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Woman to Woman:
Relationships in the Hebrew Bible

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A Thesis

in

The Department of Religion

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ABSTRACT

Woman to Woman:
Relationships in the Hebrew Bible

Sonia Zylberberg

This study grows out of the contemporary feminist reclamation of the past. It is an exploration of the woman to woman relationships that are presented in the Hebrew Bible. In the entire corpus, there are only three such relationships portrayed with any details, these being the ones between Leah and Rachel, Sarah and Hagar, and Ruth and Naomi. The examination has a twofold purpose: to probe the representations within the biblical text in order to uncover both the relationships and the women involved in them, as well as to trace the androcentrism of subsequent commentary concerning these relationships. Two groups of commentary are examined: traditional rabbinic-style commentary from the Late Antique, medieval and modern eras, and contemporary feminist commentary. Both the biblical text and the commentary are subjected to an analysis based on a methodology proposed by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza to expose the androcentrism underlying biblical texts. A careful reading of the text leads to questions, remembrances, and proclamations.

The relationships are examined both on their own and in relation to one another. What emerges is a picture of the diversity that is present in the text: these three relationships share more differences than they do similarities.

Neither the traditional nor the feminist commentaries are found to be uniform in their androcentrism. There are instances in which the traditional commentaries are relatively free from this tendency; there are also instances in which the feminist commentaries are found to exhibit them, albeit in more subtle forms.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In my most optimistic moments, I hope that this contribution to the feminist effort will help bring about the downfall of the patriarchy. I believe that every individual action, no matter how small, has an effect. Only by relentlessly unmasking inequalities in every facet of life and by continually struggling for a more just society, can we, perhaps, bring it about one day.

When I first started on the journey that has led to this thesis, I expected it to be interesting and intellectually challenging. An unexpected result was the ways in which this process interacted with the rest of my self and my life. I find myself changed emotionally and spiritually as well as intellectually. Writing this thesis has brought me face to face with the various aspects of myself and has given me the opportunity to grow in all directions.

I could not have achieved this on my own. I have been blessed by the guidance of Professor Norma Joseph, who has been my mentor throughout this undertaking. I cannot thank her enough for all her time and effort, for her tremendous patience and inspiring insights. I also found the other professors I worked with in the Religion Department at Concordia immensely helpful; in addition to the specific suggestions and insights they offered, they create an atmosphere that is both stimulating and nurturing: a place to grow, think and produce.

My friends and family have been very patient with me during this journey. They fed me, gave me moral support, and were very understanding about my preoccupation and absence. I hope to have the chance to reciprocate for them in ways that will be as fulfilling for them as this has been for me.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose

This is a thesis about women in the Bible. I am interested in uncovering, discovering and recovering insights about historical, mythological and contemporary women. Living as I do in a western late-twentieth century society, I am surrounded by evidence of the patriarchal system that is our heritage. This patriarchy is still alive and well; it permeates all facets of our lives. Ancient texts reveal that this situation is not new; it has existed at least since the beginning of recorded history. The struggle to uncover biblical women forms part of the feminist struggle in the contemporary world for control by women over their own destinies. In order to do this, it is not sufficient to focus only on present conditions. Because the past still lives with us and through us, and because we still consult ancient texts as authoritative, we must also reclaim the past. Only by looking at the past as well as the present can we hope to produce a more equitable future. In this thesis, the particular text and past being reclaimed is that of the ancient Bible.

I look to the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible,[1] because it is the foundational text of Judaism. The Bible is usually considered to be both descriptive and prescriptive, in that it describes characters and events of the Jewish historical-mythological realm, as well as prescribing ritual, moral and ethical actions to be performed by Jews. These two aspects are intermingled and it is not always obvious where the separation lies.

Even today, at least 2000 years after this text was composed, its influence is significant, both in Jewish and in Christian cultures. It is used in a variety of ways, including justification for morality and actions in our contemporary society. The biblical

characters are often looked to as role models. Judaism is a religion that stresses community and relationship. In the mainstream practice, there is little emphasis on solitary contemplation. Actions towards others are extremely important; often, these actions are thought to mirror those of God. One could even consider relationships as one of the cornerstones of Judaism. Therefore, how the Bible portrays relationships has implications that are still relevant for us today.

The Bible contains many references to women characters: there are 111 named women. However, this quantity is a small percentage of the number of male characters: there are 1426 named men.[2] And most of the women remain completely unknown, even to Bible readers. Many of these named references are nothing more than a name. Other women referred to lack even a name.

The Bible is a patriarchal text, originating in a society where men had more power and more control over their lives than the women they lived with. Framed within this androcentric context, it focuses almost exclusively on men. In the *halakhic* (legal) passages, men are presented as normative. In the narrative (non-legal) portions, male characters are the principal actors and agents. The narratives note the births of males; Dinah is the only female whose birth is recorded as an actual event within the narratives. The genealogies trace patrilineal descent and list mostly men. Men interact with men. Women characters appear as adjuncts to the male characters. With few exceptions they are attached to men as wives, mothers, sisters, daughters. Their appearance in the narratives serves mostly to further the men's stories.

This androcentric tendency did not end with the biblical era. Post biblical commentators have continued this male-oriented focus in two ways. First, they do not question the androcentrism of the original biblical text. By taking for granted the normativeness of the men, they perpetuate the doctrine that the biblical men are central and more significant than the women. In addition, their own writings are also androcentric. This serves to strengthen the (mis)belief that women are secondary, both in the Bible, and, by extension, in their own society. This two-pronged androcentrism is found in rabbinic and rabbinic-style interpretations from the Late Antique, medieval and modern eras. In many cases, post-biblical commentaries are more extreme in this regard, and decrease the status of women even more than in the original biblical text.[3]

Feminist biblical exegesis claims to reverse this androcentric perspective. Feminist commentaries seek to uncover the women of the Bible. Their interest is to focus on the women, to hear the women's voices, to find out where they were, what they were doing. Some feminists are successful in this endeavour, others less so. There is an entire spectrum, ranging from those who do reject the androcentrism and recover the women to others who continue to perpetuate the androcentric perspectives espoused by earlier exegetes, albeit in a more subtle manner. Still others reject the androcentrism of the biblical text, but, in the process, discard the text and the biblical women as well.

My goal is to trace and question this androcentrism, and, ultimately, to displace it. My primary focus is on the original biblical text, but I will also examine subsequent commentaries. I do this to subvert the traditional stereotypes of biblical women that has long been the norm in biblical exegesis. I wish to uncover the richness of material

regarding these women that the biblical text does provide, if we dig a little deeper. I believe this can be done without injury to the integrity of the original text. It is simply a matter of shifting perspective. For, despite the androcentric perspective, the women are present. Even with their secondary status, there is sometimes sufficient detail that we can discern something about them and their lives. Whether these details crept in despite the author, or whether he[4] intended them to be present does not concern us. The point is that they are there, and allow us glimpses into the lives of women in the biblical world. If we shift our focus, and bring the women in from their peripheries and margins to the centre, we begin to uncover a surprising amount of material, both about women in the biblical world in general and about the individual women in particular. From this, we also learn about the communities these women lived in, and the relationships they formed within their societies.

In my own examination, the women occupy centre stage. As my desire is to keep them in this central position, I have chosen to focus on their relationships with each other. In this way, my examination will view women interacting with women, while the men remain on the margins. I will examine the ways in which women create community among themselves.

Examining women interacting with women rather than by themselves serves to highlight the diversity of the women themselves, as well as the diversity of their positions within their society. It allows us to see the limits imposed on women by society, beyond which they move at their peril. But it also allows us to see the breadth within those limits, the arenas where women engage in their own activities without recourse to male authority,

permission or control. It lets us see and hear women acting as women, with women. If I allow my own gendered perspective to enter the picture, it adds a third dimension, that of women reading women acting with women.

My interest in probing these relationships is, ultimately, to discover what they can offer to us today. The biblical text is still of relevance in our times; it is frequently referred to in varying capacities, including offering models for our actions. It therefore behooves us to re-examine the text, to deconstruct the dominant androcentric model that is the most familiar reading, and to re-construct alternative underlying discourses. I am not willing to abandon either the biblical women or the biblical text to those who have imposed their androcentric discourse on them. These diverse reconstructed discourses can then be used as a source of models for a multitude of people, rather than remaining the domain of a small elite.

1.2 Sources

The data used for this examination is textual. It consists of the biblical books of Genesis and Ruth, and subsequent biblical commentaries on these texts.

The Hebrew Bible is an ancient text, written in ancient Hebrew and canonized roughly two thousand years ago. It is actually a compilation of diverse writings of differing ages and authorships, rather than a single homogeneous work. The authorship of these writings is controversial. Some believe them to have been divinely written; others ascribe the authorship of the Pentateuch to Moses and that of the Book of Ruth to Samuel; still others posit a variety of anonymous sources which are unnamed, but referred

to by the letters J, E, P, and D.[5] Whoever the authors were, these different texts appear to have been assembled and redacted by a single person or group, prior to their canonization.

There has been a plethora of biblical commentary in the intervening years between that time and the present day. These include straightforward translation, explication of language, fanciful additions to the narratives, legal interpretations of narrative elements, and much else. There have been the 'mainstream' Judaic commentaries as well as those from the more marginal interpreters. In the present day, these alternative commentators include many feminists. The commentaries examined in this thesis fall into two categories, the traditional interpretations and the feminist works.

The earliest traditional commentaries date from the Late Antique period. The interpretations of which we have extant versions are ascribed to rabbis, scholars who studied and discussed the biblical texts. Midrash Rabbah is a compilation of some of the rabbinic biblical exegesis from this period. In addition, it contains stories that the rabbis included in their discussions; these anonymously authored stories were apparently transmitted orally until they were included in this text. The Babylonian Talmud is another rabbinic text from the same period that also contains biblical commentary, although this is not its primary focus.

Since the purpose of this thesis is to examine a representative selection of commentary in order to trace tendencies, it is not necessary to examine all available texts. Midrash Rabbah is the primary biblical commentary from this period. Its interpretations were considered so authoritative that they were often repeated by subsequent commentators. In fact, even today the comments from Midrash Rabbah are often conflated

with the original biblical text, and presented as if they formed part of the biblical text. The Talmud is more interested in legal aspects and questions, and treats biblical interpretation in a secondary capacity. My examination will therefore concentrate on Midrash Rabbah for this period, consulting the Talmud only as a supplement.

During the medieval period, many rabbis recorded their commentaries on the Bible. Among those whose writings have been maintained and transmitted through the ages and continue to be considered authoritative in contemporary times, Rashi is the most significant. "No other commentaries have been the subject of so many super commentaries as those of Rashi".[6] Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, known by the acronym Rashi, lived from 1040 to 1105 in France. His commentary to the Bible is the first Hebrew book known to have been printed, in 1475. Rashi often quotes from Midrash Rabbah, adding his own comments to those of the Late Antique rabbis. A couple of centuries later, Nachmanides wrote his commentaries, often taking Rashi's explanations as the starting point for his own interpretations. Nachmanides, or Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, also known by the acronym Ramban, lived from 1194 to 1270. He was born in Catalona, Spain, but travelled extensively, and died in Israel. Nehama Leibowitz is a contemporary biblical commentator who follows the traditional route, what has been designated 'rabbinic-style' in this thesis. She differs from almost all other rabbinic-style commentators, past and present, in her gender. She often quotes from both Rashi and Nachmanides.

These rabbinic-style commentators were selected for their authoritative position within traditional biblical exegesis, as well as for their interaction with each other. Although they all lived at different times, none of them works in isolation. Each one brings

preceding commentaries into their own discussions, responding and adding to their predecessors' interpretations. By engaging with each other in this fashion, they form a continuum, an ongoing conversation. Even the earliest of these commentaries, Midrash Rabbah, is the record of discussions among many rabbis, not one solitary author.

Feminist biblical exegesis traces its roots to 1895, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton published *The Woman's Bible*, in which she examined the Bible's[7] attitude towards women. From then until the present day, both Jewish and Christian feminists have published their own commentaries, often resulting in a situation analogous to that of the Judaic rabbinic-style commentators, where each one enters into an ongoing discussion with predecessors. In some cases, the feminist is able to enter both ongoing discussions at the same time, engaging with both her feminist and rabbinic predecessors. Athalya Brenner, Cheryl Exum, Sharon Jeansonne, Ilana Pardes, Gail Reimer, Savina Teubal, Phyllis Trible and Aviva Zornberg are all important feminist biblical commentators who have, within the last two decades, published their own unique contributions at the same time as they engaged in the ongoing discourse. They differ in backgrounds, approaches and conclusions, but all are attempting to peel away the androcentric covering of the biblical text and reveal the women beneath. The feminist texts examined in this thesis were selected on the basis of their direct relevance to the thesis topic, as well as for their representativeness within the field of feminist exegesis.

Not all of the above exegetes wrote commentaries on all three of the relationships being examined. However, each commentator made a significant contribution to the study of at least one of these relationships.

1.3 Methodology

There are only three relationships between women in the Bible where the women are shown as directly interacting. This does not include relationships that are referred to but never actually portrayed, such as the ones between Hannah and Peninah, Rebekah and her nurse, Deborah, or Miriam and Yoheved. Nor does it include instances in which one woman is said to interact with a group, but where no details are provided, such as Dinah visiting the daughters of the land, Jephthah's unnamed daughter going to the hills with her women friends, or Miriam dancing with the women. The three being examined here are the only instances in which both women are shown to act with, by, for and/or to the other. These are: Leah & Rachel, Sarah & Hagar, and Ruth & Naomi. The texts in which these relationships are portrayed are short narratives. The stories are very fragmentary, presenting only episodes from their lives.

I will examine these three relationships as they are portrayed in the sources listed above. Not each source is available for each relationship. However, there is sufficient evidence that the trends can be discerned. For each relationship, the biblical text will be deconstructed and then reconstructed, rescuing and reclaiming the women involved. The commentaries will also be presented. For the first relationship, the commentaries will also be subjected to the same scrutiny as the biblical text. This will not be repeated for the other two relationships. The rabbinic patterns are consistent enough that they can be discerned in the first instance. Further scrutiny at this level of detail does not yield significant additional insights. The same is true for the feminist commentaries, although

their interpretations are more varied than the rabbinic ones. Additional deconstruction would add to the quantity of the analysis, but would not significantly alter it.

The relationships are examined in the order of increasing control that the women have over their own lives, with the corresponding decreasing amount of male control. Leah and Rachel are the first to be examined because they have little choice in their relationship with each other. First of all, they are sisters. In addition, the men in their lives determine that they are also to be connected through marriage to the same man. Sarah and Hagar are the next pair that I will look at. Sarah has choices in her relationship with Hagar, although Hagar has none. Sarah controls her relationship to Hagar; she decides when to terminate it. Hagar tries to end her involvement with Sarah, but is unsuccessful. The last pair to be examined will be Ruth and Naomi. Ruth definitely chooses Naomi. Although Naomi's desire for Ruth's company is ambiguous, she allows Ruth to accompany her; if she really wanted to terminate their relationship, she could do so. Their association with each other is by mutual volition.

The texts will be examined using a method proposed by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza to expose and peel away underlying androcentrism. Although she intended her hermeneutical approach to be used only in examining the biblical text, I will also use it in my examination of the commentaries. The method will be explained in the next section.

Textual analysis begins with a close reading of the text. There is always interpretation in any reading, and this is compounded when the reading is in a translated form, as we are then interpreting the translator's interpretation. My main source is written in biblical Hebrew, a language that is no longer spoken by anyone. I worked in the original

Hebrew, and translated all the biblical texts into English. There are some key words and phrases that are ambiguous and give rise to many problematic interpretations. These ambiguities and their implications will be examined when they concern the relationship being discussed. When it came to the commentaries, I used the available English translations.

Each relationship will be examined individually for the androcentric tendencies of the texts, and for ways to subvert this tendency and place the women in a central position. In the conclusion, the relationships will be examined as a whole, and trends that emerge will be discussed.

1.4 Fiorenza's Methodology

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza has proposed a framework for feminist biblical exegesis. Her purpose in establishing this methodology is not simply as an academic exercise; she is seeking a way to reclaim the utility of the biblical texts for the contemporary world, and specifically for feminist practising Christians. Believing that the hermeneutical process is not, in itself, sufficient to achieve this end, she insists that it be rhetorical as well. In other words, it is not enough to simply read the texts; we must also reconstruct and transform them. Although Fiorenza's concern is with the Christian communities and she concentrates primarily on the New Testament, her model can be applied to the Hebrew Bible as well. In addition, it can also be applied to biblical commentary, deconstructing and uncovering the prevailing paradigms.

Fiorenza's model consists of four stages, which are not meant to be used in a linear fashion. "Rather, they must be understood as critical movements that are repeated again

and again in the 'dance' of biblical interpretation".[8] Fiorenza likens this dance to a circle, but I see it more as a spiral, a dance that continuously grows on its base, constantly adding to itself and moving onward and upward, and where each part is informed by and informs all the others.

The first stage is one of suspicious inquiry. To employ this method is to analyze the texts critically, to ask questions, to examine premises, as well as to suggest possible answers to the questions raised. Fiorenza compares this work to that of a detective.

After suspicion comes remembering. Although in her earlier writings, such as "Emerging Issues in Feminist Biblical Interpretation", Fiorenza seems to envision this process as one where only the sufferings and struggles of women are reclaimed, in her later work, such as *But She Said*, she emphasizes both the negative and positive aspects of remembering. Fiorenza likens this process of remembering to that of a "quilt-maker who stitches all surviving historical patches together into a new overall design".[9]

Then there is proclamation. This is the rhetorical portion of Fiorenza's approach. Within this hermeneutical process, Fiorenza insists we must choose: which texts to affirm, and which to discard. She does not consider herself obligated to retain the entire text; those that are too patriarchal or androcentric or objectionable may be cast out.[10] This strategy she compares to the "activity of a health inspector who tests all food and medicine for possible harmful ingredients."[11]

The fourth step is one of creative actualization or imagination, a constructive process whereby we, the readers, "enter the biblical story with the help of historical imagination, artistic recreation, and liturgical ritualization."[12] This is where we retell the

stories, adding and modifying as we need to, creating and transforming. This step represents the culmination of the others; it is where the suspicions, remembrances and proclamations all come together, to create a new, more complete picture. This is where we "celebrate and make present the suffering, struggles, and victories of our biblical foresisters and foremothers."[13] As mentioned above, these steps are not necessarily performed in any specific order; I consider this entire thesis to be my fourth step, my own contribution to this celebration.

1.5 Authorship And Voice

As mentioned above, the authorship of the biblical text is controversial. This thesis assumes the author(s) to have been human and anonymous. However, given what we know of the context within which the biblical texts were written, it is unlikely that they were authored by women. Although we cannot know this with certainty, it is most probable that the author(s) and redactor(s) were male.[14] Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes agree that the author is presumably male, but attempt to identify texts that provide women's perspectives within the male-authored work.[15] Although they claim that their arguments are not essentialistic, yet still they end up ascribing certain characteristics to women across the millennia and the differences of space and culture. I do not share their belief that we can identify these women's perspectives. I agree with Tikva Frymer-Kensky, that "there is no woman's toolkit":[16] there is no identifiable mode of behaviour that can be ascribed to women. I believe that all we can say is that there are certain passages and portions of the texts that are especially meaningful to us as women today. Whether or not this was equally true in the biblical times can never be known.

This leads to a related problem, that of voice. I wish to hear the voices of the six biblical women I am examining. To say that one hears another's voice implies a direct connection between the individuals. In this case, the individuals are separated by immense quantities of time, space, and culture. In addition, one of them (me) is reading about the others in a text authored by someone else altogether, who, in addition, is also a different gender.

First of all, I reject totally the notion that there is a 'woman's voice', with the concomitant essentialism that it requires. There is no single category of woman that encompasses all the variety that can be found among individual women; there is no integral way to reduce them to a single voice.

However, even if we speak of 'women's voices', in the plural, there still remains a difficult problem. I have no direct access to these women. I have no access to their own writings. All I have is words, actions, and thoughts attributed to them by an anonymous, almost assuredly male, author. Can I still hear their voices? And, if so, what does it mean?

