

Women as Deceivers in the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract

Using Eve, Rebekah, and Delilah as examples, the concept of women viewed as deceivers in the Hebrew Bible is examined. Even a superficial reading of their stories substantiates that the focus of the Hebrew Bible, and most scholarly studies to date, are patriarchal in nature. These three women are significant figures who defied the patriarchy of their times. Although their actions are immediate, it is possible that their initial intention were to overturn men's suppression of women throughout the ages.

Women play very controversial and key roles throughout the Hebrew Bible alongside the narratives of men¹. Women emerge as shapers of the ancient Hebrew experience and serve to challenge the patriarchalism of the Hebrew Bible. Eve, Rebecca, and Delilah are three biblical female figures with historical reputations because they challenged conventional gender-interpretations. Rather than conform to the convention that women are helpers, or devoted companions to men, these three women defy the archetypes of their time. They refuse to be confined by traditional women's roles, but rather, they undermine male power and strive to share power with men. Nonetheless, although these women bring about the downfall of men, they do not affect change in the patriarchy.

Christopher Witcombe wrote of the Genesis narrative, "For the last 2,500 years it [the Genesis narrative] has underpinned our perception of sex and gender and thereby influenced how women and men are represented in art" (Witcombe par. 3). Hence, Eve, the first of the deceivers, acquired the reputation of the mother of sin because it is she who first eats from the forbidden tree, and gives the fruit to Adam. Eve obtained this controversial reputation in literature and mythology, and has been represented as a deceiver, particularly in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Janet Halley says of Milton's Eve, "...Eve [i]s the object of Milton's patriarchal imagination and

to others to whom she is the image of a genuine female subjectivity not created but recognized..." (Halley 230), shedding light that Eve is enshrined by gender-bias. Milton is not the only author or critic to paint Eve as a deceiver. Ben Sira says of women, "In woman was sin's beginning, and because of her we all die" (*The Book of Ben Sira* 25:23). However, this reputation drawn from the Genesis narrative fails to recognize how she is also a bold defier of patriarchal power and authority. Eve defies the patriarchy, which is based on the superiority of a male God, for "instead of conforming to God's plan, [Eve] is a stumbling block to the construction of the divinely conceived universe" (Mauer par. 5). By eating the fruit which was "...pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it" (*New International Version*, Genesis 3:6) Eve defies God's command to not eat from that particular tree. The serpent says "...when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God..." (*New International Version*, Genesis 3:6), so Eve eats the fruit because she is tempted by knowledge. To have knowledge would put her on equal grounds with God, a male figure.

According to the Hebrew Bible, Eve's purpose upon creation is to be a companion and partner to Adam. God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him" (*New International Version*, Genesis 2:18). From the beginning, Eve is seemingly made for man so that Adam does not become lonely, and she is made from the rib of Adam (*New International Version*, Genesis 2:22). This portion of the narrative dominates western imagination, and is often used to justify female subsidiary status. However, the patriarchal power system in which men dominates women did not exist between Adam and Eve until Eve ate the fruit. It is specifically because she eats the fruit that God punishes Eve, and she becomes subordinate to Adam. The language in the Hebrew Bible reflects when the patriarchal system is introduced, because at Genesis 2:18 the word "helper" is used and it also means "collaborator," implying that Eve was Adam's equal, but her status changes after she orchestrates their reciprocal downfall. She gets both of them cast out of Eden as a result of her actions, which "...

portrays woman as ‘temptress’ and troublemaker who is dependent upon and dominated by her husband” (Trible 72).

Deceptive also means unreliable, which is exactly what Eve is to Adam. Eve does not take responsibility for her actions. Eve looked at the fruit and was tempted by it, but she still blames the serpent, saying ““The serpent deceived me, and I ate” (*New International Version*, Genesis 3:13). Eve, whether realizing it or not, is an advocate of the serpent because she tempts Adam into eating the fruit, deceiving him in the same way she claims she was deceived. Eve is the one who reinforces a patriarchal society and more deeply engraves the roles of men and women, because after she eats the fruit, God makes Adam her master. God says, ““I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you”” (*New International Version*, Genesis 3:16). Eve is put into a subordinate position because of her deception. She is also confined to a gender role of bearing children, a task made solely for women. “The Fall on this reading initiates not sexuality or even marriage, but patriarchy. Patriarchy is a punishment of the woman for her sin” (Boyarin 38). The Genesis narrative about Eve indicates a historical change to a patriarchal society, because the patriarchal society was based on a male God, and then at Eve’s deceptive actions, society becomes even more male-dominant.

