

Ideal and Dangerous Sisters in the Bible

Family narratives are among the most well known and beloved stories of the Bible. Fathers, sons, brothers, and mothers take center stage in the Bible's grand narratives, which relate how God selects and sustains one family—and ultimately one nation—to participate in a covenantal relationship. The efforts to secure land and progeny, central concerns for any family in the ancient world, create tension within the biblical narrative as characters position themselves and betray one another to achieve those goals. Will Sarah have a son, and will Abraham kill him? Will Ishmael and Esau be granted their rightful inheritances? Will the descendents of Jacob make it out of Egypt and the wilderness and to the land of Canaan? Once in the land, can they remain there?

Within the context of the Bible's greater narrative, sisters are often overlooked as significant players in these family dramas. For good reasons, sisters and their stories seem superfluous to the Bible's central story and to the world it reflects. Family, referred to in the Bible as the *bet av*, the house of the father, was the essential social unit of ancient Israel. A typical *bet av* would include an elder patriarch and his wife or wives, their sons and their wives and children, unmarried daughters, and, if the family was affluent, slaves, who lived together in a family compound.¹ Sisters and daughters maintained a precarious position within the Israelite family, which privileged its males and preserved their authority.²

Scholars debate whether to apply the value-laden label “patriarchal” to ancient Israel, arguing that women were no less valued in their homes and were as essential to the household's survival as men were.³ Scholars also argue that the term “patriarchal” is anachronistic and does not accurately describe ancient Israel's society.⁴ Whether Israelite society was patriarchal is beyond the scope of this study. I do not attempt to describe family life in ancient Israel. Rather, I am concerned with the Bible's ideological orientation as reflected in its family narratives, in particular its portrayal of sisters. Although I recognize its anachronistic assumptions, for want of a better term, I use “patriarchal” to describe the Bible's ideology that privileges men over women. I also use the term “patriarch” to refer to the privileged males in any household and the term “designated patriarch” to refer to the privileged males in Abraham's line.

Two customs ensured a young woman's marginal position within her natal family. First, as long as there were sons, daughters could not inherit their father's property, that is, property was based on patrilineal descent passed.⁵ Second, once married, young women would leave their natal homes and join their husbands' families; that is, families lived patrilocally.⁶ Given the patrilineal and patrilocal nature of the Israelite family, it is not surprising that sisters play minor roles within the biblical narratives that are primarily concerned with securing Israel's inheritance. Esther Fuchs observes that in general, women are central figures in the Bible only when they help or hinder the overall goals of providing an heir and securing the inheritance.⁷ Therefore they appear in the family narratives mostly in the roles of wives—or potential wives—and mothers.⁸ Rebecca, a prominent figure, is an excellent example of how a woman typically functions in the context of the family narratives. She appears as a powerful wife in Genesis 25, who provides an heir for her husband, and as a powerful mother in Genesis 27, who secures her son's inheritance. Few readers recognize that she also appears as an ideal sister in Genesis 24, which I discuss below.

In particular, sisters seem extraneous to the Bible's family narratives. As transient figures in their natal homes without inheritance rights—with the notable exception of Zelophehad's daughters who inherit their father's property in Numbers 27—sisters have no natural place in the biblical story about heirs and property. In contrast, brothers dominate the Bible's family narratives. Beginning with the story of Cain and Abel, fraternal rivalry is among its most common tropes. After killing his brother Abel in a jealous rage, Cain's question to God ("Am I my brother's keeper?"⁹) introduces the family narratives and sets their tone. Apparently the answer to Cain's question must be *no* because from then on, biblical brothers deceive, threaten, and betray one another as they vie for their fathers' legacies.

In these family narratives rarely does the Bible seem to focus on sisters. And when it does, sisters could be seen, as Frederick E. Greenspahn sees them, to be pale reflections of the more dominant male characters in the family narratives. In Greenspahn's reading, Rachel and Leah, the Bible's most prominent sisters, function as little more than as stand-ins for the brothers Jacob and Esau. The narrative of sororal rivalry serves as a reminder of Jacob's betrayal of his father and of his older brother.¹⁰ Jacob's marriage to Leah is his just come-uppance for having tricked his father and stolen his brother's blessing.

