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# Women of Genesis: Mothers of Power

*Olivia DePreter*

Relegated to the background of the story, women are not often thought of as the stars of the Biblical narrative. However, if one takes a closer look at these stories it is the women who, from behind the scenes, are the most active in moving forward the narrative. Considering the biblical narrators were living in a patriarchal society it is not surprising the Genesis stories are frequently considered to push women to the backseat. Had the narrators made women the focal protagonists of these stories, it is unlikely the Bible would have spread as it did. Sarah and Rebekah are two of the first Genesis matriarchs. Both of these women are women of faith, dedicated to continuing the lineage of the Hebrew people and maintaining the covenant with God. They work within the confines of a patriarchal society to fulfill what they believe to be their calling and they do this through the use of deceitful and subversive tactics. This use of deception should not be understood as indicative of a woman's nature but instead the method a marginalized people have to resort to in order to serve justice and God's purpose. The actions of Sarah and Rebekah, though seemingly devious, were intended to advance the covenant and the family.

Characters of beauty and ingenuity, Sarah and Rebekah are loved by their husbands and specially chosen by God to be the matriarchs of the nation of Israel. Instead of reading into these characters with modern conceptions of misogyny we have to consider the context of these stories and, in doing so, we can realize these women for the strong leaders they were. Highlighted in the text is their role as mothers and though modern feminists may discredit the importance of this role, continuing the lineage was the most important role women had during this time. Children were not just a concern of women but of the entire faith community. Furthermore, Sarah and Rebekah were not just any women; they were chosen to be great matriarchs because of their willpower and commitment to God's purposes despite their marginalized status in a patriarchal society. They provide us with important models on how to live a life of faith committed to God and family. This does not mean that women today should be confined to the household; however, as the household is no longer the socioeconomic sphere of influence it once was. Sarah and Rebekah are not perfect in their faith; both have moments of doubt or jealousy, but these characteristics are what makes them relatable. These are stories

of human nature and these are independent, strong willed matriarchs who can serve as role models today in a society vastly different but also fairly similar.

### **SARAH'S PLIGHT: THE FIRST MOTHER**

The first time the reader is introduced to Sarah we are told she is barren. The inclusion of this information is noteworthy as it highlights the significance of children and foreshadows the role that barrenness will have throughout Sarah's life. When Abraham is called to Egypt, Sarah shares in the dangers of such a journey. Before entering Egypt Abraham tells Sarah, "Look, I know you are a beautiful woman. When the Egyptians see you they will say, 'That is his wife,' and they will kill me but leave you alive. Therefore please tell them you are my sister, so that they may treat me well because of you and spare my life out of regard for you" (12:11-13). Although a questionable request on the part of Abraham, he does not demand anything of Sarah but almost seems to plead with her. While not stated in the text it is assumed that she agrees to this plan as she is taken into the Pharaoh's household. The biblical narrator's choice to exclude her response to Abraham's request can be understood to maintain an air of patriarchal authority. However, perhaps understanding the threat to her husband she agrees to this plan out of her love for Abraham suggesting a more equal relationship than one in which, out of pure subordination, she is forced to feign her status as his wife. While she could have been left with the Pharaoh and Abraham could leave with his amassed wealth, God inflicts plagues on Pharaoh because of Sarah. This suggests that God is not only protecting Abraham but Sarah as well. Abraham could easily have taken another wife but the fact that God protects Sarah implies her importance. She is just as important in maintaining the covenant as is Abraham and is similarly protected. Her faith is almost more evident than Abraham's in this scene. Wary that the Egyptians will kill him, Abraham surrenders his wife. If Abraham maintains faith in God why would he even suggest putting his wife in danger? Conceivably Sarah agrees to his pleading out of her own faith that God would protect her. In the end, neither Abraham nor Sarah are punished for their seemingly immoral actions but instead blessed with an array of wealth, evidence of their favor with God and Sarah's virtuosity (Bledstein 412). It seems that it is not just Abraham but Sarah, too, who is in covenant with and protected by God.

