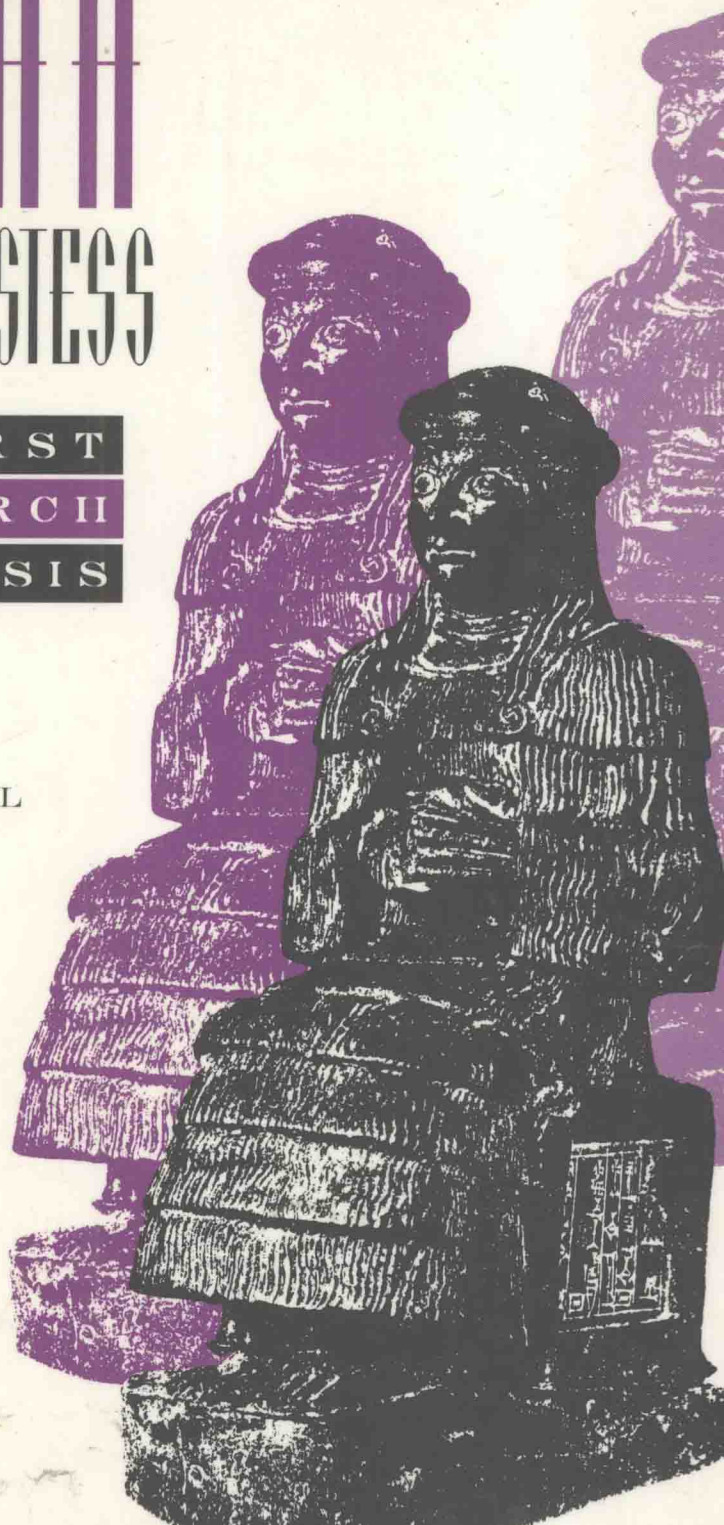


SARAH THE PRIESTESS

THE FIRST
Matriarch
OF GENESIS

SAVINA J. TEUBAL



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FOREWORD

Savina Teubal has undertaken a difficult task in writing her study *Sarah the Priestess*.

The only source in which Sarah is mentioned is the Book of Genesis, which contains a very few highly selective and rather enigmatic stories dealing with her. On the surface these stories tell very little about Sarah, and what they do tell is complicated and confused by the probability that it represents residue surviving from two different written sources based on two independent oral traditions. We are told that Sarah was the paternal half-sister of Abraham, her husband; that she was childless and gave her handmaid Hagar to be Abraham's concubine so that the child Hagar would bear would be considered Sarah's own, but some thirteen years later, at an age at which procreation had to be considered miraculous, Sarah did conceive and bear a son, Isaac; that she instructed Abraham to expel Hagar and her son Ishmael; that her beauty had attracted the attention of both Pharaoh and Abimelech, the king of Gerar; and that she died at the age of 127 years and was buried in the Cave of Machpelah. It is, in the main, on this meager and fragmentary material that Dr. Teubal had to build her reconstruction of Sarah's position as a priestess, as a carrier of an old Mesopotamian religio-cultural tradition, and as a representative of a cult in which female functionaries played the main role.

