The Shunammite Woman and the Patriarchy Problem

Virtually all biblical scholars—even feminist biblical scholars—consider the Bible and ancient Israelite society patriarchal.[1] But is that a valid designation?

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Elisha and the Shunammite Woman, 1643, by Hans Collaert. Rijksmuseum.

To be sure, the Bible is androcentric by any measure—the majority of its characters are male, and the male perspective appears throughout. Yet is it an accurate reflection of Israelite society of the Iron Age (ca. 1200–587 B.C.E.), which is not always the same as the Israel of the Bible?[2] A close look at the two narratives of the Shunammite woman and a consideration of the origins of the concept of patriarchy and the problems it poses may lead to a rather different view of the purported gender hierarchy in ancient Israel.[3]

The Woman of Shunem

The Shunammite narratives appear within the cycle of Elisha stories involving miracles. The woman of Shunem[4] is not named, but her status is indicated. In 2 Kings 4:8 she is called *gĕdôlâ*(probably “great” or “distinguished”), a term usually describing esteemed people (e.g., 2 Kings 5:1; 10:11).[5]

The first episode (2 Kings 4:8–37), which serves as the *haftara* for *Parashat Vayera*, begins by recounting how, when Elisha passes near her home, the Shunammite provides food for him and then decides to prepare a furnished chamber where he can spend the night on his travels. In return, Elisha offers to commend her to local authorities, but she refuses.

The prophet then, unbidden, announces that he will ensure that the childless Shunammite conceives, which she does. Sometime later, the son she bears becomes ill while in the fields with his father, who has him carried home to his mother, where he dies. She mounts a she-ass and rides to Elisha, who goes to her home and revives the lad.

The second episode (2 Kings 8:1-6) involves a seven-year famine. At Elisha’s urging, the Shunammite moves away with her household until the famine ends. When she returns, she finds that squatters had occupied her property. Appealing directly to the king, she has her possessions restored along with the income her fields would have provided during her absence.

Gender Dynamics in the Shunammite Narratives

Although the Shunammite’s experiences are embedded in narratives showcasing Elisha’s “great deeds” (*gĕdōlôt*; 2 Kings 8:4), they contain details of family life that have an air of authenticity. Several features of the episodes reveal gender dynamics in a well-to-do family.[6]First, the woman of Shunem interacts readily with important figures: Elisha the prophet throughout, and the king at the end. In fact, the prophet comes *to her* with the warning to leave when famine begins.

מלכים ב ח:א וֶאֱלִישָׁע דִּבֶּר אֶל הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר הֶחֱיָה אֶת בְּנָהּ לֵאמֹר קוּמִי וּלְכִי (אתי) [אַתְּ] **וּבֵיתֵךְ** וְגוּרִי בַּאֲשֶׁר תָּגוּרִי

2 Kings 8:1 Elisha had said to the woman whose son he revived, “Leave immediately, you **with your household,** and go sojourn somewhere else…”

Second, she asserts that she needs no special favors from local officials, apparently because of her status in her community. Third, she makes decisions affecting her household autonomously—she, not her husband (who is also unnamed), is the one who recognizes Elisha as a holy man and offers him hospitality;[7] she conceives of the home-improvement project that will provide lodging for the prophet;[8] she decides to contact Elisha for help, despite her husband’s protests, when her son dies; and she alone appeals to the king for restitution of her home and property after the famine.[9]

This woman exhibits the traits of a COO—chief operating officer—of the household.[10] Other biblical figures show similar aspects of women’s managerial activities: Micah’s mother in Judges 17, Abigail in 1 Samuel 25, and the “strong woman” (*’ēšet ḥayil*) of Prov 31:10–31.[11]They all have access to household resources and deploy them, without seeking spousal permission, for the benefit of their families.

These features of the actions and interactions of several biblical women call into question the idea of general subordination that is implicit in the patriarchy designation and may be indicative of a social reality that is often obscured by biblical androcentrism. A look at its origins reveals its limitations.