Although God promises Abraham offspring of his own, it is Sarah not Abraham who suggests Abraham take on another wife after years without a child. This suggests that Abraham was confident that Sarah was to be the one through whom he gains an heir as he knew she was barren yet remained faithful to her. Abraham

“abstains from sowing seed with another wife because of his faithful love of Sarai” (Kass 255). It is Sarah who finally takes the matter into her own hands giving her slave girl, Hagar, to Abraham as a second wife. Sarah states, “Listen, now! Since Yahweh has kept me from having children, go to my slave-girl. Perhaps I shall get children through her” (16:2). This seems more like a demand than a request, and the fact that Abraham listens to her suggests a more equal relationship than is often proposed. At a time when polygamy was common, Abraham could have easily taken another wife or surrogate mother after so many years without children, but he remains faithful to Sarah. It is not until her own request that he takes on another wife. While Hagar does conceive and give birth to Ishmael, it is not he who is to continue the covenant. Though he had not made it explicit before, in the covenant God makes with Abraham, he states that Sarah will bear a son, Isaac, who shall maintain the covenant. Thus Abraham is not the only parent important in the continuation of the covenant for he already has a son who, though blessed, is not to inherit the covenant. It is Sarah’s son who is to bear the covenant. Her years of barrenness were not a challenge to her status or her authority as a woman but a test of her faith in God.

In the covenant God not only promises Sarah a child but changes Abram’s name to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah. This naming implies a special bond between each of them and God as well as the spiritual progression of both Abraham and Sarah. “The act of naming signifies a recognition of identity, an endowment of new essence and being, and it suggests the namer’s authority” (Fuchs 128). The name Sarah itself is significant as it “is the feminine form of sar, meaning ruler” (Bledstein 416). Although the dialogue is only between Abraham and God, Sarah is not devoid of an identity or purpose. God blesses her and states that just as Abraham “will become the father of many nations” (17:5) so too will Sarah “become nations: kings of people will issue from her” (17:16). This covenant does not forget the special status of women and the centrality of women to the fulfillment of the covenant. Sarah too “stands in special relation to God, who will bless her with fruitfulness” (Kass 315). When God again foretells the birth of Isaac to Abraham at the Oak of Mamre, Sarah is standing outside the tent listening. When she hears she is to give birth, her response is natural as a woman well past childbearing age, she laughs in disbelief. God asks why she laughed stating, “Nothing is impossible for Yahweh” (18:14). God’s role in the conception of Isaac is thus highlighted as well as his commitment to his promises as Sarah does conceive in her old age and birth a son.

Faith and doubt often go together. Although she has been promised a son she

remains doubtful now that she is old in age. However it is her age that makes the birth of Isaac so miraculous, and it is her doubt that makes her faith that much stronger upon the fulfillment of the promise. At his birth she exclaims, "God has given me cause to laugh! All who hear about this will laugh with me! She added: Whoever would have told Abraham that Sarah would nurse children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age" (21:6-7). This exclamation is evidence of her awe at the greatness of God and her commitment to him who blessed her with a child of the covenant. Her long state of barrenness despite God's promise that she would bear a son is one of the great tests of faith that Sarah must endure. Her barrenness is continually stressed by the biblical narrator, testimony to how significant this was at a time when lineage was extremely important. Just as the patriarchs of this early community face a number of tests and trials at the hands of God, so too do the matriarchs. As Bledstein states, "In the founding of the people, Israel, Sarah's trials were as severe as Abraham's" (411). In this long struggle she learns the unlimited power of God, providing her with child when she is well past childbearing age.