How does she go about it? For one thing, she utilized data from ancient Mesopotamian (Sumerian, Babylonian) inscriptions which have a bearing on the role of women as priestesses in the religions of those lands during the thousand or so years preceding the period to which Abraham and Sarah are usually assigned. Then, in the light of what she could glean from these sources, she subjects every word contained in Genesis about Sarah — and about her successors in Abraham's family, namely Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah — to the most painstaking scrutiny. She pays special attention to every indication found in the Bible of a matriarchal or, as she most cautiously expresses herself, non-patriarchal social order.

Dr. Teubal's conclusions are, to say the least, surprising. Sarah emerges as a veritable matriarch, the heir of an old female priestly tradition to which she clings with determination even after her husband takes her to the Land of Canaan, with its patriarchal social tradition and order. Dr. Teubal shows that the "Sarah tradition" represents a non-patriarchal system struggling for survival in isolation, in the patriarchal environment of what was for Sarah a foreign society. She indicates that the insistence of Sarah and, of Rebekah that their sons and heirs marry wives from the old homeland had to do, not so much with preference for endogamy and cousin marriage, as with the intention of matriarchal priestesses to ensure the continuation of their old *kahina*-tradition against the overwhelming odds represented by patriarchal Canaan.

Has Dr. Teubal succeeded in presenting her thesis convincingly? This question cannot easily be answered. Some critics will argue that, for all her erudition and skillful marshalling of evidence, the case remains circumstantial. The fact cannot be changed that nowhere in Genesis, or in all Jewish tradition for that matter, is there a clear statement as to Sarah's priesthood. As Dr. Teubal states at the end of her conclusion, the very word *kohenet*, the female form of *kohan*, "priest," has not survived in the Biblical Hebrew vocabulary.

On the other hand, her theory sheds new light on the puzzling, highly energetic role Sarah and the other matriarchs play in the Genesis narratives — a role so active that it repeatedly overshadows that of their husbands. In a patriarchal environment such as that of the Canaan of Genesis, this role seems discordant and problematic. The difficulty, however, is eliminated if we understand, as Dr. Teubal suggests, that Sarah and the other matriarchs acted within a traditional Mesopotamian role-pattern of priestesses, of a class of women who retained a highly privileged position vis-à-vis their husbands, and who played a more decisive role than their husbands in directing the lives of their children. In addition to this major issue there are many other puzzling details in the Genesis narratives on which Dr. Teubal's investigations shed fresh light.

All in all, this study is a valuable piece of original research, which makes a considerable contribution to our understanding of the obscure origins of the role women play in the Genesis narratives.

RAPHAEL PATAI

PREFACE

My ideal, when I was young, was Abraham. I had visions of myself walking through the dusty land, talking with God as he had done. It never occurred to me that I should have looked for a heroine, not a hero. It never occurred to me that I should have chosen to emulate Sarah, not Abraham.

Why? Who were the women in Genesis, and in what way are they significant to us?

Many generations have delved into the biblical records in an effort to understand what men have achieved in the historical past, who men are and what they can become. It is against this historical perspective that men can measure themselves and their dreams in the present and in so doing validate their aspirations and achievements.

No such perspective is granted to women. Women are denied the ancient pillars of wisdom on which to structure their own aspirations and future achievements. This is not, so to speak, for want of ancient pillars. The pillars are there, waiting to be unearthed from the dust of patriarchal centuries.

For millenia, Western society has been based on codes of behavior affirmed or implied in our sacred scriptures. The stated codes, fairly straightforward, can be found in the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. "You shall not copy the practice of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their customs," is an example from Leviticus; Deuteronomy states, "Cursed be he who lies with his sister, whether the daughter of his father or mother."

The implied codes, on the other hand, are more difficult to deal with because their meaning depends on interpretation. Abraham, for instance, received a command to sacrifice his son, and without hesitation he attempted to do so. Abraham's blind faith in and obedience to the command of his God, however extreme it might be, became an example to be followed by those who held the scriptures to be sacred. To

them the story implies that we should all obey the word of God without question.

