

Stereotypes versus Biblical Role Models

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One of the biggest problems that women have with religion today is that the *Bible* itself is used as the authority to which the Roman Church (and subsequently all Christendom) have long appealed in order to justify the subjugation of women. Much of this has been based upon the words of Paul who, in his letters, makes it very clear that women are not to hold positions of power, that they are not to teach and he even suggests that his brethren become celibate so as not to taint their souls.¹ It is unfortunate that his example has been used as the basis for interpreting the entire *Bible* for a very long time. In fact it has only been since the Conference of *Vatican II* (1962-1965) that the lay person in the Catholic Church has been allowed to read the *Bible* and study it without the direct and constant guidance and interpretation of the Priesthood.

It is common opinion that the *Bible* not only supports gender roles and stereotypes but may in fact have created them. Some point to the women looking after the home as proof that they are not capable of doing anything else, that they are not smart enough, aggressive enough or maybe it is just G-d's will that they be subordinate to men and make sure his dinner is ready. Crawford and Unger, in *Stereotypes: an overview* give us a chart detailing the stereotypical gender traits in modern society based on their research.² These are traits which people believe, or have been taught to believe, are true of almost everyone. These roles may even be thought to be inescapable and some may believe that they are ordained by G-d.³

¹ I.e. *I Timothy* 2:9-14; *I Corinthians* 7:1-8 (*New American Standard Bible*, 1901)

² Crawford and Unger, "Stereotypes: an overview," *Women and Gender: A feminist psychology*, 40-41

³ The Twentieth Century mystic Aleister Crowley was often quoted as saying that Women did not even possess a soul.

The fact that the Church has done much to promote this idea over the last 1500 years has lead to many disputes within the Church in our post-modern era and many women have broken from it, some to follow other faiths (Goddess worship is particularly popular), others to feel that there is no G-d. In her article *The Bible According to Eve* Cullen Murphy tells us that many women are ready to throw in the towel when it comes to biblical study for the very reasons stated by various forms of Christianity. She tells of a woman at a symposium on *Women and the Bible* specifically being told by a panelist that totally forgetting about the *Bible* might be a “good idea”.⁴ Although some branches of Christianity are becoming more lenient others, such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Vatican, are institutionalizing the servatile role of women and their inability to communicate with G-d.⁵ Many of these are based on New Testament interpretations of the *Torah* and the various people described therein.

But what does the *Torah* have to say for herself?⁶ A careful examination of the text and commentary shows us that, although some of our modern stereotypes concerning gender behaviour are supported, the actual examples of righteousness do not conform to that mould. Commentators tell us that when Eliezer went to the well at Nahor to find a bride for Isaac he watched many girls and young women come down to the well and chatter and gossip amongst themselves.⁷ When a young woman (Eliezer calls her *עֵלְזָה* “A young woman in the vigor of life”)⁸ comes down to the well, fills her jug and immediately begins to go back to the house, he approaches her and tries his test in the hope of finding the chosen one.

⁴ Murphy, Cullen “The Bible According to Eve.” *U.S. News and World Report*

⁵ Murphy

⁶ The *Torah* is commonly referred to in the feminine. I.e. *The Legends of the Jews* Vol.1 pg.5

⁷ Scherman, Rabbi Nosson *The Stone Chumash* pg. 113

⁸ Scherman pg.117

It was not just that she did not engage in the senseless chatter of the other young girls that eventually won him over but rather her kindness, strength and hospitality. After allowing the stranger to drink she then proceeded to water all of his camels as well. Although Eliezer did not ask for this extra effort it was part of his test and expectation of the one who would have the properties befitting the daughter-in-law of his master Abraham. Not only was this a terrific display of hospitality but it was also a great feat of strength and endurance, normally masculine traits, but impressive and vital in a future Matriarch.⁹

The weak and frail woman who is dominated by men is certainly not based on Rebekah. Perhaps it occurred elsewhere but it was not the case even in a home as wicked as that of Bethuel and Laban. Even when there is some question as to whether or not Rebekah should go to her new husband immediately, Laban, had he been living up to the expectation we have of the dominating, and oppressive man, would have had a say in the matter and may have demanded that Rebekah stay. Rather he asks her if she wishes to go, the choice is ultimately hers, a choice she makes without hesitation. As an example to all women to come after her she does not support Crawford and Unger's attributes of the female stereotype. She is not weak, frail, passive or submissive although she is said to be very beautiful.