Yet this conventional reading can overlook the Bible's significant sisters. Their narratives reflect a sister's unique place within the Israelite family and serve a distinct purpose within the context of the Bible's family narratives. At particular moments of familial crisis and vulnerability within the patrilineal

narratives, the Bible assigns sisters crucial roles. Lot's daughters (two sisters), Sarah, Rebecca, Dinah, Rachel, Leah, Miriam, the daughters of Zelophehad, Tamar, Michal, Merav, and the metaphorical sisters of Judah and Israel are sisters whose stories scholars too often have overlooked. This study shines a light on sisters and their stories.

My goal is to understand how the Bible represents sisters and sisterhoods—women's networks not defined by immediate kinship ties—and to consider how they function within their discrete narratives as well as within the Bible at large. My analysis of the Bible's sister and sisterhood stories draws upon recent social and historical scholarship about ancient Israel's families and society, but my argument here is a literary analysis rather than a historical one, though it may have implications for understanding the roles sisters and sisterhoods played in ancient Israelite families. I am interested in how sisters and sisterhoods are portrayed and how they function in the biblical narratives. To understand how the Bible represents sisters and sisterhoods, I provide a close literary reading of each narrative, considering its rhetorical strategies, themes, and function within the greater biblical narrative. All translations of the biblical texts that I include are my own. I rely upon the resources of contemporary biblical scholarship to enrich my understanding of these narratives, as well as to offer points of comparison to my own readings. When brought together, these readings reveal common themes and narrative strategies that provide a coherent image of the biblical representation of sisters and sisterhoods.

The texts I address in this study come from a variety of biblical books and cross genres such as narratives, poetry, and law. As such, they certainly reflect different periods in Israel's history and in the composition of its texts. Despite this range, I believe it is possible to discuss the *biblical* representation of sisters even as it relates to the structure of the family in the ancient world because, as Jon L. Berquist observes, the structure of the family remains consistent through much of Israel's history.¹¹ Studies like this one that consider the literary representation of particular figures are crucial to the study of the Bible.¹²

By bringing together a number of texts that focus on a particular figure, we can observe literary patterns within the Bible and can identify underlying ideologies.¹³ Tikva Frymer-Kensky states this to be her intention in *Reading the Women of the Bible*. By reading the biblical stories of women collectively, Frymer-Kensky is able to identify common themes and concerns that shape these narratives.¹⁴ A study of the Bible's sisters sheds light on its family narratives, with their implicit gender dynamics and ideologies. Through the sister and sisterhood narratives, the biblical authors reveal pressing anxieties raised by women's roles in a patrilineal ideology. In narratives about property,

the sisters are critical figures in ensuring the passage of the patrimony to the proper heirs. In stories about progeny, the sisters—especially regarding the consequent possibility of incest—play important roles in the generation of new heirs. In stories about exogamy, the sisterhoods serve to deter intermarriage and thus maintain the community's firm boundaries.

By analyzing the Bible's sister and sisterhood stories, I identify a heretofore overlooked common narrative concern and function. Just as there is a typical brother story about rivalry and inheritance, there is a typical sister story concerned with the vulnerability of the natal household and a typical sisterhood story concerned with the vulnerability of Israelite society. Although many of these stories function as cautionary tales, protecting the Bible's patriarchal structures, they should not be seen only as patriarchal propaganda, as Fuchs sees them, designed to limit the roles women play in the Bible. For Fuchs, the Bible not only marginalizes its women, it "advocates their marginality," to support a "politics of male domination."¹⁵ My readings of the Bible's sister and sisterhood stories seeks to expand our perception of the roles women play beyond that of mother, daughter, and wife and reveals their narrative and rhetorical power.

The Bible's sisters and sisterhoods are powerful figures, and their stories are essential to the greater biblical narrative. Analyzing their significance sheds light on women in the Bible and perhaps in ancient Israel. My analysis suggests insight into the nature of actual interpersonal relationships within families and society and the particular anxieties sisters induce. Sisters and sisterhoods may be marginal and, at times, destabilizing figures, but they are crucial players in the biblical drama. As we will see, sisters ensure the success of the designated patriarch; and sisterhood provides a potent model for the divine-human relationship.