How Did the Term Patriarchy Originate?

“Patriarchy” is *not* a biblical term; it is a social science construct. Formed from the Greek words for “father” (*pater)* and “rule” (*archō*), it emerged—and entered the language of biblical scholarship and the accompanying study of ancient Israel—when the social sciences emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[12]

Three influential pioneers in the new field of anthropology (Henry Sumner Maine, Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, and Lewis Henry Morgan) used the term to describe ancient families, notably those in Greek and Roman society.[13] They mined classical literature, mainly legal sources, for information about family dynamics. The result? They formulated the idea of the *patria potestas* (“father’s power”), asserting that the father had complete and unlimited authority over the people and property of his household and that a woman was little more than a servant, with no household authority.

It didn’t take long for this concept of absolute male rule to enter the field of biblical studies. A large-scale history of ancient Israel published in the 1880s by the German theologian and historian Bernhard Stade[14] was probably the first work by a biblical scholar to use “patriarchy” and “patriarchal society.” His reconstruction of Israelite society, which describes the great power of the Israelite *pater familias*, became influential in biblical studies.

Assumptions about biblical patriarchy persisted for generations in discussions of Israelite family structures. Notably, the French scholar Roland de Vaux, in his prestigious *Ancient Israel*, maintains that the Israelite family was undoubtedly patriarchal and that men were masters of their wives and children, even at times having the “power over life and death.”[15]Many recent discussions follow suit.[16]

Meanwhile, the patriarchy designation for families expanded by mid-twentieth century, becoming a designation for an entire society, this time under the impact of the new discipline of sociology.[17] Max Weber’s *Economy and Society*, published posthumously in German in 1922,[18] was especially influential on studies of ancient Israel, notably Martin Noth’s *History of Israel*, which became a standard text for generations. Noth calls both the Israelite family and “social order” patriarchal.[19] This assessment, with patriarchy designating gender hierarchy in the family *and* in society, remains strong until today. But is this designation appropriate?

Problems with the Patriarchy Paradigm

Classical Studies

The patriarchy concept originated in analyses of classical societies, and classicists have been at the forefront of questioning its validity. They make several important points.[20] First, the images gleaned from legal sources hardly convey the nuances of social reality.[21] Rather, “The stark image of the severe all-powerful, despotic father and husband” is an exaggerated, misunderstood, and misleading legal construct that “too easily ignores the complexities of human relationships in everyday life”; indeed, that image is the “stuff of legendary caricature, not to be mistaken for sociological description.”[[22]](https://thetorah.com/the-shunammite-woman-and-the-patriarchy-problem/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn22)

Second, in classical sources the gendered term *pater familias*refers to household management and not biological fatherhood; consequently, it obscures the relative empowerment of at least some women in the Greco-Roman world.[23] Third, analysis of a variety of non-legal ancient sources, including archaeological materials, reveals many aspects of daily life in which fathers *do not* exercise absolute authority.[24]

In short, classicists have shown that the patriarchy concept was developed using incomplete and flawed evidence. They have challenged traditional hierarchical models of sequestered powerless women by providing evidence of female control of significant aspects of daily life.

The nineteenth-century theorists, and all who followed them, imposed Victorian household structures, with the (male) workplace outside the home, on ancient societies where the household was the workplace for virtually all family members. In traditional agrarian societies, women’s household activities contributed to the household economy just as did those of men.

Classicists have similarly shown that the expanded view of patriarchy, as absolute male control over society-wide institutions, must be modified. While not denying that male community roles were more numerous—and certainly more visible in ancient sources—than were women’s, they indicate that women were not categorically excluded.

For example, it is now apparent that women held leadership roles in certain festivals and mainstream public cults, not just marginal women’s cults.[25] Using archaeological materials, women’s roles in other extra-household activities have also been identified.