After she bears her own son, Sarah instructs Abraham to drive out Hagar and Ishmael as she wants Isaac alone to gain the inheritance. Abraham appears distressed at her request, suggesting that he is unsure of what to do and that while he does not want to do it, he cannot readily challenge Sarah's instructions. "Even if she is acting simply out of jealous love for her own, Sarah intuitively that the proper ordering of their household for the fulfillment of their parental task within the covenant requires the banishment of Hagar the Egyptian and her son, Ishmael" (Kass 290). Sarah exhibits her power, and perhaps some natural jealousy, when she orders Hagar and Hagar's son leave the household. God steps in and affirms to Abraham, "Do not distress yourself on account of the boy and your slave-girl. Do whatever Sarah says, for Isaac is the one through whom your name will be carried on" (21:12). The fact that God intervenes on the side of Sarah further legitimizes her actions and her influence. Abraham "accepts the 'rule' of his wife; he establishes the right order of his household... He for the first time ratifies by his deeds the meaning of his marriage" (Kass 290). While Sarah may appear demanding, and perhaps unreasonable, it is telling that God instructs Abraham to listen to her. While living within a patriarchal society she maintains a voice of authority. She appears as a strong-willed woman determined to uphold her status by sending away the woman who had tried to usurp her standing with Abraham. She makes sure that it is her son, the son who God promised the covenant, who inherits Abraham's blessing and continues the covenant.

Sarah's role in the history of the Israelite people is not insignificant.

As Bledstein states: Entering the harem of Pharaoh, she is determined to keep Abraham alive. While barren, she nevertheless succeeds in presenting Abraham with an offspring through Hagar, her servant. In anguish over Hagar's subsequent insolence, Sarah calls out that YHVH be her judge. Such are her trials... Faith in YHVH enabled woman, no less than her partner, to meet trials and to make choices affecting her destiny and that of the Hebrew people. (417)

Sarah is a strong willed woman whose faith is tested just as was that of the patriarchs. The biblical narrator includes Sarah's age at the time of her death, a hundred and twenty seven. Similar to the patriarchs she lived an incredibly long life and the inclusion of her death suggests the importance she maintained in this narrative (Deen 15). Abraham mourns her at her funeral, suggestive of his great affection for her. Theirs was a marriage of great love and so too a level of equality and union that seems required of a proper marriage; one in which they love one another but devote themselves to God. She was not just any woman but a woman of the covenant dedicated to Abraham and God. "Sarah's life was one continuous trial of her faith in God's promise that she was to be the mother of nations. Through this trial she emerged as a woman of power" (Deen 8).

While Sarah is not as developed as the character of Abraham, or given as much dialogue which is indicative of the patriarchal system at work, she evolves as a character who "plays a crucial role in the birth of the people of Israel" (Jeansonne 30). Despite the fact that her voice is often omitted from the text, it is evident that Sarah is an important figure; she was saved by God in Egypt, commanding in her relationship with Abraham, and a vital part of the covenant. At the time of the covenant Abraham already has a son through Hagar, however it is not this son who is to bear the covenant but a son of Sarah's. The biblical narrator thus highlights that it is important that the covenant continues through Sarah specifically and as the narrative progresses it becomes clear that only Sarah can "bear the child of promise" (Trible 282). Her barrenness is a lesson; God teaches this community through trials and Sarah is taught through her life journey with Abraham (Moyers 203). It is through many years of doubt and faith that mirrors the struggles of the patriarchs that Sarah is finally strengthened and rewarded.

### **REBEKAH: COMMITTED TO THE PROMISE**

Once Sarah has passed, fulfilling her task, and Abraham is advanced in age, the future of Israel now rests with Rebekah and Isaac (Jeansonne 55). Rebekah is the first female offspring mentioned in the biblical genealogy (Jeansonne 54). Her first actions when Abraham's servant approaches her on his journey to find Isaac