I divide this study into three parts and begin with the stories—two narratives and one parable—of the paired sisters Rachel and Leah, Michal and Merav, and Rebel Israel and Faithless Judah, whom the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel portray as sisters married to God. Next, I examine the role sisters play in the Bible's incest narratives and consider the stories of Lot's daughters, Sarah as Abraham's wife-sister, and Tamar, who is raped by her half-brother. Although I identify the women I study as sisters, I recognize that they also play other roles such as mothers, wives, and daughters within their narratives. In my analysis, I offer reasons for identifying them as sisters and their narratives as sister stories, but I do not argue that they must be seen exclusively as sisters. Rather, I argue that seeing them as sisters illuminates their role in their specific narratives and provides insight into the overall role sisters play in the biblical narrative.

In the final section of my study, I examine sisterhoods and begin with the daughters of Adam, Moab, the land, and Israel. I then consider the daughters of Jerusalem in the Song of Songs. In the final chapter, I examine the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, which I argue is the Bible's most positive sisterhood. I conclude by reflecting on the role of sisters and sisterhood in the Bible and consider its narrative and theological implications.

Throughout this study, I identify two paradigms of sisters and sisterhoods—which I call the “ideal” and the “dangerous”—that shape these passages and determine their broader narrative function. I believe these paradigms reflect the Bible's implicit gender ideology and provide general insight into the biblical representation of women. At no point does the Bible explicitly present its gender ideology or these paradigms. It is the role of the reader, and specifically the role of the feminist Bible scholar, to extract the gender ideology that is encoded in the text. Gale A. Yee models this in her book *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* in which she states that it is the critic's role to decode the text and consider the often conflicted relationship of the text to the ideology or ideologies it embodies.¹⁶ Following Yee's example, I strive to extract the Bible's gender ideology through its depictions of sisters and sisterhoods. My paradigms of the ideal and dangerous sister offer an illustrative distillation of the Bible's gender ideology that works to preserve the power, property, and honor of the family's patriarchs, often at the expense of its females.¹⁷

Claudia V. Camp adopts a similar rhetoric to my own when addressing the specific roles sisters play within the Bible's priestly texts. Camp argues that sister stories serve the priestly ideology that is concerned with protecting the priests' ascribed status and their unique identity within Israel. Camp describes sisters as “a dangerous anomaly in a system of male descent—both closest kin in the ‘right’ lineage, yet, as not-male, altogether Other.”¹⁸ Since they share a blood line with their brothers, sisters are dangerous because they pose a threat to priestly identity. The texts work to “estrangle” sisters in order to secure the power and status only afforded to *male* priests.¹⁹ Addressing many of the texts that Camp does and relying on her insights, my analysis of the Bible's sister stories offers a broader perspective. I agree with Camp that patrilineal ideology is a central concern of the sister stories. However, I argue that these stories are also concerned more broadly with patriarchal authority and the stability of household.

Within their narratives, ideal sisters serve the needs of their patriarchs and strengthen their patriarchal, most often natal, households. In contrast, dangerous sisters are destabilizing figures who assert an independent agency

that challenges patriarchal authority and threatens the stability of the natal household. At heart, both of these paradigms reflect a sister's marginal status, and reveal her potential to be destructive within the narratives. Like Miriam, an ideal sister—who protected her baby brother when he floated down the Nile—can turn dangerous when she challenges his leadership in the desert.

The majority of sister stories fit the dangerous-sister paradigm, in which an independent sister destabilizes a natal household in distress, though implicit in this dangerous depiction is its ideal counterpart. One can discern desired values and the parameters of appropriate behavior from stories in which those values and parameters are breached. At one level, simply identifying the Bible's dangerous sisters supports feminist biblical scholars like Fuchs who argue that the Bible depicts women negatively to define their roles and limit their power.²⁰ Sisters, like women in the Bible in general, are destabilizing figures. However, my study, which considers the function of dangerous sisters within the broader biblical narrative, offers a more complex picture—one that may impact our understanding of the roles women generally play in the Bible.

My study reveals that although they are destabilizing figures within their narratives, these dangerous sisters serve a crucial narrative purpose. The Bible employs dangerous sisters when it seeks to weaken certain households, like those of Lot, Laban, and Saul. In this way, dangerous sisters are *narratively* powerful figures that serve the interests of the Bible's grand story. They help solidify the power of the text's designated patriarch (Abraham, Jacob, and David, respectively) by working to remove a rival family from the narrative. Yet even though the Bible needs dangerous sisters and invests in them, these characters defy patriarchal authority and come to unhappy ends. The Bible does not embrace or reward its dangerous sisters. Their narratives function as cautionary tales that support patriarchal ideology and warn young women, either directly or indirectly, to curb their desires and serve the needs of their patriarchs.²¹ In this way, dangerous sisters are *rhetorically* powerful figures.