The answer is yes. Although I have no access to the particular individuals portrayed in the biblical text, yet still the text provides a window into the world of women in the biblical world. The author did not write in a vacuum; the women he knew, the women he lived with and was surrounded by, informed his characters. I believe there is no way to reach the actual women, if they in fact even ever really did live and breathe. However, they are more than fictional. They are examples of women in the biblical world. As Carol Meyers shows using archaeological as well as literary evidence, women like these did exist. And, just as fictional characters may come alive for us, so too do Sarah,

Hagar, Leah, Rachel, Ruth and Naomi live for me. They speak to me. I hear them. And through the voices I hear, I make contact with the biblical world and, more specifically, with the women of the biblical world. With women similar to these six women, who lived lives similar to those portrayed in the Bible. There are no actual women at the other end of these voices, but rather historical memories transmitted through a religious text that was, and remains, meaningful to a people.

My Own Voice

I am a North American Ashkenazi Jewish woman living in the second half of the twentieth century, born to immigrant parents who survived the Holocaust of the Second World War. I grew up in Canada as a secular Jew, with a cultural knowledge of my Jewish heritage but with no religious education or affiliations. I became interested in the Jewish religious traditions later in my life, and it is this interest that has led to the current examination.

[1] In the rest of this essay, I will refer to the Hebrew Bible simply as the Bible. As this thesis is not a comparative examination, there is no need to distinguish it from the Christian Bible.

[2] I did not count the characters myself. These figures were quoted in "Mysteries of the Bible" on the Arts & Entertainment television channel.

[3] An example of this is the way Deborah is treated. In the biblical text, she is explicitly named as a judge, but the rabbinic commentaries deny her this status.

[4] The author is almost assuredly male. This will be discussed in the next section.

[5] This hypothesis was initially proposed by Julius Wellhausen in 1878. 'J' refers to the Yahwist, 'E' to the Elohist, 'P' to the Priestly Writer, and 'D' to the Deuteronomistic Historian.

[6] Isidore Singore, ed, *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the history, religion, literature and customs of the Jewish people from the earliest times*, vol X, (New York: KTAV Publishing House Inc, [1975]), p.325.

[7] Stanton's examination was of the Christian Bible; it thus included the books of the New Testament as well as those of the Hebrew Bible.

[8] Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p.52.

[9] Ibid., p.54.

[10] This discarding of objectionable components does not fit particularly well in a Jewish context. The Jewish tradition has been to comment and explain what was found objectionable, rather than to throw it out.

[11] Fiorenza, *But She Said*, p.54.

[12] Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Emerging Issues in Feminist Biblical Interpretation", in: Judith L. Weidman, ed, *Christian Feminism: visions of a new humanity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), p.53.

[13] Fiorenza, *But She Said*, pp.54-55.

[14] The only serious contention of this proposition comes from Harold Bloom, who proposes in *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), that 'J' was a woman. His arguments have failed to convince many scholars.

[15] Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: E.J.Brill, 1993). In their conclusions, Brenner and van Dijk-Hemmes go further than S.D. Goitein, who only posited that women were creators of biblical genres without attempting to identify the specific passages that they produced.

[16] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992), p.141.

2 LEAH AND RACHEL

2.1 Summary Of Biblical Story (Genesis 29-31; 35:16-20)

Leah and Rachel are characters in Genesis. They are sisters, who live with their father, Laban. No mention is made of either their mother or of other siblings or members of their household. Leah is the elder. She has soft, or weak eyes; Rachel is beautiful and well-favoured. They end up married to the same man, Jacob. Jacob loves Rachel and wants to marry her; he works seven years to achieve this goal and thinks he is marrying her, but Laban has Leah go to him instead, because, as he claims, she is the elder sister and should, therefore, be married first. Jacob does not realize the difference until it is too late. The text says:" in the morning, behold, it was Leah!".[1] After a period of time, Rachel marries him as well. But the text tells us that Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah.

Leah gives birth to four sons before Rachel has any; Leah names these sons both for her feelings of being unloved, and her hopes that the children will cause her husband to love her. Rachel envies her sister for her children, and uses her handmaiden, Bilhah, as a surrogate mother. Bilhah bears two sons which are considered to be Rachel's. Leah then uses her own handmaiden, Zilpah, in the same manner. Zilpah bears two sons. This brings the number of sons to eight.

There is now an incident in which Leah's son, Reuben, brings back *duda'im* from the field.[2] Rachel wants the *duda'im* and asks Leah for them. Leah says, "is it a small matter that you have taken my husband? would you take away my son's *duda'im* as well?"[3] Rachel makes a deal with her: in return for the *duda'im*, Leah gets to spend the night with

Jacob. Leah tells him this when he comes home; he does as he is told. She subsequently bears another two sons and a daughter.[4] Rachel then bears a son.

At this point, Jacob wants to go back home to his own land. He calls Rachel and Leah out to the field, and presents his case. He tells them that their father does not want him to leave, at least not with all the cattle that he has earned. They answer him that they have no share or inheritance in their father's house, that he has "devoured their money",[5] and for the sake of the riches that are rightfully theirs and their children's, they are ready to leave. And this they do.

The last of the twelve sons is born during this journey.[6] Rachel dies on the road giving birth to him.

2.2 Late Antique Rabbinic Commentary

2.2.1 The Texts

The rabbis of the Late Antique period discussed various aspects of the Leah-Rachel episodes. Some of their commentaries were explicative clarifications; others were additions to the biblical narratives. What follows is a selection of those portions of their commentaries that are relevant to the relationship between Leah and Rachel.

According to Midrash Rabbah,[7] Rachel's mother was dead, and that is why she ran to tell her father that Jacob had arrived. This idea is later repeated by Rashi.

In both the Talmud[8] and Midrash Rabbah[9], the same explanation is given for Leah's eyes being weak. Rebekah, with her two sons, and Laban, with his two daughters, had agreed that the children would marry, the elder with the elder, and the younger with the

younger. Leah sat at the cross-roads and asked people what Esau was like, and heard that he was a wicked man, as opposed to Jacob. So she wept continually, "she wept until her eyelashes dropped".[10] The version in Midrash Rabbah adds that she prayed while she wept, and it is because of this prayer being answered that she married Jacob instead of Esau. Rashi repeats the explanation, and generalizes the custom of the elder children belonging together to be one that everyone knows rather than simply an arrangement between specific parents.

These rabbis were concerned about the episode in which Leah is substituted for Rachel. The Talmud[11] relates that Rachel knew what her father planned, and told Jacob that her father would not allow her to be married before her elder sister. They agreed on identifying signs, by which Jacob would know who was in his bed. But Rachel gave these signs to Leah so that Leah would not be disgraced. Rashi reiterates this explanation, and a midrash in Lamentations Rabbah expands on it, giving Rachel her own voice as she argues with God. The following is part of her argument:

> It was very hard for me, because the plot was known to me and I disclosed it to my husband; and I gave him a sign whereby he could distinguish between me and my sister, so that my father should not be able to make the substitution. After that I relented, suppressed my desire, and had pity upon my sister that she should not be exposed to shame. In the evening they substituted my sister for me with my husband, and I delivered over to my sister all the signs which I had arranged with my husband so that he should think that she was Rachel. More than that, I went beneath the bed upon which he lay with my sister; and when he spoke to her she remained silent and I made all the replies in order that he should not recognise my sister's voice. I did her a kindness, was not jealous of her, and did not expose her to shame.[12]

The rabbis also discussed what happened in the morning, when Jacob discovered it was Leah. According to them, he accused her of being a deceiver and the daughter of a

deceiver. But she had an answer ready for him, and accused him in turn of having deceived his own father. " 'Is there a teacher without pupils,' she retorted; 'did not your father call you " Esau ", and you answered him! So did you too call me and I answered you!' "[13]

In Leah's first naming speech, she describes herself as 'unloved' or 'hated'. Midrash Rabbah expands this to mean that everyone hated her, not only Jacob, the reason for their hatred being her duplicity towards her sister.

> All hated [i.e. abused] her: sea-travellers abused her, land-travellers abused her, and even the women behind the beams abused her, saying: ' This Leah leads a double life: she pretends to be righteous, yet is not so, for if she were righteous, would she have deceived her sister![14]

In the Talmud, we find an alternative explanation of the description: it does not mean that Leah was hated, but that Esau was hateful to her.[15]

According to Midrash Rabbah[16], Jacob had wanted to divorce Leah because of her deception. But he changed his mind because God gave her children. And eventually he even gave thanks for her. This is repeated by Nachmanides.

When Leah got pregnant the seventh time, there were already ten sons (six of hers and two from each of the handmaids). The rabbis cited in the Talmud[17] believed that Leah could foretell the future, that she knew that twelve tribes were destined to issue from Jacob, that she reasoned that if she had another son, there would only be one left for Rachel, who would then be less worthy than even the handmaids. So Leah prayed that her child would be a girl. The unborn child, which had been male, was thus changed to a female; this was Dinah. This story is picked up and repeated by Rashi.

Midrash Rabbah teaches that from Rachel's statement "Give me children or I will die", we learn that "he who has no child is as though he were dead and demolished".[18] Rashi repeats this exposition.

In both Midrash Rabbah[19] and Rashi's commentary, we are told that Rachel's envy of her sister was for her good deeds and her righteousness, and that she believed this was the cause for Leah's having children while she did not.

The rabbis in Midrash Rabbah maintained that Rachel was the "chief of the house", even though Leah had more children.[20]

In Midrash Rabbah[21] we read that both Rachel and Leah lost by their transaction concerning the *duda'im*. Leah lost the *duda'im* but gained the tribes and the birthright. Rachel gained the *duda'im* but lost the tribes and the birthright. In addition, because of her slighting treatment of Jacob, Rachel was not buried with him. Rashi repeats this point.

Rachel died before Leah. Midrash Rabbah[22] says that this was because she spoke before her sister, when they answered Jacob in the field.

2.2.2 Questions

The Late Antique rabbis share many of my questions regarding the biblical text; they provide their own answers. In many instances, they expand on the actions and motivations and speech ascribed to women. They provide voices that are absent in the biblical text. However, their commentaries give rise to additional questions concerning their comments. They increase the significance of a few individual women, but diminish the importance of women in general. For example, they show Leah caring enough about Rachel to make a sacrifice for her, when she does not want Rachel to be less worthy than

the handmaids. But the sacrifice she makes is to have her male child transformed into a female. The message clearly articulated is that females are less important than males. Is this the view permeating all of their texts? And, if so, does this bias invalidate any contributions they make?

Why do they believe that Leah was hated by everyone? The biblical text seems fairly clear that Leah's feeling of being unloved refers only to Jacob. Why do the rabbis expand this to include everyone else? Is it because they believe her deception to be more serious than Jacob's parallel deception of his father? If so, is this more evidence of the prejudice towards women discussed in the preceding paragraph?

The rabbis assume that Rachel and Jacob had agreed on secret signs by which they could recognise one another, that they had some kind of mutual understanding. This implies that Rachel returned some of Jacob's feelings towards her. The biblical text is silent on this point; nowhere is there any indication of Rachel's feelings towards Jacob. Is this evidence of an androcentric perspective, an assumption that because Jacob loves Rachel, she must also love him? Or do they consider her feelings irrelevant?

Midrash Rabbah states that Rachel envied her sister for her righteousness. The biblical passage states that when Rachel saw that she had borne no children to Jacob, she became envious of her sister. It seems clear to me that the reason for Rachel's envy is Leah's bearing of children. There is no suggestion for any other motive. Yet the rabbis expand this envy to be more serious and more all-encompassing. Although they accord a greater depth to the jealousy by attributing it to a less trivial cause, I question this expansion. It implies a belief that sterility is the woman's fault, a punishment from God for

her misdeeds. Although this belief is stated in other biblical texts, it is absent from this particular one.

In their discussion of Rachel's statement "Give me children or I will die",[23] the rabbis say that "he who is without child is as though he were dead".[24] The use of the masculine pronoun is puzzling. Do they believe this statement to be true for men as well as for women? This would be very interesting, as there is no evidence in the Bible of men having the same kind of feelings as Rachel evinces.

Although the rabbinic commentators share some of my questions regarding Leah and Rachel, their answers, in their own turn, provoke more questions on my part. As discussed above, they take away from women more than they give. However sensitive they may seem to particular women, the end result of their interpretations is one of decreased significance of women in general. They either ignore the women altogether or add comments that show them in negative or trivial lights. The overarching question for me regarding the rabbinic commentaries is whether the benefits outweigh the disadvantages: is there anything to be gained in consulting their androcentric texts?

2.2.3 Remembrance

The Late Antique rabbis were not averse to using their imagination to hear the voices of particular characters when the occasion presented itself. The midrash quoted above from Lamentations Rabbah is one such instance. In this midrash, the rabbis give Rachel a voice that is absent from the biblical text. In addition to making her more of a character in her own right, their story also sheds some light on their view of the relationship between the sisters. It suggests that there was basically harmony between

Leah and Rachel; that they cared for and helped each other; that Rachel was very concerned that Leah not suffer shame. This does not contradict anything explicitly stated in the biblical passage, it only augments the narrative. The rabbis obviously shared some of my questions regarding their interaction and concluded that the relationship between the two women was basically harmonious.

So too do they give Leah more of a voice than she has in the biblical text. They show her accusing Jacob; we hear her actual words as conceived by the rabbis. Other episodes that do not portray her actual words still serve to provide additional insight into her position and character. Leah sitting at the crossroads weeping is one of these. Another is Leah praying for Dinah to become a female. Although this latter passage is problematic in its slighting attitude towards female children, it does give Leah more of a personality, and a presence. The rabbis see Leah as a prophetess; she was obviously not a trivial or insignificant character to them.

2.3 Medieval Rabbinic And Modern Rabbinic-Style Commentary

2.3.1 The Texts

2.3.1.1 Rashi

Rashi's commentary is based on the actual words used in the Biblical text. He looks for explanations of the grammatical forms used for the words. If there are anomalies, he gives explanations for these differences. I have not included his discussions of the word forms, but only the conclusions he reaches. Many of the conclusions relevant to this thesis are restatements of the Late Antique commentary and have already been

included in that section. Following are only those comments that have no counterpart in the earlier texts.

Rashi provides more details regarding the family situation of the sisters than either the biblical text or his Late Antique predecessors, stating that Rachel tended her father's flock only because Laban had no sons to do it; if there had been sons, Laban would not have let her do this. However, Rashi notes that by the time Rachel and Leah left, Laban did have sons, many years having passed in the meantime.

As in the Talmudic commentary, Rashi posits Leah, along with the other matriarchs, as being a prophetess. She therefore knew that Jacob would be the progenitor of the twelve tribes, and that he would have four wives. In her second naming speech ("God has heard that I am unloved and has also given me this one"), she is saying, "From now he will have no fault to find with me, for I have assumed my full share in giving him children".[25]

Rashi proposes that Rachel got the idea of using her handmaid as a surrogate mother from Sarah's attempt at being built up in this way. He does not discuss the fact that Rachel is much more successful in her attempt than Sarah.

According to Rashi, when Rachel speaks about wrestling with her sister, she is really saying "I have been persistent and have made many importunities and wrestlings with God that I may become like my sister ... and God has yielded to my importunities".[26]

Rashi explains that Zilpah being given to Leah went against the custom of giving the elder handmaid to the elder daughter, Zilpah being the younger of the handmaids. Laban did this in order to sustain his deception; if he had given her the elder handmaid,

Jacob might have been suspicious. Rashi further adds that Zilpah was, in fact, so young that her pregnancy was not discernible.

Rashi attributes to Leah the belief that Jacob was being faithless to her by marrying her handmaid.

According to Rashi, Leah became pregnant after the night spent with Jacob following the *duda'im* incident. As the biblical passage states, this is because God listened to Leah. The reason for this is that "she eagerly desired and sought means to increase the number of the tribes".[27]

Rashi believes that God remembered Rachel for two reasons: because she was righteous when she transmitted the secret signs to Leah on her wedding night; and also because she was worried that Jacob would divorce her because she was childless, and that she would then have to marry Esau.

According to Rashi, when Jacob called Leah and Rachel to the field, he called first Rachel and then Leah because Rachel was the principal wife. It was for her sake that "Jacob had entered into relations with Laban".[28] Rashi believes this point further evidenced in that even Leah's descendants[29] admitted that Rachel was the principal wife, as can be seen in Ruth 4:11 when Rachel is mentioned before Leah.

Rashi tells us that on the road, Rachel and Jacob shared a tent; and he was with her constantly. After she died, Jacob moved into Bilhah's tent rather than to Leah's.

2.3.1.2 Nachmanides

Like Rashi, Nachmanides also looks to many of the late Antique rabbinic sources for his conclusions. However, this is often in order to disagree with previous conclusions, or at least to modify them.

Nachmanides comments on the fact that Rachel tended her father's flocks, as does Rashi. However, unlike Rashi, Nachmanides is concerned with the question of why Leah did not tend the flocks with Rachel. He offers two possible explanations: either because her eyes were tender and the rays of the sun would have hurt her; or because Leah was older and of marriageable age, so Laban was more concerned about her.

Nachmanides disagrees with both Rashi and the Late Antique rabbis regarding Rachel's mother; he believes that it is not necessarily true that she was dead. According to Nachmanides, Rachel went and told her father about Jacob's arrival so that he would go and honour the arrival of his relative; her mother was not related to Jacob.

Nachmanides comments that Jacob's loving Rachel more than Leah was unnatural, seeing as he married Leah first. "It is natural for a man to have more love for the woman with whom he first had relations".[30]

Nachmanides, unlike the previous commentators examined in this paper, censures Leah for her deception of both her sister and Jacob. He believes that she was wrong in doing this; she should have indicated to Jacob that she was Leah instead of pretending all night to be Rachel. That is why Jacob hated her. But God had compassion on her, "knowing that she did so in order to be married to the righteous one".[31] And Nachmanides repeats the view expressed in Midrash Rabbah, that Jacob wanted to divorce Leah because

of her deception, but because God remembered her by giving her children, Jacob decided not to.

According to Nachmanides, Leah was ashamed because she was unloved, and God saw her affliction.

Reiterating a point made by both the earlier rabbis and by Rashi, Nachmanides posits that Leah knew there would be twelve sons. However, he deviates from his predecessors by asserting that this is why she gave Zilpah to Jacob: she wanted the majority of these sons to be in her power, "so that her sister Rachel would not prevail over her with respect to the number of her sons".[32]

Nachmanides also differs from the others regarding the *duda'im*; according to him, they do not bring fertility, but pleasure. This is what Rachel wanted them for. When she did have children, it was unrelated to these plants; her fertility was achieved "through prayer, not by medicinal methods".[33] He also believes that it is possible that Rachel wanted the *duda'im* in order to perfume her couch. Leah had perfumed her bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon, the "customary way of women".[34]

2.3.1.3 Nehama Leibowitz

In Leibowitz's commentary, there is little regarding the relationship of Leah and Rachel. The one point that is relevant is her comment regarding Leah's deception of Jacob. Leibowitz repeats the midrashic explanation that Leah answered Jacob's accusation with her own: "And thou, why didst thou deceive thy father?". Leibowitz uses this passage to expound her own morality lesson; she believes that deceit is always morally wrong and brings ultimate punishment. According to her, Jacob was punished for his deception of his

father by marrying two wives, although he only loved one of them, with the result that there was no peace in his family, either between his wives, or between their children, "the rift between the children of Leah and Rachel persisting for many long years".[35]

2.3.2 Questions

The medieval rabbis also share many of my questions regarding the biblical text; as do the Late Antique commentators, they provide their own answers. In many instances, especially for Rashi, these are reiterations of previous interpretations, which are sometimes expanded, but often left unchanged. Thus, the same androcentric tendencies are often found in these texts that have been discussed vis-à-vis the Late Antique texts. In this section, I will examine only those questions raised by these texts that differ from those already discussed in the previous section.

Rashi assumes that Rachel would not have been tending her father's flocks if there had been a son available to do this. Is he projecting his own contemporary mores on a different time period, or does he have reason to believe that this was the biblical tradition? As he does not cite any extra-biblical evidence, I am left to assume it is his own projection. Nachmanides' belief that Laban's concern for Leah prevented her from also doing this work further complicates this picture. It is not clear whether he believes it was only acceptable for younger daughters, or for women below a certain age, or whether it was, in fact, not acceptable at all. And, as with Rashi, it seems more likely that these are his own projections rather than the customs of the biblical times.

