

BOOK REVIEW

David J. Zucker and Moshe Reiss, *The Matriarchs of Genesis: Seven Women, Five Views* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 282 pp. Reviewed by Mordecai Schreiber

The seven matriarchs discussed in this book are Abraham's wife Sarah and her maid Hagar; Isaac's wife Rebecca; and Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel and their respective maids, Zilpah and Bilhah.

The official Jewish view speaks of four matriarchs of Israel – Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel. However, the authors of this book take a different stand and make a case for seven matriarchs. Six of the seven gave birth to the brothers who gave rise to the twelve tribes of Israel. The seventh, Hagar, is the mother of Ishmael, believed to be the father of the Arab people. Yet, as Abraham's second wife, one could argue that she too belongs in the matriarchal ancestry shared by the Jewish people.

Thus, the thesis of this book seems to part with tradition in two respects: the number of the matriarchs and the inclusion of Hagar, who did not give rise to any of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The five views in the book's subtitle are: Biblical, early extra-biblical, rabbinical, post-rabbinical, and contemporary, with special emphasis on feminist views expressed mainly by current female biblical scholars, a growing area of biblical scholarship. The authors make extensive use of these sources so as to provide as comprehensive a view of the seven matriarchs as possible.

We live in a time of profound change in the role of women around the world, and specifically in the Jewish world. For the first time in our history rabbinical schools around the world ordain women rabbis, whose number is growing fast.

In Israel, some women rabbis lead the way in the pursuit of full equality in both the religious and secular life of the state. Against this backdrop, this book is both timely and urgent. It takes cognizance of the fact that the stories in Genesis concerning our *imahot* and *avot*, our founding mothers and fathers, give a distinct voice to the men and hardly any to the women. An Abraham and a Jacob come across as fully developed characters, while a Sa-Mordecai Schreiber is a rabbi (*Hebrew Union College-JIR* 1965) and author of books of biblical scholarship, most recently *The Man Who Knew God: Decoding Jeremiah*, and *Hearing the Voice of God: In search of Prophecy*.

rah or a Rachel are sketchy at best, forcing the reader and especially the scholar to do a great deal of guessing and speculating.

This paucity of information becomes even more pronounced when the authors delve into post-biblical sources, such as Midrash or the commentators throughout the generations. Here one runs into many conflicting views regarding the little the Bible does tell us about our matriarchs. For example, about the only thing we know about Bilhah, Rachel's maid whom she gives to her husband Jacob to be a birth mother on her behalf, is the brief anecdote about Jacob's oldest son, namely, Reuben, violating her. This episode results in many interpretations as to what actually happened between the two, whether or not anything did happen, what Reuben's motive was, how Bilhah reacted, and so on. What we do not have here is any real clarity about this episode, and less about Bilhah as an individual, and so we are left to guess.

While the authors point out that the biblical narrative gives us enough insight regarding Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, presented as being strong women who play an important role in the lives of their husbands (and perhaps Hagar as well) and in influencing the destiny of their descendants, Zilpah and Bilhah seem to be completely marginalized. Given the fact that between them they gave birth to four of the twelve sons of Jacob, one might wonder how the descendants of those four tribes must have felt about the inferior status of their mothers.

One may wonder: Are the authors of this book rewriting history or changing long-established traditional views? In other words, are we to take this book as a literary exercise or is there more to it?

Examining the many traditional sources the authors quote throughout the book, it becomes clear that such diverse sources as Josephus and Jubilees, the sages of the Talmud and later scholars, have all struggled with such episodes in Genesis as Rachel stealing her father's household idol figurines, or Sarah's reaction or lack thereof to Abraham's introducing her as his sister, or the story of Reuben and Bilhah. What this book does is give us a panoramic view of the seven women who gave rise to the Jewish people, as well as the Arab people, and, at least in the opinion of this reviewer, it is neither a rewriting of history (if that is the correct word), nor an altering of any traditions. What we have here is a book much in keeping with the spirit of our time, a time of profound social change around the world and specifically in the Jewish

world, in which the role of women as full participants in the human experience is of critical importance to improving the world in the image of the Almighty, who created man and woman as partners rather than unequal genders.