Surprisingly, my study shows that sisterhoods fare better than sisters in the Bible. To address the broader framework of sisterhood, I look at narratives that mention groups of young women most often identified as "daughters," who form sisterhoods or women's networks. The scattered references to these sisterhoods throughout the Bible conform to archaeological and ethnographic evidence that social networks existed and extended beyond women's families; these references provide a valuable lens into the interpersonal relationship among women.²² Although scholars like Carol Meyers consider the roles that women's networks served in ancient Israel, few consider, or even notice, the roles they play within the biblical narratives.

Like sisters, sisterhoods conform to the paradigms of the ideal and the dangerous. Just as ideal sisters serve the needs of the patriarchal household, ideal sisterhoods serve the broader needs of patriarchal society. Just as dangerous sisters threaten households, dangerous sisterhoods threaten society. The Bible's dangerous-sisterhood stories function as cautionary tales that encourage appropriate marriages and that warn Israelite men against intermarriage with foreign women. Although the Bible does portray many dangerous sisterhoods, it offers several significant portraits of ideal ones, suggesting that collective sisterhoods raise fewer anxieties than do individual sisters. As a reflection of the Bible's implicit gender ideology, this suggests that women's collective networks were an accepted and valued part of Israelite society. Most surprising in the Bible's patriarchal context is that sisterhood offers an alternative model of family that privileges love and loyalty over lineage and legacy. As we will see, Naomi and Ruth's ideal sisterhood reflects this model and serves as a remarkable paradigm for God's relationship with Israel.

Before beginning my analysis of the Bible's sister and sisterhood narratives, I illustrate the two paradigms and sketch some defining elements of the Bible's sister stories through brief portraits of two ideal and two dangerous sisters. Since all sisters are daughters, it is fair to ask what differentiates sister stories from daughter stories or from any of the Bible's stories that feature women. Indeed they have much in common and, as I suggest, may have a similar overall narrative function. Yet I think there are defining elements of the Bible's sister and sisterhood stories. Following these portraits, I comment on the unique focus and characteristics that mark the Bible's sister and, by extension, its sisterhood stories.

IDEAL SISTER MIRIAM

Miriam functions as an ideal sister in Exodus 2. We first encounter her among the many women in the early chapters of Exodus who represent a variety of professional and familial roles. The lack of personal names given to these women identifies each character with her role. Professionally, there are midwives,²³ attendants, and a wet nurse. The familial roles are wife, mother, daughter, and sister. In one way or another, all of these women act to save baby Moses, whose life is endangered by Pharaoh's command to drown the infant boys of the Israelites. Yet it is the baby's sister Miriam who not only protects the child by guarding him as he makes his way down the Nile River in a basket, but who also ensures the thriving of her natal family. After the baby is discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam bravely approaches the princess and suggests bringing a Hebrew wet nurse to nurture the child.²⁴ Thus the sister enables

the mother to reconnect with her child and thereby helps preserve her natal household.

By protecting her brother Moses and by ensuring his connection with his family, Miriam functions as an ideal sister who serves the needs of her natal family. She has no identity apart from her role of serving Moses, and she functions in this narrative only as a sister.²⁵ She is one of the few biblical characters who functions in the role of the sister throughout her narratives. Exodus 15:20 identifies Miriam as a prophet and as Aaron's sister. Numbers 26:59 records her birth along with Aaron and Moses and identifies Miriam as "their sister." Remarkably, Miriam is never portrayed as a mother or a wife, though as we see below, her role as a sister does develop and grows more complicated. In Numbers 12, Miriam, the ideal sister, becomes Miriam, the dangerous sister.