Midrash Rabbah states that Rachel envied her sister for her righteousness, whereas Rashi tells us that Rachel envied her sister because she was more righteous. These are not

exactly equivalent. Is the difference significant? It may perhaps be that Rashi is merely rendering explicit what was implicit in the earlier commentary.

Rashi refers to the "many importunities"[36] that Rachel has made towards God. It is not clear to what he is referring. In the biblical text, Rachel refers to her wrestlings with her sister. The wrestlings with God that Rashi mentions seem to refer to her desire for children, and serve also as an allusion to Jacob's wrestlings with God.[37] The importunities that he refers to are more problematic. He does not explain further, and there is no evidence in the biblical text for this. It seems that he is either trying to impugn Rachel's character, or to explain her lack of righteousness. In either case, it seems to me that he is projecting onto Rachel something that exists only in his own mind.

Rashi states that Zilpah's pregnancy was not obvious because of her youth. I find this statement to be extremely problematic. Even if we accept his assertion that Zilpah was young, we know nothing whatsoever about Zilpah's size. As it is patently not true that a young woman is less likely to show her pregnancy, it seems almost as if he has never seen a pregnant adolescent.

Rashi states that in the deal involving the *duda'im*, Rachel slighted Jacob, whereas Leah was looking to increase the number of the tribes. Yet again, it is as if he were condemning Rachel and praising Leah. And yet again, I question the source for this belief of his.

According to Rashi, Rachel was worried that she would have to marry Esau if Jacob divorced her. Yet Esau already has several wives at this point in the narrative, and

Rachel is barren. Is Rashi alluding to a custom, either biblical or medieval, that would require this marriage?

Nachmanides does not seem to share both Rashi's and the Late Antique rabbis' view that the sisters co-operated. He believes them to be locked into a power struggle, similar to the destructive one proposed by Brenner, which will be examined in the next section. In contrast to the view presented by both the rabbis and Rashi, of Leah praying for her child to be turned into a female so that Rachel not be unworthy, Nachmanides posits Leah's giving Zilpah to Jacob as a desire to retain the upper hand, to increase the number of sons belonging to her so that she would always have the majority of sons. Although his view of Leah is more negative than that of his predecessors, it is also more active. He shows Leah to be a powerful agent, acting in her own right and for her own purposes. Is he perhaps offended by the disregard shown towards women implied by the previous commentaries?

Nachmanides believes the purpose of the *duda'im* was for pleasure, not fertility. But this does not make sense. Rachel already presumably had whatever pleasure she wanted with Jacob; why would she need more? If she wanted them for no better reason than to perfume her bed, this episode takes on a triviality that is surprising. Does Nachmanides really believe she would trade Jacob for such a trivial reason?

From where does Nachmanides get the idea that men love the first woman they have sexual relations with? Is this a medieval concept, or does he have some reason for believing it to have been a biblical custom?

Leibowitz attributes the conflict among Jacob's sons to be the fault of Leah and Rachel. The biblical text does not do this. Why does she not allow the sons to take the responsibility, and blame, for their own actions? This suggests an attitude of blaming women for evil that is all the more surprising coming from both a modern source, and from a woman.

Leibowitz is not concerned with the women at all. Her only discussion of Leah and Rachel is really about Jacob, not about them. Why has she rendered them invisible? Does she consider them of so little importance that they are not worth spending the time on?

As with the Late Antique commentators, these interpretations invoke more questions on my part. They also end up with a decreased significance of women in general. They either ignore the women altogether or add comments that show them in negative or trivial lights. Nachmanides does this less than the others, but does not go so far as to reverse this tendency. The same overarching question remains for me regarding these commentaries: is there anything to be gained in continuing to consult their androcentric texts?

2.3.3 Remembrance

Rashi continues the endeavour of his predecessors of using his imagination to hear the voices of Leah and Rachel; he also augments the material concerning them both. In many instances, he is reiterating what the earlier rabbinic sources had already added; in some, he is creating his own additions. However, Rashi provides actual speeches by the women less than did the earlier rabbis. This is perhaps because he already had the earlier texts, and did not see the need to repeat what had already been done.

Along with the earlier rabbis, Rashi also sees Leah weeping continuously, thus causing her weak eyes. He also attributes feelings of compassion to both Rachel and Leah, each of them not wanting the other to be shamed: Rachel when she aids Leah in the deception of Jacob, Leah when she prays for her child to become a girl. Although this latter is extremely problematic, as discussed above, yet still it makes Leah a more substantial character. In addition, Rashi actually makes this into a naming speech for Dinah by Leah, an event all the more significant as there are so few naming speeches of females in the biblical text. He gives Rachel a voice when he portrays her feeling less righteous than her sister. He also believes Leah to have been a prophetess.

In Rashi's original interpretations, he gives a voice to Rachel when she speaks about her wrestlings with God. With its allusion to Jacob's wrestlings with God, this is a significant passage. It increases Rachel's status; it places her on the level of those who not only communicate with, but also engage in confrontation with God.

Nachmanides and Leibowitz do not aid in the remembrance of Leah and Rachel. Theirs is a more impersonal, expository approach. They explain and discuss, but do not add episodes that augment the biblical text.

2.4 Feminist Commentary

2.4.1 The Texts

The relationship between Leah and Rachel is not addressed by the majority of feminist biblical commentators. In fact, neither Leah nor Rachel are discussed much at all.

Ilana Pardes, Athalya Brenner and Cheryl Exum are the three who provide the most discussion regarding the relationship between the sisters.

For Pardes, Leah's first three naming speeches not only speak about her relationship with God and her husband, but are also directed implicitly at Rachel, and are intended to underscore Rachel's barrenness. And, as Pardes points out, this taunting of Leah's is effective, as shown by the next biblical passage, which tells us that Rachel envied her.

According to Pardes, Rachel's first naming speech is only an empty boast, because she has not, in fact, prevailed. It is her maid's son, not hers, that she is naming. "This naming-speech is more the delusion of a desperate woman, trying to find comfort in the offspring of her maid".[38]

Pardes agrees with other biblical literary critics[39] on the significance of direct speech in the biblical text, but she carries this analysis further by noting that there are few examples of two women conversing, the Leah and Rachel story being one of the few. Pardes notes that it is significant that they do converse, but that they do this only out of mutual despair. At this point in the story they are both angry, and their dialogue is tense. Pardes reiterates the point made by Midrash Rabbah, that in the deal they make, they both lose something: "each gives up her particular perogative in order to gain the prize she lacks":[40] Rachel gives up a night with Jacob, Leah gives up the mandrakes.

Pardes highlights parallels with the relationship between Jacob and Esau: both Rachel and Jacob, younger children, are struggling against the rights of the first-born. Rashi alludes implicitly to this parallel; Pardes makes it explicit and explains the similarities

in some detail. In both cases a deal is struck; in both cases the younger person is the initiator, and the struggle is for leadership. Pardes finds a difference in that Leah benefits as much as Rachel does in the deal they make. The situation is different between the brothers, where Esau loses his birthright and receives only a meal in return.

In her analysis, Pardes ascribes Leah and Rachel speaking with one voice to the fact that they have "learned to cooperate in times of distress".[41] However, she asserts that the one voice with which they speak is primarily Rachel's. This is similar to Rashi's point. Pardes infers this primacy from the order of presentation: Rachel is named before Leah. Pardes finds further evidence of Rachel's role as initiator and prime actor in the subsequent episode, when Rachel steals the *terafim*[42] from her father. Pardes also believes that this act of Rachel's is "yet another manifestation of the rivalry between the two sisters".[43] Even though Rachel is a mother at this point, her son is not Jacob's firstborn. She needs the *terafim* to prevail over her elder sister.

According to Pardes, the episode where Leah and Rachel speak in the field functions as a critique of the biblical period's patriarchal oppression of women, where women are at the mercy of their fathers. She believes that the text allows this critique in order to promote domination by the husband rather than the father. This choosing of a husband over a father is shown by the sisters' choice to move out of Laban's house and into Jacob's.[44]

Pardes finds Leah's to be the final triumph in the rivalry between the sisters: when Jacob dies, he asks to be buried next to her at Machpelah, rather than with Rachel, on the road to Ephrath.[45]

Brenner's view is that Leah and Rachel, along with the other pairs of biblical women who share a husband, are not portrayed as complete individuals, but rather as stereotypes whose behaviour can be predicted because they are females in a defined situation. These stereotypical women

> are always defined as two rivals who are interlinked by family ties and interlocked in social combat, as if no alternative pattern of social behaviour is conceivable for them in such a situation.[46]

The conflict between these rivals is so ingrained that there is no possibility of a permanent peaceful resolution. The only way out is for one of them to die; in the case of Leah and Rachel, it is Rachel who dies. These incomplete women must be viewed together for a whole picture to emerge.

> No single member of a given pair is a full personality in her own right but just a psychological segment. The two women complement each other: viewed together, as parts of one single entity, they might constitute a satisfactory image of one person.[47]

Both components of this whole image show a common concern, that of motherhood. But this common concern does not lead them to cooperate. "They enjoy no intimacy but, instead, quarrel and bicker incessantly".[48] Their competition is destructive, not only to themselves, but also to their family, as this friction is continued through their children.

According to Brenner, Leah and Rachel cooperate only once, and the only reason for their temporary alliance is because they believe Laban has robbed their children. Aside from this one instance of cooperation, they are locked into a power struggle that is so severe as to jeopardize the survival of their community

> The fact that they put political ambition above the overriding concern of the community's survival brands them as socially maladjusted. The final judgement passed on these paired-off women is that they do not understand the implications of their circumstances and fail to act wisely.[49]

Brenner finds this to be in contrast to biblical male pairs, who are shown capable of generous and wise conduct.

Brenner believes that Rachel's death is the price for her feud with Leah. Because Rachel is not satisfied with the children that she already has, she dies trying to have another child.

Exum's view of the relationship between Leah and Rachel is one of competition, interrupted only when it serves the androcentric interests of the text. There is no real victory for either of them; they remain unhappy. The only victor is the patriarchal system that requires an increase in male progeny.

According to Exum, Leah and Rachel cooperate only on two occasions: once when they agree to leave their father's home in Haran, and once when they trade the mandrakes for Jacob's sexual services. On both these occasions the interests of the patriarchal system are served. In the first, it is the issue of residence that is addressed: their husband's family residence is established in Canaan; in the second, the issue of descent is addressed when more children are provided for their husband. According to Exum, their relationship is one of struggle without relief the rest of the time. "It is so single-minded as to become almost ludicrous, as each sister tries to outdo the other, even to the point of giving their maids to Jacob to acquire more sons".[50]

Exum highlights parallels between Jacob and Rachel, as does Pardes. Exum points out that the biblical text refers to wrestlings for both of them, Jacob's with God and Rachel's with her sister. But Exum finds no equality in these wrestlings, for while "he becomes a nation; she becomes a mother".[51] Exum castigates both Jacob and God for

encouraging the competition between the sisters, Jacob by preferring one over the other, God by making one sterile and the other fertile. Exum also points out the difference in the settings of the two wrestlings: Jacob struggles in the world, Rachel in the house.

> The outcomes of both struggles are important for the future of Israel, but the woman's victory typically takes place in a domestic setting, on the home front, while the man's occurs against a larger backdrop.[52]

Various other feminists comment briefly on the relationship between Leah and Rachel, and several of these comments are worth noting. Susan Niditch notes that Leah and Rachel are "playing the role of mother-wife whose voice is synonymous with the voice of God"[53] when they encourage Jacob to go. She does not elaborate on this, and her meaning is not entirely clear. They are indeed Jacob's wives, but neither woman is his mother. Her intent is, perhaps, to draw parallels between Leah and Rachel and the other Matriarchs. Sharon Pace Jeansonne agrees with the three feminist commentators discussed above that, in the field, "Rachel and Leah speak, for the first time, in a united voice".[54] However, Jeansonne is more interested in determining the cause of their anger towards their father than in probing the relationship between the sisters. She finds that

> the struggle between Rachel and Leah clearly arises from a context of patriarchal structures and expectations. The narrator presents a society that determines the value of women by the number of sons they bear.[55]

Tikva Frymer-Kensky, in an examination of the desires of women portrayed in the Bible, discusses the situations that can result from these desires. "The Bible shows wives wanting children ... This desire for children could set women against each other: Rachel envied her fertile sister Leah".[56] The rivalry in this case was exacerbated by Leah's fertility and Rachel's barrenness. She notes that the rivalry can be set aside when necessary, as when

Rachel was willing to trade Jacob's sexual favours for the mandrakes that she believed would bring her fertility. Mieke Bal assumes that Leah was ugly as opposed to Rachel who was beautiful. In her view, they resolve their rivalry in the deal they strike. For Bal, the important point is that the women effect this collaboration entirely on their own, without the presence of their husband. This shows that they manage to overcome the patriarchal restrictions imposed on them:

> This encouraging story rests on the efforts the two women accomplish to break out of the narrow limits set by their father and husband. The exchange is thus thoroughly subversive.[57]

Savina Teubal does not believe that the conflict between Leah and Rachel was as great as has traditionally been believed.

> Sororal polygyny was not a great conflict for Rachel and Leah, as commentators have led us to believe. Their dissent has been stressed more than their concurrence.[58]

2.4.2 Questions

Few feminist biblical commentators have examined the stories of Leah and Rachel, either in terms of their relationships with each other or with other foci. Why is that? In recent years, there has been a vast increase of women studying the women of the Bible, but these women exegetes have, for the most part, ignored these two characters. This is in spite of the fact that Leah and Rachel are among the few women both named and heard to speak. They are also among the extremely few women who are shown as interacting with each other in the biblical text. Why, then, are they usually overlooked? Is this because they are seen as uninteresting, unredeemable from a feminist point of view, simply male constructs locked into a patriarchal struggle?

I find Pardes' statement that each of the sisters "gives up her particular perogative in order to gain the prize she lacks"[59] to be unclear. It is perhaps simply a peculiar way of restating the point made by the Late Antique rabbis, that each both gained and lost by the transaction. If so, then Pardes is in agreement with both the rabbis and with Rashi, that Rachel loved Jacob. As in the previous section, I question this belief, as the biblical text is silent on this point. Another possible explanation of this phrase is that Pardes believes that Rachel holds on to Jacob as her advantage in the struggle with her sister. Pardes does not explain further; her meaning remains unclear.

In her discussion regarding the parallels with the Jacob and Esau relationship, Pardes states that both struggles are about leadership. I am not sure that I agree with her regarding either one. The brothers' struggle concerns birthright; this is not necessarily the same thing as leadership. Leah and Rachel are struggling over dynasties, over husband and children. If Pardes believes that these are equivalent to leadership, she should clarify the connection.

Pardes distinguishes between birth children and surrogate children, assuming that the surrogate children do not provide the same satisfaction or benefits to the mother. Yet the biblical text provides no evidence of this. In fact, Rachel's naming speeches suggest the opposite. In her first speech, she says: "God has given me a son";[60] in the second: "I have prevailed [against my sister]".[61] Why does Pardes find this to be a "delusion of a desperate woman"?[62] Is she simply projecting her own belief that the two are not equivalent? Why does Pardes still seem to be focusing on the men in the story, rather than on the women? The parallels she draws between Rachel and Jacob are interesting, but she ends up focused

on Jacob rather than on Rachel. The biblical text does this as well, but the point of Pardes' book is to dig up the countertraditions relating to women; do we need to follow the biblical author's direction?

When Leah and Rachel speak with one voice, we see their co-operation. Although this is the first time it is evidenced within the biblical narrative, Pardes assumes it to be learned and new. But the vast part of their story is unknown to us, and we do not know if it was mostly conflict or not. Furthermore, she assigns a higher status to Rachel even when they speak together. I find this unnecessary, and a continuation of a dichotomizing tendency that elevates one at the expense of the other. Pardes also sees Leah and Rachel as still in struggle, even after they have spoken with one voice. The biblical text does not comment on their relationship or interaction after this point. Pardes thinks they must still solve the conflict created by the law of primogenitor; I wonder why she believes this.

Brenner sees both Leah and Rachel as incomplete, as parts of a whole, as stereotypes locked into a particular mode of behaviour. She allows them no particularity, no individuality. She sees them only as types, not as individuals. The biblical text often does violence to the women characters, both literally and figuratively, by rendering them invisible and robbing them of their names, voices and personhood. Why does Brenner continue in this tradition? She insists that Rachel must die in order for the conflict between the sisters to be resolved. Why does she not allow them the latitude to find a less final solution?

The two characters can be seen as complementary without either one being less than complete, but Brenner does not allow for this. Why does she insist that they are incomplete, rather than simply different and therefore expressing diversity?

How does she know that they "quarrel and bicker incessantly"?[93] The biblical text tells us very little about the bulk of their lives, yet Brenner assumes that this consisted of persistent and unremitting conflict. In this, she is in agreement with Pardes. Is this a continuation of the patriarchal dismissal of women?

She sees Leah and Rachel as social misfits who threaten the survival of their community. She goes much further than the biblical text in judging and condemning their behaviour; in fact, the biblical text does not condemn them at all. Is it that she sees them as upholding and reinforcing a patriarchal structure that takes away women's power and choice? Is this her own projection, or is it supported by the biblical text?

Exum, like Brenner, assumes that Leah and Rachel spend all their time in conflict. And, again like Brenner, she assumes that they act only as agents of the patriarchal system rather than with any particularity or agency of their own. My same suspicions are aroused as regards Brenner's conclusions. How does Exum know what the rest of their lives is like, whether it is mostly co-operative or competitive? And why does she feel compelled to take away what little agency and voice they do show? Leah and Rachel are both active in the text, as opposed to Jacob, who is passive. Leah and Rachel take actions, decide critical issues, show a fair amount of control over their lives. The issue of children is obviously of importance to them. Whether or not Exum agrees that this should be such a concern to them, it obviously is, and they act to ensure that their dynasties will be built up. Why does

she take this away from them? Is she only interested in reading the biblical text in order to justify discarding it, or does she want to find glimpses of countertraditions and non-dominant voices embedded in it?

Why does she need to belittle them? She is condescending when she says:

> It is so single-minded as to become almost ludicrous, as each sister tries to outdo the other, even to the point of giving their maids to Jacob to acquire more sons.[64]

She takes away the little they are given in the biblical text.

Exum makes an interesting point when she discusses the ways in which both God and Jacob encourage the conflict between Leah and Rachel. However, what she does not discuss is whether or not this is intentional, on either God's part or on Jacob's. Even if it were not intentional, the resulting conflict must have been obvious. Why did neither of them make any effort to reduce the conflict? Exum does not examine this question. I wonder whether Jacob's inactivity is an indication of the separate realms lived by women and men in biblical times. Perhaps women's lives were in large part separate from men's, and there were areas in which one gender did not interfere with the other, this being an example of one of those areas. Similarly, Exum uses her observation that the conflict between the sisters takes place in a domestic setting to trivialize and dismiss their conflict, but we could use this instead as a glimpse into the world of women in the biblical world, and infer from this that women's lives were spent mostly in domestic settings.

The biblical text states that Leah was weak-eyed. Why does Bal overemphasize and exaggerate this to the point where Leah becomes ugly as opposed to beautiful Rachel? Why do the two have to be opposites?

Bal's statement that Leah and Rachel "conquer each other's shares by abandoning their privilege"[65] is very unclear. What does she mean? What privilege is each one abandoning, and why does she see it as conquering? They are collaborating, they each gain. Is this simply an obscure restatement of the point made by both Pardes and the ancient rabbis? If so, why can she not state it clearly?

Bal finds that the collaboration between the sisters is subversive in that it allows them to "break out of the narrow limits set by their father and husband".[66] But is this true? Have they broken out? Or does this assume that their lives are completely constrained and defined by the men, and that when they initiate action, or co-operate among themselves, it must be a breaking out?

Pardes' conclusions are insightful and productive; the questions I have raised here reflect minor points that arise from her interpretation. The same cannot be said regarding Brenner and Exum. Although I find several of their conclusions to be helpful, in the main I find their texts to be counterproductive. They seem willing to discard Leah and Rachel without giving them a chance. Dismissing them as male constructs, Exum ignores what little there is of value. Brenner dismisses them as incomplete stereotypes. I agree with Pardes that we must dig to uncover the countertraditions that will help us reclaim the biblical women. Although this is not a simple task, it is possible.