Studies of Israelite Women

Scholars studying Israelite society lack the variety of sources available to classicists. There are virtually no written materials from ancient Israel other than the Bible, a problematic source for understanding gender, given that a male perspective dominates and that relatively little attention is given to women or to household dynamics. However, archaeological materials can fill part of this void, particularly when ethnographic observations of premodern societies similar to ancient Israel are used to interpret the archaeological remains of household life.

Until recently, most archaeological excavations in the land of Israel focused on the urban sites mentioned in the Bible and on the structures (palaces, fortifications, temples) associated with men’s activities. However, most people—as many as 90 percent—lived in small agricultural villages and towns (some of them walled).

Thus, in recent years, household archaeology has emerged on the archaeological scene, revisiting the published remains of older digs and excavating the structures and artifacts of daily life in the smaller agrarian settlements. The economic, social, religious, and political activities of agrarian households, which were the locus of everyday life for most people, have been identified. Moreover, as the gendered nature of many of those activities is ascertained, women’s contributions to household life become visible.

What did women do? The grinding stones, textile tools, ovens, loom weights, cultic objects, and other artifacts and installations found in the four-room (or pillared) houses in which Israelites lived in the Iron Age, provide evidence.[26] Although the tasks of women and men sometimes overlapped—all family members, for example, took part in harvesting crops—women were responsible for *maintenance activities*, a term for the basic tasks of daily life, many of which required specialized knowledge and contributed to the welfare and survival of the household.[27] Senior women in extended families made decisions about the organization of household activities and the use of household resources.[28]

The results of analyzing archaeological data fit with the images of the Shunammite and several other biblical women (Abigail; Micah’s mother; the “strong woman” of Proverbs 31) and contest the idea that *all* women were subordinate in household life. Moreover, biblical evidence about extra-household roles shows women functioning in authoritative positions as prophets (e.g., Miriam, Deborah, Huldah), sages (the wise women of Tekoa and Abel of beth-maacah), mourners (Jer 9:20), royal officials (as *gĕbîrâ,*“great lady”), and even one judge and general (Deborah). Women were hardly subordinate in *all* community roles.

Other Issues

Many feminist theorists (but, ironically, not many feminist biblical scholars) have concerns about how the patriarchy concept is used in discussions of contemporary as well as ancient societies.[29] A fundamental issue is that the focus on gender hierarchies obscures or ignores other kinds of social asymmetry (e.g., servitude, slavery, ageism, sexual orientation, ethnicity) that often put men as well as women in subordinate positions.

Another problem is that the patriarchy paradigm assumes that household dynamics are monolithic, when in fact men may dominate some aspects of household or community life and women others. The patriarchy label also assumes that social relations are static, with fixed sets of relationships, whereas social reality involves fluctuating patterns over the life cycle.

Implications

These critiques suggest that the patriarchy model is not flexible enough to reflect the shifting realities of household activities and the complex patterns of gendered life. However, claiming that patriarchy is an inappropriate and misleading designation does *not*mean asserting that there was gender equality in ancient Israel. Men clearly dominated in certain areas of life.

Patrilineality, for example, favored male descendants as heirs of household property and probably underlay the control of female sexuality reflected in the Bible.[30] And male officials outnumbered women in community roles. Such areas of male dominance were undoubtedly real, but they were not absolute. *Patriarchy*, therefore, has outlived its usefulness; it is not a suitable social-science construct for describing Israelite households or society.[31]

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-shunammite-woman-and-the-patriarchy-problem)