IDEAL SISTER REBECCA

As I mentioned above, Rebecca functions as a powerful wife and mother in most of her narratives, yet she first appears in Genesis 24 as an ideal sister. Genesis 24 tells the story of how Abraham, through the agency of his servant, finds a bride for his son Isaac. Having traveled to Mesopotamia to find a suitable bride, the servant meets Rebecca and discovers that she would be an appropriate wife for Isaac because she is the daughter of Betuel, Abraham's nephew.²⁶ Yet Betuel plays no meaningful role in the narrative.²⁷ Instead, his son Laban, Rebecca's brother, is front and center and negotiates the marriage on behalf of his sister. Laban's central role in the narrative renders Rebecca primarily as a sister whose betrothal benefits and enriches her brother and her natal household and, only by implication, the household of her father. In exchange for Rebecca, the servant gives Laban and his mother silver, gold, cloth, and other precious objects (Gen 24:53). The specific mention of Rebecca's mother in this verse makes Betuel's absence in the marriage negotiations even more noticeable, providing support to scholars like Meyers who suggest that mothers took an active role in their children's marriage negotiations.²⁸

As an ideal sister, Rebecca directs her independent will and desire in service to her natal household. This is made clear when the servant is ready to leave and Laban and his mother ask Rebecca if she is willing to go. Rebecca replies: "I will go."²⁹ Happily, mother and son send her forth as their *sister*,³⁰

וּישַׁלְחוּ אֶת-רֵבֶקָה אֶחָתָם, and Rebecca leaves bearing the specific blessings of, and marked as, a good sister as Gen 24:60 relates:

They blessed Rebecca and said to her: “Our sister, may you grow into multitudes. May your offspring inherit the gates of their enemies.”³¹

DANGEROUS SISTER DINAH

In many ways, Dinah is the antithesis of Rebecca. Genesis 24 tells the story of a sister’s appropriate marriage, which is sanctioned by a brother and strengthens a natal household. Genesis 34 tells the story of an inappropriate marriage, unsanctioned by brotherly consent and demanding violent revenge. At the start of the narrative, Dinah leaves home [וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה] to see the daughters of the land.³² Dinah’s independence as well as her desire for female companionship mark her as a dangerous sister and, as we see later, mark the daughters of the land as a dangerous sisterhood. In the narrative’s patriarchal ideology, the dangerous sister gets what she deserves for independently leaving the protection of her natal home. Instead of seeing [לִרְאוֹתָ], Dinah is seen by Shechem [וַיִּקַּח אֶתָּהּ], taken by him—perhaps into his home [וַיִּרֶא אֶתָּהּ שָׁכֵם]—and sexually violated [וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֶתָּהּ וַיַּעֲנֶה]. By the close of the narrative, the independent, once active sister, becomes a dependent and completely passive figure. Mirroring or mocking Shechem and Dinah’s initial audacious acts, the brothers *take* their sister and *bring her out* of Shechem’s house [וַיִּקְחוּ אֶת דִּינָה מִבֵּית שָׁכֵם וַיֵּצְאוּ].

Although Dinah returns tamed to her natal home, irrevocable damage has been done to her and to Jacob’s household due to Simeon and Levi’s vigilante slaughter of the Hivites as Jacob’s reproach to his sons reveals: “You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land.”³³ At the end of Genesis 34, Jacob’s house is vulnerable. Although Jacob blames his sons for the state of his household, his sons blame their sister. They did what they had to do. Whatever the consequent damage to their household, they could not allow their sister to be treated like a whore.

DANGEROUS SISTER MIRIAM

As mentioned above, Miriam functions in Exodus 2 as an ideal sister who protects and sustains her natal household. Yet in Numbers 12, Miriam becomes a dangerous sister who asserts her independence by speaking against Moses’ choice of a Cushite wife and by challenging his status as a prophet. Although their brother Aaron also challenges Moses, only Miriam, the sister, is punished. God strikes Miriam with leprosy and banishes her from the camp. Her punishment fits both her crime and her marginal status as a sister within the

patriarchal household. Her challenge against Moses' status results in her being shunned by God and removed from the camp.

Miriam's assertion that Moses introduced an inappropriate bride into the family results in Miriam being removed from her family. When appealing to Moses to heal their sister, Aaron compares her leprous body to a fetus ejected from its mother's womb.³⁴ With this image, Aaron suggests that Miriam has been aborted from her family.³⁵ Moses prays on Miriam's behalf. Once punished and healed, Miriam returns to the camp, yet it remains unclear whether she is ever fully reintegrated into her family. The verb used to describe her reintegration into the community, **קָאָה**, typically appears in the expression "gathered to one's kin," connoting death. Both Aaron and Moses are said to be gathered to their kin upon their deaths.³⁶ Yet the expression is noticeably absent in Num 20:1, which is the next mention of Miriam and records her death. The absence of this expression at her burial suggests that dangerous sister Miriam had been accepted back into the Israelite community, but not into her natal family.