a wife are extremely hospitable: she offers him her pitcher of water, attends to his camels, and welcomes him into her home. As the next matriarch, the narrator highlights her gracious and kind nature and, therefore, why she is well suited to bear future generations of the covenant. Just as the first description of Sarah is that of her barrenness, the narrator makes it known early on that Rebekah is a virgin, untouched by man (24:16). It is evident that she is explicitly chosen by God to marry Isaac as the servant stresses how thankful he is to God for making his journey successful and leading him straight to Rebekah. She is thus presented as the perfect wife for Isaac and the rightful mother of future carriers of the covenant. It is through her that the people Israel must continue; just as in the case of Sarah, the biblical narrator once more highlights the insistence on descent through the proper mother (Exum 112). When Abraham's servant requests that they leave the next day to return to Isaac, Rebekah's sisters protest, hoping she can stay another ten days. When they ask Rebekah whether she wants to leave right away she says she will. As a young girl who has likely never left on such a long journey, her decision is bold. Her independence and trust parallel Abraham "willing to take the risk of leaving her family and travel to a strange land" (Davidson 230). This risk is not only a display of her independence but of her dedication and faith in the God of her husband. She leaves her father's house and, with it, her father's gods. She is thus not only generous but an independent and faithful woman.

In contrast to the story of Abraham and Sarah in which Sarah was desperate for children, in this narrative it is Isaac who prays to God for children. Rebekah faces twenty years of barrenness before God hears Isaac's prayer and Rebekah conceives twins. As she is blessed with children out of prayer, they too have to recognize that children are a gift from God (Kass 378). Yahweh talks directly to Rebekah stating, "There are two nations in your womb, your issue will be two rival peoples. One nation will have the mastery of the other, and the elder will serve the younger" (25:23). It is Rebecca, not Isaac, who receives God's plan for her sons and it is thus she who is bestowed with the task of making sure the right son inherits Isaac's blessing (Jeansonne 63). When Rebekah overhears Isaac talking to her eldest son, Esau, instructing him to make his favorite dish before he blesses him, she takes action. Just as Sarah overheard the revelation that her child is to fulfill God's promise, Rebekah overhears Isaac's plans to bless Esau (Jeansonne 66) and she "pulls strings from behind the scenes" in order to make sure that happens (Aschkenasy 162). She had already received God's oracle that her younger son, Jacob, was to rule over the other and, in addition, "Esau's sale of his birthright confirms that he is not entitled to the first blessing" (Jeansonne

66). She thus does everything in her power “to ensure that the correct child inherits the Deity’s promise” (Schneider 62). She instructs Jacob to fetch two goats to make Isaac’s favorite dish. When he reveals his worry that Isaac will sense the deception, she covers his arms in the goat skin to mimic Esau’s hairy arms and dresses Jacob in Esau’s clothes. Her plan is successful and Isaac mistakes Jacob for Esau and provides him with the first blessing. Kass describes Rebekah’s commanding and faithful nature:

Isaac, feeble and blind, pleads for a fine dinner... Rebekah, energetic and sharp-eared, speaks and commands with authority yet is mindful of the divine. Whereas Isaac speaking to Esau had forgotten to mention God, Rebekah, in reporting her husband’s words to Jacob, improves them, placing the Lord’s name, so to speak, on Isaac’s tongue – and also into Jacob’s mind... Soon, thanks to Rebekah’s successful plotting, Isaac will bespeak his own and God’s blessing upon the proper son. But here, even as she embarks on deceiving him, Rebekah tries to enhance Isaac’s dignity and Jacob’s respect – both for his father and his father’s God – by improving upon Isaac’s piety and sparing him humiliation in the eyes of her son. She also impresses upon Jacob that the blessing to be given will be given “before the Lord.” (392)

Rebekah is the protagonist of the story; she sets off the chain of events which will ensure the right son inherits the covenant. Though her plan employs deception, she remains dedicated to both her family and to God. When Jacob is unsure about the potential success of the plan, she takes any future curse upon herself. She is able to convince him to follow through with the plan, and as Jacob becomes the next patriarch of Abraham’s lineage it becomes evident that she did pick the son best suited to be a leader.