The Bible is the word of God. As I reread the Genesis narratives with a newly open mind, setting aside accepted interpretation and attending only to what is actually there, I realized that it is the interpretations of the commentators, not the texts themselves, which place the stories in patriarchal focus. I suggest that some of these narratives were originally tales from an oral tradition about women, and that these stories were later adapted and then modified to suit an evolving patriarchal situation clearly described in the narratives themselves.

Although my concern here is with women, it is not my intent to minimize the role of the patriarchs. Untold volumes have been written about them; but I have found in those volumes hardly any mention of the women, and what little there is, is often derisive. The patriarchs were essential in the establishment of a patriarchal system in their community. This was, however, against the better judgment of their wives. The struggle of the matriarchs against this cultural intrusion is impressively described in these stories, as we shall see.

A study of the ancients reveals that they were not as unsophisticated as we have been led to believe. In particular, women have traditionally been depicted as primitive and childish in their aspirations and generally lacking in vision. Fresh study of our female forebears, however, invalidates this view and shows us that the matriarchs were learned, wise women who were highly developed spiritually.

In my opinion, no group has been more maligned in the story of human progress than women. Our history books and religious texts are filled with the aspirations and dreams of men, rarely of women. But women too have entertained hopes and visions of a better world, although these have been distorted or frustrated by those of men.

The matriarchs of Genesis, seen in this new light, provide a positive image for Western women. Like young men, young women need a model to emulate, an ideal to strive for. The narratives show that respected, mature women, with spiritual influence and worldly position, are part of biblical history. It is only a matter of interpretation whether these women are seen in a negative or positive light. It is my hope that this study will contribute a positive light to the image of the ancient matriarchs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It took me over seven years to research and write this book. It is especially meaningful to me that family and friends never failed in their interest and encouragement during that time.

In particular, I think of María Meredith Rutter, *hija de mi alma*, of her spirit of curiosity, her love and her interest, despite her tender years when the process of developing "Sarah" began.

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A manuscript comes of age on publication, in the sense that it leaves the shelter of its author to stand on its own in the world. This transition depends entirely on the vision and expertise of a publisher. I am truly grateful to Morton Weisman of Swallow Press for his faith in my work and Patricia Elisar of Ohio University for her support.

INTRODUCTION

According to tradition, the Jewish Bible is made up of twenty-four books, the first five of which are referred to as Torah, Pentateuch, or "The Five Books of Moses." The first book is known by its Greek name, Genesis, or by its Hebrew name, Bereshith, which roughly mean "beginning," or "coming into being."

In the first eleven of its fifty chapters, the book of Genesis recounts the creation of the world and history of humanity, from the creation of Adam and Eve to the birth of the patriarch Abraham. The remaining chapters narrate the lives of four generations of descendants of the family of Terah:

1. Abraham and Sarah
2. Isaac and Rebekah
3. Jacob and Leah and Rachel
4. The Twelve Tribes of Israel

The protagonists of the Genesis narratives have always been understood to be Early Hebrews who left Mesopotamia, their homeland, with a new religion and culture that they brought to Canaan as the foundation of a new cultus. The narratives relate the stories of females and males equally, from the initial migration into Canaan, that of Sarah and Abraham, to the subsequent one, two generations later, by Rachel, Leah, and Jacob.

Wouldn't the new immigrants into Canaan have brought with them some part of the faith of their Mesopotamian background?

As I studied the history and literature of the ancient Near East of the period between the 25th and 15th centuries B.C.E. (Before the Common Era), and then reread the biblical material to try to fit it into a historical or literary perspective, I looked for religious elements in the Genesis stories that did not conform to Jewish thought or tradition.

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In the story of Abraham the narratives begin with an account concerning Sarah and Pharoah and continue with this woman's trials in securing progeny. Finally, a whole chapter is dedicated to her place of burial. Of the forty-eight years of Abraham's life after Sarah's death there is no detail whatever. In other words, it is Sarah's role that furthers the story. Abraham is presented primarily as the strong warrior-consort who guards her rights and those of her offspring. That his progeny (Ishmael) by a concubine (Hagar) is also graced by the celestial authorities indicates that Abraham was worthy of his exceptional wife (Sarah), and therefore all his descendants were of princely stock.

