



PROJECT MUSE®

---

On Woman's Equal Standing in the Bible—A Sketch: A  
Feminist Re-Reading of the Hebrew Bible: A Typological View

Amnon Shapira

Hebrew Studies, Volume 51, 2010, pp. 7-42 (Article)

Published by National Association of Professors of Hebrew



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/400575>

# ON WOMAN'S EQUAL STANDING IN THE BIBLE—A SKETCH: A FEMINIST RE-READING OF THE HEBREW BIBLE: A TYPOLOGICAL VIEW

Amnon Shapira

*The University Center of Ariel*

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1895) is considered the pioneer of feminist literature; after her, in the 1950s, came Simone De Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*), and the latest crop of feminist writers includes Phyllis Trible, Mieke Bal, Esther Fuchs, Cheryl Exum, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Ilana Pardes, and many others. These women deal also with the Bible, as they claim that the female characters, such as Eve and Miriam, have a great influence on the personal and social status of women until today. This is true especially in the Christian world, whose cultural base was the Bible.

The article presents an overview of seven areas in the Bible which point up the equality, and even the superiority, of women, and our conclusions are: A) The Bible, which is mainly patriarchal, has an additional, parallel direction, in which there is a clear trend of feminine equality; B) The major equality in the Bible is religious, that is, equality of the woman as a person before God, like the equality of each person within the human race; C) From this we see that the Jewish religion, as portrayed in the Bible, contains the elements which form the theological and historical base of equality; D) A possible conclusion from this work is that this “feminine” side of the Bible, from Sarah and Miriam, may become the base at this time for spiritual renewal.

The ensuing discussion of woman's standing in the Bible posits the existence of complex and heterogeneous points of view in the Bible in general, and particularly with regard to the subject under discussion. On one hand, in many instances, the Bible clearly reflects a patriarchal, male-dominant society. For instance, the twelve tribal leaders—the spies—were, of course, “all of them men” (Num 13:3). Men were the determining factors in legal procedures; “He may write for her a Document of Cutoff” (Deut 24:1)—the man “sends away,” the woman does not send away. All this is well known and requires no substantiation. It would seem, therefore, that those who claim that the Bible does not recognize gender equality are right. Biblical literature, however, does present another side, an “otherness.”<sup>1</sup> This aspect finds woman occasionally on a level of equality, either partial or full, with

---

<sup>1</sup> This term is employed as per the definition of Ilana Pardes, in the sense of “other truths” which express difference from the accepted line of thought; its connotation is neutral or positive; it is not “otherness” which negates, which discriminates, as per its connotation in feminist literature. Current among Orthodox feminists is the phrase: “Equal—but separate.” For more on “the other” in a negative sense, see L. J. Silberstein and R. L. Cohen, eds., *The Other in Jewish Thought and History* (New York: New York University, 1995).

the man; sometimes she is even dominant. Elizabeth Stanton—the publication of whose book, *The Woman's Bible*,<sup>2</sup> established her as the pioneer of feminist literature—writes in the preface to her book:

The canons and civil law; church and state; priests and legislators; all political parties and religious denominations have alike taught that woman was made after man, of man, and for man, an inferior being, subject to man. Creeds, codes, Scriptures and statutes, are all based on this idea. The fashions, forms, ceremonies and customs of society, church ordinances and discipline, all grow out of this idea.... The Bible teaches that woman brought sin and death into the world, that she precipitated the fall of the race, that she was arraigned before the judgment seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced.... Here is the Bible position of woman briefly summed up.

These lines by Stanton, a Catholic, directed against the Bible (including the New Testament), continue to nurture some feminist writing until this very day.<sup>3</sup>

Recent generations have seen the development of various types of feminist commentary, including that concerned with the Bible:

Feminism is a movement which fights for social and legal recognition of the fact that in the new world there is no place for a hierarchical perception according to which the male is the ruler in society and family, while the woman holds only a secondary position.<sup>4</sup>

Tamar Ross's definition relates to a general phenomenon affecting the Jewish world. In this paper, we shall deal primarily with that area belonging to the Bible, the foundation of Jewish (and Christian) culture. Feminist literature dealing with the standing of woman in the Bible has been cultivated primarily by women, such as Phyllis Trible,<sup>5</sup> Mieke Bal,<sup>6</sup> Esther

<sup>2</sup> E. C. Stanton, *The Woman's Bible: The Original Feminist Attack on the Bible* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1985 [1895, 1898]).

<sup>3</sup> There are basic differences between the mainstream traditions of Christianity and Judaism. For example, the Christian concept of "Original Sin," which places the guilt for humankind's "falling" upon Eve, is not to be found in the Bible nor in mainstream Jewish exegesis.

<sup>4</sup> T. Ross and Y. Gelman, "Effects of Feminism on Orthodox Jewish Theology" (in Hebrew), in *Cultural Plurality in a Democratic and Jewish State* (ed. Z. Mautner and A. Sagi; Memorial Volume dedicated to Ariel Rosen-Zvi z"l; Tel Aviv: Tel-Aviv University, 1998), pp. 443–467; quote from p. 443.

<sup>5</sup> P. Trible, "Depatriarchizing in Biblical Interpretation," in *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (ed. E. Koltun; New York: Schocken, 1976), pp. 217–240; P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1978); P. Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Reading of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1984); P. Trible, "Eve and Miriam: From the Margins to the Center," in *Feminist Approaches to the Bible* (ed. T. Frymer-Kensky, P. Trible, H. Shanks, and P. J. Milne; Washington D. C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1995), pp. 5–24.

<sup>6</sup> M. Bal, "The Bible as Literature: A Critical Escape," *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 71–79; M. Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1988).

Fuchs,<sup>7</sup> Carol Meyers,<sup>8</sup> Athalia Brenner,<sup>9</sup> Cheryl Exum,<sup>10</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky,<sup>11</sup> Alice Bach,<sup>12</sup> Phyllis Bird,<sup>13</sup> Ilana Pardes,<sup>14</sup> and others.

In this article, I shall briefly present a number of areas in which there may be discerned—in all due caution—a tendency to equality between men and women in Scripture. Thus does Daniel Boyarin attempt “to rescue from the past those forces which resisted the ruling androcentrism,”<sup>15</sup> and so does Ilana Pardes attempt to “examine the dialogue between the forms of the dominant patriarchal representation in the Scripture and opposing women’s voices, which try to present other truths.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, Pardes recognizes the dominance of forms of patriarchal representation in the Scripture, but along with this, she seeks to examine the “opposing women’s voices which try to present other truths,” without being pressed to apologize for the “otherness” of those voices. Researchers of Bible, language, midrash and halakah, noted the ideological complexity of the text. Thus, Robert Alter returns to describe the biblical narrative as reflecting ideological tensions which derive from “the nature man in the Bible,” for it is “a function of its being conceived as caught in the powerful interplay of this double dialectic between design and disorder, providence and freedom.”<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey Hartman, in his tome on midrash<sup>18</sup> termed this process of the biblical redactors, “Respect for friction.”<sup>19</sup> The “rescue” of other voices from the text is possi-

---

<sup>7</sup> E. Fuchs, “The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (ed. A. Bach; New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 117–136; E. Fuchs, “Who is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Woman and Biblical Androcentrism,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (ed. A. Y. Collins; Chicago: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 137–144.

<sup>8</sup> C. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>9</sup> See series *A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, edited by A. Brenner for Leiden and Sheffield: Song of Songs (1993); Judges (1993); Ruth (1993); Samuel and Kings (1994); the Wisdom Literature (1995); Genesis (1998), et. al.

<sup>10</sup> C. J. Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives* (JSOTSup 163; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> T. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myths* (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>12</sup> A. Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> P. A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> I. Pardes, *Creation before Eve: A Literary Feminist Approach to the Bible* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: 1996).

<sup>15</sup> D. Boyarin, “Husbands, Wives, and Gender Dialogue: The Talmud Reads Foucault,” *Theory and Criticism* 4 (1993): 161–178, especially p. 161.

<sup>16</sup> I. Pardes, *Creation before Eve*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> A. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> G. Hartman, “The Struggle for the Text,” in *Midrash and Literature* (ed. G. Hartman and S. Burdick; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> G. Hartman, “The Struggle for the Text,” p. 14.

ble even within the halakic framework, which is supposed to be much more homogeneous than the biblical narratives, as per the definition of Menachem Alon:

The halakic system is a great symphony, containing many variegated sounds, and herein lies its greatness and its beauty. In every generation, it needs that great conductor, one imbued with inspiration and vision, who will reveal in the symphony of many sounds that interpretation which his generation and its problems hears and needs.<sup>20</sup>

Thus with halakah, so it is all the more with the Bible. Common to their approach—of Alter and Pardes to the Bible, of Hartman to midrash, and Alon to halakah—is a deep understanding of the multiple shadings of the language and the text.

Therefore, let us not transform the Bible into a manifesto of “equality,” but let us show, that, despite its prevalent approaches which attest to the inferiority of the woman to man in different areas, there are contradictory elements which support a tendency toward equality—and sometimes, even superiority—of woman over man. We have license to investigate those biblical tendencies which attest to the equality of woman in religion and public life sans apology; we have not come to “correct” patriarchal tendencies in the Bible, but to examine additional biblical tendencies. It is in place to mention the growing tendency in scholarship to prefer the literary-synchronic analysis of the Bible (as literary anthology, composed over many centuries) over the historical-diachronic analysis.<sup>21</sup> It should also be remembered that we harbor doubts as to which historical texture is reflected with certainty in each of the biblical narratives.

We shall illustrate briefly a method of “extracting” female voices from the Bible, as per Phyllis Trible’s discussion of the Miriam story.<sup>22</sup> This story places Miriam in the shadows. A few short episodes about her, and she dis-

---

<sup>20</sup> M. Alon, “The Dignity of Man and His Freedom in Jewish Tradition” (in Hebrew), in *The Dignity of Man and His Freedom in Jewish Tradition* (The President’s Residence Discussion Group on Bible and Jewish Sources, second issue; Jerusalem 5755 [1995]), p. 20. Alon finds support for his words in Rabbi Yechiel Epstein, author of *Aruch HaShulchan*, in his famous introduction for “Hoshen Mishpat”: “All the Torah is termed poetry, and the beauty of song is that the voices differ one from the other, and herein lies the pleasantness etc.” Regarding the literary approach which seeks to “rescue” from the past the voices which respect woman as possessor of an independent entity, see, for example, *Amudim*, vols. 612–613 (5757 [1997]), which was devoted to the standing of woman in the Israeli Orthodox society; featuring articles by Rebecca Lovitz, Gili Sivan, Tova Ilan, Yosef Achituv, Shalom Rosenberg, Berl Dov Lerner, Rachel Reich, and Avishag Ayali.

<sup>21</sup> For reasons for this contemporary preference of the literary-synchronic method, see E. L. Greenstein, *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation* (BJS; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars, 1989), esp. pp. 17–22.

<sup>22</sup> P. Trible, “Eve and Miriam,” pp. 17–21.

appears. But Tribble, in the footsteps of the midrash, extracts her complete “womanly” image from a few unclear fragments which receive new meaning. The text in Micah reads: “And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam” (Mic 4:6). This implies that Miriam, too, was a leader of the people. The very positioning of Miriam alongside the two national leaders provides an egalitarian element. But to where does Miriam disappear? In the *tzara’at* incident we read: “So Miriam was shut up outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not march on until Miriam had been gathered back” (Num 12:15).