Rebekah gives birth to two sons and her eldest son Esau is the very essence of masculinity. When we refer to the Crawford and Unger article we find that almost every masculine trait on the chart can be attributed to Esau without fail. He is even born hairy, like an animal and proves himself to be strong, aggressive and unemotional. He hunts, gambles,

⁹ Not only did she perform the heavy work of carrying water from the well to the trough enough times to water the camels, we are told that she ran while doing it. (*Genesis* 24:20)

worships idols, associates with wicked men and even marries Hittite idolaters. Some say that he murdered a man and his aids because Esau was unable to pay a gambling debt.¹⁰ He falls into the roles of the stereotypical Macho Man with no respect for his mother or his brother. One might suspect that he only cared for Isaac because of his hope for an inheritance and a blessing when the old man was close to death.¹¹

In contrast, Jacob was a gentle man who dwelt in tents, studied at the local schools and yeshivas, learned from his father and his grandfather and, we are told in legend, even taught others when Isaac and Abraham could no longer.¹² This is a man who spared his mother and father extra work after the death of Abraham by preparing the traditional mourning meal of red lentils himself even though there were many servants about.¹³ His love, compassion and caring were balanced by his forcefulness in buying the birthright and receiving the eldest's blessing, for Jacob and Rebekah could not stand by to see the evil and unbalanced Esau become the father of Israel.¹⁴

Murphy calls Rebekah a trickster in that she is involved in tricking Isaac into blessing Jacob when he thinks it is Esau. Some may agree where as others might consider it an act of compassion. Jacob, the kind and gentle, was known by his mother and we suspect others, to be the rightful heir to Abraham's fortune and G-d's promise to Abraham. The only other way to

¹⁰ *Legends of the Jews* 116-118; *Genesis* 25: 25-27 and 26:34-35

¹¹ Note: When Jacob and Esau came of age Isaac was about 73 years old. He married Rebekah at the age of 40 (25:20) and Rebekah was barren for twenty years for Isaac was 60 when they were born (25:26) add the fact that the time of coming of age is normally 13. Note also that Esau married his first wife at the age of 40 (26:34) making Isaac 100 at the time. We can conjecture that as Isaac was so old, he never really saw Esau's evil.

¹² *Legends of the Jews* 116-118; *Genesis* 25:27-29

¹³ *Genesis* 25:29-34; Scherman pg. 127

¹⁴ *Genesis* 25:33-34, 27:27-30

have ensured that Jacob received this blessing would have been to tell old Isaac of what cloth Esau was cut, for this was surely the grandson of Bethuel. We can imagine that this would have broken Isaac's heart, for it was sorrowful enough for him to hear Esau demand a blessing even after the first was taken from him,¹⁵ how much more would it to have hurt to learn of Esau's treachery, duplicity and wicked evil? Perhaps this was kinder, for Isaac would learn the truth soon enough in *Gan Edan*.¹⁶

But is not the man to be forceful, domineering and strong, should not the woman be weak, dependant and submissive? These two examples show us that the ideal and the stereotype are in opposition. The *Bible* identifies these stereotypes, just as Crawford and Unger have done about 5000 years later, yet the *Bible* also shows us that this is not the ideal, that the stereotype is not the example we should follow in our lives. The passive and weak women do not get the greatest blessings and the aggressive and forceful men are unworthy of ultimate holiness. What we begin to see is a pattern of balance.

The individual personality, when it is in balance has both Masculine and Feminine traits. As Qabalah teaches us (and is reflected in the commentaries) Unbalanced severity (Geburah) is cruelty and sin whereas unbalanced mercy (Chesed) is but weakness and the aid of sin for it does not interfere.¹⁷ The common, the stereotypical, the everyday are not the pillars by which we measure our lives but rather it is the exceptional who show us the righteous way to live. Even these, when they are not perfect, have their honours taken away from them. Both Isaac and

¹⁵ *Genesis* 27:38

¹⁶ "Eternal Paradise"

¹⁷ "Initiation of the Neophyte" *The Complete Golden Dawn System of Magic* Volume 6, pg 20; *Stone Chumash* Commentary on *Parashas Toldos* pg.124

Abraham dishonoured their wives by allowing others to woo them, by having their wives pose as their sisters.¹⁸ Both were then considered unworthy of G-d's promises of unlimited progeny.

If the *Torah* is to teach us how to live, how to please G-d and how to become better people then why is it that the stereotypes still exist? Are Paul's letters instructing people in etiquette and behaviour so powerful as to turn us backwards? Do we, perhaps, get lost in day to day life and forget that we have role models which are thousands of years old? Even with these few examples we can see that the ideal is to break out of the stereotype, not to perpetuate it. To liberate the spirit in a balanced personality, a perfected spirit, not to revert to our animal ancestors who were without a soul.¹⁹ Man and woman are partners in this adventure we call life and each helps the other to learn more about their selves, to understand who they are and who they have the potential of becoming. On the Tree of Life, the sacred glyph of the Qabalah, father HaShem²⁰ sits in perfect balance with mother Elohim²¹. Both are G-d, but one the mother of creation in *Genesis* 1, the other the father and teacher of Abraham.

It may be true that the *New Testament* supports some of the ideas of female dominance and subjugation, but it is unfair to lay the same labels on the *Torah* for she teaches us otherwise in the hopes that we may live happy lives, enjoy our time on Earth and make a path for ourselves into *Gan Eden*.

¹⁸ *Genesis* 20:2 and 26:7

¹⁹ Schroeder, Dr. Gerald, *Did Adam Have Parents?* (Israel: Aish HaTorah, 2000)

²⁰ HaShem, "The Name" is a reference to the ineffable name of G-d spelt יהוה .

²¹ אֱלֹהִים -the feminine name of G-d used during the story of Creation.

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