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In this thorough and well-written study of sisters and sisterhood in the Hebrew Bible, Amy Kalmanofsky (Professor of Hebrew Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York) examines the role women play as marginal figures in patriarchal narratives in the Hebrew Bible. Kalmanofsky points out that the paradigm of “sisters,” rather than “daughters,” highlights the transition from natal to conjugal home. As the female figure moves from the home into which she is born to the home into which she marries, she is sexualized, generating an anxiety about feminine agency. Will she conform to the rules of patriarchy or subvert them? In the introduction, Kalmanofsky identifies the sister’s role as either “ideal” or “dangerous.” As “ideal,” they serve the needs of their natal home and husband’s household; as “dangerous,” they threaten those values. Consider, for example, Dinah (in Genesis ch. 34), who “goes out” to see the daughters of the land and is raped by Shechem, “betraying” the purity of the patriarchal line by engaging in relations with the Hittites. When Shimon and Levi avenge the defilement of their sister, slaughtering all the males of Shechem, they reassert the boundary between Israel and indigenous people of the land, taking Dinah back to her natal home. (Here, I quibble with Kalmanofsky’s term “dangerous” as opposed to “vulnerable,” since Dinah is given no agency in the biblical text; “dangerous” implies that she brought the calamity on herself and her family.) But a sister may also serve as an “ideal” figure, protective over her brother (Miriam watching over baby Moses in Exodus 2,) or enriching her natal home as she moves from her father’s to her husband’s house (as in the betrothal of Rebecca in Genesis ch. 24).

The female protagonist in the biblical narrative may also move from a “dangerous” to an “ideal” sister, as Sarah and Rebecca do in the wife-sister episodes (Gen. 12:10-21, 20 and 26:6-11, discussed by Kalmanofsky in ch. 5). Because the patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac, are strangers, sojourners in the land, the beautiful wife highlights their vulnerability, and so the
women are compelled to pose as sisters to “protect” their husbands from being killed. But this ruse, in turn, raises anxieties about the incest taboo and the prohibition against adultery. When God intervenes, the wife-sister is returned to her husband (this time undefiled), and enriches his estate. In moving from the “dangerous” to “ideal,” the boundary between the forbidden and sanctioned is reasserted.

Throughout the reading of this study, one asks: why are sisters and not daughters the primary locus of anxiety? The author addresses this question on several levels. First, she examines the role of brothers as counterpoints to the woman’s agency. “Miriam saves her brother’s life. Laban negotiates Rebecca’s marriage. Dinah’s brothers avenger her sexual violation.” (11) In the latter episode, “the bother responds differently to his sister’s sexual violation than a father does to his daughter’s.” (11) The ideal brother-sister relations are asexual (as in the Song of Songs), and so a raped sister cannot be redeemed, despite the law (Deut. 22:28-29). So Dinah returns to Jacob’s household, but is never heard of again. Likewise, as discussed in ch. 6, when Tamar is ravaged by her half-brother Amnon (2 Sam. 13), she remains desolate under the “protection” of her full-brother, Absalom, who, like Dinah’s brothers, avenges her rape. As Kalmanofsky points out, “a brother’s discomfort with his sexualized sister is…more apparent in the Bible’s incest narratives.” (discussed in chapters 4-6) “Sister stories focus on the patriarchal natal household, manifest fears of female agency and desire, and are concerned with, or framed by, the sibling relationship.” (12)

The second major reason for the focus on sisters, as a new paradigm, is that they are often paired with each other. For example, Rachel with Leah (ch. 1) and Michal with Merav (ch. 2) are paired in their marriage to Jacob and David respectively. In rivalry for fertility and love, the sister matriarchs build up the house of Jacob into the twelve tribes. Yet, as Kalmanofsky points out, the transition from the father’s to the husband’s home is fraught. “As long as Rachel and Leah remain” in their father, Laban’s home, “they seem to function according [the] paradigm of ideal sisters whose desire to have children strengthens their natal household. Yet, with the birth of Rachel’s first son Joseph, Jacob decides to leave Laban’s house, initiating a transformation
from the sisters’ supportive role within their natal household to a destructive one.” (27) When the matriarchs ally with their husband against their father, they undermine their natal home. Likewise, Saul, the incumbent king, negotiates marriage terms with David, first to Merav, then to Michal, the younger sister who loves David, in a ruse to have his rival killed. When Michal allies with her husband against her father (in 1 Sam. 18), she threatens her natal household as a “dangerous sister.” She pays the price of loving David as the pawn between rival monarchs when she turns again, as “Saul’s daughter,” against her husband (2 Sam. 6). These “dangerous sisters do not experience happy endings” (50) – Rachel dies in childbirth, Michal remains childless until her death. “Because they challenge patriarchal authority – Rachel and Michal directly, Leah and Merav by association…they do not become happy wives or happy mothers.” (50)