1. See Adele Reinhartz, “Jewish Women’s Scholarly Writings on the Bible,” *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc ZviBrettler (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2090.
2. A disconnect between formal or authoritative texts (like the Bible) and social reality is not uncommon; for examples, see Carol Meyers, “Seeing Double: Textual and Archaeological Images of Israelite Women,” in *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, edited by Yvonne Sherwood with the assistance of Anna Fisk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 514–18.
3. On gender hierarchy in the Bible, see Marc ZviBrettler, “Gender in the Bible,” in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc ZviBrettler (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2179–80.
4. Shunem, a site in the territory of Issachar according to Josh 19:18, is located on the southern edge of the Jezreel near Mount Gilboa.
5.
6. The woman and her family can be considered well-to-do because “reapers” are working for the family (2 Kings 8:18) and because they have multiple servants (2 Kings 8:22).
7. To be sure, she does say to her husband “let us make” the room. Yet she is credited with the renovation, for when the prophet (through his assistant Gehazi) offers recompense, the offer is addressed to her alone (2 Kings 8:13).
8. This designation is suggested by David E.S. Stein, “Dictionary of Gender in the Torah,” in *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation*, edited by David. E. S. Stein (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 403.
9. For a discussion of these texts, see Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2013), 187–92.
10. Here I’m summarizing part of my article “Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133 (2014): 8–27.
11. See Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society, and Its Relation to Modern Ideas* (London: John Murray, 1861); Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges,*La cité antique:* *Étude sur le culte, le droit, les institutions de la Grèce et de Rome* (Paris: Durand, 1864); and Lewis Henry Morgan, *Ancient Society, or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery, through Barbarism to Civilization* (New York: Holt, 1877).
12. Bernhard Stade, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (2 vols.; Berlin: Grote, 1887–1888).
13. Roland de Vaux,*Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. John McHugh; New York: McGraw Hill, 1961), 20.
14. *of the Old Testament*(London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 72.
15. Social analysis goes back to the Greeks if not earlier, but it did not emerge in academia until the end of the nineteenth century.
16. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (2 vols.; Tubingen: Mohr, 1922).
17. Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (trans. Stanley Godman and Peter Ackroyd from the second German edition [1954]; 2nd ed.; New York: Harper, 1960; 1st German ed., 1950), 108.
18. See the work of Roman historians Richard Saller (*Patriarchy, Property, and Death in the Roman Family* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994], especially chapter 5, “*Pietas* and *patria potestas*: obligation and power in the Roman household,” 102–32), and Suzanne Dixon (*The Roman Family* [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992]).
19. The nineteenth-century theorists assumed erroneously that the legal texts on which they based their formation of the patriarchy concept functioned just as European or American legal systems do.
20. Saller*, Patriarchy*, 2.
21. See Richard Saller “*Pater Familias*, *Mater Familias*, and the Gendered Semantics of the Roman Household,” *Classical Philology* 94 (1999): 182–97.
22. E.g., Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood, “Feminist Gender Research in Classical Archaeology,” in *Women in Antiquity: Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Archaeology*(ed. Sarah Milledge Nelson; Gender and Archaeology Series; Lanham, MD.: AltaMira, 2007), 29–74.
23. See, e.g., Celia E. Schultz, *Women’s Religious Activity in the Roman Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).
24. See my *Rediscovering Eve*, 125–70.
25. See, inter alia, Paloma González-Marcén, Sandra Montón-Subías, and Marina Picazo, “Towards an Archaeology of Maintenance Activities,” in*Engendering Social Dynamics: The Archaeology of Maintenance Activities*(ed. Sandra Montón-Subías and Margarita Sánchez-Romero; BAR International Series 1862; Oxford: Archaeopress, 2008), 3–8.
26. Ethnographic data from premodern societies in ecological environments in the Mediterranean basin similar to that of the Israelites provide information about gender dynamics in households dependent on women’s maintenance activities. These data indicate considerable female agency in running household affairs. See my *Rediscovering Eve*, 182–87.
27. For other issues, in addition to those mentioned here, see my “Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?,” 24–26.
28. A more suitable designation might be *heterarchy*, a term used by anthropologists to depict societies in which a hierarchical model does not allow for the complexities of social or political reality. See my “Hierarchy or Heterarchy? Archaeology and the Theorizing of Israelite Society,” in *Confronting the Past: Archaeological and Historical Essays in Honor of William G. Dever* (ed. Seymour Gitin, J. P. Dessel, and J. Edward Wright (Winona Lake, IN.: Eisenbrauns: 2006), 249–51; see also my discussion of “The Heterarchy Alternative” in *Rediscovering Eve*, 196-99.