The people—not Moses—out of love for Miriam, the devoted leader, did not travel on; they waited for her. Those whom she had served did not abandon her in her time of trial. (This idea is to be found in the Talmud: *b. Ta’anit* 9a, and *b. Sotah* 9b). I suggest support for Tribble’s developed midrashic line from the fact that Miriam is first revealed at water, and herein lies her uniqueness. So it was when she saved her brother at the Nile (Exod 2:4), so at Israel’s crossing of the Sea of Reeds (Exod 15:20–21). Water provides life; dearth of water brings death: “And the entire community came to the Desert of Zin ... and there Miriam died, and there was she buried. Now there was no water for the community.” Not only do the Children of Israel identify with their leader; even nature itself reacts to Miriam’s death, immediately and severely. The wells in the wilderness dried up; Miriam symbolizes life, and upon her death, the people have no water. (This idea is mentioned in Rashi, (Num 20:2), basing himself upon the midrash: “There was no water for the community. From this we derive that all forty years they had a well thanks to Miriam.”)

Such textual exegesis (surprisingly close to—even based upon—the midrash, sometimes creating independent midrash of the text) raises “womanly” voices, as it highlights the centrality of women in a patriarchal world. Such a reading augments the importance of the woman in the biblical narrative, and changes—to her advantage—the customary reading proportions of the male majority to the female minority. The discussion of “The woman’s voice” relates not only to the overt voice—such as the Song of Miriam—but also to the implied voice, which the reader attempts to extract from the walls of the text. Some contributors to the new feminist reading turn to the midrashim of the sages in the hope—often required—of enriching the economical and equivocal biblical text. Similarly, the rhetorical method of the Reader Response, which adjusts the reading to the thoughts of the

reader—rather than to the thoughts of the author—and with its sensitivity to its finer points, attempts to fill out the biblical text.<sup>23</sup>

In our treatment of such “pictures and voices” in biblical literature which may testify to woman’s position of equality, we will sketch seven subjects which will give expression to this standing. The following is “an outline” (meaning, a rough sketch in general lines);<sup>24</sup> in part it is a “photo” of the present situation, of part of the literary material existent in research, while attempting to add in certain aspects. The following lines are intended to suggest some boundaries and possible directions for discussion of what is termed “the equality of the woman” in the realm of the Bible. In my words on equality of the woman in the Bible, I mean overt or implied, statutory or social, even if only on the level of the subjective awareness of the biblical author.

These are the seven suggested areas:

1. The physical creation of woman in a body shared with man.
2. The spiritual creation of woman “in the image of God,” similar to that of man.
3. Participation of women along with men in national ceremonies of entering or renewing covenants described in the Bible (openly or implied).
4. The special personal status attained by some women—as mothers, judges, prophetesses, queens, and others.
5. “Birth stories,” in which women are assigned, in certain respects, a superior status than that of man.
6. Women’s independence and initiative in personal decisions, especially those made for the survival of their relatives or their compatriots (and the independent methods they forged as a result), and the Bible’s recognition of the autonomy of their decision.
7. The power of the potential in woman’s weakness; or the dialectical dimensions of the strength in weakness.

---

<sup>23</sup> See “Rhetoric as Reader Response,” in *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies* (ed. R. Con Davis and R. Shleifer; New York: Longman, 1989), pp. 69–74; S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); W. Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University, 1978). The researchers are divided among themselves as to the role of the reader in the “creation” of the text. Fish and others assign the major share to the reader; others, such as Iser, are of the opinion that the writers intentionally leave gaps in the text, thus causing the reader to play an active role.

<sup>24</sup> As per the definition of Y. Zakowitz, “The Woman in Biblical Literature: An Outline” (in Hebrew), *Beit Mikra* 32 (5747 [1987]): 14–32; esp. p. 14.

## 1. THE CREATION OF WOMAN IN A BODY SHARED WITH MAN

Scholars have pointed to a contradiction in the narratives describing the physical creation of man and woman. In Genesis 1, we read “male and female He created them” (Gen 1:27), that is, they were created together, equally. In the chapter 2 depiction, man is created first; afterwards, woman is created “from one of his ribs” (Gen 2:21). “Rib” is the most widespread translation of the Hebrew “*tsela*,” so in the Septuagint, in various versions of the Aramaic translations, continuing until the modern translations (such as that of Luther in German; “*der Rippe*” and the RSV in English: “the rib”). The word “*tsela*” appears in the Bible forty times. In at least thirty-eight of them, it means “side” of some physical structure, such as *tsela ha-mishkan* ‘the flank of the Dwelling’. Only twice, in the chapter 2 version of the creation of woman, does the word seem to mean “a bone.” But a check of midrash<sup>25</sup> reveals that as a rule, there too, the word “*tsela*” is understated not as “bone” but as “a side” of the body. Originally, man and woman were created as one organic whole. In some of the midrashim (such as *Gen. Rab.* 8:1), the idea of the andro-genus (man-woman) is developed; that is to say, originally both were created together, without any separate sexual identification; only later were they separated. In other midrashim, there appears the idea of the *diprosephon*, of the *duo-partzufin*;<sup>26</sup> man and woman were created as one body with two “faces,” one masculine and one feminine. Later they were disjoined. Thus Rashi: “From his sides as in ‘and the flank of the Dwelling’ (Exod. 26), this being what they said: ‘Two faces were they created.’” Rashi integrated two similar approaches of the midrash: woman was created from “a side” (one of the two sides), and she was created “*du-partzufin*.” The tradition of this reading by the Sages and Rashi, of equality in creation of Adam and Eve, probably resulted from the desire to solve the contradiction between the description of the creation of Adam and Eve as equals—as appears in chapter 1—and their creation by stages—as in chapter 2. Perhaps the Sages were influenced by the words “and they became one flesh” (Gen 2:24), which describe organic wholeness of the two bodies, the end clarifying the beginning. Support for the Sages’ reading may be found in the Akkadian, in which the word “*tsela*” frequently means “side”—*sulu*<sup>27</sup>—

<sup>25</sup> Similarly in midrashic haggadah, and in the Talmud Bavli. See *Torah Sheleima* of M. M. Kasher, and a complete list of sources in L. Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 5 (Philadelphia, Pa.,: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), p. 88, n. 41.

<sup>26</sup> L. Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews*, p. 88, n. 42.

<sup>27</sup> “*Selu*,” *The Assyrian Dictionary*, CAD 124–126.



and similarly in Arabic.<sup>28</sup> Yet more, in Akkadian, the *ṣelu* is often found in two connotations; the side (right or left) of a person, and also his bone (and also as connoting the “side” of a structure).

Further it may be said, with all necessary caution, that there is a gap between the Jewish tradition, which developed from the original Hebrew text, and Christianity, which developed from the languages of translation (such as the Septuagint in Greek, the Vulgate in Latin, Luther in German, etc.).<sup>29</sup> Hebrew, as source, is open to multiple-meanings and to ambiguity,<sup>30</sup> like any rich source language.<sup>31</sup> The other languages of translation lose, to one degree or another, this ambiguity during the move from the source language to the language of translation; *Targum* tends to reflect only one precise (but narrow) meaning (even though a good translation may encompass varied connotations). The religious significance of the language allows it to be multi-faceted with the multiple meanings. No man has an exclusive monopoly over its exegesis; only after lengthy discussion, which never reaches ideological resolution (in contrast to practical resolution by means of halakic ruling)—“both this and that are the words of the living God.” This is evidenced by the extended discussion in the talmudic and midrashic literature. The Sages’ position is important here not only for its rich and multi-dimensional perceptions of Scripture, but also because of its role in the process of canonization and redaction of the twenty-four books of the Bible. Therefore, it is not sufficient to examine woman through the narrow prism of the first two chapters of Genesis, but rather with an all-encompassing general view, such as this article purports to offer. Thus there could have developed in the midrash and in Rashi a reading tradition of “*tsela*” as “side”; it follows of itself that in this tradition is reflected the element of equality between man and woman at creation (or perhaps it was the Sages’ tendency towards equalization which led to this particular reading?). Needless to say, this reading, too, as proposed by the midrash and Rashi, is only an option, an alternate, possible—but not decisive—reading.

---

<sup>28</sup> “צֵלָע” HALOT 3:1030.

<sup>29</sup> See Y. Dan, *On Holiness: Religion, Ethics, and Mysticism in Judaism and Other Religions* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1997), see esp. chapter 1: “Holiness and Becoming Holy: Judaism and Christianity,” pp. 11–30. There are those who reject Dan’s thesis. See Greenstein’s discussion in “Theories of Modern Biblical Translation,” in E. Greenstein, *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation*, (BJS 92; Atlanta, Ga. Society of Biblical Literature, 1989), pp. 85–118.

<sup>30</sup> See W. Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1963), esp. pp. 234–256.

<sup>31</sup> See F. Gudas, “Ambiguity,” *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 40–41.

## 2. EQUALITY IN THE SPIRITUAL CREATION OF WOMAN “*IN THE IMAGE OF GOD*”

In the creation narrative in Genesis 1, it is written: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God did he create it, male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). Here we have solid—not apparent—testimony to basic equality between woman and man. This sweeping conclusion was reached by, among others, Rabbi Yitzhak Armaah, in his analysis of the meaning of the two names given woman: “Eve” and “Isha.” In “Eve” he detects connotations of life and birth, which are woman’s secondary and “minor purpose”; the name “Isha” implies equality, the result of “the possibility to fully participate in human perfection along with men,” and this is her primary purpose.

The meaning of the word “Isha” is learned from ‘*For she was taken from Ish*’... And similarly she can understand and be enlightened with words of intelligence and righteousness, as were our mothers and some saintly women and prophetesses.<sup>32</sup>

His expository view, which allots woman an existential-intellectual status equal to that of man, is important, especially since such exposition is not far from the plain reading (*pshat*) of the Bible—“male and female he created them.” Modern commentators also reached similar conclusions, for example, Phyllis Trible, who paid very close attention to the root passage: “And the Lord created man in his image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). She sums up: Inasmuch as the passage contains three nouns (“man,” “male,” “female”) and two pronouns (“him” and “them”), suitable interaction between them will clarify their roles in the passage.<sup>33</sup>

Trible’s explication of these words may provide a representative example of feminist reading (which, in many points, resembles interpretations already proposed in midrash of the Sages) and is worthy of special attention:

- A. The shift from singular (“created him”) to plural (“created them”) teaches that man is not a single being which incorporates male and female, but is two beings, one male and one female. This follows the previous passage, which also contains a change from singular to

<sup>32</sup> Y. Armaah, *The Binding of Isaac*, (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: The Ninth Gate, 5721 [1961]), p. 73b.

<sup>33</sup> P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 17–20.