While exercising favoritism between her sons she does so in order to fulfill what she saw to be God’s plan (Kelly-Zukowski 34). “Rebekah, like Sarah before her, was not a headstrong woman with a tendency to cruelty; she was exercising her authority – the matrilineal prerogative for the transmission of rights to offspring – while struggling to prevent patriarchal customs from encroaching on her life” (Teubal as quoted in Bellis 83). She not only ensures that the proper son inherits Isaac’s blessing but continues to protect him as she sends him on his journey. In order to protect Jacob from his brother’s rage she sends him away but makes sure he is rightly blessed before he sets off telling her husband, “The Hittite women sicken me to death. If Jacob were to marry a Hittite woman like these, one of the local women, what would there be left in life for me?” (27:46). Isaac then blesses Jacob. Rebekah consequently not only ensures that her son is rightly blessed and



protected by God but that he marries a proper woman with whom he can continue the right lineage. She is adept yet again at carefully selecting her words, and omitting certain details, so that the men act as they should in order to properly fulfill the covenant. Her actions may appear unfair, especially if placing oneself in the shoes of Esau, but her actions are not enacted out of cruelty but in her dedication to the promise (Jeansonne 67).

The fact that neither she nor Jacob are punished for their devious plan is telling of the fact that she was in actuality fulfilling God's promise. She takes initiative in order to guide her husband and her children in the direction she believes to be right for the future of the people. It is thanks to Rebekah that Isaac commands Jacob "about whom to marry, a decision critically important to the future of the covenant" (Kass 400). Rebekah thus emerges as a confident and adept woman who is adamant about ensuring the rightful son inherits the covenant. While a powerful woman in the history of Israel, she could not exert her full power as a woman. Knowing that Isaac may not go along with her plan and that he has the final say in the blessing, she has to resort to trickery in order to assert her power. In a patriarchal world she defies male authority, remaining confident in her own wisdom (Aschkenasy 165). "The presentation of Rebekah shows that women in Israel were viewed as persons who could make crucial decisions about their futures, whose prayers were acknowledged, who might know better than men what God designed, and who could appropriately take the steps necessary to support God's plans for the community" (Jeansonne 69). God entrusted Rebekah with his plan, evidently confident in her abilities and her wisdom.

## **KEEN & COMMANDING MATRIARCHS**

Working within the confines of a patriarchal framework, Sarah and Rebekah each have to resort to some sort of conniving deception or trickery in order to reach their ends. This should not be understood as a categorization of the nature of women, for so too are there stories of conniving men in the biblical narrative, but rather as evidence of the lengths they were willing to go to in order to maintain their status as women committed to God. As Aschkenasy states:

That women were very often seen as using underhanded, dishonest means to accomplish their wishes may not necessarily reflect the male writers' slanted view of reality or their biased conception of the female nature. It may be a true representation of realities and times when an underprivileged group had to resort to devious tactics to offset the built-in injustice in its legal and social circumstances. At the same time, treachery, falseness, or even just a circuitous manner of dealing

with problems should not be seen as congenital, inherent in the feminine nature, but rather as an acquired evil, a device used by women who were very often barred from decision making, and whose opinion was rarely solicited, even in cases directly involving their own lives and fate. (162)

Therefore, Sarah's conspiracy to get rid of Hagar and Rebekah's plan to fool her husband so that the right son inherits his blessing are tactics they have to resort to in order to exert their particular power and accomplish their goals. Sarah and Rebekah, as part of a disempowered people, have to resort to subversive behavior in order to achieve God's plan. They have to go against the norms of the dominant patriarchal culture in order to reach their ends. "Theirs was not a passive, static faith but a faith characterized by unswerving determination, boldness, ingenuity, and creativity which enabled them to maneuver within the confines of an oppressive patriarchal and sometimes misogynistic culture" (Kelly-Zukowski 33). Although members of the dominant culture may view their actions as unfair, it is these actions through which the marginalized women fulfill their calling. They have to go against societal norms and expectations which do not serve the purposes of God and in this way they may be seen as deceitful and dishonest, however it is this unswerving dedication which best showcases their faith.