These brief portraits of ideal and dangerous sisters illustrate the expectations and the anxieties associated with sisters in the Bible and reflect a fear of female agency. Their focus is on the natal household that sisters, as temporary members, can either strengthen or weaken. Ideal sisters, like Rebecca and Miriam in Exodus 2, support their natal homes whereas dangerous sisters, like Dinah and Miriam in Numbers 12, assert an independent agency that threatens their natal families. As we see when we discuss the incest narratives, sisters do not have to be agents pursuing their individual desires to be dangerous. They can threaten their homes by being objects of desire as well.

Of course, fears of female agency and desire are not directed only against sisters in the Bible. Whether mothers, daughters, sisters, or sisterhoods, all women provoke these fears within the patriarchal context of the biblical narrative. Honor and shame were essential values that shaped ancient Israelite society, and a woman's honor was associated with the qualities and behaviors of submission. According to Yee, a woman must be timid, deferential, submissive to male authority, passive, and sexually pure.³⁷ A woman who does not embody these qualities elicits anxieties and is a destabilizing figure in the biblical narratives.

Yet a woman's particular role in the narratives shapes the way fears are manifest, and her specific role raises particular anxieties. A mother asserts agency differently than a sister or a wife does; her narratives reflect anxieties related to children as opposed to siblings or spouses. As mothers, Sarah and Rebecca

choose one child over another, and their stories reflect anxieties concerned with securing heirs and not husbands. As sisters, the Sarah and Rebecca stories reflect anxieties concerned with supporting brothers and securing their natal households.

Since sisters are also daughters, their stories share common elements with daughter stories. Yet, they introduce unique elements, challenges, and anxieties related to a sister's sibling status in relation to brothers or to other sisters. As the paired sister stories show, the interpersonal relationship among sisters is a complicating factor. The interpersonal relationship among women is naturally a factor in the sisterhood stories as well. The portraits offered above reveal the centrality and particular complexities of the brother-sister relationship. In these portraits, the brother, and not the father, appears to be the primary patriarch in the sister's life. Miriam saves her brother's life. Laban negotiates Rebecca's marriage. Dinah's brothers avenge her sexual violation.

These stories, along with those I examine in greater detail, may reflect the reality or at least the biblical author's ideology that a brother could play a significant role in securing a husband for a sister.³⁸ They also portray an intimacy between a brother and sister that may have exceeded the intimacy felt between a father and a daughter.³⁹ Since brothers and sisters grew up together and participated together in household tasks,⁴⁰ it is logical that a less hierarchical, more intimate relationship formed between them than between a parent and a child.⁴¹ Siblings could care for each other in practical ways, such as when Tamar tends to her brother's (feigned) illness. Brothers also took care of their sisters. Although legal texts in the Bible suggest that it was a father's responsibility to protect his daughter's sexual purity⁴² and a husband's responsibility to protect his wife's,⁴³ Genesis 34 shows Dinah's brothers assuming responsibility for her sexual purity and responding to its violation.

The brothers' outrage at Dinah's violation is striking when compared to Jacob's passive response. At least as a reflection of the narrative ideology, and perhaps reflecting ancient norms, this tale indicates that a brother responds differently to a sister's sexual violation than a father does to his daughter's. It may be that Dinah is redeemable from Jacob's perspective because a raped daughter can become a legitimate wife according to the law of Deut 22:28-29. Yet a raped sister, as a sexualized sister, cannot be redeemed; she must be avenged. As the incest prohibitions show, the brother-sister relationship ideally is asexual. It is logical to assume then that brothers do not relate comfortably to a sexualized sister—whether as an object of unconsummated desire, as in the Song of Songs or, as in Dinah's case, as a sexually violated, unmarried woman. Even if married, brothers do not have to engage regularly with their sexualized

sisters. Following patrilocal custom, married, sexualized sisters move away and into their husbands' homes and function narratively as wives or mothers. As we will see, a brother's discomfort with his sexualized sister is even more apparent in the Bible's incest narratives.