2.4.3 Remembrance

As mentioned above, the feminist biblical commentaries, for the most part, ignore Leah and Rachel. In those that do examine them, we find a mixture of those that wish to

remember and reclaim Leah and Rachel, along with those who wish to discard them, as well as gradations between the two.

Teubal is unique in her depiction of the women of the biblical period. Although her focus is on Sarah, she also portrays Rachel as being a Canaanite priestess struggling to maintain her own religion against the onslaught of the patriarchal Israelites. Her analysis gives a voice and presence to the Matriarchs that is not found anywhere else.

In her search for the subversive countertraditions present in the biblical text, Pardes uncovers, highlights, and hears the voices of Leah and Rachel. An important contribution she has made is in highlighting the significance of naming speeches within the biblical text. These speeches refer chiefly to the relationships between the women and God, and allow us considerable insights into the depths of their characters. In emphasizing these speeches, Pardes brings them into the foreground, where we hear their voices clearly. In the case of Leah and Rachel, this is especially true, due to the relatively large number of naming speeches.

However, when she discusses the content of these particular naming speeches, Pardes is less generous. She sees Leah as taunting her barren sister, and Rachel as boasting emptily. While I do not believe remembering necessarily entails portraying the character as good and noble, yet still I find that depicting them as petty and vainglorious, where these are not indicated by the original text, does them a major disservice and helps bury them once again rather than to unearth their memories.

Pardes notes that the deal struck between Leah and Rachel is different from that between Jacob and Esau, in that Leah benefits as much as Rachel. Although she does not

pursue this line of thought herself, Pardes thus opens the door to a view of this interaction in which both sides gain. As neither one is being bested by the other, it is a co-operative effort rather than a competition. In the biblical text, it is our first glimpse of a co-operation between the sisters that we see again in the field, when they speak with one voice.

Pardes' disservice to the memory of Leah and Rachel is nothing compared to that done by both Brenner and Exum. Brenner's refusal to see them as complete characters, her insistence that they are stereotypes locked into a patriarchally created and sanctioned struggle from which there is no escape, leaves them in an unredeemable position. Likewise Exum's interpretation, in which the sisters' story functions to serve the androcentric interests of the text. Both of these interpretations render the actual characters of Leah and Rachel invisible. Jeansonne makes a similar point, in terms of the limitations imposed on these women by their patriarchal environment, but she allows them more agency.

We must bear in mind that women in the biblical period did not have the same variety of choices that women have today. Their options were severely limited by the times in which they lived, as were the options of men. However, these constraints do not mean that they did not act at all, and to deny them their own agency is to take away their voices, and render them invisible yet again.

2.5 My Own Commentary

2.5.1 Questions

The biblical narrative focuses on a very small part of the lives of Leah and Rachel. I want to know the rest of their stories. Did Leah and Rachel always fight with each other,

were they always competitive, always in struggle? Or is it only the entrance of Jacob into their lives that causes the conflict between them? The text mentions no members of their immediate family other than their father. Along with the late Antique and medieval rabbis, I wonder about their mother. Where is she? Do they even have a mother in common, or are they only half-sisters? And what about siblings? Rashi assumes it is because there are no brothers that Rachel is a shepherd tending her father's flock, but I wonder if women in the biblical times were not, in fact, shepherds by choice. And what did Leah do? Did she, as the elder, have to stay at home and care for the house, or is this a contemporary stereotyping that does not apply to the biblical period?

Rachel dies giving birth to her second birth son. She leaves behind her three other sons, one natural and two adopted. Who takes care of these children after her death? Is it her handmaiden, Bilhah, or her sister Leah? Does the rivalry that existed between the sisters during their lifetimes extend after her death, or at the time of her death is there peace between them, as Brenner postulates?

We have some indication of the relationship between Leah and Rachel, but none at all concerning that between the sisters and their handmaidens. Were these impersonal relationships of the employer-servant variety? This seems unlikely due to the fact that both handmaidens perform as surrogate mothers. Or is this a projection on my part, the assumption that surrogacy requires a measure of intimacy? Bilhah and Zilpah appear as names in the story, nothing more. What are their stories?

We know from the text that Jacob loves Rachel and that Leah feels unloved by him. Nowhere does the text give any indication of how either of the women feel about

Jacob. We are told that Leah feels unloved by him, and that this makes her unhappy, but is that because she actually cares for him, or only that her status and situation are affected by his disregard? Regarding Rachel's feelings, there is even less evidence, although the Late Antique rabbis and Rashi all assume that Rachel loved Jacob.

When Laban deceives Jacob by substituting Leah for Rachel, what is the involvement of the women? Both sisters must have known about the deception, at the last minute if not before. Were they willing, or unwilling, accomplices? Both Rashi and his predecessors believe them to have been willing accomplices.

Later in the story, when Leah and Rachel are in the field with Jacob and he asks them to leave with him, they speak with one voice. This strongly suggests harmony between them. Is this the first time that they act in harmony, or is this their normal state, one that has been disrupted for a time by the crisis in their lives? Is this crisis now over, so that they can revert to their former state?

The biblical text is very sparse. It omits many details in the narratives, leaving these to the reader to fill in. My questions are, for the most part, regarding what is left unsaid - I want to fill in the gaps. Most of the questions that the text suggests to me must remain unanswered.

2.5.2 Remembrance

One area in which the voices of both Leah and Rachel are heard in the biblical text involves the relationships that they have with God. Especially in the speeches with which they name their sons, both Leah and Rachel talk to and with and about God in a way that shows intimacy. Pardes has examined the naming speeches of the entire biblical text, and

concludes that they are extremely significant. Throughout the Bible, naming speeches are performed predominantly by women, and their subject is, most often, the relationship between the woman and God. In this narrative in particular, there are eleven naming speeches.[67] Leah looks to God to make up for the wrong her husband does her by not loving her. In fact, her first child is conceived because God opens her womb "because God saw that Leah was unloved".[68] Leah's focus is on her relationship with Jacob, but she involves God in her problems. In her first speech, she says: "God has seen my affliction and now my husband will love me".[69] In naming her second, she says: "God has heard that I am unloved and has also given me this one".[70] The third time, she says: "now my husband will join himself to me".[71] By the fourth, she has shifted and says: "now I will praise God".[72] Does this mean she is no longer concerned with her relationship with her husband? Or is it that this relationship has improved? The latter does not seem probable, because of her response to Rachel in the subsequent *duda'im* episode, when she says: "is it not enough that you have taken my husband?"[73] God is present throughout the story, interacting with both Leah and Rachel, especially in terms of their bearing of children. Jacob seems almost incidental. When the sisters make a deal, he follows their orders with no comment. It is God who opens and closes their wombs, it is God who they talk to and about in their speeches. This suggests that Jacob is not all that central to their lives.

The sons birthed by the maidservants are named by Leah and Rachel; this implies that the sons are in fact theirs, and that the maidservants function as surrogate mothers. Rachel says: "Bilhah shall bear on my knees",[74] apparently referring to a custom where the

surrogate mother literally gives birth on the knees of the adoptive mother, who then claims the child.

Jacob appears to have no part in the birthing or naming of the children, except for the twelfth son, whom he renames as Benjamin, although without a naming speech explaining the significance of the name. The children belong to their mothers. This is consistent with many other birthings portrayed in the Bible. The covenant between God and the people of Israel is carried out in large part by the women, and they name their children to reflect this covenant.[75] There are many instances where the text tells us that women are "built up" by their children. This term, "built up", is used in reference to Ruth and to Sarah, as well as to Leah and Rachel.[76] It seems a vital concern of the women in the Bible, that their dynasties be established. In this case, it is obviously of prime importance to both Leah and Rachel, as well as to the narrator. It is where we get to hear their voices the most. Following are the remaining speeches. I include them in order that we may hear their voices as much as possible.

Rachel's first speech (when Bilhah gives birth): "God has judged me and has heard my voice and has given me a son".[77] Her second: "With great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed".[78] Leah's next one (via Zilpah): "What luck".[79] Then, also Leah: "Happy am I, daughters will call me fortunate".[80] Leah then gives birth herself again and says: "God has given me my reward, because I have given my maidservant to my husband".[81] And her last: "God has given to me a good gift; now my husband will live with[82] me, because I have born him 6 sons".[83] When Rachel finally bears her own son, she says two things: "God has taken away my disgrace",[84] and then: "God will add to me

another son".[85] As mentioned previously, Rachel names her second birth son on her deathbed, but without a speech: she calls him Benoni; however, Jacob renames him to Benjamin. Perhaps she does not have the time or the strength for a speech; the text says her soul is already departing. In any event, Jacob robs her of her voice at the end, by renaming her son.

In her second naming speech, Rachel says that she has wrestled with her sister and prevailed. She cannot be referring to their relationships with Jacob here; although it may have been difficult for Leah, Rachel has not had to wrestle for Jacob's attention. Obviously there has been great conflict between them, and it centred on the issue of children, a vital concern for them both. Just how vital is indicated when Rachel has not conceived yet and says to Jacob: "give me children or I will die!"[86] This gives us some insight into the mindset of these women; assuring their dynasties, their descendants is of such importance that it overrides family harmony, household harmony, friendships.

Carol Meyers has attempted to reconstruct the lives of everyday Israelite women from the biblical period. Using whatever resources she could find, including archaeology and comparative sociology as well as a literary analysis of the biblical text, she concludes that these women lived in extended households.[87] Certainly it seems probable that Leah and Rachel would have lived within the same household, sharing as they did both a husband and father. From the narrative, it seems that Jacob simply moved into Laban's household: he worked for him and married his daughters. When Jacob comes home after the *duda'im* incident, Leah meets him and tells him to come to her that night. He obviously was not expecting this, and was not coming to her house. It does not seem that she had

very far to go to meet him. The fact that Rachel was aware that Reuben had brought the *duda'im* is further evidence that they all lived in fairly close proximity. In the field, Rachel and Leah say that they have no desire to stay in their father's house. From all this, I think we can conclude that they all lived in the same household, although most probably with their own small dwellings within the larger perimeter.

And they obviously lived for some years in a state of disharmony. Even if we allow for a minimum of nine or ten months between the birth of each child by the same mother, the time period in question is some years. And through all this time, it seems, the sisters envied each other. However, they still lived together all those years, and presumably their household continued to function. Therefore, perhaps outside of those areas of conflict that the narrator has chosen to relate to us, they got along. According to Meyers' conclusions, they would certainly have been busy: there was no shortage of work in those days, both for women and for men. And although Laban seems to have been a property holder with a fair amount of wealth, and with servants as well, it does not seem probable that Leah and Rachel, nor for that matter Laban himself, lived lives of idle luxury. So presumably they continued to work together, Leah and Rachel, despite their wrestlings with each other, harmoniously enough for the household to continue, and, indeed, to prosper.

Another time that we hear the voices of Leah and Rachel is in the episode with the *duda'im*. Rachel apparently wants the plants for their fertility properties. Rachel begs Leah for them; she says: "Give me, I beg you, of your son's mandrakes".[88] Presumably she would know that this was a touchy subject: this is, after all, the cause of one of the great conflicts between them, that of bearing children. But she asks anyway; in fact she pleads

for them. This is important to her. And Leah reacts as we might expect her to: "is it a small matter that you have taken my husband? would you take away my son's mandrakes also?"[89] Leah also recognizes the significance of the *duda'im*. It is no small matter, she says. And Rachel responds by offering what Leah wants, to lie with Jacob. It is interesting to note that it is in her power to offer this. It is not necessary to consult Jacob; Rachel obviously has the power to decide this on her own. This can perhaps help subvert some of the patriarchal stereotypes of women's positions within the biblical context.

We also hear their voices in the field. Jacob wants to go home.[90] Laban tries to trick him out of the wages he has worked for, and is obviously not happy about them leaving, although it is not clear if this has anything to do with the people or only with the cattle. Jacob calls Leah and Rachel into the field and tells them what has happened; they answer as one. They speak with one voice. They say that they have no desire to stay in their father's house, that he has devoured their inheritance. Besides showing them acting in unison, in harmony, this also implies that they had an inheritance. It is unclear whether this wealth is actually theirs, or their children's, but they speak as if they had every right to it, and Laban has stolen it away from them. They are, in some sense, women of property, although obviously not independent, or Laban would not have been able to devour it.

2.6 Hermeneutics Of Proclamation

My focus is Leah and Rachel, and the relationship between them. I find this relationship to be at times bitter and tumultuous, but also at times harmonious. It is, perhaps, going too far to call it also at times sweet; I recognize this as my own particular wish, and not particularly supported by the text. However, what the text does most

certainly support is a view of their relationship as dynamic. This is a relationship that lasts many years. The biblical narrative relates episodes of competition and episodes of cooperation. The rest of their story, outside of these particular episodes, is left untold. I believe it is more likely, and more believable, to posit this unrelated story as being one of many ups and downs, but more harmonious than not.

Most of the commentaries discussed in this chapter do not see their relationship this way. The feminists believe the sisters to have been locked into a competitive struggle from which they could not escape. Pardes is the least extreme, in that she believes that Leah and Rachel have at least learned to cooperate in times of stress. Brenner believes that the sisters bicker constantly, and that the only way out of their struggle is for one of them to die. Exum believes that they cooperate only twice. The rabbinic commentators are more varied in their views. Nachmanides posits Leah as seeking power over Rachel. However, Rashi and the Late Antique rabbis believed Leah and Rachel cared enough about each other's happiness, that each one made a sacrifice so that the other not be shamed. This is inconceivable in a relationship that is at all times in conflict and competition. Therefore, at least to some extent, these rabbinic commentators shared my view that the relationship was not all bad.

I do not wish to downplay the conflict within the relationship. It is certainly there; the biblical text is very clear on this point. I only want to very strongly suggest that it is not the whole story, that the entire lives of both Leah and Rachel do not begin and end there. They have complete lives, and although the narrator has chosen to dwell almost exclusively on the conflicts, we do not have to follow his direction. To me, the events

narrated in the Bible represent the dislocation in their relationship, and there is every reason to believe that the rest of the story, if we could know it, would be one of relatively harmonious existence. The portrayal of only the dislocation is consistent with the direction of the Bible, which tends to focus on the discontinuities rather than the everyday lives of its characters.

[1] Gen 29:25.

[2] The precise meaning of *duda'im* is unclear, although all commentators agree that is is a plant, and, presumably, a plant with some kind of fertility property. There is considerable discussion, especially among the medieval exegetes, as to which particular plant it is, and what properties it possesses in relation to fertility. It is most commonly referred to as mandrake in English.

[3] Gen 30:15.

[4] Other than the creation of Eve, this is the only instance in the Hebrew Bible where the birth of a woman is noted.

[5] Gen 31:14.

[6] These twelve sons will become the twelve tribes of Israel. The daughter, Dinah, does not count as one of the twelve tribes.

[7] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 70:13.

[8] *Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Nezikin, Tractate Baba Bathra, 123a.

[9] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 70: 16.

[10] *Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Nezikin, Tractate Baba Bathra, 123a, p.510.

[11] Ibid. Also Tractate Megillah, 13b.

[12] *Lamentations Rabbah*, Prologue 24.

[13] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 70:19.

[14] Ibid. 71:2.

[15] *Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Nezikin, Tractate Baba Bathra, 123a.

[16] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 71:2.

[17] *Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Zera'im, Tractate Berakoth, 60a.

[18] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 45:2.

[19] Ibid. 71:2.

[20] Ibid.

[21] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 72:3.

[22] Ibid. 74:4.

[23] Gen 30:1.

[24] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 45:2.

[25] Rashi, *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Rashi's Commentary, Vol 1: Genesis*, Translated by Rev. M Rosenbaum and Dr. A.M. Silbermann (New York: Hebrew Publishing company, 1934), p.139.

[26] Ibid., p.140.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., p.146.

[29] This refers to the fact that the the law court is considered to be descended from Leah through the tribe of Judah.

[30] Ramban (Nachmanides), *Commentary on the Torah. Vol 1: Genesis*. Translated by R. Dr. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing House, Inc, 1971), p.365.

[31] Ibid., p.366.

[32] Ibid., p.368.

[33] Ibid., p.369.

[34] Ibid., p.370.

[35] Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in the Book of Genesis: In the Context of Ancient and Modern Jewish Bible Commentary*, Translated by Aryeh Newman. (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1972), p.324.

[36] Rashi, p.140.

[37] Rashi would most probably have considered this allusion to be so obvious as to not need explicit explanation.

[38] Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.65.

[39] See, for example, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (HarperCollins, 1981). Alter discusses the significance of direct speech between characters in the biblical text.

[40] Pardes, p.66.

[41] Ibid., p.68.

[42] *Terafim* were household gods.

[43] Pardes, p.71.

[44] Susan Niditch shares this point of view. She writes that Leah and Rachel only set aside their own feud when they have been transferred from the control of their father to that of their husband. According to Niditch, their goal is to "unify with their husband and children as one family" (Susan Niditch, "Genesis", in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds, *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), p.20).

[45] However, Machpelah is where Sarah, Abraham, Isaac and Rebekah are buried, so it is possible that Jacob's desire to be buried there demonstrates a wish to be buried with his ancestors and has nothing to do with either Leah or Rachel.

[46] Athalya Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour: Two descriptive Patterns within the 'Birth of the hero' Paradigm", in Athalya Brenner, ed, *A Feminist Companion to Genesis* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 207.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid., p.210.

[49] Ibid., p.212.

[50] J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women:Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, Pa: Trinity Press International, 1993), p.134.

[51] Ibid., p.134.

[52] Ibid., p.134, note 71.

[53] Susan Niditch, "Genesis", p.20.

[54] Sharon Pace Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: from Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p.80.

[55] Ibid., p.79.

[56] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, p.123.

[57] Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.85.

[58] Savina Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch of Genesis* (Athens, Oh: Swallow Press, Ohio University Press, 1984), p.64.

[59] Pardes, p.66.

[60] Gen 30:6.

[61] Gen 30:8.
[62] Pardes, p.65.
[63] Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour", p.210.
[64] Exum, p.134.
[65] Bal, p.84.
[66] Ibid., p.85.
[67] The daughter, Dinah, is named by Leah but there is no speech associated with her name. Rachel's last son, Benoni, is named by her, but without a speech explaining the name.
[68] Gen 29:31.
[69] Gen 29:32.
[70] Gen 29:33.
[71] Gen 29:34.
[72] Gen 29:35.
[73] Gen 30:15.
[74] Gen 30:3.
[75] I am indebted to Professor Norma Joseph for this insight.
[76] This point regarding these other women is discussed in their respective chapters.
[77] Gen 30:6.
[78] Gen 30:8.
[79] Gen 30:11.
[80] Gen 30:13.
[81] Gen 30:18.
[82] The Hebrew here is ambiguous - it either means "my husband will live with me" or "my husband will exalt me". The ambiguity is perhaps intentional in the original text, and is unfortunately not evident in the translation.
[83] Gen 30:20.
[84] Gen 30:23.
[85] Gen 30:24.
[86] Gen 30:1.
[87] Carol Meyers (*Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)) finds the term "extended households" misleading, as we tend to have our own preconceptions as to who would have constituted the members of this household.
[88] Gen 30:14.
[89] Gen 30:15.
[90] It is interesting that this happens after Rachel finally bears her own son.

3 SARAH AND HAGAR

3.1 Summary Of Biblical Story (Gen 16, 21:9-21)

Sarai has an Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. After they have lived in Canaan for 10 years, Sarai has still not borne any children to Abram. She tells Abram that God has kept her from bearing, and that he should have sex with Hagar, so that she, Sarai, will be built up through Hagar. Abram listens to the voice of Sarai. Sarai takes Hagar to Abram and gives her to him as a wife. When Hagar realizes that she has become pregnant, she thinks less of Sarai. Sarai blames Abram for this; she says to him: "I myself put my maidservant in your bosom; she saw that she conceived, and I am lowered in her esteem".[1] Sarai says God will judge between her and Abram. Abram tells her that her maidservant is in her hands, and to do as she thinks right. Sarai mistreats Hagar, and Hagar runs away from her.

An angel of God finds Hagar in the wilderness and asks her where she has come from, and where she is going. Hagar answers that she is running away from her mistress Sarai. The angel tells her to return to her mistress and allow herself to be afflicted. The angel then announces to her that her offspring will be too numerous to count, and that the child she is pregnant with will be a son, whom she will call Ishmael. Hagar does bear a son to Abram, who names him Ishmael.

God changes Sarai and Abram's names to Sarah and Abraham.