While the Biblical portrayal of women is often criticized for limiting women to their role as mothers, the importance of lineage during this time cannot be understated; "motherhood is the most exalted female role in the biblical narrative" (Fuchs 138). "Be fruitful and multiply" (1:28) is the first command of God in the Book of Genesis, and fertility is always associated with blessing throughout the Hebrew Bible (Jeansonne 79). Further, "having children was normally not viewed as a discrete role that precluded or interfered with other social and economic roles" (Meyers 38). In fact, household domestic chores, which we often devalue today over corporate jobs, were incredibly important "in a context in which the family household was the primary economic and social unit" (Meyers 40). For the communities of ancient Israel "the only way they could see their lives continue was through the bearing and raising of children. Hence, the childless wife was impeding not only her husband, but the community as well. The duty to reproduce was so strong that Levirate marriage was required if the husband died before producing a male heir" (Kelly-Zukowski 31). Jarrell states that women "were used by men to ensure the continuity of the covenant" (3).

Women, however, are not passive characters in these stories, themselves unconcerned with the continuation of the covenant. Rather, the women are active in their own right and often more concerned about bearing children than their

husbands. Exum states that the Genesis matriarchs are “allowed to advance the plot only insofar as they have important consequences for their sons, the future patriarchs: either to ensure that the ‘right’ son become the bearer of the promise, i.e. become ‘Israel’ (as Sarah and Rebekah do), or to increase Israel (as Rachel, Leah, and their maids do by bearing Jacob twelve sons – the twelve tribes of Israel)” (103). This statement underscores the importance of childbearing during this period. The future of Israel “depends absolutely on the right ordering of the household” and the women are “devoted wholeheartedly to the noble and sacred task of rearing and perpetuation” (Kass 402). Continuation of lineage was extremely important in the ancient Middle East. However women in the Bible are more concerned with their barrenness as, living in a polygamous society, their husbands could have easily taken on another, fertile, wife and yet they remained committed to their wives (Aschkenasy 81). “If a couple were unable to conceive, the assumption in ancient Israel was that the problem was invariably with the woman” (Jeansonne 62). Sarah and Rebekah were not thrown aside when they were barren, evidence that they were important characters in their own right, not just random women valued for their ability to bear children.

Sarah and Rebekah are each loved by their husbands but find difficulty conceiving. Exum states, “The Genesis narrators undermine the chosen mothers’ importance by denying the very thing for which they are so highly valued, their reproductive ability” (120). However, rather than undermining their identity by making them barren, as chosen women they, like their husbands, have to face tests which challenge their faith but through which ultimately they grow in their faith. The text always assumes that childbearing is the work of God; Sarah and Rebekah thus experience barrenness as a test of their faith. Sarah and Rebekah are human figures who experience natural human emotions. Since much of their worth was tied up in their reproductive abilities it is not surprising they would do whatever they could to uphold their worth and become jealous of those capable of bearing children. Both Sarah and Rebekah do eventually give birth to great nations and recognize that childbirth is a gift from God. The birth narrative therefore “becomes a specific type of contractual relationship within the Hebrew Bible between a childless woman and Yahweh” (Jarrell 5). The standard progression from barrenness to a divine promise of conception to birth of promised son outlined by Jarrell is not meant to undermine the value of women but to show that “God’s covenant people don’t come into being naturally but by faith in the divine promise, by special intervention from the Lord” (Davidson 455). This paradox of barrenness and a promised child is meant to:

Alert us to the precariousness of human birth and the precariousness of the child once born... Barrenness then, drove home the inestimable value of these children, with what care they must be raised, how vital that the right son inherit the birthright, and how indispensable his marriage to a woman who would honor the covenant and wish to continue it – over all of which the matriarchs took great pains. Sometimes they acted with greater wisdom than did the patriarchs. (Dresner 446)