- plural: “God said let us make man (singular) in our image, according to our likeness, let them (plural) rule.”
- B. The noun and pronoun in the singular (“man,” “him”) indicate that male and female are not opposed to each other, but they are different classifications, divided in function, but living in harmony (an idea which is a central theme in midrash).
- C. Placing “man” parallel to “male and female” teaches that differentiation by gender does not imply hierarchy, but equality. By their simultaneous creation, male and female are not in a ruler-ruled relation, they relate as equals.
- D. The silence of the text is also instructive. The above quote states: “And God said: Let us make man ... and they (both) will rule ... and God blessed them (both) ... God said to them (both) ... bear fruit and be many (both) and fill the earth and subdue it (here too, both man and woman).” Inasmuch as “bear fruit and be many” applies to man and woman equally, so does the end clause—which speaks about dominion over the world (“subdue it”)—speak to man and woman equally. I offer support for Tribble’s “egalitarian” analysis from the fact that equal reference to man and woman in the passage appears seven times (a leading motif?): [He blessed] them, [He said to] them, bear fruit, be many, fill, subdue, have dominion. Puzzling, then, is Rashi, who, following the Sages on the subject (*b. Yevamot* 65b, *Gen. Rab.* 8:12), ignores the plain reading of “subdue” assigning meaning diametrically opposed to the original one, using a formal rationale—the word is written without vowels, thus making possible an alternate reading; the command is now directed at the male alone: “‘and subdue’—minus the letter *vav*, to teach that the male subdues the female ... and also that man, whose nature is to subdue, is charged with the command to bear fruit and multiply, not the woman.”<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> It seems, however, that the Sages’s *apriori* halakic, or theological, stand on the subject (be its rationale what it may), prevailed over the text’s plain reading (so well analyzed by Prof. Tribble), and completely voided the word *v’kivshuha* ‘and subdue’ of its plain meaning, depending on familiar formalism, the absence of the letter *vav*. Rabbi Yochanan ben Broka, however (*b. Yevamot* 65b, in the parallel *sugya* in Yerushalmi, and in *Gen. Rab.*) expounds and prefers the egalitarian plain reading: “Rabbi Yohanan ben Broka says: The man and the woman—regarding both is it written ‘*And God blessed them and said ... bear fruit and be many.*’” He applies this only to “bear fruit and be many” which obligates both equally [in contrast to normative halakah, which obligates man alone], whereas in reference to the “subdue” the earth, he yields and agrees that “because man subdues his wife, that she not go out to the marketplace” (*Gen. Rab.* 8:12).

The above description is that of Genesis 1. Our reading of the second chapter provides a different picture: man is created first—woman is created later and from him. This implies that he is “primary” and she is “secondary” to him.<sup>35</sup> This deficiency of her being secondary has been turned to advantage by feminist commentary; inasmuch as Genesis 2 parallels Genesis 1 (as two creation narratives), and inasmuch as chapter 1 describes the development of creation from simple, primal stages to more advanced and complex stages (from plants, through animals, to man), so the very creation of woman after man (as per chapter 2) is proof—so claims the feminist reading—of her being a more advanced and developed “model” of man. In any case, this ambiguity of varying descriptions in chapters 1 and 2 will accompany woman throughout the Bible. For example, “Toward your husband will be your lust, yet he will rule over you” in Gen 3:16 as compared with the opposite bias of “and his desire is for me” of the Song of Songs 7:11. This subject receives special attention in the feminist literature of the last generation.<sup>36</sup>

With regard to law and custom in the Near East, one can generalize and argue that, in the words of W. Hallo, “The ancient East did not recognize the equivalent of ‘Amendment to the Law of Equal Rights’ [of the American constitution]; its constitution differentiated sharply between the sexes [men and women] just as it distinguishes sharply between social classes.”<sup>37</sup> An examination of the Torah laws relating to the woman as compared with man, on the other hand, indicates—occasionally—an egalitarian relationship, inasmuch as both are equal in their standing before God. So emphasizes Moshe Greenberg, pointing out that, according to biblical law, women are not penalized for the sins of their husbands, as they were in Babylonian and Assyrian laws pertaining to adultery: the sentence for the adulteress wife (as well as for the adulterer) is prescribed by her husband alone. “The aim of the law is to protect the rights of the husband and to recompense him for the injustice done him.”<sup>38</sup> In contrast to this, the fate of the woman in the Bible is

---

<sup>35</sup> In the New Testament, Paul reaches a sweeping conclusion from Genesis 2: “Woman shall learn silently, in complete submission. I do not permit women to teach, or to raise herself above man, but let her remain silent. For man was created first, and only later, woman” (1 Tim 2:11–13). Paul’s post-Biblical interpretation served as a catalyst for revolt for the new feminist interpretation. However, whoever studies the general image of biblical woman—as delineated in this article (which also summarizes other essays), will find it difficult to support Paul’s conclusion. (A similar idea—although less sweeping—can be found in the commentary of Rabbi Saadya Gaon; S. Gaon, *Torah Commentary on Genesis* (Zucker edition; New York: 1984), p. 277.

<sup>36</sup> For example, in C. Meyers, *Discovering Eve*.

<sup>37</sup> W. W. Hallo, *Origins: The Ancient Near Eastern Background of Some Modern Western Institutions* (New York: Brill, 1996), p. 245.

<sup>38</sup> M. Greenberg, “Basic Assumptions of the Criminal Law in the Bible” (in Hebrew), in *Torah Nidreshset* (Tel Aviv: 1984), p. 21.

not at all conditional upon the husband's wishes: "A man who adulterers with the wife of another man ... with the wife of his neighbor, is to be put to death, put to death, the adulterer and the adulteress" (Lev 20:10). The sin is against God, not against the husband. The outcome is that there is parity (albeit between sinners) between man and woman.

### 3. PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN ALONG WITH MEN IN NATIONAL CEREMONIES OF ENTERING OR RENEWING COVENANTS

Eight public ceremonies of entering or renewing covenants are found in the Bible: two occur in Moses's time (1\* the covenant of Sinai, Exodus 19, and 2\* the covenant of the Plains of Moab, Deuteronomy 28–29); two in Joshua's time (3\* the altar on Mount Ebal, Joshua 8, and 4\* the assembly at Shechem, Joshua 24); one in the days of Josiah (5\* upon the discovery of the Torah scroll, 2 Kings 23); two in the days of Ezra (6\* the reading of the Torah in public, Nehemiah 8, and 7\* the "pledge", Nehemiah 10); and one as a standing order (8\* "Gather the people," Deuteronomy 31), a ceremony which is not a one-time event, but an abiding one, to be repeated every seven years—thus imparting to it its special importance. In five of the ceremonies, women's participation is expressly mentioned; in three, there is no such mention.

The following is a detailed list of the assemblies in which female participation is expressly mentioned (2\*, 3\*, 6\*, 7\*, 8\*):

- 2\*) *In the days of Moses*: "You are stationed ... every man of Israel. Your little ones, *your wives*, and the sojourner in the midst of your camp ... for you to cross over into the covenant ... that the Lord your God is cutting with you today" (Deut 29:9–11).
- 3\*) *In the days of Joshua*: As the Torah was written on the stones at Mount Ebal, it was read "in the presence of the entire assembly of Israel, including the women and children and the strangers who accompanied them" (Josh 8:35).
- 6\*) *In the days of Ezra*: The participation of women receives special emphasis as Ezra gathered "all the nation as one man in the street" in Jerusalem and read for them the "scroll of the Teaching of Moses" (Neh 8:1). Three times the Torah repeats that men and women were gathered, apparently in equal fashion: "men and *women* and all who could listen with understanding" (Neh 8:2, 3, and 10:1) The fact that the ceremony took place on Rosh Hashanah (Neh 8:2) attaches major

importance to it. And similarly afterwards “He read from it, facing the square before the Water Gate ... to the men and the women and those who could understand; the ears of all the people were given to the scroll of the Teaching” (Neh 8:3).

- 7\*) Also participating in the ceremony of the acceptance of the pledge (Neh 10:1), were “the rest of the people ... their *wives*, sons, and daughters, all who knew enough to understand” (Neh 10:29).
- 8\*) In the “Hakel” ceremony, Israel was ordered to read the Torah “you shall read this Teaching aloud in the presence of all Israel. Gather the people—men, *women*, and children, and the strangers in your community” (Deut 31:11–12).

The five national covenants, in which female participation is noted, fall into two categories:

- a) For the purpose of cutting a covenant or ratifying one (2\*, 7\*).
- b) For the purpose of cutting a covenant, as above, but including a public reading of the Torah before all assembled (3\*, 6\*, 8\*).

There seem to have been two sorts of participation of women in the covenantal ceremonies:

- a) The appearance of women is similar to that of the men (i.e., “egalitarian,” to be referred to here on as “men + women”), such as: “*men and women*” (6\* and 8\*).
- b) The appearance of woman in a subordinate status, men comprising the public, women secondary to them (to be referred to as “assembly + women”) such as: “You are standing ... *every man of Israel; your wives*”—the public, “*Every man of Israel*” (a collective term, much discussed—but never agreed upon—in research), whereas women are the minority, the exception.

My attempt to find correlation between men + women as against assembly + women and the two types of covenants (those in which the Torah was read and those at which it was not read) was unsuccessful. Were we to find, for instance, that the egalitarian participation of women (men + women) was always prescribed for covenants which featured Torah-reading, or the opposite, we might have considered deriving appropriate conclusions. But we find that there is no set rule regarding those five cove-

nants which mention the participation of women; there seems to be no connection between the reading of the Torah, or its absence, and the “egalitarian” nature of female participation (for example, 2\*, at which the Torah was not read, was not “egalitarian,” but 3\* was also not “egalitarian”—even though the Torah was read). This conclusion leads to the thought that perhaps the main differentiation between “egalitarian” participation (men + women) and less egalitarian (assembly + women) is not intrinsic, but semantic.

Proof of this may perhaps be found in Nehemiah, where the “egalitarian” female participation is emphasized thrice (“*men and women*”—instance 6\*) whereas at “the Pledge”—instance 7\*, the “non-egalitarian”), the participants are listed: “And the rest of the people ... their wives, their sons, and their daughters, all who knew enough to understand” (Neh 10:29). Thus we find, in the same chapter, three “egalitarian” examples (men + women) alongside one “non-egalitarian” example (assembly + women). Perhaps here, too, we must not read too precisely: we should not reach any conclusions about “equality,” as it were. It may be argued, of course, that the designation “*their wives, their sons, and their daughters*” is proof that the primary gender, the dominant one, is the masculine, and all the others are secondary. On the other hand, it can be argued that such formulations are less important than the actual story being related, in which women were not excluded from these assemblies. There are, however, two more instances in which women are not mentioned, but neither are men (1\*, 4\*, 5\*).

I shall begin with examples from Joshua and Josiah. In Joshua 24, at the great assembly in Shechem (4\*), Joshua cut “a covenant for the people” (Josh 24:25). Participating in the assembly were “all the tribes of Israel” (Josh 24:1), “all the people” (Josh 24:1), or “the people” (Josh 24:16, 19, 21, 22, 25, 28); neither men nor women are specified. In the earlier assembly described in the book of Joshua, which took place on Mount Ebal, the Torah was read “in the presence of *the entire assembly of Israel, including the women*” (Josh 8:35). Can we not assume that the composition of the assembly was similar to that of the earlier assembly, which took place at the same location, in which women participated?

In Josiah’s reign, an assembly was held in The House of the Lord (5\*). For the purpose of ratifying the Book of the Covenant, the king called a convocation of “all the people, young and old” (2 Kgs 23:2; 2 Chron 32:30). The discovery of the scroll had prompted the king to send a query, through the agency of Hilkiyah the Priest and others, to the prophetess Huldah (during the lifetime of the male prophet Jeremiah), and to accept her authoritative

answer. Does one who requests operative directions from a prophetess exempt women from passive participation in a meeting of “all the people” in Jerusalem? During the meeting, there was offered up a sacrifice, the Pascal lamb, defined in the Torah as a family ritual (“Pick out, take for yourselves a sheep for your clans, and slay the Passover animal” [Exod 12:21]). May we not at least see a hint that women were present? And more: the phrase “young and old” (or: “old and young”) appears sixteen times in the Bible. It clearly denotes an entire collective, which does not exempt women from its midst (as in: “and He smote the inhabitants of the city, *young and old*” [1 Sam 4:9]). All the above make it difficult to conclude that women were excluded from “all the people” at Josiah’s convocation.