If the narration of events following the death and burial of Sarah were truly patriarchal, it would deal with the life and exploits of the male heir, Isaac. Instead, once again the accent is on the role of a woman: Rebekah. About Isaac, her husband, we are told little relating to the establishment of the religious faith. He is a placid, sedentary man whose life is colored and influenced by the presence of his outstanding wife. Apart from the incident of the Akedah (The Binding of Isaac in which Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his son), we know nothing of the boyhood or youth of the supposed hero. "His" story begins with a detailed account of Rebekah's betrothal. Rebekah's story, like that of Sarah before her, records the trials before and after the birth of her sons. It is Rebekah who influences and directs Jacob, the son of her choice, who later becomes Israel, leader of the Hebrew Patriarchy proper.

My interest in the women deepened when I recognized that Sarah's actions in banishing Hagar and Ishmael need not be seen as those of a spiteful, jealous woman but could be explained on the basis of Mesopotamian law codes and, in certain instances, on regulations that applied only to women in the ranks of religious orders. It became clear to me that the issues between Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel and their menfolk, as related in the Genesis narratives, are not individual personal disagreements but the result of the women's struggle to maintain certain principles over a period of three generations.

In the following investigations I give evidence to show that Sarah was a "priestess" whose intimate relationship with the supernatural made her privy to the mysteries of religions and endowed her with the power of the office that went with it. I also suggest that the particular office held by Sarah was the most elevated in rank and status, the most sacred and most revered — a position comparable to that of women known as *en* and *naditu* who belonged to religious orders in the ancient Mesopotamian region of Sumer.

In ancient times the moon represented the power of creativity and most frequently was personified by a Goddess. Social change that

made property personal rather than communal brought the rise of male power and the patriarchal society, symbolized by the sun and the God. Sun worship and male priests superseded the earlier moon cults presided over by priestesses, though remnants of these remained at such shrines as Delphi and Paphos.

One function of ancient religious office was oracle-giving. Priestesses at this time acted as oracular prophets, providing military and political advice to rulers, and thus had a powerful if indirect influence on the affairs of state. It was the priestess, too — versed in astronomy — who advised the community of seasonal changes and astronomical conjunctions that affected the cycle of agriculture, and who prescribed the appropriate rituals for each occasion.

I have chosen as a model for Sarah the *en* and *naditu* women for two reasons: (1) the most extensive information on these particular “priestesses” comes from cuneiform tablets discovered in Mesopotamia; and (2) the *naditu* were associated both with Ur, the southern Sumerian city where Sarah’s family originated, and Haran, the northern Mesopotamian city to which they moved. I would like to stress, however, that my use as a model of a priestess role of the period 3000–1500 B.C.E. does not mean that the Genesis stories concerned with women could not have originated in a different ethnic milieu before recorded times; they probably did.

In our extant biblical text, tales of female and male protagonists have been woven into a homogeneous pattern, revealing quite precisely customs and traditions of Mesopotamia and Canaan known to us from their laws and literature. While the tales may reflect actual migrations in some instances, in others they may be ancient stories of traditional folklore that were later applied to historic situations. For example, the story of Sarah’s emigration from Mesopotamia to Canaan may well represent the migration from Haran to Hebron of a group or tribe led by a priestess. But the personal story of Sarah and Hagar, which follows in detail the codes of Hammurapi and Lipit Ish-tar, could have been part of a legend of actual heroines who may or may not have been Hebrew matriarchs.

No reason is given in the texts for the choice of Canaan over Mesopotamia as the setting for the development of a new faith. Abraham is told “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to a land that I will show you,” with the promise that he will acquire a great name and blessings and will father a great nation. No mention is made of founding a new religion. Abraham took Sarah, his priestess wife, with him. As will become evident in the following chapters, it was Abraham who was influenced by the social and religious customs of Canaan against the better judgment of Sarah. Had Sarah and

INTRODUCTION

her matriarch successors not been isolated in a foreign land, they would have commanded more authority over their husbands, who instead absorbed the patriarchal values of the Canaanites.

In the chapters that follow, the name Abram will be used for the patriarch rather than Abraham because the latter name conjures up a wealth of characteristics with which the patriarch has been endowed. In using the lesser known version of the patriarch's name, I think it will be easier for the reader to visualize Sarah's husband, Abram, without preconceived ideas.

Likewise ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands . . .
Even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. . . .

1 Peter 3:1,6

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PART ONE
SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS



