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as a Woman (review)

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Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues, Number
6, Fall 5764/2003, pp. 209-215 (Review)

Published by Indiana University Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nsh.2004.0019>

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Esther Fuchs

Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative:

Reading the Bible as a Woman

JSOT Supplement Series, 310, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield,
2000, 244 pp

reviewed by George Savran

While the notion of the patriarchal bias of the Bible is a given in feminist criticism as well as in much of academic biblical studies today, Esther Fuchs goes beyond the usual sociological and historical observations to address the significance of narrative poetics in furthering this patriarchal agenda. Her readings of familiar biblical stories are a response to texts which “. . . do not merely describe a male-dominated social order, but justify it as morally requisite and sanctioned by God” (p. 14). Fuchs is dissatisfied with feminist interpretations, like some by Phyllis Trible, which offer positive re-readings of these narratives. From her perspective, such an interpretive approach doesn't go far enough in confronting the deeply embedded patriarchal agenda of the texts and may have the unwanted effect of excusing or even justifying it. Thus, those critics who would “purge the Bible of its sexism (by rereading various passages)” (p. 26) may actually hinder a critical feminist response. Feminist criticism ought, rather, to unmask the extent of this patriarchal agenda, including its literary reflections. The task of “reading as a woman” demands exceptional sensitivity to the role of woman as outsider, and its primary objective should reside in uncovering poetic strategies that justify patriarchal power structures and reinforce the ostensible necessity of male control of women. In this regard Fuchs is representative of what Alice Bach has described as the third stage of feminist criticism.

Fuchs has organized her book around the spectrum of female roles in the narrative that emerge from the structure of the biblical family, with

consecutive chapters on mothers, brides, wives, daughters, and sisters. In each case she explores these roles by examining a number of type-scenes that illustrate the poetic bias she wishes to critique. Fuchs recognizes her debt to Alter's work on this subject but is critical of the limitations of his analysis. In her view, it is hardly accidental that annunciation narratives are the most frequent and most developed type-scene involving women, since "procreative contexts are the only ones in which women address YHWH and hold a dialogue with him" (p. 45). Developed as the female characters may be in these narratives, they invariably disappear after fulfilling the role of giving birth. While feminist critics like Exum and Aschkenasy see mothers as positive, anti-patriarchal figures, Fuchs disputes this, claiming that such portrayals affirm the female characters only insofar as motherhood serves the interests of patriarchy. Similarly, in the betrothal type-scenes, Fuchs notes a gradual de-emphasis of the role of the bride as one moves from Rebecca to Rachel to Zipporah. She suggests that this betrays a greater interest in the prospective husband and reflects "an ideology whose goal is to minimize the power of women as prospective wives" (p. 105). The relative passivity of Rachel and Zipporah in contrast to the importance of their husbands, Jacob and Moses, demonstrates this clearly. The descriptions of these wives depict the bride as an object who is desirable for external reasons only; her feelings are of no concern to the narrator.

Fuchs breaks new ground in her discussion of additional type-scenes, previously unrecognized as such by Alter and others. The temptation type-scene portrays the attempts of a daughter/wife to gain male offspring by deceit, as seen in the narratives of Lot's daughters (Gen. 19), Tamar (Gen. 38), and Ruth. While these texts seem to empower the woman by depicting her as more actively concerned than her male counterpart with achieving offspring in the face of adversity, Fuchs prefers to see in them a strategy of displacement. Women are given narrative authority only in the pursuit of male interests, namely, the birth of a male heir to continue the line. As Fuchs describes it, "the more explicit and detailed validation of the mother figure in [the story of Judah and Tamar] validates the interests of motherhood as a patriarchal institution" (p. 73). In all three of these texts, the woman disappears from the narrative arena once the continuity of the line is guaranteed. Fuchs offers insightful, close readings of the stories; building upon the work of Fisch and van Wolde, she skillfully brings out the hermeneutical implications of their studies for a feminist reading of the three texts. While the

stories of Tamar and Ruth are usually celebrated as triumphs for biblical women, Fuchs insists that the restrictive strategies present in these texts not be ignored. "Only by examining the interaction of these apparently contradictory impulses shall we be able to comprehend the ideology that shapes nativity narratives" (p. 87).