The revelation at Mt. Sinai (1\*): There is no unequivocal evidence of female presence at the giving of Torah at Sinai.

The examination of twenty instances of the phrase “House of Jacob” in the Bible indicates that there is no definite semantic proof in the text for Rashi’s explication (based on the Midrash, Exod 19:3): “*Say thus to the House of Jacob, these are the women.*”<sup>39</sup> Greenspan, in fact, assumes that women were absent from that event, relying on the assumption that “People of Israel” refers to males.<sup>40</sup> Examination of four instances of this term in the Bible would seem to substantiate his claim. Unfortunately, the phrase “*Am Yisrael*” does not appear at all in the Torah-giving narratives (Exodus 19). In that narrative only, the following appears: “The Children of Israel” (four times); “Israel” (once); “House of Jacob” (once); “all the people” (four times); “the people” (sixteen times). These collective terms are common in the Bible, and it can be shown that each of them refers to a large Israelite

---

<sup>39</sup> The midrash (*Mekilta* of Rabbi Yishmael, *Exod. Rab.* 28:2, and others) not only explicitly inserted the women, but it also took pains to point out their special merit: “Why the women first, because they are quick to observe the mitzvot.” The Sages’ hermeneutical exposition, quoted by Rashi: “*House of Jacob*—these are the women,” is shown, by examination of appearances of the phrase “House of Jacob,” to lack any biblical basis. In the Bible, it connotes the Israelite people in general, not only the women. But examination of the meaning of “House” (sans the word “of Jacob”), in a family context, may indicate an affinity to a *drasha* of the Sages: “*His house*”—this is his wife (Mishnah, beginning of *Yoma*), such as in: “When may I, too, do something for my household” [argues Jacob] (Gen 30:30—“my household”: “my wives and my children); “And Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, Put away the foreign gods” (Gen 35:2—“his household” refers primarily to his wives, because his children were yet young). The subject requires more examination. We can assume that the absence of explicit evidence of female presence at the Sinai revelation engendered (already in the times of the Sages) interpretation in which women did not participate. This (assumed) argument raises the question: How is it possible to obligate women to observe some of the commandments if they did not participate in the receiving of the Torah at Sinai? Perhaps this is the reason that the Sages made special effort to emphasize the active participation of women at the Sinai revelation. The results of such interpretation, despite its apologetic character, suits the spirit of the text, as derives from my discussion of the subject.

<sup>40</sup> F. E. Greenspahn, “A Typology of Biblical Women,” *Judaism* 31 (1983): 47.



public, which includes women (such as “and the people which you led up out of the land of Egypt,” [Exod 33:1]—men and women, together).

But Greenspahn’s other argument—that the Ten Commandments were phrased in the second person, masculine—is irksome. In contrast to the command “You shall not steal” which may encompass men and women equally, the command “You shall not covet the wife of your neighbor”—specifically addresses the males! Greenspahn’s conclusion is that “Women were not intentionally excluded, they were simply ignored.” He is not the first to argue so.<sup>41</sup>

Judith Plaskow, in 1991, repeated his position in a monograph entitled *Standing Again at Sinai*.<sup>42</sup> Her overall point of view is Jewish, and she utilizes the title of the book as a metaphorical expression of the position of women in general. The author repeats the recurrent feminist claim that “at the central movement of Jewish history, women are invisible.”<sup>43</sup> She uses the absence of women from the covenant at Sinai (“the central event which established the Jewish People”) as substantiation of her claim of “the profound injustice of Torah itself. Here, in this chapter, the ‘otherness’ of women finds its way to the center of the Jewish experience.”<sup>44</sup> She quotes Rachel Adler, who protested bitterly against the absence of women at the Sinai Revelation:

Because the text has excluded her, she is excluded again in this yearly re-enactment and will be excluded over and over, year by year, every time she rises to hear the covenant read.<sup>45</sup>

Plaskow is not mollified before she concludes with an additional quote from Rachel Adler:

We are being invited by Jewish men to re-covenant, to forge a covenant which will address the inequalities of women’s position in Judaism, but we ask ourselves, “Have we ever had a covenant in the first place? Are women Jews?”<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> See F. E. Greenspahn, “A Typology of Biblical Women,” p. 47; P. A. Bird, “Images of Women in the Old Testament,” in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (ed. R. R. Reuther; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), p. 50.

<sup>42</sup> J. Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco, Calif.: Harper and Row, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> J. Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> J. Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, p. 25.

<sup>45</sup> J. Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, p. 26.

<sup>46</sup> J. Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*, p. 26. See R. Adler, “I’ve had Nothing Yet So I Can’t Take More,” *Moment* 8 (September 1983): 23.

Her question is incisive, but an encompassing examination of female participation in covenants in the Bible, does not support these sweeping conclusions. We have already seen that women are mentioned as participants in five of the eight covenants (one, the *Hakhel* is ongoing), and in the remaining three, there is no evidence—even a hint—of their being exempted. Therefore, it may be proper to judge the covenants in a general view, letting the obscure be informed by the explicit, thus: inasmuch as in five of the covenants, women did participate, and inasmuch as in the three remaining covenants women were not exempted, (and we see no textual indication of “men only”); and in the latter three we do find general terms (such as “all the people”) which, in other places includes men and women, it is not unreasonable to assume that in these three covenants, vague in their description, women participated along with the men.

A detailed examination of the revelation at Sinai does not support the Greenspahn-Plaskow conclusions. The Children of Israel left Egypt and arrived at Sinai as a national collective: “They sojourned from Rephidim and arrived at the Sinai Wilderness, and encamped in the desert, and Israel encamped there, facing the mountain” (Exod 19:2). Who, then, encamped “facing the mountain”—only the men? The revelation at Sinai was one of ancient history’s first “multi-media” productions<sup>47</sup> ever recorded: “There were thunder clouds and lightening, a heavy cloud on the mountain, and an exceedingly strong shofar sound ... Mount Sinai smoked all over ... all of the mountain trembled exceedingly” (Exod 19:16–18). “Now all of the people were seeing the thunder-sounds, the flashing-torches, the shofar sound, and the mountain smoking” (Exod 20:15). What could be a reason, social or religious, for excluding the women from so impressive a multi-effect ceremony as this at the foot of Mount Sinai, in the midst of the wide desert? If this was the case, where were they hidden? Thus the words: “And he said to the people: Be ready for three days; do not approach a woman” (Exod 19:15), do not necessarily indicate the distancing of women from the revelation at Mount Sinai, but only that the event be preceded by a process of purification in male-female relations. Thus Rashi (following the Sages, *Mekilta* of Rabbi Yishmael, in loc sit.) “So that ‘the women be ... pure in order to receive the Torah.’” Rabbi Steinsaltz detects in the Torah-giving event a kind of repetition of the story of the creation of Man, “When the Bible deals with the ‘creation’ of the Jewish people at the Sinai revelation ...

---

<sup>47</sup> See A. Shapira, “The Communication Media Against the Background of the Conflict between *Moderna* and Religion” (in Hebrew), in *Mibaseret: A Compilation of Articles about Judaism and Cinema* (Jerusalem: Lifshitz College, 5756 [1996]), pp. 53–66.

all the House of Israel, women and men together, stand and receive, as one, the Torah.”<sup>48</sup>

Finally, despite all my suggested proofs of female participation at the revelation, we are still in need of further examination: Why did the Torah refrain from explicit mention of female participation in the fundamental covenant obligating Israel to Torah? How many doubts could have been eliminated had there appeared an explicit statement, such as: “And Moses told all the people, men and women, gather at Mount Sinai.” I have already mentioned that the derasha of the Sages, quoted by Rashi: “*House of Jacob*—these are the women” cannot be considered the plain meaning of the text. Even so, the essence of his exegesis, which establishes woman’s participation in the receiving of the Torah at Sinai, is buttressed. Particularly against the background of some Sages’ reservations about women learning Torah—whether learning by themselves<sup>49</sup> or being taught by others<sup>50</sup>—the biblical phenomenon of female participation with men in the receiving of the Torah and in its public national ratification—throughout the biblical period, beginning with Moses and ending with Ezra—stands out. If we read these sources as relaying a social, more than historical, message, we find women being positioned in the central junctions in the life of people, enjoying equal status with men, by virtue of their being partners to the national covenant ceremonies.

In this section, it is proper to mention the participation of the women in the erection of the Tabernacle.<sup>51</sup> The word combination, “man and woman” appears in the Bible ten times, equalizing man and woman in two subjects, both public and polar: in shared national tragedy (such as “to cut off from you man and woman”)<sup>52</sup> or in the holy national project of contribution to the Tabernacle, as can be seen in the verse: “Every man and woman whose mind

<sup>48</sup> A. Steinsaltz, *Women in the Bible* (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv: University Meshuderet, 5743 [1983]), p. 12.

<sup>49</sup> “From where do we know that woman is not obligated to teach her son Torah? ... whoever is not obligated to learn is not obligated to teach” (b. *Qiddushin* 29b).

<sup>50</sup> “Rabbi Eliezer says: He who teaches his daughter Torah, teaches her licentiousness” (*Sifre Deut*, Article 46; H. S. Horowitz and L. Finkelstein, eds., *Sifre on Deuteronomy* [in Hebrew; New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969], p. 104). May I point out that there were other halakic positions, and in different historical periods, women studied—and even taught their sons—Torah. But generally, until recent generations, women were, as a rule, excluded from Torah study. In the ultra-Orthodox world, advanced Torah study still remains “off limits.”

<sup>51</sup> Goitin is of the opinion that the distancing of woman from the Temple—in contrast to their participation in public and religious life in general—derives from the negative “shady” role played by Gentile women in the Canaanite and Babylonian shrines. Therefore, as a protective fence, “the lawgiver chose to distance them from the Temple altogether”; S. D. Goitin, “Women as Creators of Literary Types in the Bible,” in *Studies in the Bible* (ed. S. D. Goitin; Tel Aviv: Yavne, 1967), p. 261.

<sup>52</sup> Jer 44:7. See also: Judg 9:49; 16:27; 1 Sam 27:9, 11; Jer 51:22.

made them willing to bring for the workmanship that God had commanded them to make through Moses, the Children of Israel brought it, a freewill offering for God.”<sup>53</sup> This is also understood from the words: “Then came men and women alike, everyone of willing mind, they brought” (Exod 35:22). The somewhat vague beginning caused the NewJPS to translate: “Men and women . . . came,” preferring to ignore the somewhat problematic preposition *‘al* [Translator’s note: An absolutely literal translation would read, “Then came men on (*‘al*) women”]. But the RSV detected the egalitarian character of the activity and translated: “So they came both men and women.” Similarly, Everett Fox translated: “Then came men and women alike” and thus also Luther and Buber, in the German. Rashi preceded them all: “‘*On the women*’—with the women, and adjacent to them.” The most outspoken of all is the Ramban: “They were there first and the men adhered to them.”

True, the very presence of women together with the men does not make them equal to the men (even strangers and children participated in some of the covenants). But since the women were not exempted from these important ceremonies—and their participation was specifically mentioned—it is not improper to mention and to determine: women were partners, and thereby, equals, in the receiving of the Torah and in participation in all public covenantal convocations in the Bible.