These brief portraits and the more detailed analyses that follow reveal defining features of the Bible's sister stories, which remain evident even when they are adapted to stories about collective sisterhoods. Sister stories focus on the patriarchal natal household, manifest fears of female agency and desire, and are concerned with, or framed by, the sibling relationship. As marginal figures, sisters both cause and reflect the vulnerability of their homes.

Sisterhood stories manifest a similar dynamic with a broader focus on patriarchal Israelite society in general. Here, too, these narratives reflect the fears of the biblical text of female agency and desire; and the stories are concerned with the interpersonal relationship among women. Given biblical anxieties about exogamy, sisterhoods are crucial in responding to this vulnerability and in maintaining the boundaries of Israelite society. The sisterhood narratives also reveal the positive ways in which women's networks contribute to Israelite society. Sisterhoods supported women socially and emotionally by marking their lives ritually and by providing an appropriate outlet for the expression of women's desire and agency.

Scholars have often failed to notice that sisters and sisterhoods are critical figures in the biblical narrative, precisely in those narratives of families and society that are facing crises of stability. They play an essential role in the Bible's grand narrative of how God selects one family for a covenantal relationship. Crucial to the stability of the house of the father, sisters, not unlike brothers, help designate the right family to maintain God's covenant. They build the house of Jacob and establish the house of David. Sisterhoods ensure the stability of the house of Israel by making sure that Israel preserves its purity and its relationship with God. Most remarkably, it is a sisterhood that establishes the Davidic dynasty and provides a paradigm for the divine-human relationship.

Sisters and sisterhoods are not superfluous figures in the Bible. They have their own stories, and they play an integral part in Israel's story. Through their narratives, the Bible recounts the threats and vulnerabilities, but also the building, sustenance, and redemption of the house of Israel.

Notes

1. For a description of the *bet av*, see J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 147–55.
2. Gale A. Yee describes the patrilineal kinship ideology that privileged ancient Israel's males. See Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 37.
3. Carol Meyers discusses the difficulties of using the term patriarchal in *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 24–46.
4. In his analysis of the Israelite family, Daniel I. Block prefers the term “patricentrism” over patriarchy, arguing that patriarchy carries negative and inaccurate assumptions about the despotic role the father played in the family. See Daniel I. Block, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel,” in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 41.
5. According to Num 27:1–11, a daughter could inherit her father's property if there were no sons and if she married within the paternal clan.
6. Block describes the family in ancient Israel as patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal. See Block, “Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel,” 40.
7. See Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 14.
8. In the Bible, daughters must have husbands, and wives must have children, not for personal fulfillment but, as Fuchs observes, to ensure patrilineal continuity. See *ibid.*, 44.
9. Gen 4:9.
10. In his book examining the ubiquitous plot of a younger sibling usurping an elder, notably entitled *When Brothers Dwell Together*, Frederick E. Greenspahn observes: “Before turning to the details of these issues, a comment is in order about the male orientation that pervades so much of the language used throughout this study. . . . The few exceptions (Rachel and Leah or Michal and Merab) merely confirm the Bible's androcentric focus, for the narratives that do include females invariably function as adjuncts to those dealing with males in one way or another. Thus Rachel and Leah echo Jacob's relation with Esau, and Michal and Merab epitomize the conflict between David and Saul.” See Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 7.
11. See Jon L. Berquist, *Controlling Corporeality: The Body and the Household in Ancient Israel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 13.
12. Leila Leah Bronner conducts a similar study in her examination of the representation of mothers in the Bible in *Stories of Biblical Mothers: Maternal Power in the Hebrew Bible* (Dallas: University Press of America: 2004).
13. Introducing his study on the representation of disability in the Bible, Saul M. Olyan remarks on the importance of such studies; he writes: “However, representations are central to our enterprise nonetheless because they are ideologically charged and function themselves to mold patterns of thought among those for whom they are intended.” See Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4.
14. See Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken, 2002), xvii.
15. See Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative*, 11.
16. See Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve*, 24.
17. This supports Yee who observes that ancient Israel's patrilineal ideology “disenfranchised the female in a hierarchy of gender.” See *ibid.*, 38.
18. Claudia V. Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 228.