There is a scene in which Sarah's laughter provokes from God a question as to why she laughs and a rebuke for lying about her laughter.[2]

Sarah conceives and bears a son, whom Abraham names Isaac. Sarah explains the name, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me".[3]

Sarah sees Hagar's son *m'sacheik*.[4] She tells Abraham to expel that slave and her son, and that Ishmael will not share Isaac's inheritance. The next morning, Abraham puts bread and water on Hagar's shoulder, along with the child, and sends her away.

3.2 Rabbinic And Rabbinic-Style Commentary

According to Midrash Rabbah[5], Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter, given to Sarah because of her righteousness. The rabbis posited Pharaoh as saying: Better let my daughter be a handmaid in this house than a mistress in another house. This story is repeated by Rashi.

The rabbis in Midrash Rabbah[6] explain that Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham as a wife, not as a concubine. Nachmanides reiterates this point and points out "the ethical conduct of Sarah and her respect toward her husband"[7] in this regard. Leibowitz also repeats this and, in fact, quotes Nachmanides. In addition, Nachmanides explains that Abraham complies only because Sarah tells him to, that his intent is merely to do Sarai's will. In the interpretations of both Nachmanides and Midrash Rabbah, it is the merit of this act that makes Sarah worthy to have children.

The rabbis discussed why Hagar was able to conceive at once, whereas Sarah was unable to conceive in all those years. They concluded that it was analogous to the difference between weeds and crop plants:

> Thorns are neither weeded nor sown, yet of their own accord they grow and spring up, whereas how much pain and toil is required before wheat can be made to grow![8]

Their implication is that Sarah's son is more sought-after and useful than Hagar's son.

Midrash Rabbah recounts that Sarah told the ladies who came to inquire how she was, to go and ask about the welfare of this poor woman, meaning Hagar. It further relates that Hagar maligned Sarah to these women, saying:

> My mistress Sarai is not inwardly what she is outwardly: she appears to be a righteous woman, but she is not. For had she been a righteous woman, see how many years have passed without her conceiving, whereas I conceived in one night![9]

Rashi repeats this story.

According to the late Antique rabbis, Hagar miscarried the first time because an evil eye had taken possession of her.[10] Rashi expounds further on this explanation, stating explicitly that it is Sarah's evil eye that causes this.

In the opinion of the rabbis in Midrash Rabbah, Hagar could not be enslaved again, having been freed. They discussed Sarah's mistreatment of Hagar, concerned to discover what she actually did. One opinion was that Sarah restrained Hagar from cohabiting with Abraham; another that Sarah slapped Hagar's face with a slipper; a third that Sarah made her carry the water buckets and towels to the baths.[11] According to Rashi, it means only that Sarah made Hagar work hard.

The Late Antique rabbis[12] seem concerned to keep Sarah's status higher than that of Hagar, and all women's status lower than that of men. They assert that Sarah is the only woman to whom God speaks, and even then it is in a roundabout way. They insist that God spoke to Hagar only through an angel.[13] However, they do note that even though Hagar was only Sarah's handmaiden, five angels appeared to her.[14]

According to Midrash Rabbah,[15] Sarah was Abraham's ruler. The rabbis evidently felt the need to explain that this was unusual. Rashi makes a similar, but not identical point; according to him, Abraham was inferior to Sarah in terms of prophecy.

The late Antique rabbis[16] tried to figure out what Ishmael was doing that caused Sarah to expel him along with Hagar. One opinion was that it involved immorality, that Sarah saw Ishmael "ravish maidens, seduce married women and dishonour them".[17] Another rabbi taught that it refers to idolatry, and that Sarah saw Ishmael "build altars, catch locusts, and sacrifice them".[18] For a third, the reference was to bloodshed; he explained that Ishmael would lure Isaac into the field and then shoot arrows in Isaac's direction, pretending to be playing. According to a fourth, it refers to inheritance: that Ishmael was insisting on his rights as the firstborn. Rashi repeats all these possibilities, without choosing one. Nachmanides discusses all the above interpretations, but concludes that Ishmael was mocking Isaac on the day Isaac was weaned.

According to Midrash Rabbah,[19] Sarah cast an evil eye on Ishmael when he was leaving, making him sick. Because of this, Hagar had to carry him, even though he was a grown man. Rashi repeats this interpretation.

Rashi discusses Sarah's statement that she will be built up through Hagar. His interpretation of this statement is that she believes her status will be increased though the merit of admitting a rival into her house.

According to Rashi, Sarah won Hagar over initially by kind words

Nachmanides states clearly that Sarah transgressed in her mistreatment of Hagar, and that Abraham also sinned in allowing it. He adds that it is for this reason that God

gave Hagar a wild-ass of a man for a son, so that this son could afflict Abraham and Sarah's offspring.

According to Nachmanides, Hagar can never be free from Sarah, and Sarah's children will rule over Hagar's forever.

Nachmanides states that Sarah expelled Hagar along with Ishmael because the boy would have died without his mother. He was evidently concerned about the reason for Hagar's expulsion, when she had done nothing wrong.

Leibowitz points out that it was a common custom in those times for a barren wife to give her handmaiden to her husband so that she could bear children for her.

According to Leibowitz, Sarah begins by being noble, "making a supreme sacrifice to overcome the natural feelings of jealousy and egotism".[20] However, she is unable to sustain this when faced with Hagar's mockery. The bitterness produced in Sarah is translated into actions. Leibowitz finds Sarah's reactions to be understandable. However, she concludes that the lesson to be learned from this episode is that we must ask ourselves whether we can maintain our high standards before undertaking a difficult mission. She believes that Sarah could not.

3.3 Feminist Commentary

The relationship between Sarah and Hagar has received a fair amount of attention from feminist commentators. Phyllis Trible, Cheryl Exum, Athalya Brenner, Sharon Pace Jeansonne, and Savina Teubal are among those who provide interpretations of the relationship.

Trible sees Hagar as a victim of "use, abuse, and rejection",[21] as opposed to Sarah, who holds a position of privilege and power, albeit within the confines of a patriarchal environment. According to Trible, we know Hagar's story only from the oppressor's perspective. She contrasts the two women: Sarah, who is married, rich, and free, but old and barren; Hagar, who is single, poor and bonded, but young and fertile. She sees in them opposites: Sarah is powerful; Hagar is powerless. When Sarah makes Hagar a wife, rather than just a concubine, Sarah diminishes her own status in relation to Hagar. But the relationship between them remains one of objectification on the part of Sarah. For Sarah, "Hagar is an instrument, not a person".[22] This is evidenced by the facts that Sarah never mentions Hagar's name, and that there is never any dialogue between them. Both of these highlight the distance between them. As Trible notes, God's messenger is the first to address Hagar by name, thus acknowledging her personhood.

In Trible's view, the conflict arises when Hagar becomes an active subject, losing her "hierarchical blinders",[23] seeing herself as Sarah's equal. Rather than Sarah being built up, it is Hagar's status that is built up instead. Sarah has not planned for this and is unwilling to accept it; she wants her superior status back. At this point, Sarah afflicts Hagar. Trible notes the strong language of the text, evoking Israel's suffering under Pharaoh. The result is that the women are once more unequal. Sarah is subject and vanquisher; Hagar is object and victim. The fact that Sarah never uses Hagar's name reinforces this view, Hagar having lost even her name.

And the conflict continues. Trible traces the continuing enmity between the women after Sarah bears a son. Hagar is no longer a wife, nor even Sarah's servant: Sarah refers

to her as "this slave woman"; even God refers to Hagar as "your slave woman" when talking to Abraham. Trible again contrasts Hagar's status with that of Sarah, who now enjoys even greater power. Sarah's life has prospered, Hagar's has worsened.

In her analysis, Trible diminishes Sarah in order to raise up Hagar. She lists ways in which Sarah is inferior to Hagar, such as the fact that Sarah is never the recipient of a birth announcement, and that God speaks to her only once, "and then with a curt reprimand for disbelieving laughter".[24]

However, Trible does not blame Sarah totally for her treatment of Hagar; instead, she notes that Sarah herself is also a victim of patriarchy.

For Exum, Hagar and Sarah are both losers, both victims of the patriarchal environment in which they live.

> One is cast out, becoming the mother of a great nation excluded from the covenant; the other stays within the patriarchal hearth and almost loses her only child to the father.[25]

For Exum, these seem to be equally disastrous.

Exum analyzes Hagar's treatment as an example of the exploitation of lower class women. She sees Hagar as being doubly exploited. The first instance is by Sarah, who uses her to obtain a child. The second instance of exploitation is by the authors of the biblical text, "who use her to endorse androcentric values",[26] that of motherhood as a source of pride. For Exum, this is a value imposed on women by a patriarchal system.

Exum repeats Trible's observation that Sarah objectifies Hagar by not even using her name. And, as does Trible, Exum also diminishes Sarah in order to raise up Hagar. Exum repeats Trible's points: that Sarah doesn't receive a birth announcement, that Sarah

only overhears the announcement given to Abraham. This is in contrast to Hagar, who is told by the angel of God about her upcoming birth.

According to Brenner, Sarah and Hagar are portrayed as the same incomplete stereotypes as Leah and Rachel.[27]

Brenner is surprised that Sarah and Hagar do not cooperate, "for they share a basic raison d'être".[28] She finds the two women equally to blame for their conflict. Sarah is at fault for making Hagar's life a misery, and then expelling her; Hagar is wrong in trying to improve her position at Sarah's expense, and then for running away. Neither woman is satisfied with her lot, in spite of having what the other lacks. Even the birth of the sought-after male heir is not enough; there is no truce after Hagar gives birth. According to Brenner, Sarah goes back on her word. Although she has promised to do so, she does not treat Hagar's child as her own.

Brenner's analysis concludes that the conflict between Sarah and Hagar breaks up the family, causes the family unit much suffering and sets the precedent for conflict between their descendants.

In Jeansonne's estimation, the biblical text is not simplistic in its portrayal of this relationship and conflict, but manages to show both sides. Both Sarah and Hagar suffer, each woman contributing to the other's suffering. Hagar uses her pregnancy to antagonize Sarah; from Hagar's contempt, Sarah senses that her plan has failed, and that Hagar will not release her child to her; Hagar suffers because of Sarah's jealousy. In the end, Sarah drives Hagar out after Isaac's birth because she is afraid of Hagar and her son.

According to Jeansonne, the two women are separated by their stations in life. Sarah's intention is not only to have a child, but to establish a people through Hagar. Sarah did not expect any problems from Hagar, as surrogacy was a common practice at the time.

Jeansonne repeats Trible's point that the fact that Sarah does not mention Hagar by name emphasizes Sarah's strength as opposed to Hagar's powerlessness. She also points out that we never hear Hagar's own words in relation to Sarah.

Teubal's interpretation differs from all others. She posits Sarah as being a priestess of the prevailing Mesopotamian non-patriarchal system, struggling to maintain her own religion against the patriarchal threat that Abraham represents. In this interpretation, Hagar is neither slave nor concubine, but Sarah's companion, a woman whose particular function was to bear children for a priestess. Teubal portrays the conflict between them as arising out of Abraham's interference with this custom. In her view, Sarah was not being particularly cruel in her treatment of Hagar; she was merely following her own law, the Code of Hammurapi, which states what action to take when surrogacy does not work.

In Teubal's opinion, Ishmael's mocking action had a religious connotation, and that is why he had to be banished. Sarah did not want Ishmael to influence Isaac culturally or religiously.

3.4. My Own Commentary

3.4.1 Questions

As with Leah and Rachel, the biblical narrative focuses on a very small part of the lives of Sarah and Hagar, and I want to know the rest of their stories. Sarah and Hagar are

together for a long time before the episode related in the Bible, at least the ten years that they spent in Canaan. What were those years like? The text tells us that Hagar is Sarah's maidservant. Were the two women friends, or at least friendly during that time, or was their interaction strictly on a business basis? It seems unlikely that they could have lived in such close proximity during all that time and remained strangers; it appears equally unlikely that Sarah would have kept Hagar as her maidservant if they did not function well together.

Sarah offers Hagar to Abraham so that she will be "built up" through Hagar's sons. Whose idea is this, Sarah's or Hagar's? Has Sarah discussed it with Hagar previously? Is Hagar willing or unwilling? The custom of using a maidservant as a surrogate mother seems to have been common enough in biblical times that the text does not comment on it. Was this considered to be one of a maidservant's duties? How did this custom work? It is difficult for us to even understand, let alone judge, the friction between Sarah and Hagar when we do not know what was expected of each of them in this arrangement.

The term "built up" is usually explained as "having a son". Is the word "son" meant to be generic, or literal? What would happen to the arrangement if Hagar had a daughter?

Hagar thinks less of Sarah after becoming pregnant, but the text does not tell us the reason for this. If it is the custom for handmaidens to be surrogate child-bearers for their mistresses, why does Hagar react this way? Is it perhaps because she is foreign (an Egyptian) and does not understand, or perhaps even approve of, the custom?

Does Sarah give Hagar to Abraham as a wife, or a concubine, or a servant, or does she only lend Hagar to Abraham for the time required for her to become pregnant? Does

Hagar remain Sarah's maidservant? Abraham tells Sarah that "your servant is in your hands".[29] Does this mean that the relationship between the women has not changed?

Sarah and Hagar never speak directly. Sarah speaks about Hagar to Abraham, but not to her. Neither does she ever use Hagar's name, referring to her instead as "my maidservant" and "that slave". Along with most of the feminist commentators, I wonder if this is indicative of the distance between them, the non-equality in their relationship, the objectification of Hagar by Sarah.

Even though the problem lies with her maidservant, Sarah accuses Abraham, as if the conflict were between them and not between Hagar and Sarah. Sarah goes as far as calling on God to decide between him and her, implying that his fault is serious. But what has he done? Where is his fault?

We know nothing about Sarah's treatment of Hagar after Hagar returns from the wilderness. Does the abuse continue?

When Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, there are no details of the birth. This is in contrast with Bilhah, who gives birth on Rachel's knees.[30] Is Ishmael considered Sarah's son or not? If not, is it the earlier conflict between the women that has cancelled their arrangement?

Sarah sees Ishmael "making sport" or "playing" or "mocking" , and orders Abraham to expel him and his mother from the household. It seems an overreaction on Sarah's part. What exactly did he do? I share this question with the Late Antique and medieval rabbis.

Sarah also resolves for us the issue of whether or not Ishmael is still considered her son at the end. She says that she will not let Ishmael share in her son Isaac's inheritance, implying that only Isaac is her son. Can we infer from this that the opposite was true up to this point?

Sarah mistreats Hagar. In this passage we have a woman relating to a woman, yet in a way that is certainly not inspiring. Sarah sounds like an oppressive and abusive mistress mistreating a powerless victim. She mistreats Hagar; she sends Hagar and her son out into the wilderness, where they will presumably die. At the very least, Sarah does not care what happens to them; at worst, she wants them to die. Is there, can there be, any justification for her behaviour?

Although Sarah's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael seems cruel, God condones her actions. In the first episode, the angel of God tells Hagar to return to Sarah; in the second, God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah. Are we to consider this as ethical behaviour? If not, what is the reason for God's support?

3.4.2 Remembrance And Proclamation

In remembering Leah and Rachel, we are able to draw on the occasions in which they speak to each other directly, as well as the many naming speeches delivered by each of them. With Sarah and Hagar, the task is more difficult. They never speak to each other directly; Sarah never even uses Hagar's name; they deliver no naming speeches.[31]

As well, the only glimpses we have of Leah and Rachel are in their interaction with each other. This is not the case with Sarah and Hagar, where the opposite is true. The biblical text focuses more on their interactions with men and with God than with each

other. As these other interactions are not the focus or concern of this examination, they will not be considered.

There is no doubt that the relationship between Sarah and Hagar is unequal. Even Teubal, whose remembrance of their interaction is the most positive among the commentators referenced in this thesis, is unable to eliminate or ignore the differential in power that characterizes it. Sarah has the upper hand. She is active, in contrast to Hagar's passivity. It is Sarah who gives Hagar to Abraham, it is Sarah who mistreats Hagar, it is Sarah who expels Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar's actions are largely reactive and relatively passive. Nor is their conflict equitable. Sarah's actions are much more harmful than Hagar's. Hagar thinks less of Sarah, but Sarah mistreats Hagar. However much Hagar may have offended Sarah, it is not on the same level as the potentially life-threatening mistreatment of Sarah's.

This does not mean that Sarah is the evil and cruel culprit, whereas Hagar is the blameless victim. It seems obvious that Hagar's actions, in the biblical context in which she and Sarah live, are serious infractions of the expected code of behaviour. Whether she did, as the rabbis postulated, speak belittlingly of Sarah to the other women, or whether she acted from Abraham's influence, and this is why Sarah yells at him and not at her, as Teubal has suggested, she has done something she was not supposed to do. Trible's theory that all she did is see herself as Sarah's equal seems unlikely. Trible views Sarah as an unprovoked abuser. I reject this view; whatever Hagar did, it certainly amounted to provocation.

I see no reason to diminish Sarah in order to increase Hagar's status, as do Trible and Exum; likewise, there is no need to raise Sarah up at Hagar's expense, as do the Late Antique rabbis. This dichotomizing tendency obscures the non-conflictual components of the text. Neither Sarah nor Hagar is perfect. This is consistent with the Bible in general, which portrays all its characters complete with flaws. However, I find Leibowitz's assertion that Sarah set herself an impossible task, that she had to overcome her initial feelings of "jealousy and egotism",[32] to be without foundation. There is no indication that Sarah has these feelings initially or at any other time; there is no evidence of jealousy or that Sarah enters into their arrangement with misgivings and negative attitude that she has to overcome. Sarah's reaction is based on what Hagar does, not on some generalized or pre-existing feelings of jealousy.

Both Sarah and Hagar are characters of great significance. They both speak with God, or at least with God's messengers. God considers both of them to be worthy of conversation. In fact, the announcements made to Hagar mirror those made to Abraham. Based on the text, there is no need to diminish the importance of either woman.

Both Sarah and Hagar are constrained by the limits of their environment. They have choices, they can act, but only within these externally imposed boundaries. Hagar, in particular, has limited options. Sarah obviously wants children, and acts to try and make this possible. She has enough choice to put into motion a scenario that she thinks will make this happen. Hagar may or may not have the same choice. From the biblical text, it seems more likely that she does not. Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham. Perhaps Hagar's only freedom lies in expressing contempt for Sarah. We have no idea what Hagar's motivation

is for her rebellion. She is invisible to us at this point; we see her only through others' eyes. Sarah's desire for children is not enough that she is willing to put up with Hagar's actions. She mistreats her servant; this is within her power and mirrors some of the harsh realities of life. Hagar's choices do not extend to gaining her freedom. She tries to run away, but is unsuccessful. She becomes visible in this episode, she talks with God. But it is God who denies her her freedom, telling her to return. We do not see Hagar taking the initiative again until she has been expelled into the desert. However, we do not see Sarah acting in relation to Hagar again either. It is only in Sarah's reaction against Ishmael that we see them interacting again at all, and the interaction is indirect, Hagar seemingly only included because of her position as Ishmael's mother rather than for anything particular to her own personhood.

And again, as with Hagar's rebellion, it is not clear what exactly Ishmael does, but whatever it is, it is too much for Sarah. It seems that Ishmael, like his mother before him, has transgressed the societal norms that Sarah expects. It is extreme enough that Sarah is no longer willing to tolerate his presence. Whether or not he was considered her son before, after this episode he is not. The consequence for his action is severe. We do not know whether the harsher treatment this time is due to the fact that Ishmael's transgression is more severe than Hagar's, or whether it is because Sarah now has her son to think of. Again, Sarah has the upper hand and is able to cause Hagar's expulsion; Hagar does not seem to have much choice in the matter.[33]

What we do not see in the biblical text is the rest of their story. The narrator relates several episodes from the totality of their lives, episodes that further his own

particular agenda. He is interested in the begetting of sons, and the continuation of the patrilineal lines. But this is not my interest. Sarah and Hagar live together for a long time, at least ten years before the initial episode related in the text. Even after this conflict, they continue to live together for at least thirteen more years. During all this time, they must have gotten along at least well enough for their household to function and even to prosper. I believe that, as with Leah and Rachel, the biblical author has shown us the dislocations within the relationship between Sarah and Hagar. This dislocation was certainly extreme, especially at the end, when Sarah expelled Hagar into the wilderness, where she might well have perished. But, again as with Leah and Rachel, this is consistent with the agenda and focus of the Bible, and we are not constrained to follow this lead. I believe their relationship must have been mixed, neither all bad nor all good. There were areas in which they got along well, but the one major realm in which they could not get along proved too serious to accommodate.

[1] Gen 16:5.

[2] This rebuke may not be from God. The original text is ambiguous, using only a pronoun: "He said" (Gen 18:15). The 'He' may refer to either God or Abraham. However, within the context, it seems more likely that it refers to God.

[3] Gen 21:6. This sentence may also be translated as "everyone who hears will laugh at me". This sentence of Sarah's is not necessarily a naming speech for Isaac. It may merely be an observation.

[4] This word can mean either playing or mocking.

[5] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 44:10.

[6] Ibid. 45:3.

[7] Ramban (Nachmanides), p. 212.

[8] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 45:4 (the exclamation point is part of original quote).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid. 45:5.

[11] Ibid. 45:6.

[12] Ibid. 45:10

[13] In this passage, the rabbis also maintain that God spoke to Rebekah only through an angel, even though the biblical text explicitly states that God spoke to Rebekah.

[14] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 75:4

[15] Ibid. 47:1.

[16] Ibid. 53:11.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid. 53:13

[20] Leibowitz, p.154

[21] Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadephia: Fortress Press, 1984), p.9.

[22] Ibid., p.11.

[23] Ibid., p.12.

[24] Ibid., p.19.

[25] Exum, p.104-5, note 13.

[26] Ibid., p.122.

[27] See chapter on Leah and Rachel for a discussion of this perspective.

[28] Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour", p.208.

[29] Gen 16:6.

[30] Gen 30:3.

[31] There is the possible exception of Sarah's statement that everyone will laugh with her, but this is ambiguous, not necessarily a naming speech.

[32] Leibowitz, p.154.

[33] Nor does Abraham have much choice in the matter. As God explicitly states, it is Sarah who is the decisor, the judge, the principal agent.

4 RUTH AND NAOMI

4.1 Summary Of Biblical Story (Ruth 1-4)

Naomi and her family are in Moab. Ruth, a Moabite, marries Mahlon, one of Naomi's sons. After about 10 years, Mahlon dies, as does his brother, Chilion. Naomi then decides to return to Judah. Ruth and Orpah, Naomi's other daughter-in-law, accompany Naomi as she sets out. Naomi tells them to return, each to her mother's house. "May God do with you great *hesed*[1] as you have done with the dead and with me".[2] Ruth and Orpah both weep and tell Naomi they will go with her to her people. Naomi tells her daughters again to return, that she has no more sons in her guts to be their husbands. Orpah cries and kisses her mother-in-law, but Ruth clings to Naomi. Naomi tells her to return as Orpah has done; Ruth says to her:

> Do not entreat me to leave you, to return from following you. For wherever you go, I will go. And wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God, my God. And where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. God will do so to me, and more, if even death parts me from you.[3]

When she sees how determined Ruth is, Naomi stops speaking with her, and they go. When they get to Bethlehem, the women of the city say: is this Naomi? and Naomi tells them to rather call her Marah, because God has made her very bitter:[4] "I went full and God has returned me empty. Why would you call me Naomi? God has testified against me and God has brought misfortune to me".[5]

Ruth suggests to Naomi that she gather leftover stalks in the harvest fields, and Naomi tells her to go. It is Boaz' field. He tells Ruth she is welcome there because of all she has done for her mother-in-law since the death of her husband, because of how she left

behind her father and mother and her homeland and came to a people she did not know. Ruth takes her gleanings to Naomi and recounts to her the day's events.

After the harvest, Naomi suggests to Ruth that she wash and anoint herself, put on her mantle, go to Boaz on the threshing floor, and uncover his feet. Ruth does as Naomi says. She also tells him to be her redeemer. She comes back and tells Naomi what has happened and gives Naomi the barley Boaz has given her.

Boaz marries Ruth and she bears a son. The women tell Naomi that her daughter-in-law, who loves her, is better to her than seven sons. Naomi takes the child to her bosom, and the women of the city name him Obed, saying "A son is born to Naomi".[6]

4.2 Rabbinic And Rabbinic-Style Commentary

In the entire book of Ruth Rabbah and in the other Late Antique and medieval texts that comment on the Book of Ruth, there is very little that refers to the relationship between Ruth and Naomi.[7] The rabbis were much more interested and concerned with other questions raised in this story, and practically ignored the interaction between the two women. What follows are the few comments they made that are relevant to this thesis.

According to Ruth Rabbah, Ruth's desire to go with Naomi was a desire to convert to her religion. The rabbis understood Ruth's telling Naomi not to entreat her as expressing a desire for conversion, saying:

> I am fully resolved to become converted under any circumstances, but it is better that it should be at your hands than at those of another.[8]

They postulated that when Naomi heard this, she began to explain to Ruth the laws that she would be required to follow after her conversion. They interpreted Ruth's speech as

her response to these laws. According to them, Naomi told Ruth that : "My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to frequent Gentile theatres and circuses"[9] to which Ruth replied: "whither thou goest, I will go".[10] Naomi continued: "My daughter, it is not the custom of daughters of Israel to dwell in a house which has no mezuzah,"[11] to which Ruth responded "and where thou lodgest, I will lodge".[12] Ruth's reference to adopting Naomi's people they took as a reference to "the penalties and admonitions [of the Torah]";[13] and her reference to adopting Naomi's God they understood to refer to the other commandments of the Bible.

Rashi offers a similar explanation to the above; his version differs in the specifics of Naomi's admonitions. Ruth's first statement is a response to Naomi telling her that "We are forbidden to go abroad beyond the limits on the Sabbath".[14] Her second is a response to "It is forbidden that a female should be alone with a male who is not her husband".[15] The third answers "Our people is differentiated from the rest of the peoples by six hundred and thirteen commandments",[16] and the fourth is after "Idolatry is forbidden to us".[17]

Ruth Rabbah also offers another interpretation for Ruth's speech. In this alternative, Ruth's utterance that she will go wherever Naomi goes means that she will go "to the tent of testimony, to Gilgal, Shiloh, Nob, Gibeon, and the Permanent Temple".[18] When she says she will lodge with Naomi, she means that she will "lodge overnight with the sacrifices".[19] Adopting Naomi's people means that she will destroy all idolatry within herself, and adopting Naomi's God means that she will be rewarded for her labour.

Ruth Rabbah[20] explains the last part of Ruth's speech, where she refers to dying with Naomi, as a reference to the four forms of capital punishment that the Court could

inflict, these being stoning, burning, beheading, and strangulation. Her reference to burial refers to the two graves prepared for those punished by the above methods. Rashi repeats this explanation.

Ruth's last statement that not even death would part them the rabbis understood to be a response to Naomi telling her that she would be as righteous as possible in this world because they would be parted in the world to come.

Rashi interprets Naomi's silence after Ruth's speech as an admonition from the biblical author that "a proselyte is not to be overburdened or cross-examined too closely".[21] In this, he is repeating a comment from the Talmud.[22]

What all the above interpretations of Ruth's speech have in common is the way they remove it from the personal realm. None of them present the speech as really concerning the two women, as expressing Ruth's desire to be with Naomi. It is not obvious whether this was because the desire was expressed from one woman to another woman or whether it was because it was an expression of love. As there are not many such expressions within the context of the Bible, perhaps they considered that it must, therefore, necessarily be symbolic. Whatever the reason, they are not interested in the explicit narrative of this story.

The Late Antique rabbis continue in their attempt to make the focus of this story one of conversion, and, in addition, also present their hierarchical view of society, in which some people are more valued than others. In their opinion, once Ruth decides to become converted, "Scripture ranks her equally with Naomi".[23] Rashi repeats this interpretation.

Rashi adds that Ruth and Orpah had not previously been converted to Judaism, even though they married Jewish men. Their desire to come with Naomi indicates that they now want to be proselytes.

According to Ruth Rabbah,[24] Ruth's name refers to her relationship with Naomi. In their opinion, the name 'Ruth' meant that she paid attention to her mother-in-law's words.

The rabbis in Ruth Rabbah do make passing reference to the fact that Naomi calls Ruth daughter. However, they do not use this opportunity to inquire into the nature of the relationship. For them, this implies that Ruth looked younger than her years, that even though she was forty, she looked only fourteen. They also inserted the rather incongruous comment that whoever saw her was sexually excited.[25]

The Late Antique rabbis offered several similar explanations as to the origins and relationship between Ruth and Orpah. In one version, they are the daughters of Eglon, the king of Moab.[26] In a different version, they are his granddaughters.[27]

4.3 Feminist Commentary

In contrast to the rabbinic works, there is a great deal of feminist commentary on the Book of Ruth.[28] As an enumeration of all the commentary that is relevant to this thesis is not possible, I will examine only those that are the most pertinent and interesting. These are Ilana Pardes, Athalya Brenner, Aviva Zornberg, and Gail Twersky Reimer.

Pardes' analysis of the relationship between the two women focuses almost exclusively on Naomi. According to Pardes, Naomi is too sunk in her mourning and sadness to acknowledge Ruth's value at first. She never reciprocates or responds to Ruth's oath of loyalty. She describes herself as old and empty, even though Ruth is clinging to

her. Pardes traces the transformation that Naomi undergoes as she sees that God's *hesed* is manifested through human agents, and that she herself can also become one of these agents. And her attitude towards Ruth changes as well. "Naomi discovers that, unexpectedly, mothering a daughter-in-law may be rewarding as well".[29] Pardes sees Naomi fuller at the end of the story, with the child at her bosom. But, Pardes insists, the chorus makes it clear that Naomi has been full all along, because of the presence of Ruth, although she did not realize it.

Pardes also uses a psychoanalytical model in her analysis. She sees the relationship between Naomi, Ruth and Boaz as representing a "resurgence of the preoedipal triangular structure".[30] She also understands Ruth's speech of loyalty to Naomi as expressing a yearning "to recapture the primal unity with the mother".[31] These models imply a universalism, a shared mode of behaviour across differences of time, space and culture that I find questionable.

Pardes considers the Book of Ruth to be a revision of the story of Leah and Rachel. For her, the female bonding between Ruth and Naomi that results in a harmonious sharing of the child is prefigured in the mandrake exchange between the sisters. In both stories, she finds evidence that the cooperation leads to fertility in previously childless women. Pardes concludes that vicarious maternity works in this instance because of the bonding between Ruth and Naomi: "a different perception of female bonding is a prerequisite for a more heterogeneous treatment of motherhood".[32] In addition, the relationship between the women presents another model for women's interactions, different than that portrayed between Leah and Rachel. "Ruth's clinging to Naomi makes

clear that rivalry is not necessarily a predominant feature in relations between women, even in types of relations which are particularly prone to conflict",[33] in this case the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. These comparisons between the various stories will be examined in the conclusion of this thesis.

For Pardes, this story, in which female bonding is the central plot, demonstrates the value of cooperation vs rivalry. In her opinion, it is the clinging between the two women that determines the movement of the plot. As she points out, this is the only place in the Bible where the word 'love' is used to define a relationship between two women.

Brenner analyzes Ruth and Naomi in much the same way as she examines the other women in the Bible. She concludes that Ruth and Naomi are, like the others, complementary parts of a whole, neither of which is complete on her own. She believes that they were originally separate characters in separate stories, but that the stories were merged into one composite, and thereby lost their individuality and independence. She does note that the women function well as a team within this composite tale, but she emphasizes that it is as a team. Presumably, neither could operate outside this structure, as each one needs the other. Even within this cooperation, Brenner sees a power struggle: "Whatever the internal shifts in the balance of power may be, they are in the struggle for survival together and thus cooperate".[34] Brenner postulates Naomi as being motivated by duty in her actions towards Ruth, and Ruth being motivated by her love for Naomi as well as by duty.[35]

According to Zornberg , Ruth's major attachment is to Mahlon, not to Naomi at all. In Zornberg's opinion, Ruth still "loves [him] with a fever in her bones",[36] and she

wants to be with Naomi because she is his mother, and Ruth wants to become part of his people. "[Ruth] wants to attach herself to a past that's not hers".[37] Zornberg finds no other possible reason for Ruth's deep attachment to Naomi. She accepts the possibility that Ruth feels a superficial attachment to Naomi herself as a person, and also as a symbol of the Jewish religion and the Jewish people, but Zornberg does not believe this can suffice as an explanation, especially in the face of Naomi's reluctance.

Reimer examines the different worldviews of the two women. She sees Naomi's self-definition as revolving around motherhood. "Motherhood is at the core of Naomi's identity",[38] so much so that Naomi assumes it must also be at the core of Ruth's. This core is the reason for Naomi's feeling of emptiness; without her children, she feels that she has ceased to exist, to the extent that even her name no longer applies. Naomi is so bitter that she cannot even recognize Ruth's presence. Her silence in the face of Ruth's speech "is one of frustration and separation, not acceptance or even resignation".[39]

Reimer contrasts this view with that of Ruth's, whose sense of self is defined neither in relation to men nor children. When Ruth pledges her commitment, it is to Naomi herself. The roles of mother and wife are of secondary importance at best. Ruth is fulfilled by her love for Naomi. Her desire is to care for Naomi. It is Naomi, not Ruth, who becomes fulfilled by the birth of a child. The women recognize this, and that is why they proclaim the child as Naomi's. Ruth shows no interest in bearing children. After all, she lived for at least ten years with her husband without children, and there is no mention of this causing any suffering. In Reimer's view, Ruth is not averse to marriage; however, she is reluctant to have children, and that is why God's help is required for this.

An additional general point is too significant to be ignored. Many of the feminist commentators contrast the two women, and end up choosing between Ruth and Naomi, preferring one over the other. Some praise Ruth for her goodness or kindness, and denigrate Naomi for her bitterness. Mona DeKoven Fishbane finds Naomi insecure, anxious, experiencing herself as powerless and needing to resort to manipulation and trickery. Although these are not necessarily negative attributes, she obviously finds them so, in passages like the following: "In contrast with Naomi's desperate scheming, it is remarkable that Ruth and Boaz develop a relationship of honesty and respect".[40] Others criticize Ruth, finding her passive, or too nice, in contrast with Naomi, who is the real actor and mover. Vanessa Ochs refers to Ruth as "Miss Perfection",[41] and goes so far as to consider this text as the Book of Naomi. Sylvia Barak Fishman describes Naomi as a general in the "army of destiny" who "directs the action throughout even if mostly behind the scenes".[42] I find the Book of Ruth to be unequivocally the story of both Ruth and Naomi, the story of their life together. I feel no need to choose one over the other, to view them as binary oppositions, to dichotomize and choose between them. They are different from each other, they both emerge from the story as unique individuals, which is how it should be; in this way, they help combat the propensity to stereotyping that many of us are prone to; they remind us of the diversity within each and every category of humans. They make it clear that not all women are alike.

4.4 My Own Commentary

4.4.1 Questions

Our first introduction to Ruth is as the Moabite woman who marries one of Naomi's sons; we are told nothing more about her background than this. Who she is, where she comes from, what her relationship is to Orpah, how she feels about marrying a foreigner, all these are questions that are left unanswered by the text. Along with the stories of the other women discussed in this thesis, I want to know the rest of her story.

We know nothing about the lives of Ruth and Naomi during the at least ten years they live together in Moab. What are their lives like during this period? No mention is made of any children for either Ruth or Orpah. Were there none? Or were there perhaps daughters, who did not count in the author's eyes? When they are on the road, Ruth and Naomi appear to be alone. Would any daughters have remained with Ruth's family?

After Naomi's sons die, we see Ruth on the road with Naomi and Orpah. The text says that Ruth is returning to Bethlehem, although it is a place she has presumably never been.[43] Why does Ruth go with Naomi? Orpah also wants to go initially. Does this represent a Moabite custom, that the daughters become associated with their husbands' house, and therefore attached to their mother-in-law rather than to their own mother? If so, it does not appear to have been an Israelite custom, since Naomi tells them to return.

Why is Ruth so determined to go with Naomi? Naomi tells her three times to return, but Ruth insists. In fact, she responds with "*al tifgi bi*". This means "Don't entreat me" but also has connotations of affliction. It is a strong response. So is her speech that begins with the statement that she will go wherever Naomi goes. Why does Ruth feel so strongly? Is it Naomi's religion she is so attached to, as the rabbinic commentators suggested, or is it a personal attachment? If it is personal, is it a mutually reciprocal

relationship between the two women, or does the fact that Naomi tells her to return imply that it is one-sided?

What and who is Ruth leaving behind? Naomi refers to her mother's house. Is this to be taken literally, or as a metaphor for her homeland?

Naomi refers to Ruth several times as her daughter. Is this an honorific title, or does Naomi really feel that Ruth is a daughter to her? There are very few instances of mother-daughter relationships in the biblical text, and no details on those, so we have no clues to help us understand what this relationship would have consisted of.

When they get to Bethlehem, Naomi says that she has returned empty. But she is not alone: Ruth is with her. Why does Naomi not consider Ruth's presence?

At the end, the women say a child is born to Naomi, even though the child is Ruth's. Why do they say this?

How does Naomi feel about Ruth? Ruth expresses her desire to be with Naomi forever, but Naomi says nothing to Ruth. She does not even respond to Ruth's speech. Does she actively not want Ruth with her? Is she indifferent? overwhelmed?

Why does Naomi insist that Ruth and Orpah return? Is it because she cannot afford to keep them? or is it concern for their well-being? or is it because she is so wrapped up in her own misery that she does not want to think of them?

4.4.2 Remembrance and Proclamation

Naomi tells both Ruth and Orpah to return to their *bet 'immah*, their mothers' houses. The use of the term 'mother's house' is significant. It is a term used rarely in the Bible; the only other two instances are in reference to Rebekah[44] and in the Song of

Songs[45]. What does it refer to? Some feminist commentators interpret the term metaphorically, as an allusion to the women-centredness of the text.[46] Carol Meyers understands the term literally and finds it indicative of the social reality; *bet 'immah* being synonymous with *bet 'ab*, 'father's house'. To her, it refers to the household of the biblical world, a social structure that included both physical space and kinship concerns, and within which a woman's role was as important as a man's. It offers us a glimpse into a domain that was both private and public, both work and living place, and which was probably "characterized by internal gender balance rather than gender hierarchy".[47] Meyers sees the use of the term *bet 'immah* as highlighting the centrality of women in the text, and I agree with her.

In addition to the above general statement, the term *bet 'immah* also tells us in particular that Ruth has a family that she could return to. If we take the term in its most literal sense, it also indicates that she has a mother, still alive at the time she leaves Moab. Boaz confirms this when he says that Ruth left her father and mother.[48] Ruth has chosen Naomi over her own mother.

We are also offered clues as to the first ten years of Ruth's life with Naomi. Naomi refers to the *hesed* that Ruth has previously done for her.[49] Edward Campbell explains *hesed* as "more than ordinary human loyalty; it imitates the divine initiative which comes without being deserved".[50] He refers to the "plus" factor which is implicit in the term. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld notes that *hesed* is always done; it therefore implies an act rather than simply a state of mind or a passive characteristic. If we combine these two explications, then we can say that Ruth performed actions for Naomi that were

exceptional, that were beyond obligation, and that were beneficial to Naomi.[51] Although there is no elaboration on what Ruth's *hesed* consisted of, at the very least we know that it has good connotations. If their life together had been miserable, Naomi would not have referred to the *hesed*. Because it contains the sense of 'something extra', it also suggests that their life together was more than simply bearable.[52]

Ruth cleaves to Naomi.[53] She sticks herself to Naomi, she bonds herself with Naomi, she makes them inseparable. She causes their lives to be joined together inextricably. Naomi responds to Ruth's clinging by entreating her, yet again, to return to Moab, to her own people and god(s).[54] This third entreaty of Naomi's is too much for Ruth and she bursts out with "*al tifgi bi*". As Fishbane explains this phrase, it has two connotations: that of "don't urge me" and also "don't hurt me". Ruth can stand it no longer. She goes on to proclaim her allegiance to Naomi herself, to her people and her god(s), her desire to be joined together with Naomi even in death (by being buried in the same place). And she seals her oath of allegiance by invoking Naomi's God. She will not take "no" for an answer!

At the end of the story, Ruth is strangely absent. In the entire fourth chapter, she initiates no action. She is acquired by Boaz, she is blessed through him, he marries her, he has sexual intercourse with her, God gives her a child. Naomi takes the child and nurses it; the chorus of women proclaim the child as Naomi's, and name him. Where is Ruth in all this activity?

This inactivity of Ruth's underlines the point that this ending is not Ruth's primary concern. Her allegiance, which she stated explicitly in the first chapter, was, and has

remained, to Naomi. I disagree with and find no evidence to support Zornberg's assertion that Ruth needs to have a child to restore the soul of Mahlon.[55] On the other hand, neither do I find evidence for Reimer's thesis that God needed to intervene because Ruth was a reluctant mother. Ruth does not seem averse to marrying Boaz and bearing a child, but she shows no signs of regret at giving the child over to Naomi. If Naomi wants a son so much, Ruth will, and does, have the son for her. The chorus of women make Ruth's priority clear in 4:15 when they say to Naomi: "your daughter in law who loves you". Ruth loves Naomi. She loves her at the beginning of our story. She still loves her at the end. Although we do not know what caused this great love, we see the evidence of its existence, and its fruits.

Naomi goes through a transition from wife and mother to widow and childless. After each loss, she is described as "being left", the implication being that she is not happy about it, that she is bereaved. Her words support this implication. She dwells on the subject of husband and children, first in her words to her daughters-in-law, and then when she addresses the women of Bethlehem. Her worldview is one where women find security and fulfilment in having husbands and children. She wants Ruth and Orpah to leave her because she cannot provide this necessity for them; she implores them to find it elsewhere. She describes herself as bitter and empty. She goes even further: she has lost God. In fact, she blames God for her sorrow: "The hand of God has struck out against me".[56] She sees herself as bereft of everything: husband, children and God. The fact that Ruth is clinging to her does not count. Naomi is so absorbed in her misery that she has nothing left for anyone else. As Reimer says, Naomi is an "embittered and depressed old woman who feels

her life has neither purpose nor value because she is no longer the mother of sons".[57] I agree with the sense of this statement but would expand Naomi's sense of loss to include husband and God as well as sons.

I think that Naomi does not want Ruth to come with her. On the road to Bethlehem and when she first arrives there, she is so wrapped up in her own misery that she has no room for anyone else. Pardes notes that Naomi does not reciprocate or respond to Ruth's oath of loyalty; I don't think she even hears it. Naomi blames God for her suffering; Zornberg thinks she also blames Ruth and Orpah.[58] In either case, the result is the same: Naomi is mired in a "kafka[esque] world of existential guilt and despair".[59]

As the story unfolds, we are witness to the transformation that occurs in Naomi. Through Ruth's continued *hesed*, Naomi begins to return to life, to realize that God has not left her. She experiences God's *hesed* through Ruth's. She has come to understand, as have we the readers, that God acts when we do, not in place of us.[60] At the end of the story, the chorus of women acknowledge this when they proclaim the value of Ruth: "she is worth seven sons".[61] They are not speaking only of the birth of the son, although that is part of it. It is the sum total of Ruth's actions: her clinging to Naomi throughout her misery and into her happiness; her allegiance and concern for Naomi which has never faltered; her willingness to give Naomi what Naomi feels she needs: security (in the form of a man to care for them) and a son. Although Naomi has not changed in her view that these last two are essential, she has also come to see that they are not the only possibilities for fulfilment. The women's proclamation echoes Naomi's own feelings at that point. She takes the child to her bosom, she is undoubtedly overjoyed at its arrival; yet she can also

now see Ruth, her daughter-in-law who loves her and who is standing beside her, for now and for ever. She is no longer "Marah" (bitter); she has re-become "Naomi" (pleasant).

This story is subversive in its patriarchal context. Naomi's dependence on males leaves her bereft and empty; it is only when she begins to understand the value of women that she refinds God and redemption.

As mentioned in the previous section, I consider the Book of Ruth to be the story of both Ruth and Naomi. I do not view them as incomplete, I see no need to choose one at the expense of the other. As with Leah and Rachel, and Sarah and Hagar, the text presents a view of their relationship as dynamic. And again, as with the others, the rest of their story, outside of these particular episodes, is left untold. Ruth and Naomi, like Sarah and Hagar, live together for a long time, at least ten years, before the episodes related in the text. In this instance it is cooperation, rather than conflict, that is portrayed, but the principle is the same. They have complete lives, and although the narrator has chosen to dwell on particular episodes, we do not have to follow his direction. I believe their relationship must have been mixed, neither all bad nor all good. There are areas in which they differed, and which led to conflict, but in the end these differences are resolved and lead to a happy ending for all concerned. Ruth and Naomi learn to love each other because of, rather than despite, their differing worldviews.

[1] *Hesed* is a difficult term to translate into English; none of the various alternatives are entirely satisfactory. It has been translated as lovingkindness, kindness, loyalty, benevolence, charity, goodness, mercy, and duty. This is, I am sure, an incomplete list, gathered from a variety of dictionaries, biblical translations and commentaries.

[2] Ruth 1:8.

[3] Ruth 1:16-17.

[4] This refers to the fact that Naomi means pleasant in Hebrew, and Marah means bitter.

[5] Ruth 1:21.

[6] Ruth 4:17.

[7] In fact, there is much less commentary on the Book of Ruth than on Genesis, and neither Nachmanides nor Leibowitz comments on it. I did examine the relevant Ibn Ezra commentaries as an example of authoritative medieval commentaries, as a substitute for Nachmanides. However, after due consideration, I did not include his comments as they added nothing significant to this thesis. Similarly, as a substitute for Leibowitz, I examined Bachrach's *Ruth, Mother of Royalty* as a modern rabbinic commentary. Although there were some interesting points made in that document, there was nothing that advanced or challenged this thesis.

[8] *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth* 2:22.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ruth 1:16.

[11] *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth* 2:22.

[12] Ruth 1:16.

[13] *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth* 2:22.

[14] Rashi. As quoted in D.R.G.Beattie, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth* (Sheffield, England: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Department of Biblical Studies, University of Sheffield, 1977), p.104.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth* 2:23.

[19] Ibid.

[20] *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth* 2:24.

[21] Rashi. As quoted in Beattie, p.104.

[22] *Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Nashim, Tractate Yebamoth 47b.

[23] *Midrash Rabbah: Ruth* 3:5.

[24] Ibid. 2:9.

[25] Ibid. 4:4

[26] Ibid. 2:9 and *Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Nahim, Tractate Sotah 47:a (As quoted in Beattie, p.195).

[27] *Babylonian Talmud*, Seder Nashim, Tractate Nazir 23:b (As quoted in Beattie: p. 195, note 22).

[28] There is a plethora of feminist commentary on the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. Much of this material has appeared in the last few years. Two volumes have recently been published, entirely devoted to feminist interpretations of the Book of Ruth.

One is *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* edited by Judith Kates and Gail Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994). The other is *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, edited by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

[29] Pardes, p.110.

[30] Ibid., p.103.

[31] Ibid., p.104.

[32] Ibid., p.106.

[33] Ibid., p.102.

[34] Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth", in Athalya Brenner, ed, *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p.83.

[35] As a note, Brenner makes one factual error in her analysis. She refers to Ruth being more useful for Naomi than ten sons. The biblical text says seven sons. The ten sons is a reference in the story of Hannah (1 Sam 1:8).

[36] Aviva Zornberg, "The Concealed Alternative", in Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, eds, *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), p.75.

[37] Ibid., p.72.

[38] Gail Twersky Reimer, "Her Mother's House", in Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, eds, *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), p.98.

[39] Ibid., p.99.

[40] Mona DeKoven Fishbane, "Ruth: Dilemmas of Loyalty and Connection", in Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, eds, *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), p.303.

[41] Vanessa L. Ochs, "Reading Ruth: Where Are the Women?", in Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, eds, *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), p.295.

[42] Sylvia Barak Fishman, "Soldiers in an Army of Mothers: Reflections on Naomi and the Heroic Biblical Woman", in Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, eds, *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), p.280.

[43] Since we know next to nothing about Ruth's life prior to this moment, we cannot say with certainty that she has never previously been to Bethlehem. However, in light of the animosity between Moabites and Israelites articulated in the Bible, and without information to the contrary, it is unlikely that she has been there before.

[44] Genesis 24:28.

[45] Song of Songs 3:4 and 8:2.

[46] Ilona Rashkow believes it to be a metaphor. Nehama Ashkenazy carries this one step further: she believes that Naomi creates the reality of this women-centredness by speaking it.

[47] Carol Meyers, p.99.

[48] Ruth 2:11.

[49] Ruth 1:8.

[50] Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth: A New Translation* (The Anchor Bible, Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975), p.81.

[51] Let us not forget that Orpah also did *hesed* for Naomi during those ten years.

[52] Although it has been suggested in some of the more traditional commentaries, such as the Artscroll commentary on the Book of Ruth, that Ruth's *hesed* consisted of her tending to the burial of the dead, in the light of the rest of the story, and Ruth's obvious devotion to Naomi herself, I think we can ignore this suggestion.

[53] The word for cling is *d.v.q*. This word occurs many times within the Bible and describes relationships of persons to persons, persons to God, persons to things, and things to things. It can also have either positive or negative connotations. The one strand in common for all these usages is the sense of inseparability. Whatever cleaves together is stuck! The best known usage of *d.v.q* is from Genesis 2:24, where it describes the relationship that will exist between a man and his wife, this 'cleaving' that will cause them to become one flesh. As Pardes points out, the allusion to the passage in Gen 2:24 is reinforced by Boaz' speech of 2:11, when he talks of Ruth leaving her father and mother.

[54] The word for god(s) used in both 1:15 and 1:16 is *elohim*, which can be either singular or plural, and can therefore mean either "god" or "gods". In addition, Hebrew does not have capitalized letters, so there is no distinction beteen "god" and "God".

[55] Zornberg, p.75.

[56] Ruth 1:13.

[57] Reimer, p.97.

[58] The Hebrew language in verse 1:13 is ambiguous. The standard translation is "my lot is more bitter than yours" but it can also be understood as "it is bitter for me because of you". Zornberg favours this second meaning. In light of Naomi's statements about their *hesed* towards her, I find this interpretation unlikely.

[59] Zornberg, p.67.

[60] Campbell.

[61] Ruth 4:15.

5 CONCLUSION

5.1 Common Threads

The three relationships examined in this thesis are all intense relationships between two women. They are the only such instances found in the Bible. There are characteristics common to all three, although the first two (Leah & Rachel, Sarah & Hagar) share many more similarities with each other than they do with the third (that between Ruth and Naomi).

These are all long term relationships. During that time the women participate in a joint household and must, for better or for worse, put up with each other. As sisters, Leah and Rachel have been living together since Rachel's birth. When they finally leave their father's house, they leave together. They continue to live together until Rachel's death. Rachel has never lived without Leah's daily presence; the only time Leah spends apart is before Rachel's birth and after her death. Sarah and Hagar have lived together for many years, as master and servant.[1] Hagar tries to run away from Sarah, but she is told to return. Sarah is the only one of the six women who manages to put an end to the relationship she is in, with Hagar, and this only after many years. Ruth and Naomi have also lived together for a long time, since Mahlon married Ruth while they were in Moab. Naomi tries to sever her relationship with Ruth, but is unsuccessful. Ruth is the only one whose desire is to continue the relationship; she wants to remain with Naomi, not to leave her. These women are stuck with each other; following Ruth's example, they cleave together.

Leah, Rachel, Sarah and Hagar are all from the time of the biblical ancestors, a period much earlier than that of Ruth and Naomi. Their stories are told in the book of Genesis, whereas Ruth and Naomi's stories appear in the Book of Ruth. Leah, Rachel and Sarah are considered Matriarchs in the Jewish tradition;[2] Ruth and Naomi are accorded no such status, although Ruth is venerated as the ancestor of David.

In the first two relationships, both women are married in some fashion to the same man. Leah and Rachel are both married to Jacob. Although Sarah is Abraham's only actual wife,[3] she gives Hagar to him as an *isha*. This Hebrew word is ambiguous, meaning either wife or woman, but it definitely has connotations of being more than a concubine or mistress. Ruth and Naomi are not in any way married to the same man. Naomi is present when Ruth marries Boaz and when she bears his child, but her relationship is with Ruth, not with him. Ruth and Naomi do both have a relationship with Mahlon, but not in the same capacity: Ruth is his wife, Naomi his mother.

Each of these women is involved with and concerned with the bearing of sons. Leah keeps having more sons, hoping that they will result in her getting Jacob's love, or at least his attention. Rachel has Jacob's love and attention, but she desperately wants his sons. Sarah's inability to conceive does not prevent her from wanting sons. She is initially content to let Hagar birth a son for her, but this plan does not work and she subsequently bears her own. We don't know Hagar's initial concerns, but her pregnancy precipitates an overt display of antagonism towards Sarah; perhaps she has realized the advantages in being the birth mother. Naomi shares the attitude of these women: having sons is a fundamental necessity. She feels empty and bereft with her sons gone; she cannot imagine

what else there can be of value. Ruth, alone of these six women, has a different worldview. Although she does bear a son, it is not a major concern for her; she has other priorities.

This concern with offspring leads to rivalry between the women. Leah keeps having sons in order to get what Rachel has, while Rachel sees herself locked into wrestling with Leah. When Sarah herself bears a son, the conflict with Hagar becomes unresolvable; she sends Hagar and her son away, so that he will not inherit along with her own son. Hagar's becoming pregnant is what changes her attitude towards Sarah; this is when she becomes antagonistic. For Ruth and Naomi this is not an issue; there is no rivalry between them. Theirs is a relationship centred on cooperation, on love, on voluntary association, on each other. Even at the beginning of the story, when only Ruth recognizes this, there is still no competition on Naomi's part, only bitterness and sadness, and these are directed at God, not at Ruth.

Although in all three instances there is great anguish, there are significant differences between them. Leah and Rachel blame each other for their unhappiness, as do Sarah and Hagar. Ruth rages against Naomi in her sorrow. It is the possibility that Naomi will leave her that precipitates her grief-stricken outburst. However, this is very different from the blaming that occurs in the first two instances, in which either one would have been overjoyed to have the other person go away. Here, the opposite is true. It is the possibility of separation that triggers Ruth's misery. Naomi is extremely wretched, more so than any of the others except for Hagar. However, rather than focusing on another person, she blames God. When she does not want Ruth to come with her, it is not due to personal

animosity, but because she is too caught up in her own misery to see anyone else. Perhaps because of these differences, because Naomi does not blame Ruth and Ruth only wants to not be separated from Naomi, the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is the only one of the three that ends happily. Leah and Rachel seem to have resolved their differences when they speak with one voice, but have no time to pursue a harmonious relationship as Rachel dies soon after. Sarah and Hagar come to no resolution at all.

All three of these relationships involve surrogate motherhood, and these surrogacies achieve varying degrees of success. The attempt by Sarah and Hagar is the least successful; it does not work at all. Hagar bears a son, but he does not become Sarah's, which was the original purpose of the pregnancy. He may have initially been considered Sarah's; the text does not tell us this. However, by the time of Isaac's birth, he is definitely not. When Sarah tells Abraham to throw out Hagar and Ishmael, she refers to them as "that slave-woman and her son".[4] Furthermore, she does this so that he will not inherit along with her own son. Obviously, Sarah considers Ishmael to be Hagar's son, as opposed to Isaac, who is hers.

Leah and Rachel are more successful in their attempts; they claim and name the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah, who are incorporated into Jacob's dynasty along with their own. The twelve tribes of Israel are the descendants of the children of all four women. However, this does not bring to an end their rivalry or competition. Leah and Rachel continue their struggle to produce more sons.

Naomi and Ruth are entirely successful in their surrogacy; Ruth bears a child, who is proclaimed as Naomi's, and the story ends happily. In this situation, there is no conflict, no struggle, no jealousy regarding the child.

The success of the surrogacy depends on the relationship that exists between the surrogate and adoptive mother; these are different in all three cases. Whatever the initial relationship may have been between Hagar and Sarah, it becomes fraught with tension and hostility once Hagar is pregnant. The women are not united, there is no bond between them. They appear to see each other as rivals, competing for a position that only one of them can occupy. In the manner of self-fulfilling prophecies, their expectations come true: in the end, only one of them does fill the role of mother of this covenantal people.

With Leah & Zilpah, and Rachel & Bilhah, the situation is better but still not optimal. There does not seem to be a relationship between the surrogate and adoptive mothers other than that of usefulness. Perhaps Leah and Rachel are too focused on their own rivalry to appreciate the company of their handmaidens. They are using their surrogates, not relating to them as people; they are objectifying them.

Between Naomi and Ruth, there is no such reification. Naomi and Ruth are both subjects, in the story and to each other. By the time the child is born, they relate to each other, they see each other, they value each other. During the entire course of their relationship, they talk to each other. As Robert Alter has demonstrated, direct speech is significant as the Bible is extremely terse and does not include unnecessary dialogue. Yet the Book of Ruth is full of conversation between Ruth and Naomi. They talk to each other on the journey to Bethlehem, they discuss their plans with each other. They even talk over

the day's events when Ruth comes home from work. And this seems to be the lesson the Bible teaches on this point: that surrogacy can work, that people can help each other and do things for each other, but only when both are active subjects for each other. As Pardes points out, "[f]emale bonding is a prerequisite for a more heterogeneous treatment of motherhood".[5] The bond between Ruth and Naomi is strong enough that it can encompass the child; this strengthens their bond, rather than weakening it.

The children belong primarily to their mothers, not to their fathers. Although the genealogies focus on patrilineal successions, the biblical text states explicitly that Sarah, Leah, Rachel and Ruth are built up by their children. These are their dynasties. And, as we are shown via their naming speeches for the children, this is the way their covenant with God is enacted.

The naming speeches provide insights into the minds and hearts of these women. Leah names eight sons, her own and Zilpah's. Her focus is on her own unloved status, but she does deviate in order to praise God and to realize that she is, at least in some sense, happy ("Happy am I, for the daughters will call me blessed"[6]). Rachel names four sons, three of them with speeches. From these, we see her preoccupation with matters of judgement, wrestlings with her sister, and redemption. Sarah does not name her son, but she does provide the speech that explains his name; for her, it is about laughter and joy. Hagar does not name her son either, but his name reflects her relationship with God: according to the angel, Ishmael is named for God having heard Hagar's affliction. Neither Ruth nor Naomi names the son that is born, but the women of the town provide the

speech that links the child to Naomi as well as to Ruth; implicit in this is their previous statement that Ruth loves Naomi, and that she is worth more to her than seven sons.

The naming speeches show the peripheral position of men in the lives of these women. These speeches are significant; they provide the occasions for the women to express their deepest thoughts and feelings. Yet Leah is the only one of the six who even mentions a man in any of her speeches. Rachel is focused on God and her sister, Ruth and Naomi on each other. Sarah is concerned with her son and her position in the world: she invites everyone to enjoy the event with her. And the naming of Hagar's son deals with her relationship with God.

The naming speeches all provide insights into the relationships between the women and God. All six of these women have significant relationships with God; God is an active participant in their lives. It is God who opens Leah's womb in the first place because "God saw that Leah was unloved and opened her womb".[7] In five of the six naming speeches for her birth children, Leah talks about God and her own personal relationship with the deity. God is intimately involved in Leah's life. The same is true for Rachel. It is when God opens her womb that she is finally able to bear her own children. Rachel's naming speeches also reflect the intimacy of the relationship: two of her three naming speeches are about her own relationship with God. In fact, both sisters relate to God on such an intimate level that God seems almost like a participant in their rivalry, fanning the flames of their competition by opening and closing their wombs.