#### **4. EQUALITY IN THE PERSONAL STATUS REACHED BY WOMAN AS “MATRIARCHS,” JUDGES, PROPHETESSES, QUEENS, AND OTHERS (SUCH AS SAGES, ACTIVE IN PUBLIC AFFAIRS)**

Mention must be made of the outstanding public status of certain women who were “matriarchs,” judges (with the status of ruler, such as Deborah), prophetesses, and queens.<sup>54</sup> This is the conclusion reached by S. D. Goitin, in his article on “Women as Creators of Literary Types in the Bible”: “In the period of the Bible, the Hebrew woman was active in various areas of public and spiritual affairs,”<sup>55</sup> and the sophisticated song by women in the Bible is evidence of “substantial participation in public life.”<sup>56</sup> This is in addition not only to many other women who were active in public life, especially “wise women” (such as the woman from Abel Beth Maacah, 2 Samuel 20; the

---

<sup>53</sup> Exod 35:29. See also Exod 36:6.

<sup>54</sup> A status achieved by only very few in today’s religious (modern and *hareidi* alike) society.

<sup>55</sup> S. D. Goitin, “Women as Creators,” p. 261.

<sup>56</sup> S. D. Goitin, “Women as Creators,” p. 253.

woman from Tekoa, 2 Samuel 14), but also to those in womanly—ergo, secondary—occupations, such as performers and dancers (such as Miriam, Exodus 15; Jephthah's daughter, Judges 11); and “the women of the cities of Israel,” 1 Samuel 18); poetesses (such as in Ezra 2:65; also Miriam, Exod 15:20–21; and Deborah, Judges 5, who were poets in addition to being prophetesses), dirge-singers (as in Jer 9:16), and the “male singers and the female singers” (such as in 2 Chron 35:25; 2 Samuel 19 and Ecclesiastes 2), and even the authoresses of “Lovers' Songs” (many in Song of Songs, such as 2:2–7). I reiterate and stress that I have not come to deal with these women in comprehensive fashion (relevant literature has rapidly expanded in recent years), only to briefly mention the known and the accepted regarding some of them as prototypes. These special women, and others like them, attest that in the Bible there were dominant women, whose standing was not lower than that of men.

#### 4.1 “Matriarchs”

The definition: “The Patriarchal Era,” and not “The Matriarchal Era” teaches that the patriarchs were those dominant in family and tribal life. With all this, the four mothers are described in the Bible not merely as followers of their husbands and dependant upon them, but as independent personalities; they are those responsible for the destiny of their children and the coming generations. As an example of this tendency, we shall use Sarah, our mother.

There is no denying that Abraham, not Sarah, is head of the family, and therefore, when he leaves Haran for Canaan, he “takes” with him his wife Sarah—she does not “take” him (Gen 12:5); just as the “covenant between the pieces” (Genesis 15) is cut with Abraham and not with Sarah (even though the destined seed would be from her womb, and she is destined to be blessed with “and she shall become nations, kings of peoples will issue from her,” Gen 17:16).

With all this, the fabric of relations between Abraham and Sarah is intricate; the relationship is not always that of a “first” (meaning the male) and his “second” (meaning the woman; so termed by the feminists, such as Simon de Beauvoir, not without bitterness, in her *The Second Sex*).<sup>57</sup> Writes Rabbi Steinsaltz:

---

<sup>57</sup> S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (trans. H. M. Parshley; New York: Bantam, [1949] 1952). A distinction must be drawn between gender and sex (although both are translated into Hebrew as *min*). Gender is a general characterization of the species, such as a biological species; the Academy for the Hebrew Language

Here is not a male, who is the central figure upon which all are dependant, and a female, a dependant who follows him everywhere. There is a clear impression that Sarah has a full status of her own ... the special result of an independent personality.<sup>58</sup>

He points out that Sarah is the only woman in the Bible whose name is changed (from "Sarai" to "Sarah," a process which testifies to an active change in life); this testifies to a condition of equality with Abraham. Both, Abraham and Sarah, are the only persons which the Bible mentions in a single clause "Abraham and Sarah," as to say, "people of equal station."<sup>59</sup>

Sometimes Sarah is the initiator, while Abraham is the listener: "And Abraham listened to the voice of Sarah" (Gen 16:2). He is, on occasion, charged by the Lord to obey her: "Whatever Sarah says to you, hearken to her voice" (Gen 21:12).<sup>60</sup> Other examples may be brought: God listens to Hannah; her prayers make her the dominant figure in comparison with her husband, Elkanah and Eli the Priest (1 Samuel 1); and similarly, the daughters of Zelophehad, who appear alone, on their own initiative, before Moses and before the Lord, and are ultimately vindicated in their demand: "Rightfully speak the daughters of Zelophehad" (Num 27:7).<sup>61</sup>

#### 4.2 Judge: Deborah

Deborah served in a double role: she was "a prophetess" who also "judged Israel" in the period of the Judges. To her came "the Children of Israel for justice" (Judg 4:5). In comparing her as a judge with Samuel, it may be said that Deborah's national standing was pronounced. According to

---

suggested the translation *migdar*. Sex is a characteristic bearing a negative connotation, such as oppression of woman and sexual exploitation. Some authors (such as de Beauvoir) differentiate between the terms and some do not.

<sup>58</sup> A. Steinsaltz, *Women in the Bible*, p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> A. Steinsaltz, *Women in the Bible*, p. 8.

<sup>60</sup> There is a midrash by the Sages which posits that the prophetic powers of the matriarchs, such as Sarah, exceed those of the patriarchs: "From here you learn that Abraham was inferior to Sarah in prophecy" (*Exod. Rab.* 1).

<sup>61</sup> The Bible relates in detail to what great degree the destiny of Moses, master of the prophets, was tied to a long list of women: Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives; Bat-Levi, a daughter of Levi, who gave birth to him and later nursed him; his sister Miriam, who saved him; the daughter of Pharaoh, who raised him; the seven daughters of Jethro, who were saved by him from the shepherds; Zipporah, daughter of Jethro, who was married to him and later saved their son; and finally, the daughters of Zelophehad, who came to judgment before him (in the twice-related narrative): "Rightfully speak the daughters of Zelophehad" (Rashi: "Teaching that their eyes saw that which Moses's eyes did not see"; Num 27:7. Does the Bible wish to create a balance between Moses, the great leader of the Jewish people (and, as it were, it's midwife), and women, the "midwife" of all mankind? Although we may have no definite answer here, the door is open to the question of comparison of motif.

Scripture, Samuel divided his time; sometimes he was an itinerant judge, “Each year he made the rounds of Bethel, Gilgal, and Mizpah, and acted as judge over Israel at all those places” and sometimes he returned to his home at Ramah “and there too he would judge Israel” (1 Sam 7:16–17). Deborah, on the other hand, sat permanently beneath the “palm of Deborah,” and the Children of Israel came up to her, to be judged by her (Judg 4:4). Kaufman is doubtful as to Deborah’s being a judge “in the political sense (in the usual sense of ‘judging’ in this book); rather; she judged them in matters between man and man.”<sup>62</sup> This statement deserves thought, for the term “judge” in the book of Samuel has a political connotation; even the biblical text tells of Deborah, on her own initiative, instigating and carrying out a political-military action, by summoning Barak ben Abinoam, and ordering him to wage war against Sisera (Judg 4:6). Yet more, Barak makes his going to war contingent upon Deborah’s joint participation: “If you go with me, I will go” (Judg 4:8). May we not derive from this that her “judging” had a political-governmental character? This, even though the feminists quote an alternate evaluation of Barak as evidence of women’s inferior status: “There will be no glory for you in the course you are taking, for then the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman” (Judg 4:9).

A counter argument is supplied by the fact that in the battle against Sisera, Deborah fulfilled a national role of a definite military nature, as she orders Barak to command the northern and central tribes; jointly they defeat Jabin, King of Canaan. This political activity leads Rabbi Steinsaltz to label her “Deborah—Political Prophetess.” He points out that whereas the phenomenon of prophetesses in the history of the nations is usually relegated to women who are outside the circle of life (e.g., hermitesses, or virgins dedicated to this specific role), in the Bible, these women, such as Deborah, function within the circle of normal and natural life of the nation.<sup>63</sup> Jacob Liver writes:

Deborah ... fulfills a role similar to that of Samuel. She was a judge ... transmitter of God’s word ... in the Song of Deborah she is called “*Mother in Israel*” (Judges 5:7). It would seem that this title, like the designation “father” hints at religious authority ... and the judicial [authority], which is reserved for men of God ... her influence over the Children of Israel was so strong as

---

<sup>62</sup> Y. Kaufman, *The Book of Shoftim* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1975), p. 122.

<sup>63</sup> A. Steinsaltz, *Women in the Bible*, p. 50.

to infuse the tribes ... with the recognition of the religious uniqueness and national bond which united them.<sup>64</sup>

All this is significant, even if she were not a “judge-deliverer” of the usual type.

### 4.3 Prophetesses: Huldah

Huldah was a prophetess who lived in Jerusalem (2 Kings 22). When the Torah was discovered in the days of Josiah, it was to her that Josiah dispatched “Hilkiah the High Priest” with a company of royal ministers to inquire of the Lord on behalf of the king and his people (2 Kgs 22:8–13). With a sure voice, Huldah commands them: “Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: Say to the man who sent you to me ... I am going to bring disaster upon this place and upon its inhabitants” (2 Kgs 22:18). She replies to each of the king’s inquiries, and it is her unequivocal statements which pressure King Josiah to convene all the people for a renewed cutting of the “Book of the Covenant” which was found in Jerusalem. This prophetess’s extraordinary standing was, of course, not hidden from the eyes of the Sages (as we shall soon see). Another prophetess was Noadiah, who lived in the early days of the Second Temple, and is remembered as one who, together with other prophets, exhibited firm opposition to Nehemiah. From Nehemiah’s complaint, it would seem that her influence was greater than that of other prophets: “O, my God, remember ... and against Noadiah the prophetess, and against the other prophets that they wished to intimidate me!” (Neh 6:14).

The Bible designated as “prophetesses” four women: Miriam (Exod 15:20); Deborah (Judg 4:4); Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14; 2 Chron 34:22); and Noadiah (Neh 6:14). Rabbinical tradition expanded the list to seven: Sarah,

---

<sup>64</sup> Y. Liver, “Deborah,” *Biblical Encyclopedia* 2:583. See also E. M. Macdonald, *The Position of Women as Reflected in Semitic Codes of Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1931). This independent judicio-governmental status of Deborah—as a woman—puzzled the halakic masters of the Middle Ages, who concluded that this was a case of “public acquiescence” of “the heads of the community.” See *t. Shevu’ot* 29b, beginning “*Shevuath ha’eduth*”; *Sefer Hachinuch*, Mitzvah 83, et. al. This conclusion is important from another angle, as it emphasizes the democratic element of “general agreement” which affected the Jewish communal structure, an element which developed in the halakic literature from the Middle Ages on. See from the expansive body of literature: M. Alon, “Democracy, Basic Rights and Proper Administration in the Rulings of the Sages of the Orient After the Expulsion from Spain,” *The Yearbook of Hebrew Law 18–19* (5754 [1994]), pp. 14–18; and, for a more encompassing picture, the above M. Alon: “Ruling in the Appeal of Leah Shakdiel Against the Minister for Religious Affairs and Others—and High Court Justice M. Alon,” in *Hapenina: A Volume in Memory of Penina Rappel* (Jerusalem: Bnei Hemed, 5749 [1989]), pp. 64–126.



Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther (*b. Megillah* 14a). In midrash *Shir Hashirim* is to be found an unusual augmentation of the list,<sup>65</sup> with the author even establishing that there were exactly the same number of prophetesses as prophets!<sup>66</sup> In the *darshan's* point of view, there is evident a tendency of equalization between prophets and prophetesses in the continued existence of this institution of prophetesses alongside the prophets in Israel. And all this despite the fact that there is extant no book of prophecy by a prophetess, and not a single prophetess reached the level of the classic prophet.<sup>67</sup>

#### 4.4 Queen: Athaliah

Athaliah, daughter of Ahab, was the first woman to actually rule over Israel. (There is extensive evidence that the phenomenon of a female sovereign was not at all foreign to the ancient East).<sup>68</sup> She ruled as Queen in Judea for a number of years, until she was killed by a cabal, and the kingship returned to Joash son of Ahaziah (2 Kings 11). Her personality and her relations with Jehoiada, the Priest, have been much discussed in research.<sup>69</sup> May I point out that this queen, like Queen Shlomzion of the Second Temple period, was not judged by the Bible as a woman *per se*. True, Shlomzion is judged (by the Sages) favorably, while Athaliah (yet in the Bible) is judged unfavorably, but this is because of their behavior, not their gender. We should also make mention here of the “*gevirah*,” the King’s mother, the noble woman of independent character, who reaches high royal station (such as Bathsheba, who guaranteed the coronation of Solomon in David’s old age, 1 Kings 1; Maacah, mother of King Asa, 1 Kings 15:13; and the mother of his predecessor, Abijam, 1 Kings 15:2). The *gevirah* held an independent

---

<sup>65</sup> Said R’ Berakhia in the name of R’ Helbo: Just as six hundred thousand (male) prophets arose in Israel, so, too did six hundred thousand prophetesses, and Shelomo came and revealed them” (*Song Rabbah* [ed. S. Donsky; Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: 5740 (1980)], Parasha 4:22: p. 119).

<sup>66</sup> This midrash serves the feminist scholars as a highly inspirational source of egalitarian reading, despite the overall patriarchal framework of the scroll of Song of Songs: One cannot ignore two groups of males who oversee the beloved maid’s behavior—the guards and the brothers; see I. Pardes, *Creation before Eve*, p. 100, in discussion with Phyllis Trible.

<sup>67</sup> Even literature dealing with women (such as the Scroll of Ruth) cannot claim female authorship (perhaps in keeping with “Her children declare her happy, her husband praises her” (Prov 31:28).

<sup>68</sup> See the article about women, “In Public Life,” in W. W. Hallo, *Origins*, pp. 252–261, and the detailed bibliography there.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, S. Arbeli, “Women in High Standing in the Bible and Their Involvement in Life as Compared with Documents from the Ancient East” (Doctoral thesis, Jerusalem, The Hebrew University, 5744 [1984]).

and highly respected position, both in Israelite tradition and in that of Semitic nations in general.<sup>70</sup>

In her words of summation in a 1994 symposium, Tikva Frymer-Kensky<sup>71</sup> called the attention of readers of the Bible to a paradox: In a patriarchal biblical world, in which men are the central figures, and in a world of androcentric viewpoint, we find women moving out of the wings onto the stage; they know what will happen and what will transpire, they do what has to be done that it may be realized. So—better than men and with superior wisdom—do Eve and Sarah, Rebecca and Zipporah act. And so Rahab the harlot, from the fringes of society, reveals God's intent to give the land of Canaan to His people, and Huldah the prophetess brings the word of God regarding the people and the land. Yet another woman—the woman of En-Dor who consulted ghosts—informs Saul of the impending end of his reign, and of the commencement of David's rule. We know not the origins of all this, but “it is worthwhile to note that in the Bible, constantly and consistently, the wise words of women are recorded and emphasized.”<sup>72</sup>

## 5. WOMEN IN “BIRTH STORIES,” IN WHICH THE STATUS OF WOMAN IS SUPERIOR TO THAT OF MAN

Women in biblical “Birth Stories” have received wide attention in scholarship, such as that of Ackerman, Zakovitz, Alter, and more recently, by Uriel Simon.<sup>73</sup> Inasmuch as Simon is the latest to deal with this subject, and his analysis is the most detailed analysis of the literary genre of “Birth Stories,” I shall use it as a basis for the present section, summarizing his words.

Simon details the recapitulation of his discussion with a chart<sup>74</sup> containing ten components which appear “in significant measure” in each of the eleven<sup>75</sup> birth tales in the Bible. Ten of the components which identify the

---

<sup>70</sup> See S. Arbeli, “Women in High Standing.”

<sup>71</sup> T. Frymer-Kensky, “Goddesses: Biblical Echoes,” in *Feminist Approaches to the Bible: Symposium at the Smithsonian Institution September 24, 1994* (ed. P. Tribble and H. Shanks; Washington, D. C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1995), pp. 27–44.

<sup>72</sup> T. Frymer-Kensky, “Goddesses,” pp. 27–44.

<sup>73</sup> U. Simon, *Literary Readings in the Bible: Stories of the Prophets* (Ramat Gan: Mossad Bialik, 1997), pp. 40–56.

<sup>74</sup> U. Simon, *Literary Readings in the Bible*, pp. 44–45.

<sup>75</sup> His list contains twelve stories, among them the story of Danel which begins the saga of Akhat the Ugarite. The closeness of the Ugarite story to the Bible (such as “Noah, Danel and Job” in Ezek 14:14. See his treatment, U. Simon, *Literary Readings in the Bible*, pp. 44–45) is known, but it is too long a discussion for this paper.

literary genre termed “Birth Stories” range from the distress, the eligibility for a miracle, the woman’s wisdom and resourcefulness to the mission, the miracle, the explication of the name, and the expression of thanks. Even though Simon counts ten components, he argues that three are basic: the distress (of the barren woman), the miracle, and the mission (which is the reason for giving life to the child).<sup>76</sup> My reference from here on will be to the overall phenomenon of the basic components, not to their possible elucidation.

One who wishes to focus on the woman’s independent standing in the Bible—equaling that of the male and even surpassing him—will choose to relate to Simon’s conclusions regarding the fifth component, defined as “woman’s wisdom and her resourcefulness.” Simon includes four women in this category: Rachel (Gen 29:30), the wife of Manoah (Judges 13), Hannah (1 Samuel 1–2), and the Shunamite woman (2 Kings 4). In these stories appear two major phenomena which characterize the heroines relative to the other birth stories: A) Excepting the Shunamite (in the first stage), they exhibit no resignation to their bitter fate. On the contrary, their behavior reveals a strain of “heroic refusal.”<sup>77</sup> So it is Rachel, not Jacob, who rebels against her barrenness (Gen 30:1); Jochebed, not Amram her husband, who derives encouragement from the uniqueness of the newborn (Exod 2:2); Hannah rejects her husband’s consolation (1 Sam 1:10); the Shunammite, not her husband, urges the man of God to save her sons from servitude (2 Kgs 4:27). In these birth stories, the males (Jacob, Amram, Elkanah, the Shunammite’s husband), are “secondary characters: whereas the main characters are women (Rachel, Jochebed, Hannah, and the Shunammite)! Simon’s conclusion seems inevitable:

The third component, “woman’s wisdom and her resourcefulness,” relates to the vigorous struggle of all [four]<sup>78</sup> of these women, during which they had to overcome both the resignation and the passivity (sometimes by misunderstanding and disagreement) of the spouse and other males. Moses’s mother hides the baby, afterwards placing him (with the help of his sister) into a wicker basket among the reeds; Manoah’s wife is better able than her husband to identify the angel and to understand his message; Hannah surpasses her husband and Eli the Priest in her ability to vow and fulfill; and the Shunammite does more to further the resurrection of her son than do her husband, Elisha, and Gehazi. Scripture recounts similar behavior on the part of Rachel, but she is the only one whose persistent efforts—the giving of Bilhah

---

<sup>76</sup> U. Simon, *Literary Readings in the Bible*, p. 42.

<sup>77</sup> U. Simon, *Literary Readings in the Bible*, p. 50.

<sup>78</sup> For the sake of economy, certain alterations in Simon’s lengthy and detailed dissertation are necessary.

to Jacob and the purchase of the mandrakes from Leah—bear no fruit; only after she prays to God is she finally answered. In other words, all the males who are described along with the struggling women function in the stories as secondary figures, clearly belonging to the opposite type, men who surrender to the stern decree ... in those stories in which the resignation and lack of faith are represented by **the secondary figure** [the male, emphasis in the original] this [male] weakness is balanced by the courageous struggle of the main character (the female) who is driven by the power of her deep faith in He who hears our prayers.<sup>79</sup>

In summation, here, in a certain class of birth stories, the males-fathers function in supporting roles, expressing “weakness” and acquiescence with the family distress caused by the wife’s inability to bear children. In contrast to them, the women function as main characters, expressing “deep faith in He who hears our prayers” and who wage a “vigorous struggle” for their way. This explains the entitling of “Birth Stories” as a distinct category, in a dissertation dealing with the egalitarian position of woman in the Bible. On the contrary, the uniqueness of this section lies in the fact that, more than in others, women are not in a class equal with men, but are superior to them: in their wisdom, their resourcefulness, and even in their religious faith and their standing before God. All this is despite the fact that the designated births, in all the “birth stories,” are always of important males, never of important females! I mention briefly the field of “name exposition” (*midrash sheymot*), a subject which is explored extensively in scholarship.<sup>80</sup> I offer a quote by Cassuto, as a typical example of an egalitarian line of thought which has been developed in modern literature, regarding the words of Eve, following the birth of Cain, “I have gained a man as has God” (Gen 4:1):

The first woman, in her joy over the birth of her first son, is proud of her creative power, which seems in her eyes to be close to the creative power of the Creator. God created the first man, (Gen. 2:23), and I created the second man. I have gained a man as has God; I stand together with Him in the ranks of creators.<sup>81</sup>

These words, penned over fifty years ago, preceded by a generation the feminists of our day (such as Tribble, Brenner, Pardes, and many others) who have dealt extensively with the chapter of the Creation and Eve’s role in it.

<sup>79</sup> U. Simon, *Literary Readings in the Bible*, pp. 50–51.

<sup>80</sup> See the chapter, “*Midrash-shem of Mothers*,” in the recent work by Pardes, I. Pardes, *Creation before Eve*, pp. 36–43, and the bibliography there.

<sup>81</sup> Emphases in the original; U. Cassuto, *From Adam to Noah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 5713 [1953]), p. 135; see I. Pardes, *Creation before Eve*, pp. 38–39.

## 6. EQUALITY IN WOMEN'S INITIATIVE AND INDEPENDENCE, IN THEIR PERSONAL DECISIONS, ESPECIALLY ON BEHALF OF SURVIVAL OF RELATIVES OR FELLOW CITIZENS, AND THE BIBLE'S AWARENESS OF THIS AUTONOMY

The list of instances of female independence in personal decisions, in ways they forged for themselves, and the Bible's awareness of this autonomy, can be quite lengthy. I shall limit myself to just a few, some of which have already been mentioned: Sarah and Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, Ruth and Naomi, Hannah and Abigail, the wife of Manoah and the Shunammite woman. Descriptions of some of these women and their relationships to their husbands are brief. The woman is dominant as compared with her spouse or surroundings: Manoah's wife (Judges 13); the wise woman who prevented Joab from destroying Abel Beth Maacah (2 Samuel 20); the Queen of Sheba, who comes on her own initiative to test Solomon and to "test him with hard questions" (1 Kings 10); Jezebel (1 Kings 21); the important woman of Shunem (2 Kings 2); even Vashti, who dared stand up to the king as she refused (at the price of her crown) to accede to Ahasuerus's foolish request (Esther 1) and others. There are others whose role, compared with that of their spouses, is not dominant, but we read of an episode in which the woman overcomes the man, or her antagonistic environment, by exploiting her wisdom and her understanding of the changing realities and the most suitable means for solution of current problems.