19. Camp uses Miriam's punishment after having challenged Moses' authority to illustrate her point; she writes: "Her affliction with leprosy, a form of impurity, merely dramatizes the point. . . . Aaron is clean no matter what he does—his status is ascribed, not achieved—and the primary importance of his relationship with his brother is established. Miriam's (female) impurity, her irrevocable difference, is simply made manifest, the reality of her strangeness to the patrilineage exposing the illusion of her insider blood." See *ibid.*, 231.

20. See Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*, 14.

21. Perceiving the sister stories as cautionary tales raises the question of the Bible's intended audience. Current scholarship views the Bible as a product of, and for, the ruling male elite. See Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Although women might not have had direct access to Israel's national literature, they could still be influenced by its stories and ideology. I will consider this argument in my analysis of the portrayals by Jeremiah and Ezekiel of Israel and Judah as sisters married to God.

22. See Carol Meyers, "'Women of the Neighborhood' (Ruth 4.17): Informal Female Networks in Ancient Israel," in *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 110–27 and Aubrey Baadsgaard, "A Taste of Women's Sociality: Cooking as Cooperative Labor in Iron Age Syro-Palestine," in *The World of Women in the Ancient and Classical Near East*, ed. Beth Alpert Nakhai (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), 13–44.

23. The midwives are first identified professionally as midwives before their names are mentioned.

24. Exod 2:7.

25. Although I identify Miriam as the sister, it is possible that Exodus 2 could be referring to another sister. Among Moses' female saviors, the only women named are the midwives Shiphrah and Puah. Perhaps being named indicates that they are not as selfless as the other women saviors and do not work solely for the good of the patriarchal household. After all, God rewards their actions by granting them their own households.

26. As I will discuss further, the family narratives reflect a preference for endogamous marriage to an individual who is closely related to the nuclear family without defying the laws of incest. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family in First Temple Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 59.

27. Betuel is mentioned in Gen 24:15, 24.

28. See Meyers, "'To Her Mother's House': Considering a Counterpart to the Israelite Bêt 'āb," in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, and Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991), 50–51.

29. Gen 24:58.

30. Gen 24:59.

31. As stated above, all biblical translations are my own.

32. The expression **וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה** marks an independent action. Like Dinah, other women independently "go forth" and by doing so initiate irrevocable, significant, and often deadly events. In Gen 30:16, Leah goes out to meet Jacob and informs him that she has purchased him for the evening with Reuben's mandrakes. In Judg 4:18 and 22, Yael goes out to meet Sisera to lure him into her tent and then to kill him. In Judg 11:34, Jephthah's daughter goes forth to greet her father and seals her death. In 2 Sam 6:20, Michal goes out to criticize David for revealing himself before his maidservants.

33. Gen 34:30.

34. Num 12:12.

35. The French commentator Rashbam (1085–1158) understands the image of the aborted fetus as a powerful appeal to Moses as Miriam's *brother*; he writes: "For your sake, may you yourself not be like one dead, in as much as all born from the same mother's womb partly die, that is to say

after Miriam was born from Moses' mother's womb dead, it is as if Moses' flesh is half-consumed."

36. Num 20:24 and 27:13.

37. See Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve*, 41.

38. Basing himself on Genesis 24 and 34, as well as on the prominent role of the brothers in the Song of Songs, Ingo Kottsieper argues that brothers negotiated the marriages of their sisters. See Kottsieper, "We Have a Little Sister': Aspects of the Brother-Sister Relationship in Ancient Israel," in *Families and Family Relations as Represented in Early Judaism and Early Christianities: Texts and Fictions*, ed. Jan Willem Van Henten and Athalya Brenner (Leiden: Deo, 2000), 73–74.

39. Kottsieper writes: "In contrast to the father, the full brothers have a closer relationship to their sister, based not on legal terms but on an emotional proximity. They take care of her fate and represent her interests regarding an outsider." See *ibid.*, 73.

40. According to Block, gender distinctions in labor began during adolescence, and children spent their earliest years working together at household tasks. See Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," 93.

41. Other biblical passages convey brother-sister emotional intimacy. In the Song of Songs, the male lover's favored term of endearment for the female lover is "my sister, my bride." As I discuss in chapter 8, the term "sister" does not always indicate kinship but can indicate a non-kindred feeling of fellowship.

42. Deut 22:13–21.

43. Num 5:11–31.