The way in which the Genesis narrative is written is also inherently male, expressing an unspoken patriarchy, as the narrative of Adam and Eve begins and ends with the focus on Adam. Eve is given minimal attention in the narrative itself, and what notice she receives is entirely focused on her deceptive actions. The distinct lack of Eve’s voice portrays the patriarchal system, because the glimpse of Eve that is shown is of a woman that “appear[s] as [an] obstacle to these broad overriding goals through nonfulfillment of [her] particular role in the divine scheme” (Mauer para 2). Readers see that Eve has defied God by eating the forbidden fruit, thus she gets her label as a deceiver, with no more say in the matter.

Rebecca, like Eve, is a controversial literary figure. Although considered the mother of Israel in the Hebrew Bible, the focus of the narrative in Genesis is on her husband Isaac, and then on her son Jacob. This reflects the idea that women support the patriarchs. Lisa Cunning says Rebecca's "actions [are] as those of a woman with limited options doing the best she can to accomplish God's will as she understands it" (Cunning par. 20). Rebecca's options are limited because she lives in a world ruled by men. The very beginning the narrative reflects the patriarchy because it is Isaac that "prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife" (*New International Version*, Genesis 25:21), putting Isaac in the forefront of the narrative, with the focus on his actions.

Shauna Mauer says of women in general, but inclusive of Rebecca, that "women...are typically unreliable, inadequate, deceitful or...an outright liability, and they frequently threaten to undermine God's will as it is expressed in the opening book of the Bible" (Mauer par. 2). God does not tell Rebecca to intervene on her children's behalf to make Jacob the next leader, thus she defies the patriarchy by not doing what a man says to do. Rather, Rebecca takes it upon herself to make sure her will is done, which is to bless her favorite son. "Words such as shrewd, deceitful, manipulative, and conspiring are rife in the literature about this matriarch of the Israelites," (Cunning) because Rebecca does indeed deceive and manipulate Isaac on behalf of Jacob. Perhaps it is because "Rebekah is sidelined from the process of bestowing the blessing. She merely *overhears* Isaac asking Esau to hunt for game..." (Adelman 25) that she feels deception is her only option to change events since she was told by God that Jacob is the chosen one.

From the beginning of the narrative in Genesis when Rebecca is first sighted, she is judged by man as being an obedient woman, but Rebecca proves otherwise. The initial sighting of Rebecca is crucial to building her reputation as a deceiver, because she is first encountered as a helper who retrieves water for a servant, making her appear altruistic and submissive on sight. Rebecca does as a wife should in that she gives birth despite being barren at the beginning, but as

soon as her children come, Rebecca defies the tradition of leaving decision-making to the man on behalf of her sons because she favors Jacob. She becomes a deceiver on behalf of her child. It is Rebecca's plotting that causes Isaac to bless Jacob instead of Esau, and in doing so, Rebecca undermines the tradition of primogeniture.

Rebecca deceives her blind husband Isaac by dressing Jacob in goat-skin so he will seem hairy like Esau. Rebecca says to Jacob, "Then take it to your father to eat, so that he may give you his blessing before he dies" (*New International Version*, Genesis 27:10). She instructs Jacob on how to deceive Isaac, and when Jacob worries about being caught, she thinks to cover Jacob in goatskins to imitate Esau's hair. Rebecca is a complete mastermind, and not a weak, mindless woman as the patriarchy reading would expect. Isaac's blessing is bestowed on Jacob just as Rebecca wants, therefore taking away Isaac's blessing from Esau. Although Isaac does not "fall" in the way Adam fell from Eve's actions, he is grieved that his oldest son did not receive his blessing, thus making Rebecca a bold defier of the patriarchy, because as scholar Shana Mauer says, Rebecca "takes assertive, independent action with regard to her family's development, and this action clearly crosses over the rigid boundaries of the prescribed female role" (Mauer para 13). She disturbs the patriarchy by deceiving Isaac, because she removed him from the male-intended role as the sole decision-maker.

Rebecca continues to trick Isaac into doing what she wants in order to help Jacob. She says, "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women! If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living" (*New International Version*, Genesis 27:46). She says this in order to get Jacob sent away; to save him from Esau's wrath. This influences Isaac enough that he sends Jacob away, believing he is doing so to find a non-Hittite wife. Rebecca undermines the patriarchy, not only because Isaac seems to be in charge and but does what she wants. She also influences the future

patriarchy since Jacob will be next in power. Rebecca does not gain any power for women to make them equals since she is focused on her son gaining power.

Delilah is perhaps the most famous deceiver of men next to Eve because she is the downfall of Samson, a seemingly indestructible and powerful man in the Hebrew Bible. Davis Jeffrey said of the Samson and Delilah narrative that “in literature and art...St. Augustine identified Samson with Hercules...and associated Delilah with Omphale, who humiliated Hercules” (Jeffrey 193). Delilah’s narrative has literary importance because she has been a model for later female tricksters. Delilah is a deceiver of men, as she skillfully deceives Samson, and humiliates him on behalf of her people just as other women have deceived in order to weaken a man.

