
Book Section:
Strine, C. orcid.org/0000-0002-1101-0242 (2017) Sister save us: The matriarchs as breadwinners and their threat to patriarchy in the ancestral narrative. In: Halvorson-Taylor, M. and Southwood, K., (eds.) Women and Exilic Identity in the Hebrew Bible. Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies . Bloomsbury T&T Clark , London , pp. 53-66. ISBN 9780567668424

<CT> Sister Save Us: The Matriarchs as Breadwinners and Their Threat to Patriarchy in the Ancestral Narrative

C. A. Strine

<A> 1. Introduction

In an important article describing the shape of a sociology of involuntary migration,[1] Stephen Castles observed that '[r]efugee movements are nothing new,' but rather, they are 'as old as human history' and '[t]he imagery of flight and exile is to be found in the holy books of most religions and is part of the founding myths of countless nations.'[2] One might conclude the presence of this observation in a sociology journal would mean many biblical scholars had applied it to the book of Genesis. That is not the case. Rather than constituting a banal remark, framing the book of Genesis from the perspective of not just migration but *involuntary* migration produces an unusual summary of the narrative contained in Gen 12–36.

The story begins with Abraham, who migrates to Canaan, first through the choice of his father and then at the command of God. Immediately upon arrival (Gen 12:10), famine forces Abraham and his family to flee to Egypt. Abraham eventually returns to Canaan, where his son Isaac faces a famine too (Gen 26:1). Rather than leave Canaan, Isaac drifts within its boundaries, residing in various places to survive. Isaac's son Jacob grows up in Canaan, but

1. Selecting the term involuntary migration rather than forced migration—the more frequent term in scholarly discourse and publication—foregrounds the migrant rather than the human or natural power that prompts the migration. This choice goes some (very limited) distance towards highlighting the agency that people retain in the midst of this experience.

2. Stephen Castles, 'Towards a Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation,' *Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2003), 17.

spends his early adulthood seeking asylum with his family in Haran to avoid the aggression of his brother Esau.[3] After 20 years, Jacob returns to Canaan to find a transformed, unrecognizable society, epitomized by the conciliatory attitude of Esau. The desire of Jacob's brother to reconcile with him, not commit homicide, exemplifies Jacob's reverse culture shock. Throughout, the patriarchs are called *gēr*, a Hebrew term translated 'sojourner' that connotes transitory residence, difference from the host population, and limited legal protection.

All this may be rephrased in terms employed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): Abraham is an environmentally induced externally displaced person, Isaac is an environmentally induced internally displaced person, and Jacob is an asylum seeker who subsequently repatriates by choice. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all experience forced displacement in one fashion or another, though at each stage they exercise some agency over where to migrate to. In the terms of UNHCR, they are all self-settled involuntary migrants.

Genesis does not offer merely a patriarchal narrative; rather, women play crucial roles and transform the story into an ancestral narrative that depicts the experiences of a whole family, not only three or four male figures.[4] Such terminological specificity may be seen as unnecessary quibbling by some, but shorthand identifiers influence how readers interpret texts, thus they merit careful consideration. Demarcating Genesis 12–36, for example, as a patriarchal narrative can, and surely often does, obscure the importance of attending to the women characters and their experiences.

This essay focuses on three connected narratives related to the environmentally induced migrations of Abraham and Isaac, which are equally the involuntary journeys of Sarah and

3. Though well aware of the issues related to the naming of Jacob's destination as Haran and Padan-aram, for the purposes of this essay it is neither necessary to discuss the source-critical questions nor to complicate the point by employing both terms.

4. On this, see the forthcoming work by Jonathan Kruschwitz, *Interludes and Irony in the Ancestral Narrative*.

Rebekah. In route to Egypt, where they seek respite from the famine in Canaan, Abraham coaches his wife Sarah to identify as his sister, thus protecting him from any Egyptian who might consider murdering him to take this beautiful woman as their wife.[5] The ruse occurs again when Abraham and Sarah sojourn in the vicinity of Gerar, where Abraham once more fears these outsiders might kill him to take Sarah for themselves. Like father, like son: when Isaac and Rebekah encounter a famine in Canaan and migrate to Gerar in order to survive it, they employ the same scheme for the same reasons.

Adopting the categories of the UNHCR once more, Sarah and Rebekah are both environmentally induced involuntary migrants. Sarah is displaced externally the first time, internally the second. Rebekah experiences environmentally induced internal displacement. In all three cases, circumstances beyond the control of the matriarchs compel the women to enter into a form of sex work in order to provide for their families.[6]

The message of these stories—and the larger narrative that surrounds them—connects inextricably with the experience of involuntary migration. Approached from this point of view, it is obvious that the commentator can and should employ the social scientific study of

---

5. When he first appears, Abraham is called Abram. His name is later changed to Abraham (Gen 17:5), but Abraham appears throughout this essay for simplicity. Sarah also undergoes a name change from Sarai to Sarah at the same time Abraham's name also changes (Gen 17:15), but again for simplicity, Sarah occurs throughout this piece.

6 For further discussion of sex work and the Hebrew Bible, see Nancy Nam Hoon Tan, 'Hong Kong Sex Workers: Mothers Reading 1 Kgs 3:16–28,' in Gale A. Yee and John Y.H. Yieh (eds), *Honouring the Past, Looking to the Future: Essays from the 2014 International Congress of Ethnic Chinese Biblical Scholars* (Hong Kong: Divinity School of Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016), 157–78, and idem., 'Breaking the Silence of the Dismissed Foreign Wives and Children,' in Lung Kwong Lo and Ying Zhang (eds), *Crossing Textual Boundaries* (Hong Kong: Divinity School of Chung Chi College of Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2010), 84-93.

involuntary migration to interpret the texts. And yet, this work remains notably absent. What is more, these female characters demand special attention; failing to adopt such a gendered approach neither fully appreciates the texts themselves nor considers adequately the lived experience of involuntary migration. Therefore, this investigation will employ a hermeneutic informed by the lived experience of involuntary migration, the gendered nature of that experience, and the gendered authorship of Genesis in order to offer a fresh interpretation of these three familiar stories.

Feminist scholars have championed the interpretive necessity of a gendered approach,[7] so this paper remains indebted to them and only aims to enhance research that has foregrounded the figures of Sarah and Rebekah in these stories by setting those insights alongside others that arise from employing the study of involuntary migration. The study of involuntary migration—known by some as refugee studies and others as forced migration studies—is young. Some trace its origin to the 1951 UN convention relating to the status of refugees,[8] but a vast number place its birth in the early 1980's.[9] Regardless of its age and genealogy, a tipping point has been reached in the discipline, signalling that the time is now ripe for employing its findings in other disciplines. Elizabeth Colson, for instance, observes that scholars 'have acquired an ethnographic base sufficiently large so that we ought to be able to generalize about likely consequences of forced uprooting and resettlement.'[10] Caution, of course, remains the byword

7. For a current and succinct discussion of the state of Feminist biblical criticism, see Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), viii-xxi.

8. Richard Black, 'Fifty Years of Refugee Studies: From Theory to Policy,' *International Migration Review* 35, no. 1 (2001); for the UN document see http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html.

9. Dawn Chatty, 'Anthropology and Forced Migration,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 74-85.

10. Elizabeth Colson, 'Forced Migration and the Anthropological Response,' *Journal of Refugee Studies* 16 (2003), 3. It is important to note that she continues on to observe that one must still recognize 'that human

when pursuing such interdisciplinary applications for findings from the social sciences in Biblical Studies.[11] Yet, with appropriate restraint, there exists substantial opportunities for this work to generate fresh insights.

When the interpreter treats all the protagonists in the ancestral narrative—female *and* male—from the perspective of involuntary migration, the stories come to life in a way that they might have for an ancient community with the lived experience of involuntary migration. Extraordinarily difficult as it is to say anything about the environmentally induced experience of migration for Israel and Judah, there is no doubt that the invasions and deportations of 722, 592, and 586 BCE profoundly shaped the concerns of the Israelite and Judahite audiences who Genesis addresses. Whenever these texts were written, wherever they originate, the theme of involuntary migration foregrounded in the ancestral narrative spoke directly to the audience and its lived experience.

To reap the benefit of this basic insight, this essay proceeds in two steps. First, it investigates Gen 12:10-20, 20:1-18, and 26:1-33 by employing relevant cross-cultural insights from involuntary migration in order to interpret the texts and outline the response to involuntary migration they advocate. Second, it reflects on how the gendered, male voice of the authors dictates the presentation of the stories.

<A> 2. Genesis: A Family on the Move

The ancestral narrative begins with Abraham, who is already married to Sarah when he is introduced in Gen 11:27. YHWH commands Abraham to go to Canaan, 'the land that I will

---

beings are creative and can come up with surprising, never before imagined, solutions.'

11. A helpful discussion of this issue is Philip Esler, 'Social-Scientific Models in Biblical Interpretation,' in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in its Social Context* Ed. Philip Esler (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress, 2006), 3-14.

show you' (Gen 12:1). Abraham moves in stages from north to south until he encounters a famine, which prompts him to go 'down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe' (Gen 12:10).

<B> (a) Gen 12:10-20

This environmentally induced migration puts Abraham into contact with an imperial power that he does not trust. His suspicion manifests in a request that his wife Sarah identify as his sister.

> [11] As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife [Sarah], 'I know what a beautiful woman you are.' [12] If the Egyptians see you, and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. [13] Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you.

Suspicion is a common experience for involuntary migrants, so that 'the importance migrants give to issues of trust and reciprocity' writes Colson, stands at 'the forefront in refugee research.'[12] The ruse Abraham suggests serves to protect his life, at least initially. The ploy creates time to evaluate the situation. Such caution permeates the lives of involuntary migrants, who know that '[t]rust rests on reciprocity... it requires action and response and some possibility of sanctioning breaches of expectations.'[13]

Daniel Smith-Christopher, building on Susan Niditch's work on these stories,[14] argues

12. Colson, 'Anthropological Response,' 5.

13. Colson, 'Anthropological Response,' 5.

14. Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore: Underdogs and Tricksters* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 23-69.

that trickster narratives like this one contribute to a 'subcultural ethics' that emerges from the social circumstances of exilic subordination. Tricksters extol the subaltern's ability to successfully navigate problematic circumstances and a willingness to use truth and falsehood for survival.[15] Phrased in the words of contemporary involuntary migrants, Barbara Harrell-Bond and Eftihia Voutira quote one of their involuntary migrant sources opining that '[t]o be a refugee means to learn to lie.'[16] Necessity, not deficient morality, drives dishonesty; deceptive actions like the matriarch-sister ruse furnish an opportunity to evaluate the character of the unknown host population. Indeed, misdirection constitutes one of the few survival mechanisms available to involuntary migrants when they arrive in a new place.

Abraham and Sarah, furthermore, devise a ploy that proactively exploits a potential support system. The plan requires that they blur the lines of their marital relationship, but Barbara Harrell-Bond outlines similar behaviour among Ugandan asylum seekers in Sudan who found an 'extra-marital sex life [financially] advantageous to the household.'[17] Harrell-

---

15. Daniel Smith-Christopher, *Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis, Minn: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 167.

16. Eftihia Voutira and Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, 'In Search of the Locus of Trust: The Social World of the Refugee Camp,' in *Mistrusting Refugees*, ed. E.V. Daniel and J. C. Knudsen (Berkley: University of California Press, 1995), 216.

17. Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 119-20, 149-50, 328. The situation faced by female involuntary migrants varies widely, of course. For further discussion about the female experience of involuntary migration and how Harrell-Bond's findings compare to other situations, see, *inter alia*: Jesse Newman, 'Narrating Displacement: Oral Histories of Sri Lankan Women,' *Refugee Studies Centre Working Papers* 15 (2003), 1-59; Peter Mwangi Kagwanja, 'Ethnicity, Gender, and Violence in Kenya,' *Forced Migration Review* 9 (2000), 22-5; Karen Jacobsen, 'Livelihoods and Forced Migration,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 99-111, with extensive bibliography; and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 'Gender and Forced Migration,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, ed. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 395-408, again with

Bond's finding highlights an aspect of all three stories generally overlooked by biblical scholars: economic provision.[18]

Harrell-Bond's research about the financial benefit of women's sex work elucidates the narrator's statement that 'because of [Sarah], it went well' for Abraham, who acquires 'sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, female asses, and camels' (Gen 12:16). Just as contemporary involuntary migrant communities may turn a blind eye to a female member who engages in a sex trade in order to obtain the financial resources they need to survive,[19] so also do Abraham and Sarah employ this strategy. Even though the magnitude of wealth Abraham and Sarah accrue from Pharaoh suggests it is a gross exaggeration of the real economic power a woman like Sarah might possess, that only underscores the point: Abraham's and Sarah's ploy results in economic provision for the family. Their experience, as presented in Gen 12:10-20, parallels other involuntary migrants, albeit in ways culturally relevant to the ancient Near East.

<B> (b) Gen 20:1-18

The theme of wealth gained runs through all three matriarch/sister stories. In Gen 20:1-18, the narrator describes Abraham and Sarah as sojourners in Gerar. Though the precise location of Gerar remains elusive, the text depicts it as within the borders of Canaan, probably on the edge of Philistine territory. The move to Gerar—announced without background or motivation—again places Abraham and Sarah among a group of outsiders who present a threat to their

---

helpful bibliography.

18. Although Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 23, and Sarah Shectman, *Women in the Pentateuch: A Feminist and Source-Critical Analysis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 79, for instance, observe that this theme occurs, neither explores its interpretative significance.

19. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid*, 149.

independent identity and their ability to live peacefully in Canaan.

As the story unfolds, without explanation or justification Abraham declares to Abimelech, the king of Gerar, that Sarah is his sister. Claus Westermann notes that this statement 'hangs completely in the air,' and without the prior knowledge from the narrative in Gen 12:10-20 it would 'have no meaning at all.'[20] The narrator, in this way, invites the audience to recall the story of Abraham and Sarah fleeing famine in Egypt.

Operating on the knowledge provided by Abraham's statement, Abimelech brings Sarah 'to him,' a vague statement heavy with euphemism. Yet, Abimelech 'did not draw near to her,' for God pre-empts further error by giving Abimelech a dream that uncovers the scheme: 'God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "You are to die because of the woman that you have taken, for she is a married woman"' (20:3). Abimelech protests, maintaining his innocence; God yields, but instructs the Philistine king to ask Abraham to pray for him to be spared.

Abimelech, understandably incensed, confronts Abraham, who admits his deception (20:11-13).

> 11 'I thought,' said Abraham, 'surely there is no fear of God in this place, and *they will kill me because of my wife*. 12 And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father's daughter though not my mother's; and she became my wife. 13 *So when God made me wander from my father's house*, I said to her, "Let this be the kindness that you shall do me: whatever place we come to, say there of me: He is my brother."'[21]

20. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary,* trans. John K. Scullion S.J. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 320.

21. Emphasis added.

Enigmatic though it remains, Abraham's response to Abimelech offers the only explicit context for the sojourn in Gerar: Elohim caused Abraham to wander from his father's house (התעו אתי מבית אבי אלהים). Though it differs sharply from fleeing famine and is filled with self-justification, Abraham's statement frames the migration to Gerar as involuntary.

Whatever the reason for Abraham and Sarah being in Gerar, as a result of their deceptive act Abimelech gives Abraham sheep, oxen, and male and female slaves. Sarah herself receives 1,000 pieces of silver from Abimelech, which the king gives to Abraham to symbolize Sarah's innocence. While Sarah Shectman remarks that this episode 'has no connection to the wife-sister story,' and Niditch omits this pericope too,[22] the context provided by both Harrell-Bond's research and the role of wealth accumulation in Gen 12:10-20 argues otherwise. Deception has once again been a proactive, financially productive response to the experience of involuntary migration.

Note that two key themes from Gen 12:10-20 recur. First, disguising the true relationship between Abraham and Sarah provides them information about whether Abimelech can or cannot be trusted. When Abimelech's actions suggests he represents an honest partner, Abraham and Sarah engage differently with him. Honesty and trust replace deception and suspicion. Newfound trust, achieved through this incident, underpins Abimelech's offer to Abraham to 'settle where you please' in his land (v. 15). Confident that the people of Gerrar do not present a clear and present danger, Abraham and Sarah accept this invitation.

Second, the substantial sum Abimelech bestows on Abraham and Sarah underscores the financial benefit accrued from the mere *possibility* of Sarah's sexual availability. Just as with Gen 12:10-20, the patriarch and matriarch emerge as shrewd involuntary migrants willing to use the potential benefits of sex work in order to obtain the financial resources they need to

22. Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 50-51.

survive their predicament. Financial provision vindicates initial dishonesty.

<B> (c) Gen 26:1-33

Genesis 24 turns attention to Abraham's son Isaac, namely, to his marriage to Rebekah. Genesis 25 recounts the birth of their two sons, Esau and Jacob, and then ch. 26 returns to the theme of living among the unfamiliar Other. Isaac encounters a famine 'besides the former famine that occurred in the days of Abraham' (Gen 26:1). Not only does this announcement allude to Gen 12:10-20, when YHWH prohibits Isaac from fleeing to Egypt and commands him to stay in Gerar, the text also evokes the story of Gen 20:1-18.

Isaac struggles with the same fears as Abraham: 'When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he was afraid to say "my wife," thinking, "The men of the place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful"' (Gen 26:7). Unlike Gen 12 and 20, where Pharaoh and Abimelech take Sarah into their household, Gen 26 does not specify that transfer. Rather, the scheme unravels sometime later when Abimelech, King of Gerar, sees 'Isaac fondling his wife Rebekah' (Gen 26:8), revealing the truth of their relationship. Equally incensed with Isaac as he was with Abraham, Abimelech confronts Isaac (26:9-11). The patriarch justifies his behavior just like Abraham: 'because I thought I might lose my life on account of her' (26:9b).

In this case, Isaac receives a declaration of protection from Abimelech, though not an immediate increase in wealth. However, the theme of economic prosperity appears forthwith: the verse immediately following Abimelech's statement that Isaac should not be threatened by the people informs the audience that 'Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year' (26:12). Lest anyone miss the point, the narrator continues, observing that 'the man grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy... so that the Philistines envied him' (26:13,

24b). Yet again, the experience of involuntary migration leads to testing the trustworthiness of an unfamiliar foreign host, which results in increased wealth for the ancestral family.

But, Gen 26 delves further into this issue. One of Isaac's subsequent actions is to open a well, indeed one Abraham had dug before him. Genesis 26:19-22 states:

> [19] But when Isaac's servants, digging in the wadi, found there a well of spring water, [20] the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's herdsmen, saying, 'The water is ours.' He named that well Esek, because they contended with him. [21] And when they dug another well, they disputed over that one also; so he named it Sitnah. [22] He moved from there and dug yet another well, and they did not quarrel over it; so he called it Rehoboth, saying, 'Now at last YHWH has granted us ample space to increase in the land.'

This episode reflects a difference in attitude between the political elite and the general population of the host: though Isaac is granted the right to reside without harm by the local authority, a level of skepticism and resistance exists among the general population. Isaac and Rebekah assume a subordinated position relative to the power that grants that status and a marginalized status with respect to the host population among whom they live. When Isaac accepts permission to remain from the local authority, that authority gains a level of dominance over him that precludes asserting independence in some ways. When something between animosity and frustration emerges among the people that now surround them, Isaac and Rebekah possess limited options for resistance.

The narrative does not present Isaac as an equal to the people of Gerar. Approaching the text with the study of involuntary migration in mind, this feature of the narrative is hardly surprising. Asylum seekers in the United Kingdom, for instance, do not choose where they live, cannot work legally, and face the constant threat of deportation. Even after receiving refugee

status, involuntary migrants remain at the mercy of the government, frequently residing on time limited and revocable visas. To say the least, some portions of the general public perceive asylum seekers and refugees with disdain. Without uncritically applying modern circumstances to the ancient context, it is possible to see the dynamic that crosses cultures: the authority granting protection to the asylum seeker possesses tremendous power over them, and their 'foreign' identity can produce an attitude of dislike for them among the host population. So long as the threat of expulsion exists, so does an asymmetric power relationship. So long as their difference from the host population remains evident, so too does the threat of hostility from this Other.

It is hardly surprising, then, that on two occasions Isaac moves away when the men of Gerar claim ownership over the wells dug by Isaac's servants. Observe, furthermore, that Isaac does not even contest this issue with the men of Gerar. His acquiescence is extraordinary, especially compared with his willingness to lie about his marital status to the King. Neither Isaac nor Rebekah countenance deception or resistance; circumscribed in their autonomy because they depend on Abimelech's protection, devoid of options for challenging the men of Gerar's claims, circumstances restrict their options. Moving on is less a choice than it is a requirement.

Only when Abimelech, the trustworthy foreign authority who provides protection for the ancestral family, comes to Isaac at Beer-sheba and expresses the willingness to negotiate an agreement regarding his residence does the conflict dissipate (Gen 26:26-33). The exchange of oaths and banquet of confirmation conclude the story, effectively transforming Isaac from a refugee in Abimelech's territory to something like a 'documented' resident.

So that the second theme does not escape notice, recall that the increase in Isaac's wealth prompts this entire dispute. When Abimelech authorizes Isaac to find a residence in the land of Gerar, great economic gain for Isaac and Rebekah ensues. In the series of conflicts over

the wells that follows, this economic issue drives the action. Indeed, the narrator remarks (Gen 26:13-18):

> [T]he man grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy: he acquired flocks and herds, and a large household, so that the Philistines envied him. And the Philistines stopped up all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham, filling them with earth. And Abimelech said to Isaac, 'Go away from us, for you have become far too big for us.' So Isaac departed from there and encamped in the wadi of Gerar, where he settled. Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham.

This story, like its companions in Gen 12 and 20, begins with the experience of involuntary migration, explores how to test the trustworthiness of a foreign host that is largely unknown, and ends by addressing the power of a female's sexual availability to obtain financial resources for the ancestral family. These stories all teach the audience about the benefits that result from proactive efforts to employ deception and female sexual availability in order to navigate the predicament of involuntary migration.

<A> 3. Gendered Narration

Bearing in mind the preceding exegesis, informed by not just the study of involuntary migration but the gendered, female experience of it, it is now possible to reflect on how the gendered, male voice of the Hebrew Bible's authors shapes these stories. Despite the central role Sarah and Rebekah play in all three vignettes, it is essential to remember a male voice tells these stories and depicts their experiences.

During the so-called second wave of Feminism, many biblical scholars pointed out that

the ancient societies that produced the Hebrew Bible were patriarchal and that the royal functionaries, scribes, and priests who likely wrote and preserved the texts were all male as well. This is the case even in the instances when female characters dominate.

For instance, David Clines insightfully elucidates this dynamic in his discussion of the Song of Songs. Though no other text in the Hebrew Bible, bar the book of Ruth, implies that a woman might have such a significant level of agency in society, the Song of Songs remains a thoroughly male text. Clines remarks:

> Even feminist critics sometimes ignore the fact that what we have here in this book is not a woman, not the voice of a woman, not a woman's poem, not a portrayal of female experience from a woman's perspective, but always and only what a man imagines for a woman, his construction of femininity.[23]

Failing to recognize this gendered nature obscures many of the messages in the text, not to mention how it fails to understand how the interactions it portrays may—or may not—relate to ancient experience. What is true for Song of Songs is also true of the matriarch/sister stories, and, therefore, any attempt to engage them productively needs to do whatever possible to navigate this dynamic and identify its influence on the texts.

Cheryl Exum has written perhaps the seminal study of these stories from a Feminist perspective. The question that frames her investigation is, '[S]ince Genesis is the product of a patriarchal worldview, in what ways do these stories of Israel's mothers serve male interests?' In the first chapter Exum dedicates to this study, she focuses on the matriarchs as mothers,

---

23. David J. A. Clines, 'Why Is There a Song of Songs and What Does It Do to You If You Read It?' in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* ed. David J. A. Clines (JSOTSup, 205; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 94-121.

vessels in the maintenance of the ancestral line. 'Their importance cannot be underestimated,' Exum observes about these mothers, 'but it cannot be fully acknowledged by a text in which the significant features are the fathers.'[24]

Exum then narrows the area of study to Gen 12, 20, and 26, what she calls the 'endangered ancestress' stories. Her approach is psychoanalytic and literary in nature, leading her to argue that the three stories seek to outline a moral position about the possibility of a woman's sexual knowledge of another man that moves from an external imposition of this authority to an internal commitment to it.[25] Exum concludes:

> If the danger in these stories is women's sexuality and women's sexual knowledge, who or what is in danger? To the question, 'Who or what is afraid of the women's sexual knowledge?', the answer is, 'Patriarchy'.

Exum's conclusions may be extended and further supported from another angle, specifically, one that foregrounds the female experience of involuntary migration.

Whereas Exum's approach builds upon the possibility of 'the narrator's intrapsychic conflict'[26] as the motive for exploring the question of women's sexual knowledge and morality, the present analysis grounds itself in the cross-cultural and cross-temporal need for involuntary migrants to evaluate unfamiliar Others. Not only does this approach complement Exum's findings, it embeds the rationale for crafting these stories within an ancient experience common to both Israel and Judah that, in all likelihood, presented a clear and present threat to patriarchal

24. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 114.

25. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 115-33.

26. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 120.

power. Exum envisages 'unthinkable and unacknowledged sexual fantasies'[27] as the complex psychological motivation for the tales; it is hard to deny the possibility of this motivation, but it is equally hard to demonstrate its presence. The line of argument advanced here requires a visceral concern that if the sexual availability of a matriarch becomes a viable means to provide financially for the community, then the role of patriarch as communal authority stands at great risk. This dilemma lies both on the surface of the three matriarch-sister stories and also in the lived experience of Israelite and Judahite involuntary migrants.

The masculine voices that mediate Gen 12, 20, and 26,[28] depict the patriarchs as the protagonists. Self-assured and clever, Abraham and Isaac navigate their predicaments with aplomb. Yet, Harrell-Bond's research with contemporary involuntary migrants suggests this presentation masks both the dissonance associated with blurring marital bonds in this way and the female agency created by the experience. 'Husbands may be fully aware of their wives' extra-marital affairs,' writes Harrell-Bond, 'but since women may earn soap or sugar for the family, they cannot afford to object.'[29] Exum's analysis accounts for the first of those concerns, but it does not contemplate the ramifications of the second.

In a similar fashion, by highlighting the agency and cunning of the patriarchs, both Niditch and Smith-Christopher astutely observe the ways in which they extol the subaltern's ability to successfully resist the power of an imperial Other. And yet, neither Niditch nor Smith-Christopher explore the gendered nature of this 'subaltern ethics': the matriarchs, as female members of the community, constitute the 'resource' that makes it possible for the disempowered community to construct the deception at the heart of all three stories. This makes

27. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 120.

28. Although it is not a topic of concern here, the evidence does indicate that these three stories did not all come from a single author. Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 61-66, provides a helpful discussion of the issue.

29. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid*, 149.

the strategy a sort of double subaltern approach: at the first level, the stories advocate the power of a disempowered community, but there is a second level in which all three stories—wittingly or unwittingly—promote the potential economic power of women, the subaltern gender within that community.

When one scratches at the masculine surface of these stories by utilizing what the study of involuntary migration tells us about the experience as an interpretative heuristic,[30] the problems of consistently advocating patriarchy come into sharper focus. Note that the masculine narrators of these stories fail to mention the obvious danger to their own authority that follows from the lesson the texts substantiate: female sexual availability provides a real, immediate, powerful means for financially supporting the involuntary migrant community. The economic challenge to patriarchy remains unspoken, and in its place one finds the (inconsistent) fear of physical violence from the Outsider.[31] Perhaps this is a strategy to distract the audience from the threat to patriarchy by ardently directing everyone towards another anxiety inducing issue. That remains a topic for conjecture. Far less speculative, insofar as the community embraces the basic lesson of the stories concerning female earning capacity, it will also gain unsettling knowledge that its female members could gain a level of power that patriarchy cannot tolerate.

