to cast an ominous shadow over the concerns at stake in the text. With her licentious intentions (albeit, failed intentions) and dishonesty, she defies the primary function the text has set out for her as a female. When she attempts to seduce Joseph, she contradicts patriarchal standards by taking morally, illicit, overt, and decisive action. After her attempts fail, she proves herself even more untrustworthy when she slanders the innocent Joseph and causes his imprisonment. Furthermore, Joseph is the last of Abraham’s descendents to directly receive the divine blessing. So, her attack on him is also an attack on God’s select people, the people that is supposed to be the origin of a great, prosperous, and abundant nation.

Instead of being a helpmate to her husband, or to Joseph, Potiphar’s wife brings both men strife. AS a result of her actions, her husband has Joseph, his most trusted and valued servant, imprisoned and wrongly declared a criminal. Rather than acting as an aid or, or facilitator of, God’s will, or of the patriarchal society that will fosters, she is an obstacle that God has to overcome in order for the divine will to prevail.

In Genesis, there is a consistent evolution of what is at stake. In the beginning, God invests in an idyllic world governed by a patriarchal hierarchy. It is a world destined to be a model of harmony and a perfect domestic domain for human existence. Then, when the Eden experiment fails and God is compelled to recreate the world through the flood episode, this investment expands into an effort to produce a populous world for extensive human habitation. In the remainder of genesis, god directs his efforts toward the development of Abraham’s family, the representatives of God’s select nation and an expression of the divine ideal of human existence. Building this blessed nation is the chief value in the post-Flood Genesis, and this nation, as the nation devoted to the God of Genesis, is the only value that remains relevant right through to the end of the text.

At every juncture in Genesis, women primarily serve as hurdles to be negotiated so that the text’s values may be actualized. They destroy paradise, delay the propagation of the human species, defy the patriarchal structure, and endanger the proliferation of God’s blessed nation. Clearly, there are patterns to the forms of this female subversiveness, such as unreliability, infertility, and disobedience. But, since there is not one single paradigm for female insubordination, the problem of women in Genesis is a narrative device that is integrated into the text to create subversive tension. They are the hurdles that God overcomes in order for the text to prove God’s boundless and all-encompassing power. With their actions, they draw attention to the Genesis value system, prevent its immediate success, and allow for eventual divine triumphs that dramatically reinforce those values and their consequences.

Refernces

Calloway, Mary. Sing O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash. New York: Society of Biblical Literature. 1986.

Graetz, Naomi. “Dinah the Daughter” in A feminist Companion to Genesis. Ed. Athalia Brenner. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic press, 1993.

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