It is worth noting that most of the examples in this section—and they are not just a few—position the women as centrally involved in their initiative, in the process of survival of the individual, the family, the nation, or mankind in general. They are the ones who are concerned with continuation of the species and the coming generations; they read the reality—both short and long range—more accurately than do their husbands, the men. Thus the daughters of Lot gave birth for the sake of the continuation of mankind (so they mistakenly thought, Genesis 19).<sup>82</sup> So Rebecca, thanks to whom

---

<sup>82</sup> From the silence of the narrative we are unable to discern a positive—or even a neutral—evaluation of their behavior. The Sages are surprising in their positive attitude: "Said Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha: One should always hurry to perform a mitzvah (!) because of the one evening which the older daughter preceded the younger, she merited to precede her with four generations of kingship in Israel" (*b. Nazir* 23b). According to the tanna Rabbi Yohanan, The Holy One, Blessed Be He, himself was an accomplice to the act by making wine available in the cave (*b. Niddah* 31a). It can, of course, be argued that the Sages were attempting thereby to dilute the severity of the affair, thus smoothing its connection—via Ruth the Moabite—to David. It is preferable, however, to accept the view, found in traditional commentary, that here, as in other places, man is sometimes judged by his motivation and goal, rather than by his actual behavior, and since "they had good intentions," they were forgiven; especially, when the goal was the

Jacob—not Esau—received his father’s blessing which was appropriate for him, seeing that Jacob was the son fit to continue the house of Abraham (Genesis 27; and this, after God’s word was revealed to her, prophesying that “the elder shall serve the younger,” Gen 25:23); the two sisters, Rachel and Leah, who—instead of Jacob—resolutely exhibit initiative to continue the family line: Rachel, who initiated the giving of her maidservant Bilhah to Jacob so that he could have a child through her (Gen 30:1–2), and Leah, who “rented” her husband Jacob (Gen 30:14–18); Tamar, who strove towards married life and childbearing, overcoming Judah (Genesis 38) (from the story it may be concluded that the Bible supported her right to *yibbum*—levirate marriage; thus, through *yibbum*, was created the connection (as in “reflection stories”) to Ruth; both were active, both initiated.<sup>83</sup> Zipporah, who was more expeditious than Moses, saving her son’s life by circumcising him (Exod 4:24–26); Jael, who vanquished Sisera and saved her people (Judg 4:17–23); Michal, whose initiative saved her husband, David (1 Sam 19:11–18); Abigail, who saved (even if temporarily) her husband Nabal (1 Sam 25:2–38); Rizpah, daughter of Aiah, who prevented the desecration of her sons’ corpses (2 Sam 21:10–14); the woman of Bahurim who hid Ahimaaz and Jonathan, messengers of David (2 Sam 17:18–20) and others. Therefore Goitin’s sweeping conclusion: “Early man attributed to woman, giver of life to all mortals, spiritual powers not found in man.”<sup>84</sup> Mention should be made of “the beloved” in the Song of Songs, in whom Phyllis Trible (and many like her) finds indications of equality in the love relationship: “There is no male control [on the one hand] nor female control [on the other hand].”<sup>85</sup> The authoress repeats an old argument, based on linguistic analogy, in which the fabric of relationships in Song of Songs: “I am my beloved’s and his desire is for me” (Song 7:11) “repairs” (perhaps preferably: “diffuses”) the indenture of woman in Genesis: “And you will desire your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gen 3:16). This explication finds expression in a midrash (based on a different linguistic analogy).<sup>86</sup>

---

preservation of the human race in general, as per: “He did not create it a waste, but formed it for habitation” (Isa 45:18). This is to say: the preservation of the world and civilization is the goal of Creation (see Ramban on “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it,” Gen 1:28).

<sup>83</sup> See S. D. Goitin, *The Art of the Story in the Bible* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency, 5716 [1956]), p. 63.

<sup>84</sup> S. D. Goitin, *The Art of the Story*, p. 280.

<sup>85</sup> P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, p. 161.

<sup>86</sup> “In all songs [of the Bible], either He praises them or they praise Him ... but here [in the Song of Songs] they praise him and He praises them: ‘You are beautiful, my beloved’ (1:15), and they praise Him: ‘Behold, you are beautiful, my beloved, and pleasant’ (1:16),” *Song Rabba*, Parasha 1:11; Donsky, p. 11.

## 7. EQUALITY OF THE POTENTIAL POWER IN WOMAN'S WEAKNESS (THE DIALECTIC DIMENSION OF THE POWER IN WEAKNESS)

This concept, “the power in weakness,” has, for some time, been appearing in biblical research.<sup>87</sup> The dialectic term defining this tendency has been supplied by Yair Zakowitz.<sup>88</sup> “Woman’s weakness” is “a consequence of the social structure”;<sup>89</sup> but alongside this “the literature is liable to exhibit the power of weakness, the power which would seem to contradict the social norm.”<sup>90</sup>

Zakowitz’s main examples are taken from the Bible, from that literary genre in which “men incite a woman against a man,” so the wife of Samson, who subdued him with her sobbing (Judg 14:16). In effect, “the courageous hero, who vanquished the lion, is vanquished by a woman.” Other women who made wise use of their relative weakness are the wife of Potiphar (Genesis 39), Abigail (1 Samuel 25), Esther (Esther 5), Bathsheba (1 Kings 1), and others. To Zakowitz’s list we can add the following women: Tamar (Genesis 38), Puah and Shiphrah (Exodus 1), the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27, 36), Rahab (Joshua 2), Acsah, daughter of Caleb (Judges 1), Jael (Judges 4), Hannah (1 Samuel 1–2), and others. Common to all is the fact that it is their basic weakness—legal and/or social—which serves as a lever for prevailing over the individual man who stands against them (Abigail, Jael) or over the entire system (Tamar, daughters of Zelophehad).

There are scholars who complain that many women in the Bible, more than men, are forced to deceive and to use stratagems (i.e., “the weapon of the weak”). Even should their complaint be justified (and the matter is subject to doubt)<sup>91</sup> one must still contend with the claim that, as in wars for survival or in a fateful struggle, the important thing is who wins, not what are the means employed. Goitin surmises that part of biblical woman’s spiritual activity was possible because she benefited from the protection of the weak. The women’s song: “Saul has slain his thousands, David his tens of thousands” was possible only as a song of women; had men sung such a song, “they would have had to fear punishment by the offended king.”<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> See the chapter on Rebecca’s deception in my forthcoming book: A. Shapira, *Jacob and Esau: A Polyvalent Reading* (SemeiaSt; Atlanta, Ga.: The Society of Biblical Literature).

<sup>88</sup> Y. Zakowitz, “The Woman in Biblical Literature,” p. 14.

<sup>89</sup> Y. Zakowitz, “The Woman in Biblical Literature,” p. 22.

<sup>90</sup> Y. Zakowitz, “The Woman in Biblical Literature,” p. 22.

<sup>91</sup> See, for example, O. H. Prouser, “The Truth About Women and Lying,” *JSOT* 61 (1994): 15–28.

<sup>92</sup> S. D. Goitin, *The Art of the Story*, p. 281.

## 8. DOES THE BIBLE ASSIGN WOMEN TO THE CLASS OF THE “OTHER”?

As we approach the summation of this discussion of the above seven categories,<sup>93</sup> a basic question related to the general status of women in the Bible should be asked: Did they have the status of an “other”?

Tikva Frymer-Kensky,<sup>94</sup> of the University of Chicago, opines that the biblical woman does not have the status of an “other” (in the negative sense, found in feminist literature). The authoress advances a theological position which asserts that the Bible does not sketch an image of woman as the “other” (in the negative sense of the anomalous) in any way, even though the Bible is clearly patriarchal and it is rare “that women play a central role in a Biblical story.”<sup>95</sup> She bases her position on the phenomenon according to which

the Biblical text makes no issue of the fact that the prophetess is a woman. The “taken-for-granted” manner in which she [the woman-prophetess] is mentioned in the text indicates that her standing was not exceptional; in the Bible, one might expect of woman to be prophetesses, and that they have the

---

<sup>93</sup> It would have been proper to discuss this topic also from the viewpoint of the literature of the Sages, but this is not the place to expand. But “we cannot excuse ourselves without some remark” and my following words come as a side comment, which touches one of the possible directions of the discussion. The overall picture of the status of woman in the talmudic period may indicate a worsening of her standing as compared with her biblical counterpart; there are no more women of the status of Sarah, Deborah, and Huldah. On the other hand, the author of the midrash “Tanna D’vev Eliyahu” evaluates the potential status of Deborah among women in general: “*Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she led Israel at that time. What was the nature of Deborah who judged the people of Israel at that time and prophesied about them? Was not Pinhas son of Elazer alive in that period? I call the heavens and the earth to testify that Jew and Gentile, man and woman, slave and maidservant—the presence of The Holy One, Blessed Be He, rests on each one according to his actions*” (Tanna D’vev Eliyahu [Warsaw: 1881], p. 125). True, our discussion deals with the Bible, but perhaps we can detect in this midrash the voice and echo of earlier understandings which were already beginning to emerge between the lines of the Bible. The midrash is quoted here despite the fact that its universal and egalitarian character is atypical, and one can bring many midrashim which point in a completely different direction. I do not come to discuss the positions of the authors of the midrash, but to point out that this direction, too, can be found in it. See examples in Judith Hauptman’s book, which contains a critical feminist reading of the Sages’ literature regarding various topics relating to the status of woman: J. Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman’s Voice* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1998). I do not refrain here for pointing out even a religious Jew, for whom the midrashim of the Sages serve as a spiritual infrastructure, cannot ignore this midrash of Tanna D’vev Eliyahu which can provide a basis for a modern feminist theology which does not uproot preceding theologies, but stresses new/old views which are also anchored in the literature of the Sages. Employing religious idiom, I suggest the following formulation: The Holy One, Blessed Be He, introduced into the Torah a “male” voice, and, along with it, a “female” voice. It is right that He who hears the first hear also the second.

<sup>94</sup> T. Frymer-Kensky, “The Bible and Women’s Studies,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (ed. L. Davidman and S. Tenenbaum; New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 16–39.

<sup>95</sup> T. Frymer-Kensky, “The Bible and Women’s Studies,” p. 19.



prophetic authority to make pronouncements on important matters of sanctified tradition.<sup>96</sup>

Biblical stories present woman as having “the same goals, the same capabilities, and the same strategies as Biblical man.”<sup>97</sup> As a rule, there is no “Darwinist” social stratification; the indigent and the slaves are not described as being basically different from the “standard” Israelites. The Bible does not justify social inequality on the basis of an ideology of superiority or “otherness.” On the contrary, the Torah “clearly” reflects an ideology which presents the unity of the human race, in which “women and men were created in the image of God, and no negative stereotype is attached to women, to the indigent, to slaves, or to strangers.”<sup>98</sup> The author discerns a paradox: the Bible’s social structure—in which, of course, there exist occurrences of division and oppression—is not in harmony with the theological underpinnings of that same Bible. Historically, this tension was not long-lived, and post-Biblical literature—primarily due to Hellenistic influence—fixed the gender differences; only then did they begin to relate to the woman as to the “other.”<sup>99</sup> In the Bible, “the dualistic axis” (of the cosmic nature) functioned in the duality of: “God-Man, holy-profane, pure-impure, Israel—the nations. [But] ‘male-female’ was not included in this category.”(!)

From here on the distance was short: the legitimization for Frymer-Kensky to read the Tanak with “non-patriarchal eyes.” The Bible’s view of humanity is gender blind. This prevented it from becoming a “perfect patriarchal text,”<sup>100</sup> and the path was paved for a female reading, “other” rather than masculine. Frymer-Kensky’s view that the exclusion of woman from Jewish public life in the post-biblical period resulted from Hellenistic influences, is shared by others, such as Goitin. In his opinion,

<sup>96</sup> T. Frymer-Kensky, “The Bible and Women’s Studies,” p. 17. The Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Tel Aviv, Rabbi Hayyim David Halevy z”l, used this kind of point of view as a basis for his permission to permit contemporary woman to serve in public positions.

<sup>97</sup> T. Frymer-Kensky, “The Bible and Women’s Studies,” p. 23.

<sup>98</sup> T. Frymer-Kensky, “The Bible and Women’s Studies,” pp. 23–24.

<sup>99</sup> This is similar to the talmudic definition, expressed by Ulla: “Women, a separate people” (*b. Shabbat* 62a). In opposition to this stands the view presented in the midrash “Tanna D’veiy Eliyahu” quoted above (note 93), which deals with the unique phenomenon of Deborah, wife/judge, who judged and led all the tribes of Israel. The midrash sets forth a totally different position from that which considers women “a separate people” and even accords them far-reaching egalitarian legitimacy: I call upon the heavens and the earth to testify ... man and woman ... the presence of The Holy One, Blessed Be He, rests on each one according to his actions.” In this midrash, we hear the echo of the biblical theology presented above, and it is infused with religio-theological equality between man and woman. It may be said that the midrash “Tanna D’veiy Eliyahu” is more representative of biblical theology than that of the Sages.

<sup>100</sup> T. Frymer-Kensky, “The Bible and Women’s Studies,” p. 24.

biblical society was one which does not oppress women and especially does not degrade her spirit ... [she was as yet unfamiliar] with that destructive separation of people into males who know Torah and women whose wisdom is only with the spindle, which arrived in the Near East apparently under the Persian and, especially, the Hellenistic influence.<sup>101</sup>

Professor Frymer-Kensky's words came to my attention only after my article had already been completed, and I discovered, *ex post facto*, that her thesis (with Stephen Geller's gentle critique)<sup>102</sup> can buttress my main points here. According to them, there are present in the Bible important elements of equality (or better: of the biblical narrator's consciousness of equality), and from a theological aspect, far-reaching equality between man and woman, as is demonstrated by the seven areas detailed above. Why does the Tanak relate, extensively and consistently, stories such as these about women? Why does it depict for the moment a world which was but is no more, or for the sake of a world constantly renewed "in his goodness, every day, forever"?

## 9. IN SUMMATION

All the above—examples representative of the perimeters of the area discussed and the general direction more than its detailed content—are not enough to testify to biblical equality between men and women in the sense which modern democracy defines "equality." (For the sake of comparison, it is sufficient to recall the status of woman in the spheres of politics, law, and economics yet at the turn of the twentieth century in Europe and the United States). But the examples cited do suffice to teach that, even in biblical literature with its variegated voices, which reflects an obvious patriarchal and masculine bias, there is evidence of a different reality (or better: awareness), of an egalitarian nature in various areas.<sup>103</sup> On the contrary, precisely because the Bible is known for its male and patriarchal bent in social and legal matters, the fact that the very same Bible often mentions the accomplishments and egalitarian standing of many women (not "others") as illustrated by the examples cited in the seven areas—that fact stands out.

---

<sup>101</sup> S. D. Goitin, *The Art of the Story*, p. 280.

<sup>102</sup> S. A. Geller, "Goddesses and Women in Biblical Religion" (Reviews), *Prooftexts* 13 (1993): 295–298.

<sup>103</sup> Perhaps it is proper to differentiate between the legal standing of woman vis-à-vis man in the Bible which (despite the general rule of "Scripture made the woman equal to man with regard to all punishments in the Torah") was, in effect, inferior; and her family and community situation, which was, in effect, much better than his, and certainly in her theological standing, as we will see further on.

*A succinct summary of the seven categories:*

1. Physical creation in the Image, as an equal
2. Spiritual creation in the Image, as an equal
3. Equality at national covenants
4. Equality in special personal status
5. Equality—even superiority—in birth stories
6. Equality, if not superiority, in their initiative and independence
7. A sort of equality in the power of their weakness

These sections may be divided into two major groups. The first group includes the first three categories (1–3), which are concerned with the religious equality of women in general, without mention of specific names (Eve is to be considered a prototype of woman, not as a specific woman). The second group (4–7) includes specific women, identified by name and can be sub-divided into two clusters: 6–7 deal with woman as a person, and 4–5 have mixed content: “religious” and “human.” Inasmuch as the first three categories relate to women in general, and indicate the religious equality of women, as women, before God, they are, of course, primary. If we add to these subjects 4–5, those with the religious aspect (women in special personal status and those in birth stories), it may be deduced that the equality in the Bible is primarily religious equality, and this becomes the cornerstone for general human equality.

## 10. CONCLUSIONS

A). The Bible, which is patriarchal in its primary circle, has, alongside it, a circle marked by a clear tendency of equality of woman (a tendency which is later blurred, from the period of the Sages onward<sup>104</sup> until recently. There is much to say on this subject—but elsewhere).

---

<sup>104</sup> In the period of the mishna and the Talmud, two contradictory processes occurred: On the one hand, the option of women having social standing similar to that of biblical women such as Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah, was closed. There were some women, “hiding among the baggage,” the “wives of” who remain anonymous, such as the wives of Rabbi Judah, Rav, Rav Yosef, Zeira, Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, and others. There were others mentioned by name: Bruriah, wife of Rabbi Meir; Huma, wife of Abaye; Yilta, wife of Rav Nahman; Rachel, wife of Rabbi Akiva—but they are the very few. On the other hand, in the first generation of the Amoraim of Babylon, there is a new—seemingly opposite, phenomenon: Rav bans the betrothal of woman through cohabitation alone (*Yevamot* 52a), and he forbids fathers from giving their minor daughters in marriage before they mature and declare: “I want” (*Qiddushin* 81b). Later, at least from the period of Rabeinu Gershon, the Light of the Diaspora on, polygamy is forbidden, and one may not divorce a woman against her will (which was permitted in earlier times, as seen in the Mishnah quoted in *Gittin* 80a). The Rama, in the Shulkhan Aruch, Even HaEzer 119:6 quotes the S’mak: “Today one may not divorce against her will.” May I suggest the following: The destruction of the Temple and the loss of

B). The primary equality in the Bible is religious. From it derives the equality of the human race, and from it the equality of woman as a person before God. In the Bible are to be found elements which not only do not contradict the value of equality,<sup>105</sup> but, on the contrary, they are its theological<sup>106</sup> and historical foundations.

C). One possible conclusion which may be derived from this study is that the Bible, with its “female” voices, from Sarah and Miriam, through Deborah, until Noadiah, may serve, in our times, as a basis for spiritual renewal, in the sense of: “The ancient will be renewed, and the holy will be regenerated.”<sup>107</sup>

D). As regards the question of equality of women in general, the not-unfounded thesis of Tamar Ross:

---

political independence forced Jewish life to center around the Bet Hamidrash—the House of Learning—(“Give me Yavneh and her scholars”). Inasmuch as women remained outside the Bet Hamidrash, they were, of course, excluded from public life in general. For study of the processes which occurred in the times of the Sages, see Moses Halbertal’s recent work *The Development of Revolutions in Commentary* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 5767 [2007]), especially chapter 3, pp. 69–93, and J. Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis*.

<sup>105</sup> In a broad work on “Roots of Democracy in the Bible” which I am in the process of completing, is to be found a paradox. The Bible, which, of course, was not cognizant of democracy, serves, at the same time, as its most important ancient source, especially as regards its main values.

<sup>106</sup> Ross finds support in H. H. Ben-Sasson, *Philosophy and Leadership: The Social Viewpoints of Polish Jewry at the End of the Middle Ages* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 5719 [1959]), pp. 19–20, who quotes the Shalah regarding renewal of the Halakah from Mt. Sinai: “So the Sages who stand in every generation, each one received his from Sinai ... and all their innovations and all their casuistry, is from Sinai and not from human intelligence, only divine intelligence, only that they turn the potential into the actual” (Rabbi Yeshaayahu, son of Rabbi Abraham Horowitz, *The Two Tablets of the Covenant* [in Hebrew; Jerusalem: Machon Shaarei Ziv, 5753 (1993)], p. 109). Ross used this as evidence of a tradition of revelation of “God’s voice” from Sinai which was not a one-time event, but which is continual, and which may help in the assimilation of the new viewpoints in Orthodox society in its reevaluation of women, in keeping with the presumption that “our women are important women” (Rabbi Yeshaayahu, *The Two Tablets*, p. 460). On “important women” in our time, see Kessef Mishneh’s commentary on Rambam, “The Laws Hametz and Matzah” 7:8; and the Rama (in the name of the Mordecai and others) on the Shulkhan Aruch, Orah Hayim, “Laws of Passover” 462:4; “and all our women are considered important (and, therefore, are required to lean at the seder); see further: J. B. Wolowelsky, *Women, Jewish Law and Modernity: New Opportunities in a Post-Feminist Age* (New Jersey: Ktav, 1997), esp. pp. 4–14.

<sup>107</sup> The Bible reflects throughout a many-shaded continuum of female personal and public activity, such as the communal activity of Miriam and Deborah (Halakah supplies a broad basis for this). The question of woman’s status in current generations depends upon decisions by modern religious society. In the opinion of Ariel Rosen-Zvi: “The social, cultural—or, in other words, the environmental factors—make a critical contribution to the formation of the rules of Hebrew Law in this area.” It may be said that the phenomenon we are witnessing in recent years, that of growing attraction of women to high level study of the study of Torah, especially the Oral law (so in the *midrashot*, such as the “*Hesder Yeshivot*” for girls, and the universities) and study in all fields of science and knowledge, announce the desirable trend. The biblical paradigm—that of women in prominent personal, social, and legal status—holds the potential of serving as a positive model for Torah-loving women in our time. The more they advance in the stages of Torah and knowledge, the closer they can approach the high level preserved for them from the days of the Bible.

If we relate to the patriarchal type of thinking as an expression of divine revelation ... it is proper that we relate similarly to the development of feminism and to ... the special nature of feminine spirituality, and to consider it a rare religious privilege of a new revelation of the divine will ... the believing Jew does not have to see feminism as problematic, but, on the contrary, a spiritual challenge of the highest order ... a duty to be accepted with devotedness and with love, adopting it as an important value in his religious life.<sup>108</sup>

---

<sup>108</sup> T. Ross and Y. Gelman, "Effects of Feminism," pp. 564–643.