God is present for both Sarah and Hagar individually, as well as in their relationship. Hagar's relationship with God is direct and powerful. Although God compels

her to return to Sarah, she receives a blessing which parallels that given to Abraham.[8] It is also God who gives her water when she has given up after being cast out into the desert. In both instances, Hagar's wretched state is caused by Sarah; in both instances, God appears to her and tells her what to do. Sarah's relationship to God is more indirect than Hagar's. It also only indirectly involves Hagar. This is perhaps because Sarah is the one who controls the relationship; because of this, it is not as central to her life as to Hagar's. As with Leah and Rachel, it is God who opens Sarah's womb. But this does not happen until Sarah has given up hope of ever bearing children, and has already run into conflict with Hagar through her attempt to use her as a surrogate mother. In addition, when Abraham is unhappy with Sarah's treatment of Hagar, God tells him to listen to Sarah's voice. As with Leah and Rachel, it is almost as if God wants the rivalry and conflict to persist.[9]

God is also present in the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. In choosing Naomi, Ruth tells her: "Your God will be my God".[10] Even if we reject the traditional commentaries that focus on this statement to the exclusion of the rest of her speech, it is still significant. Whether Ruth chooses Naomi's God for theological reasons, or whether her reasons are purely personal, the fact remains that Ruth's God henceforth is the God of the Bible. And this is because of Naomi. As with the other women, it is thanks to God that Ruth bears a son. Naomi's relationship to God is intimate but different from the others: she holds God personally to blame for her misery. She believes that God's hand is raised against her. Her relationship to God changes along with her relationship to Ruth: she comes to learn that God acts through humans, and she learns God's *hesed* through Ruth's.

Naomi refinds God by opening her eyes to Ruth. At the end, when God gives a son to Ruth, the child is laid on Naomi's bosom. This child brings together all three of them: God, Ruth and Naomi.

What all six women have in common without exception is that they all do as much as they can to control and improve their own life and situation. As Carol Meyers has shown, the lives of women in the biblical world were intertwined with one another. Women in the biblical world did not live as isolated individuals; they functioned as part of groups. Moving out on one's own was seldom an option. We see how difficult life was for Naomi and Ruth, because they did not belong to a group, even though they had each other. However, these six women differ in the amount of control they are able to exert over their own lives. Hagar, in particular, is not free to go: she is a servant, not a free woman, and her life is controlled by others. When she tries to act, to leave, she is told in no uncertain terms that she cannot do this: God tells her to go back. When she does end up on her own, it is not through her own choice, and she requires God's help in order to survive. Hagar has a very limited range within which to exercise control over her own life, but within these limits she can and does act. In addition, she receives a significant blessing directly from God.

While Leah and Rachel have more control than Hagar, they are still very constrained in their choices; they cannot choose to end their relationship with each other. Neither one can leave and go elsewhere. This is a condition imposed on them by both their father and their husband. Their only choice, which they do make, is to leave the house of their father to go to their husband's. But, as they share a husband, this too they must do

together. In this capacity, Sarah has much more control than Hagar, Leah or Rachel; it is she who is able to end her relationship with Hagar. Whatever constraints Sarah may face in the rest of her life,[11] in this particular capacity she can and does act. Initially she decides to use Hagar for her own ends; when she doesn't like Hagar's reaction, she first mistreats and then expels her.

Although Ruth and Naomi are extremely constrained by their struggle for survival, they have complete control over their association with each other. As poor women with no man or rich relations to take care of them, they are both consigned to the margins of society, where they must try to survive as best they can. This they do; they are even able to develop and put into effect a plan that ensures their survival not only as individuals, but as a unit. Their actions bind them as a secure family.

All of these women are active agents. They think and feel, act and react. Although none are able to act entirely freely, yet none of them are passive or totally submissive.

The most striking feature of both these women and the relationships between them is their diversity. There is no one category that fits them all; there is no single description that is valid for all. They are all different. And their very difference shows us how models for both women's characters and for their actions can be, are, and must be diverse. Ruth and Sarah are not the same woman; neither are Hagar and Rachel; nor even Leah and Rachel. They have different worldviews, different goals, different preoccupations. None of them is reducible to another.

5.2 The Androcentrism

A second goal of this thesis is to trace the androcentrism, both in the original biblical stories and in the subsequent commentaries.

It is not obvious from the summaries of biblical passages presented in this thesis just how marginal the women are in the biblical text. That is because only those portions that focus on these six women and their relationships towards each other have been excerpted. But these passages form a very small portion of the entire text. By sheer quantity alone, the Bible can be classified as androcentric. In addition to quantity, there is also the question of quality. Women, for the most part, are introduced in terms of the men with whom they are associated; they are not allowed to stand alone. This is in contrast with the men in the Bible, who, for the most part, are either introduced in their own capacity, or contextualized by their connection with other men. Our own examples show this. Sarah is introduced as the wife of Abraham, while he is first mentioned in connection with Terah, his father. Jacob, the husband of both Leah and Rachel, is first presented in a passage that notes his birth, mentioning his father, Isaac, by name, but referring to his mother, Rebekah, only by the implicit pronoun in the verb. Naomi is introduced as the wife of Elimelech, who stands by himself.[12] Ruth is presented as the wife of Mahlon, who is introduced as the son of Elimelech; his mother, Naomi, is not mentioned in this passage. Both Leah and Rachel are presented as the daughters of Laban, who stands out as the exception among the men: he is introduced as the brother of Rebekah. Hagar is the lone exception among the women; she is introduced by her association with Sarah, rather than with a man.[13] These two exceptions serve to highlight the prevailing tendency: they are the exceptions that prove the rule.

In addition to the way they are introduced, the main role of the women, according to the biblical narrative, is to birth sons. Once this has occurred, they disappear from the text. Sarah's story is invisible from the time Isaac is weaned until her death; this is so surprising given the momentous events that subsequently occur to Isaac[14] that many commentators have noticed her absence. Hagar gives Ishmael water in the desert, and reappears only to get him a wife. Leah returns with Jacob to his homeland, but is not mentioned again; it is only when Jacob is dying[15] that we learn that Leah has already died and is buried at Machpelah. Rachel literally disappears after producing sons: she dies in her second childbirth. Ruth and Naomi's stories both end with the birth of the son. These women are introduced as wives and daughters; they die as mothers.

The traditional commentaries continue to focus on women as adjuncts of men. There are many examples of the presumption that everything in the women's lives results from their relationships with men. Some of these are: the assumption in both Midrash Rabbah and Rashi that Leah's eyes are weak from crying about Esau; the interpretations of both Nachmanides and Midrash Rabbah that Sarah's merit is derived from her relationship with Abraham, that it is in allowing her rival into his bed that she becomes worthy to have children;[16] the disinterest on the part of all the rabbinic and rabbinic-style commentators towards the story of Ruth and Naomi, a story that revolves around two women.

Another strand of the androcentric trend is the belittlement of women and the insulting ways in which they are depicted. The view that women don't count is expressed clearly in the midrash where Leah prays for Dinah to be turned into a female. The belief expressed by the rabbis that Hagar was able to conceive at once because she was like a

weed, as opposed to Sarah who was like a crop plant, is insulting to both of the women[17]. The stereotyping of women as witches, expressed when the late Antique rabbis and Rashi attribute the evil eye to Sarah, is equally insulting. The insistence by the Sages that God does not speak to women directly is belittling towards women. The suggestion by Leibowitz that the conflict among Jacob's sons is the fault of Leah and Rachel blames women for evil in a way that is all the more surprising in that it comes not only from a modern source, but from a woman. And the disinterest in the story of Ruth, although not necessarily misogynist, certainly indicates that the women by themselves are just not that important.

There is no question that the rabbinic commentators, taken as a whole, consider women secondary. In their discussion regarding the creation of the first woman, they use Sarah and Rachel as examples of the triviality, superficiality, and general 'lesserness' of women:

> I did not create her from the head, yet she is swelled-headed, as it is written, They walk with stretched-forth necks (Isa. 3:16); nor from the eye, yet she is a coquette: And wanton eyes (ibid.); nor from the ear, yet she is an eavesdropper: Now Sarah listened in the tent door (Gen. 18:10); nor from the heart, yet she is prone to jealousy: Rachel envied her sister (Gen. 30:1); nor from the hand, yet she is light-fingered: And Rachel stole the teraphim (Gen. 31:19); nor from the foot, yet she is a gadabout: And Dinah went out, etc. (Gen. 34:1).[18]

But they are not unrelievedly androcentric. The rabbis of Midrash Rabbah explain that Rachel ran to tell her father that Jacob had arrived because her mother was dead, the implication being that the father was not the most important parent nor the centre of the family. Their midrash regarding the signs that Rachel gave Leah brings the women into the central focus, and makes them active in their concern for each other. The rabbis proclaim

Sarah's superiority to Abraham as a prophet, even though they go on to explain that this was unusual. Leibowitz allows Sarah the complexity of a real person; however, she ends by finding her less than admirable.

The rabbinic commentators bring more visibility to particular women. Although the end result of their commentary is to render women as a class more insignificant, it also makes individual women strong and active, in charge at least to some extent of their own destiny. What the rabbis also do, which is very important, is to allow the women to be different. They do not seem to have felt the need to impose a sameness on the women, to make them all one.

What is remarkable about the feminists is that they also exhibit some similar androcentric behaviour. Certainly, the feminists are more varied in their approach to the women, and it is difficult to discern trends that apply to all the interpretations examined. And certainly, on the whole, there is less androcentrism and more focus on women. However, there are surprising instances in which this is not true. In addition, they create dichotomies and force the women into one or the other of the categories. Elsewhere, they position the women in a hierarchical plane, so that one is, of necessity, 'better' than the other. And there are instances where they portray the women as competitive and oppositional when the original biblical text does not. Although the rabbinic commentators also do this, it is more surprising in feminist analyses, as feminist theory rejects these dichotomizing methods as patriarchal.

Pardes draws parallels between Rachel and Jacob; although these parallels are interesting, she ends up focused on Jacob despite her explicit goal of centering the women.

Brenner's view of all these women as incomplete is similar to the male-based view that robs them of their particularity and individuality. Exum's portrayal of biblical women as patriarchal constructs denies them any identity or agency, as does her insistence that their concerns are not real, but have been imposed by men. Zornberg sees Ruth's attachment to Naomi as actually being about Mahlon, a suggestion never mentioned in the biblical text.

The feminists create oppositional categories, dichotomies and hierarchies. Many feminist commentators contrast Ruth and Naomi, and end up choosing one over the other. Pardes sees Leah and Rachel as unequal even when they speak together. Bal's depiction of Leah's ugliness is only necessary if the beauty of one requires the ugliness of the other. Trible diminishes Sarah in order to raise up Hagar.

In addition, some of the feminists judge the women and condemn them, on more serious grounds than do the rabbinic commentators. Much of the rabbinic condemnation is of a trivial nature, focusing on the silly ways of women, as shown in the midrash from Gen 18:2 quoted in the previous section.[19] But some feminist condemnation is of a much more serious and consequential nature. Brenner sees Leah and Rachel as social misfits who threaten the survival of their entire community. She finds Sarah and Hagar equally to blame for their conflict, but concludes that their conflict breaks up the family, causes the family unit much suffering and sets the precedent for conflict between their descendants. The feminists also express the more trivial belittling kind of insults that we find in the rabbinic commentaries, as when Exum finds Leah and Rachel single-minded and ludicrous.

The agenda of the feminist commentators is different from that of the rabbis. Stated explicitly, it is to recover and uncover the women from their patriarchal trappings.

However, this does not always result in the women being elevated from their traditional second class status. Under the pretext that they are being rescued, some of these women have been buried once again. In addition, and even more problematically, they have had a sameness imposed on them that robs them of their own particularity. We need to heed Frymer-Kensky's admonition, that "there is no woman's toolkit".[20] Brenner's categorization of biblical women as incomplete stereotypes reduces them, as does Exum's positing of them as male constructs. The result of these reductions is to produce one "Biblical Woman", a being constructed by patriarchy. The result of this reduction is to bury once again the women behind the text, to deny them their existence, to cancel out their voices. This is especially striking when viewed alongside the rabbinic commentaries which give the women their individuations.

5.3. Summation

The relationships examined in this thesis are the only instances within the Hebrew Bible where there is a direct interaction portrayed between two women. The Bible is, of course, not a women-oriented text. As demonstrated above, it is androcentric, and the author(s) not particularly interested in probing the lives of the women characters. The details regarding women were included when it fit in with the prevailing agenda; they were not included for their own sake. The same is true, but to a lesser extent, for men as well. The Bible is not a character study nor an epic tale. Details are included regarding both men and women only when it suits the polemic purpose of the text.

Be that as it may, the result is that we have little information regarding women's relationships in biblical times. In all three examined here, the biblical text shows only a

very small part of the interaction, focusing on a few episodes in each case. The remainder of the stories is unknown. However, as has been demonstrated, these relationships are all dynamic. They are not static; they change over time, and are affected by events, both of conflict and of joy. These are relationships that endure, and encompass the ups and downs of everyday living. In addition, these relationships are different from one another. Although all three involve two women, there are few other similarities between them. The fact that little can be said that applies to all three highlights the diversity that existed in biblical times: not all women were the same, and not all the relationships they formed were the same.

Women in the biblical period did not have the same variety of choices that women have today. Their options were severely limited. However, these constraints do not mean that they did not act at all. To deny them their own agency is to take away their voices, and render them invisible yet again. The commentary regarding these relationships has both granted them this agency at times, listening to their voices, and at other times, has denied it. This is true for both the rabbinic and the feminist interpretations.

One way to highlight the diversity that does exist between individuals is to listen to their own words. As Pardes points out, naming speeches are especially significant. The six women discussed in this thesis do not all deliver naming speeches. However, they all give expression to their worldview, their view of themselves, and/or their view of their relationship with God.

And these views are not all the same. There is no single woman's voice, no one woman's point of view. This was true in biblical times. And this is true today. Women are,

were and will always be different. There is no one mold for the creation of women. For this reason I feel no need to choose any of these women over another, or to squash their uniqueness. Neither is there only one mold for women's relationships. Although there are only three such relationships portrayed in the biblical text, we can find enough diversity and difference within these instances to make it clear that they are different. Each one involves conflict of some kind, but that is to be expected: most biblical relationships do involve conflict at some point. These six women, along with all the other biblical women, are all different. I prefer to celebrate their diversity, both as individuals and in their relationships. They make it clear that not all women are alike. Even in a patriarchal context, not all women were perceived or portrayed as interchangeable.

That is one very good reason for continuing to read this ancient text. The Bible can teach us to celebrate diversity. Similarly, it is still worthwhile consulting the androcentric rabbinic-style commentaries. First of all, because of their recognition of difference, the ways in which they explore the diversity of the characters. But also as a further extension of the celebration of difference. We do not all read the Bible in the same way, and this is a good thing. Reading other points of views, other interpretations, often helps us uncover what is there for us. Although I could wish that they had not been so dismissive towards women, yet still I can find enough of value to make it worthwhile reading them. They often see the women as real people, although they impose their own moral judgements and presuppositions onto them and reduce their significance as a class.

Similarly, it is worthwhile to read the feminist commentaries, even those which I find reductive and dismissive of individuals. The insights that surface when the focus is on

women are often illuminating, and, again, help uncover the complexity and depth in this ancient text.

Feminist reclamation of the Bible is an ongoing process. Great progress has been made; this can be seen by the ever increasing number of feminist texts making their appearance. But it remains on the margins, not having yet reached the critical mass which will force mainstream biblical exegesis to acknowledge these alternative perspectives as valid and credible, and to respond to and incorporate their insights. It is my hope that this thesis increases not only the quantity, but also the quality of this feminist effort. If we recognize and eliminate the androcentrism in our own works, perhaps we can help bring that critical moment into existence.

[1] It is unclear whether Hagar's status was that of a servant or a slave, or if there was a distinction between these two in biblical times.

[2] Rebekah is the fourth of the traditional Jewish Matriarchs. Although Hagar could also be considered a Matriarch, this would be within the Islamic tradition, not the Jewish one.

[3] This is true at the time of this story. After Sarah's death, Abraham marries Keturah.

[4] Gen 21:19.

[5] Pardes, p.106.

[6] Gen 30:13.

[7] Gen 29:31.

[8] In the biblical text, these actions of God are attributed to an angel, rather than to God directly. However, after the blessing, Hagar calls God who spoke to her by name (Gen 16:13). God was presumably present along with the angel.

[9] God also participates in the lives of biblical men, often intervening to increase their dependence on God. God's role in the relationships of the women perhaps serves the same function, that of preventing the women from becoming too independent.

[10] Ruth 1:16.

[11] These include two episodes in which she is presented by Abraham to foreign monarchs as his sister, rather than his wife (Gen 12 and Gen 20). In both cases God rescues her when the monarch subsequently desires her.

[12] However, in the next sentence (Ruth 1:3), when he dies, he is described as Naomi's husband. Naomi becomes the focus and active subject of the story.

[13] This androcentric tendency is reinforced by the midrash that proclaims Hagar to be the daughter of Pharaoh, as if the concept of a woman not contextualized by her connection to a man could not be tolerated.

[14] Gen 22 recounts the near-sacrifice of Isaac at Abraham's hand.

[15] Gen 33:7.

[16] They probably got this idea from Leah's assertion that: "God has given me my hire, because I have given my maid to my husband" (Gen 30:18).

[17] This may be a modern projection. However, even if the comparison to a crop plant was not necessarily insulting in the crop-based society where the midrash originated, the comparison to a weed would have been. At the very least, this analogy is insulting to Hagar.

[18] *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 18:2.

[19] The suprising exception to this generalization is Leibowitz, the only woman included in the traditional rabbinic-style commentaries. She condemns Leah and Rachel on serious and long-reaching grounds: she attributes the continuing conflict among Jacob's sons to the rivalry between Leah and Rachel.

[20] Frymer-Kensky, p.141.

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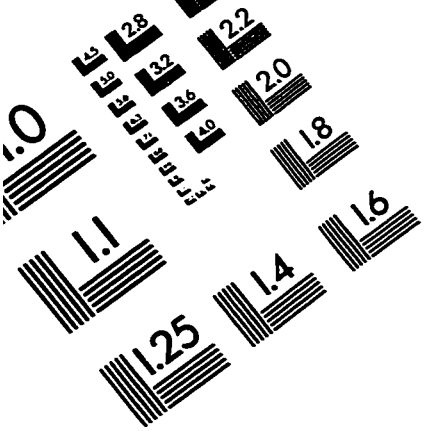

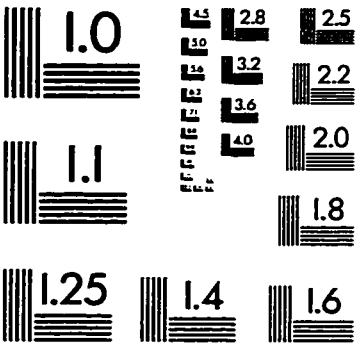

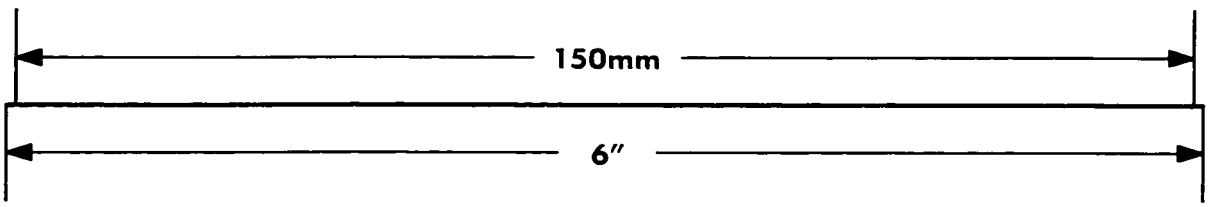

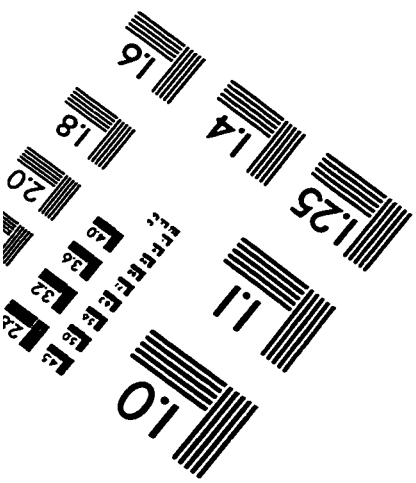

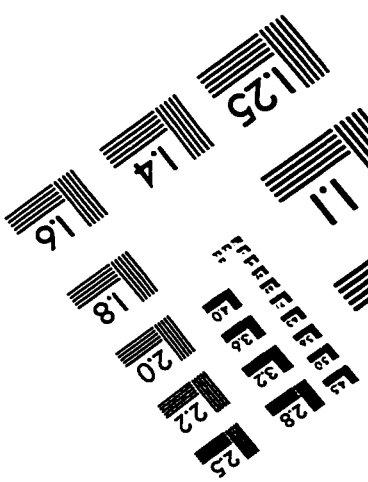

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