While I agree with Fuchs that “the biblical mother figures attain neither the human nor the literary complexity of their male counterparts” I disagree that “the patriarchal framework of the biblical story prevents the mother figure from becoming a full-fledged human role model” (138). In fact these women can be understood as impressive role models, encouraging women to maintain their faith and calling despite the discouragement of men. While there are many more men than women mentioned in the bible, those women who are named and have voices in the Bible are “tough, active, and vocal” (Aschkenasy 161). Sarah and Rebekah both display their power in their relationships with their husbands and each remains committed in the love they have for both their husband and God. The love of these couples serves as models of marriage, marriages in which each partner maintains a level of power. However, as “bearing a child may satisfy the human desire for immortality, ‘creating’ life may satisfy the human wish to be as God” (Kass 148). Therefore, instead of immortalizing one another and/or their children, the role of God in the conception is incredibly important and highlighted in the various stages of barrenness to conception Sarah and Rebekah experience.

## CONCLUSIONS

Even though the women of these stories are portrayed by male narrators we cannot impose all of our modern understandings of gender roles onto this text. Accordingly, we have to take into consideration the historical context of the Biblical stories and although we can perhaps never fully understand the impact these stories had on people centuries ago we can draw out the meaning of these stories for modern readers today. While these stories are about specific people it is perhaps more important that they are stories about human nature and purpose. The meaning of these stories is not laid out for readers, rather we have to interpret how these stories are made meaningful to us. The Bible does not have a single point of view nor can it be interpreted in the same way across different generations. We read the Bible through our own framework, from our own specific personal cultural lens.

Despite the fact that the Bible was written from a male perspective for a male audience, it does not have to be discredited as a meaningless text to a

modern female reader. While today feminist scholars often scoff at any suggestion that women's most important task is childbearing and mothering, early Israel esteemed the production of offspring as the primary function in life for both women *and* men as it was integral to the proper continuation of the community. As Dianne Bergant states, "It's not by repeating or reinterpreting...[these stories]...meant for the ancient world that we find revelation, but by discovering what it means for us" (Moyers 327). Understanding the cultural context means we can better appreciate the centrality of the woman's role in the Bible and, consequently, that women of faith today can find their own calling through the powerful examples of these women.

These observations support the conclusion that although the magnitude of Sarah and Rebekah may not be immediately apparent, they are central to the plots and to the establishment of the Biblical community. Further, these women teach us important lessons on what it means to be human, the nature of human experience and what it means to be religious. The fact that they remain important characters is significant, they could each be replaced by another woman but they are not for their husbands love for them is great. These stories consequently teach us what constitutes a good marriage and proper faith. While it is important that they love one another and their children, it seems as if the long stage of barrenness is a lesson against idolatry. The men have to recognize that children are a gift from God rather than of their wives just as the women have to acknowledge their lack of power over childbearing. While couples should revere one another, they have to recognize the ultimate power of God. Their barrenness, then, is a test of their faith. Sarah and Rebekah experienced doubt but they were also incredibly determined in their faith and were able to persevere through a sometimes wavering faith in order to make history and ensure the continuation of Hebrew culture and the covenant with God.

These women were not picked merely because of their ability to produce offspring, for it is God who holds that power, but for their strength and power within a patriarchal framework. They were as dedicated to the covenant as were the men and faced tests of faith similar to that of the men. Though their actions may be understood as deceitful, they devised these tactics in order to serve the purpose of God, a purpose not served by the norms of the dominant culture. Despite their marginalization, their unswerving dedication to the covenant allowed them to persevere through a patriarchal society in order to serve justice and fulfill their calling. As independent and active women, Sarah and Rebekah can serve as role models today, encouraging women, and other marginalized groups, to persevere

in their faith through whatever obstacles they may face and to challenge the status quo if it is not serving the purpose of God.

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