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With the surge in recent years of Bible translations and companion editions to the Bible reflecting both contemporary scholarship and a wide variety of viewing lenses, David Zucker and Moshe Reiss’ book *The Matriarchs of Genesis* comes as necessary and desired relief. With so much out there, how does one narrow the field? How does one gain focus and see how views have changed and developed at least in one area of analysis and contemporary concern? This is what Zucker and Reiss have provided: examining women’s position in the Bible, specifically the matriarchs of Genesis, and presenting how they have been treated and viewed in the Bible and in four major bodies of exegetical literature.

In the Introduction, Zucker and Reiss lay the groundwork for their study. They present themselves forthrightly as two males, rabbis no less, highly aware and sensitive to their possible male bias, who are examining an area of feminine interest. It is not new ground for them as both have published widely on biblical themes, individually and as co-authors. In fact, some of their work has appeared in the digital pages of this publication. Unfortunately, with the recent passing of Moshe Reiss, *The Matriarchs of Genesis*, is the last of their joint efforts and the final contribution Reiss makes to biblical studies.

The title and sub-title of the book require some explication. Traditionally Jewish thought has spoken of only four matriarchs. What makes them so, as Zucker and Reiss note, is that they are simply wives of the three patriarchs. However the patriarchs had other wives: Sarah gives her handmaiden Hagar as a wife/ishah to Abraham and Rachel and Leah both give their handmaidens Zilpah and Bilhah as wives to Jacob (Gen. 16:3; 30:4; 30:9). All these seven women—Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah plus Hagar, Zilpah and Bilhah—become the matriarchs of the founding faiths, Judaism and subsequently Christianity from the sons of Jacob’s four wives and Islam from Ishmael, the son of
As an aside, Abraham had one more wife, Keturah, whom he took after the death of Sarah (Gen. 25:1). By definition, she should also be a matriarch as she too was called an ishah and produces six more sons for Abraham. Unfortunately, there is little in the literature that explores Keturah’s life or descendants’ line. There is a suggestion, however, that her sons, sent off to the east, became the founders of eastern religions, thus making Abraham now the father of moral religious traditions throughout the world.

The five views the authors offer are from five specific periods. Clearly, the first is the Jewish Bible as their work explores the lives of the matriarchs as presented by chapter and verse. But the biblical text was never considered sufficient unto itself. Once the Jewish Bible was canonized, the post-biblical period produced its own take on the matriarchs. This second view shows up specifically in Jubilees and The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs in the Pseudepigrapha and in the contemporaneous writings of Josephus. This literature may be described as Rewritten Scripture in that it retells biblical stories, in some cases amplifying some biblical details and omitting others. The results are quite revelatory. During the same period and extending into the late Middle Ages are the writings of the Rabbis, Zucker and Reiss’s third view. Here the Rabbis produce Midrash, not a “revision” of the biblical text but a commentary and explication of it done phrase by phrase. By no means monolithic, one finds commentary that is at times praiseworthy and at times blameworthy, directed at both the men and the women in the biblical text. The fourth view is contemporary or modern commentary, some of it written as expositions on various verses, filling in the blanks of the biblical verse and some of it as narrative exposition. Finally, there is a feminist viewpoint, focusing on the mind-set of each matriarch as she deals with her life situation in a decidedly patriarchal society. These five views then bring insights from biblical times right up to the present day.

There are some four issues that are pervasive among the seven women. These include infertility, motherhood, power, or the lack of power, and endogamy (marriages within the family). The authors find these concerns among each of the women and explore how they respond to the subtle and not so subtle demands placed upon them. This is a unique vantage point for examining these leading women of Genesis, a different kind of peg to
hang one’s assessment of these women over time.
The bulk of this work is devoted then to exploring each of the seven matriarchs following
the rubrics outlined. Each woman gets her own chapter (with the exception of Zilpah and
Bilhah who are treated together). The same rubrics are used in each chapter, providing an
exposition of the woman as presented in each of the five time periods, Bible, post-
biblical, rabbinic, contemporary, and feminist thought. For the most part, the authors
simply present the material available from that period, without comment or assessment,
without apologetics or justifications. They allow the texts to speak for themselves and so
it is left to the careful reader to make his or her own assessment of any comment’s
validity. In some cases, the authors’ interpolations might have provided some welcome
guidance and clarification, but then that could be considered “loading the dice” and so
best to challenge the readers rather than spoon-feed them or direct them. The last section
of each chapter then offers a summation of the five literary periods bringing the chapter
to its conclusion.
The book is well organized and straightforward. It offers an introduction to their work
and then presents material on each of the matriarchs, followed by a conclusion chapter
and extensive bibliography. While scholarly, it is not pompously academic, designed
purposefully for the interested lay reader whose background and knowledge of Hebrew
may be limited as well as for those of a more academic bent. If criticism there were, the
book suffers from some redundancy. While the authors’ stated intention is to allow each
chapter to stand on its own and to be read in isolation, the consequence is that the same
background material in one chapter too often shows up again in other chapters. A second
editorial pass on the manuscript before publication might have found a better solution to
the authors’ concerns and would have eliminated some of these redundancies and some
other glaring dittographs.
The book’s greatest contribution to contemporary biblical studies is its wealth of
material. In one volume, one can find panoply of primary sources from each period. Its
“quote without comment” approach eliminates the problem of evaluating any author’s
assumed bias by his or her paraphrase and the reader is not put in the position of having
to explore literally hundreds of journals, books and tomes on the subject of the matriarchs
to make any kind of verifications. It’s all here, as small proof of that is over a dozen full pages of bibliography. The works cited are originally in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and English but are presented in their English translation. This allows the more interested and monolingual reader access to primary sources for further exploration.

Zucker and Reiss provide a genuine service in the publication of their book. It is a good read and an arresting one. There is material not readily available and often not considered, some of it surprising and thought-provoking. Focusing on the matriarchs of Genesis, the book is sympathetic to a feminist viewpoint but is not per se a feminist book. It acknowledges the importance and value of the feminist view without making it the final say on who the matriarchs were or how they should be viewed. It is one more frame of analysis in the long line of historical frames of analysis. Thus, *The Matriarchs of Genesis* is both a very contemporary addition to biblical studies yet well placed in giving insight to the length of the chain of biblical exposition.