The Judges' narrative is not about Delilah specifically but focuses almost entirely on Samson. Samson has a weakness for women to begin with. Before Delilah, Samson desires women because they are pleasing to him. He is already deceived by one of his wives when she cries about him not loving her because he won’t tell her the answer to his riddle (*New International Version*, Judges 14:16), foreshadowing his downfall through Delilah’s deception. Samson gives in to his wife’s request during her emotional outbreak; a conventional view of a woman as being emotional and needing love. This sets Samson up as a man that will fall easily to womanly charms, because he underestimates the stereotype of woman’s role as a companion. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode observe,

The larger story holds out blueprints of security – a nation, a land, institutions of leadership (judge, king, priest, prophet, and patriarchy) – only to undermine and fracture them by recounting their fragility, corruption or irrelevance (Alter and Kermode 117).

Although these scholars are not writing specifically about Samson and Delilah, their words describe the couples’ narrative perfectly. Samson represents one land and nation as well as male power, while Delilah represents the opposing side. Although patriarchal society still endures, Samson’s power is undermined by Delilah. Feminist scholar, Melissa Jackson says in her book that Delilah “endanger[s] the life of an Israelite hero, drawing him into a trap made of words and

female guile” (Jackson 120-121), thus depicting Delilah as being irrelevant to the bigger picture, because it is Samson’s story and that of the Israelites, not the Philistines.

Delilah tries to find out the secret of Samson’s strength in order to take his power away. The Philistines tell Delilah to deceive Samson: ““See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength...”” (*New International Version*, Judges 16:5). Lure also means entice which is a powerful word in this instance because women are often seen as able to get what they want by seducing men, what Melissa Jackson refers to as “female guile.” Delilah’s attempts at destroying Samson, however, are evidence of her failure to change the patriarchy because she does not have immediate success in discovering Samson’s secret. It is also the Philistine men who command Delilah to trick Samson, not something that Delilah decides for herself. Her actions are a result of bribery and she therefore relinquishes control to the Philistine men by doing what they ask her which in turn just lends more power to a different patriarchy as opposed to Samson.

Mieke Bal says, “Delilah’s acceptance of the deal is *the* shocking detail in this episode. It gives evidence of Delilah’s wickedness, and consequently of unreliability” (Bal 50) through her creation of rifts and uncertainty within the patriarchy. Although the Hebrew Bible do not state why Delilah accepted the Philistine’s proposal, critics such as Bal have interpreted Delilah’s actions as being untrustworthy, a common view of women and why they developed into deceivers. Throughout the Hebrew Bible men are warned not to take wives from certain tribes in order to preserve power and serve God. This is seen when Rebecca complains about Hittite women, and also in Deuteronomy where Moses states, “Do not intermarry with them...for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve others gods...” (*New International Version*, Deuteronomy 7:3-4). But Samson is too infatuated with Delilah’s beauty to think about the fact that Delilah comes from a different background. This is perhaps why Delilah was successful in her deception, because Samson did not stop to consider the consequences of marrying Delilah.

After several failed attempts at trying to learn his secret, Delilah says, “‘How can you say ‘I love you,’ when you won’t confide in me’” (*New International Version*, Judges 16:15). This time asking Samson his secret, Delilah changes her tactic of asking by accusing him of not loving her. This is the same tactic Samson’s other wife employed and succeeded with, illustrating women’s deception of men through emotions. Mieke Bal states, “Traditionally, woman is the master indoors, man, in society” (Bal 54), which demonstrates how Samson was deceived in a traditional female setting, the home, but his place is in society, a place where women, stereotypically, do not belong. Samson gives in to Delilah as she “put[s] him to sleep on her lap” (*New International Version*, Judges 16:19). Delilah brings Samson down to his most vulnerable state. She is able to succeed in her deception, because she had entranced Samson with her beauty. Delilah is the downfall of Samson but she is not changing the patriarchy, because it is the Philistine men who instruct her to act. She defies her role as a wife to Samson by betraying him, but she is still under the influence of the patriarchy, and the narrative continues to be about Samson, not Delilah.

Eve, Rebecca, and Delilah in the Hebrew Bible undermine the power of men through their deceptions, but do not overthrow the patriarchy. All three women are not able to change patriarchal society, but instead end up reinforcing it because it reinforces the view that women are not trustworthy, as Ben Sira states with “[There is] no venom greater than that of a woman” (*The Book of Ben Sira* 25:14). Eve, Rebecca, and Delilah’s aim in their actions was not necessarily to destroy the patriarchy altogether, which is perhaps why they fail to overturn male power. The women, although acting outside of traditional women’s roles, do not change the view of women as men’s subordinates. Their acts of deception illustrate they have the ability to share power with men, but they do not assert themselves beyond the first act of deception.

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