Kalmanofsky’s most original analysis is found in the pairing of the “daughters of Israel and Judah” in the prophetic narratives (Jeremiah 3:6-11, and Ezekiel 16:44-63 and 23), as sexually promiscuous sisters, married to God. In chapter 3, she argues that sisters serve as destabilizing forces; sororal desire, agency, and solidarity arouse anxiety over female sexuality. “To protect God’s house, Jeremiah and Ezekiel use sisters as a potent part of a rhetoric that encourages proper behavior among the community of Israel and, more specifically, among its women. Jeremiah and Ezekiel warn Israel (and its women) not to behave like dangerous sisters whose uncontrolled desirers and misplaced loyalties threaten their patriarchal home.” (65) Thus, the tragic fate of these sister pairs – both as real players and symbols – serve to reinforce normative, patriarchal values.

The third reason for highlighting sisters over women as a category is found in Kalmanofsky’s identification of a “sisterhood,” women allied with each other in a group, often identified as the “daughters [benot] of…” as in the “daughters of Adam, Moab, the Land, and Israel” (discussed on ch. 7), or the “daughters of Jerusalem” (in Song of Songs, discussed in ch. 8), or the women in the Book of Ruth (Naomi, Ruth, and the women of Bethlehem, discussed in ch. 9). This new category of “sisters” is rather forced, since they are often referred to in the Hebrew as “daughters” [banot]. Kalmanofsky also deems them either dangerous—the Moabite
women in Num, 25:1-5, who seduce the Israelite men to betray their God—or ideal in reinforcing patriarchal sexual norms (as in the four oaths that Shulamit utters, adjuring the daughters of Jerusalem “not to arouse or hurry love” before the sanctioned time, (Song 2:7, 3:5, 5:8, 8:4). But the alliance of Naomi and Ruth does not fit neatly into this either/or scheme, nor does it conform to the other paradigms of sisterhood. According to Kalmanofsky (and I think her argument is bolstered by the Levirate marriage background and Ruth’s status as a foreigner), when Ruth refuses to accept Naomi’s dismissal, she “reconstructs and redefines her relationship to Naomi. She adopts her as her sister.” And so, “the book of Ruth demonstrates that love can override biology and that a loyal sisterhood can be worth more than seven sons.” (172) In the conclusion, Kalmanofsky takes this non-biological model of sisterhood one step further, upholding the story of Ruth and Naomi as a love story (grounded in hesed) that redeems the Moabites, transcends biology, and redefines the destiny of Israel. This is, perhaps, the author’s most moving and powerful point.

Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible is a nuanced reading of the biblical narratives that addresses paradigms overlooked by past scholars. In analyzing stories of marginal female characters and their relationship to power structures, as either bolstering or subverting the integrity of the Israelite patriarchal line, Kalmanofsky contributes original insight into the underlying agenda of the text. While the focus is on the Bible in its historical context, the hermeneutic method is primarily literary and feminist; it does not draw on comparison with parallel Ancient Near Eastern texts. Nonetheless, the author assumes that one shared monolithic, normative patriarchal structure under-girds all the books of the Bible. This reading feels constrained, especially in the Song of Songs and Ruth, where norms are blurred and feminine agency is so strong. Their literary art and characterization are hardly reducible to the question as to whether they reinforce or undermine Israelite patriarchy. The substance of the personhood in the characters feels strangely missing in the analysis. Nevertheless, this book is an essential read for anyone engaged in the feminist interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, breaking hitherto untilled ground.