Fuchs also describes an adultery type-scene, which presents "a husband, a wife, and a powerful king who either threatens to or actually succeeds in appropriating to himself another man's wife" (p. 118). This is demonstrated by the three wife-sister stories in Genesis (12:10–20; 20:1–18, and 26:1–12) and the account of David, Uriah, and Bathsheba in II Sam. 11. In these texts, the wife is treated as an adjunct of her husband and is little more than an object for furthering male desires. Male privilege is central here; there is never a suggestion of a woman taking another woman's husband, as that would contradict the basic sense of the wife as chattel. For Fuchs, Nathan's parable of the ewe-lamb in II Sam. 12 well illustrates the status of the wife, a passive creature who can be taken and used by other men.

In the contest type-scene, two wives compete for the affections of a single husband by their attempts to bear him sons. Examples of this type are to be found in the accounts of female rivalry between Hagar and Sarah (Gen. 16 and 21), between Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29–30), and between Hannah and Peninah (I Sam. 1). Fuchs describes a paradoxical situation in which the husband remains in control over both wives despite their "fight" over him. Even when the husband is portrayed as weak, the narrative strategy is turned to his advantage: he is "the good guy," never the cause of the problem. In this way, Fuchs suggests, his negative role is minimized, though it is really the practice of polygyny that stands at the root of the conflict between the women. Thus, Abraham in Gen. 16 is portrayed as innocent; it is the women who are at fault. Rather than working together to solve a mutual problem, they are shown to be at odds with one another, unable to turn a cooperative effort to their advantage. Strikingly, women are categorized as either favored or fertile, but never both; polygyny is thus justified at the expense of the women.

While this systematic uncovering of the androcentric bias in biblical narrative is largely convincing, the polemical tone of Fuchs' arguments has the undesirable side effect of treating these female characters instrumentally. There are moments when Fuchs departs from this agenda to offer real insight into the female characters themselves, as in her penetrating discussions of

Ruth, Rebecca, and Jephthah's daughter. But too often Fuchs's ideology limits the dimensions of her reading of the characters, flattening them and ignoring what is most interesting about biblical narrative: its ability to delineate complicated situations and complex characters with a few short strokes. At issue here is a larger question about the ideological reading of biblical texts: Insofar as the Bible does not speak with a single voice about most issues it touches upon—from monotheism and the nature of the deity, to sin and punishment, to the essence of human identity—why should we assume that it would be overwhelmingly consistent about the place of women in its patriarchal worldview? To be sure, the sense of patriarchy is felt powerfully in many places in the Bible, but this hardly means that it is the dominant voice in all narratives, and that the portrayal of female characters should be explained primarily as advancing a single patriarchal agenda.

This tendency leads Fuchs to make ideologically driven statements that are misleading. For example, Fuchs claims that a connection is implied "between barrenness and moral deficiency" (p. 49) in the annunciation stories. However, the moral imperfections of characters like Sarah, Hagar, and Rachel are not peculiar to women; nearly everyone in the Bible, male or female, is portrayed as morally flawed. Moreover, beyond a general notion of divine causality and birth, the narrative does not attempt to explain why some women are barren and others are not. The narratives that describe the opening of the womb no more have to do with the moral attributes of such characters as Hannah or Manoah's wife than the promise of Isaac's birth has to do with Abraham's hospitality in Gen. 18. Similarly, when Fuchs, in her discussion of the annunciation story in II Kgs. 4:8–37, claims that ". . . the Shunammite's structural autonomy is restricted to the functions of maternity and maternality" (p. 61), she is ignoring the woman's narrative function in taking Elisha to task for his lack of responsibility. Shields's analysis of the story demonstrates nicely how the Shunammite's words and actions express her concerns about what she does and does not want from the man of God.