The shape of these stories—with the patriarchs as dynamic protagonists—likely arises from the desire of their male authors to celebrate the ability of the subaltern, involuntary migrant community to survive, even thrive, in difficult circumstances by their own agency while simultaneously seeking to avoid the destabilizing social ramifications of the strategy. These men felt compelled to depict this possible response to involuntary migrations in a way they hoped would reinforce, rather than threaten, the patriarchal norms of their society. A

30. On this approach, see Esler, 'Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context,' 3-14.

31. Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters*, 54.

certain amount of moral ambiguity and anxiety regarding the nature of marital bounds could not be eliminated—this is what Exum's analysis underscores. However, other troubling issues also resisted omission, namely, the precedent that a matriarch might be a successful, independent breadwinner for the community.

Finally, it is worth stressing what the masculine voice never attempts to displace: the deep seated desire of involuntary migrants to provide for themselves. It is surely significant that this desire remains. Indeed, in each story, the wealth the ancestors of Israel gain comes from their dishonest ingenuity and their own agricultural labor. Elsewhere, the Hebrew Bible positively advocates social care for the displaced and marginalized (e.g., Deut 10:16-19), but in those cases the texts speak from a posture of power. Such expressions of generosity arise when the authors envision themselves as the host society, not the involuntary migrant outsider.

When the involuntary migrants' voice speaks—as it does in the ancestral narrative of Genesis—rather than ask for such social care it champions independent, proactive use of whatever resources the community possesses. The matriarch-sister stories affirm the desire and the capacity of the involuntary migrant to be self-sufficient. In its masculinized presentation, the ancestral narrative obviates some of the challenges to this strategy, but it does not exclude all of them. Reading beyond the masculine facade of the texts, striving to recover the perspective of the *female involuntary migrant* within them, enables the interpreter to go some (limited) distance towards appreciating this lived experience more comprehensively.

<A> 4. Conclusion: Full Exposure

'Feminist biblical criticism,' as Exum herself describes it, 'aims both to expose strategies by which women's subordination is inscribed in and justified by texts and to highlight the

difficulties these texts have in maintaining their ideology.'[32] In this essay, the social scientific study of involuntary migration has served to illumine two coordinated themes in the matriarch-sister stories that allow for new insights into the role of the female characters in these stories and the ways the male authors of those stories presented them.

First, close reading of the texts informed by the study of involuntary migration highlighted that these three stories begin with an instance of involuntary migration, explore the need to determine whether a foreign host could or could not be trusted, and address the capacity for the sexual availability of a matriarch to obtain financial resources for the ancestral family. These three themes are far from a literary fiction, but ancient Near Eastern descriptions of an experience common among involuntary migrant communities.

Second, the ethnographic basis for this insight suggested these themes produce a challenging situation for the male authority figures in the involuntary migrant community. Faced with the problematic choice between financial provision and maintaining marital fidelity, involuntary migrants often ignore the moral vagaries of female members engaging in sex work so that the family might obtain the economic resources it requires. Absent from the surface of the matriarch-sister stories, this dilemma comes to the fore when the interpreter employs findings about the female and male experience of this situation.

Thus emerges the third point: combining this work with Feminist interpretation, the evidence indicates the male authors of these stories attempted to obscure these implications as much as possible in order to protect male hegemony. Competing with and, in places, overriding that intention, these male authors also wanted to advocate the ingenuity and self-sufficiency of involuntary migrants. When exposed to a reading informed by the study of involuntary migration and Feminist criticism, these texts tell a story about resilience, self-sufficiency, and

32. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, viii-ix.

the capacity to navigate the immense challenges of involuntary migration that resided with the *women* of the ancient world, just as it does today.