Undeniably, the Bible's women characters are frequently deployed in the service of male interests, but this should not blind the reader to their portrayal as rounder, fuller characters who have important things to say and do beyond their roles as wives and mothers. It is certainly correct to describe Ruth and Naomi as two women in a man's world (see Tribble, pp. 166 ff.), but the richness and complexity of their relationship should not be reduced

to their functions as mother, daughter, and wife. Fuchs's reading of Ruth grows out of her (correct) analysis of the patriarchal bias in the narrative; as she claims, Ruth's submissiveness toward the end of the story is a deliberate attempt by the narrator to portray her as the ideal passive wife, and her "most important function is to bring about her betrothal with Boaz" (p. 109). Nevertheless, such an ideological reading, in which Ruth's relationship to Naomi appears simply as a reflection of her fidelity to her dead husband, undercuts her growth and dynamism as a character. Why not see the narrative as an attempt to develop another, more positive, model of female behavior and interaction, in marked contrast to the sense of rivalry between co-wives that dominates the relationship between Rachel and Leah (see Pardes, pp. 98ff.)? To claim that there is a "perfect fit" (p. 90) between the story and the aims of patriarchy is to ignore the profound tensions between this narrative and its larger biblical context. A character like Ruth poses a serious challenge to biblical gender roles, both in her devotion to her mother-in-law at the beginning of the story and in the virtual handing over of her child to Naomi near its conclusion.

While the focus of Fuchs's study is admittedly limited to the poetics of the biblical narrative, one might hope for a broader perspective here. On the one hand, Fuchs rightly takes readers like Alter and Sternberg to task for the failure of the New Criticism to recognize the problematic nature of its claim to objectivity, as well as its blindness to its own male bias. Not only do these critics refuse to admit that there is an ideological agenda to the text, but they tend to treat only the male characters as significant. Given the influence of Alter's and Sternberg's work, Fuchs's critique is very important, and one can only hope that the sensitivity she shows to gender issues will continue to find its way into critical treatments of biblical narrative. At the same time, one would have wished that Fuchs had engaged the work of other feminist critics more actively. Beyond her references to new critics like Alter and Sternberg, she barely mentions developments in structuralism, deconstruction, and post-colonial criticism. Important studies by Bal, Exum, and Pardes, among others, are cited in the preface but thereafter mentioned only in passing in the notes. Fuchs herself admits that the literary appreciation of the Bible in feminist circles has come a long way in the last two decades; these voices should be addressed more substantively in the body of the book.

The oft-repeated grievance that the new critics have turned a blind eye toward historical and social contexts can be directed at Fuchs's reading

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process as well. She pays scant attention to societal and historical factors that play a significant role in the narratives she discusses, or to the familial and political roles of women, as addressed by Brenner and Meyers in their important studies on these subjects. Particularly glaring is the lack of reference to women's roles in the ancient Near East. Questions such as the valuation of virginity (Frymer-Kensky), the definition of rape in biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts (Bechtel), and the liminal position of widows (Niditch) need to be addressed in conjunction with the discussion of poetics. Despite the accepted sociological understanding of the brother's right to avenge his sister's rape in the ancient world, Fuchs prefers to claim that the narrator does not offer the biblical woman the option of avenging her own rape. In response to objections of historical unlikelihood or impossibility, she claims that a resort to such arguments "posits the biblical narrative as a 'reflection' of 'historical reality' rather than as a story whose goal it is to teach a lesson" (p. 201). But why argue that the narrative must be either literary or historical, when both aspects, of course, are essential? Just as we cannot ignore the literary dynamics of the text, so we must recognize that it is the product of a particular time and place and must perforce reflect some degree of historical reality.

The abovementioned issues aside, Fuchs's book offers her readers a body of impressive and insightful readings. Her attention to textual detail, her sensitivity to gender roles, and her willingness to suggest provocative and thought-provoking conclusions make this book required reading for anyone involved in feminist criticism of the Bible.

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