

Dangerous Sisters in the Hebrew Bible

Yet even though the Bible needs dangerous sisters and invests in them, these characters defy patriarchal authority and come to unhappy ends. Their narratives function as cautionary tales that support patriarchal ideology, warning young women to curb their desires and serve the needs of their patriarchs. In this way, dangerous sisters are rhetorically powerful figures.

See Also: *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress, 2014).

Dr. Amy Kalmanofsky
Associate Professor of Bible
The Jewish Theological Seminary
August 2014

For good reason, sisters and their stories seem superfluous to the Bible's central story and to the world it reflects. Sisters and daughters maintained a precarious position within the Israelite family. Two customs ensured a young woman's marginal position within her natal family. First, as long as there were sons, daughters could not inherit their father's property, that is, property was passed patrilineally.¹ Second, once married, young women would leave their natal homes and join their husbands' families; that is, families lived patrilocally.² Given the patrilineal and patrilocal nature of the Israelite family, it is not surprising that sisters play minor roles within

¹ According to Num 27:1-11, a daughter could inherit her father's property if there were no sons and if she married within the paternal clan.

² See Daniel I. Block, "Marriage and Family in Ancient Israel," in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Downers Grove, IL; InterVarsity, 2003), p. 40.

the biblical narratives that are primarily concerned with securing Israel's inheritance.

As transient figures in their natal homes without inheritance rights, sisters have no natural place in the biblical story about heirs and property. In contrast, brothers dominate the Bible's family narratives. Rarely in these family narratives does the Bible seem to focus on sisters. And when it does, sisters could be seen, as Frederick E. Greenspahn sees them in his book *When Brothers Dwell Together*, to be pale reflections of the more dominant male characters in the family narratives.³

Yet this conventional reading can overlook the Bible's significant sisters. At particular moments of familial crisis and vulnerability within the patrilineal narratives, the Bible assigns sisters crucial roles. My goal in *Dangerous Sisters of the Hebrew Bible* (Fortress, 2014) is to understand how the Bible represents sisters and sisterhoods—women's networks not defined by immediate kinship ties—and to consider how they function within their discrete narratives as well as within the Bible at large. To understand how the Bible represents sisters and sisterhoods, I provide close literary readings of biblical sister and sisterhood stories. The sister stories I examine are the stories of Rachel and Leah; Michal and Merav; Israel and Judah who the

³ See Frederick E. Greenspahn, *When Brothers Dwell Together: The Preeminence of Younger Siblings in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 7.

prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel portray as sisters; Lot's daughters; and Tamar, David's daughter. The sisterhood stories I analyze are the stories of the daughters of humanity⁴, Moab⁵, the land⁶, and Israel⁷; the daughters of Jerusalem⁸; and Ruth and Naomi, who I argue form the Bible's most significant sisterhood.

Just as there is a typical brother story about rivalry and inheritance, there is a typical sister story concerned with the vulnerability of the natal household and a typical sisterhood story concerned with the vulnerability of Israelite society. Sisters and sisterhoods may be marginal and, at times, destabilizing figures, but they are crucial players in the biblical drama. Sisters, like Rachel and Leah, ensure the success of the designated patriarch; and sisterhood, as manifest in the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, provides a potent model for the divine-human relationship.

Two paradigms of sisters and sisterhoods—the “ideal” and the “dangerous”—shape the biblical passages and determine their broader narrative function. The paradigms of the ideal and dangerous sister offer an illustrative distillation of the Bible's gender ideology that works to preserve

⁴ Gen 6:1-4.

⁵ Numbers 25.

⁶ Genesis 34.

⁷ Judges 11.

⁸ The Song of Songs.

the power, property, and honor of the family's patriarchs, often at the expense of its females.

Within their narratives, ideal sisters serve the needs of their patriarchs and strengthen their patriarchal, most often natal, households. In contrast, dangerous sisters are destabilizing figures who assert an independent agency that challenges patriarchal authority and threatens the stability of the natal household. At heart, both of these paradigms reflect a sister's marginal status, and reveal her potential to be destructive within the narratives.

The majority of sister stories fit the dangerous-sister paradigm, in which an independent sister destabilizes a natal household in distress. Although they are destabilizing figures within their narratives, these dangerous sisters serve a crucial narrative purpose. The Bible employs dangerous sisters when it seeks to weaken certain households, like those of Lot, Laban, and Saul. In this way, dangerous sisters are *narratively* powerful figures that serve the interests of the Bible's grand story. They help solidify the power of the text's designated patriarch (Abraham, Jacob, and David, respectively) by working to remove a rival family from the narrative.

Yet even though the Bible needs dangerous sisters and invests in them, these characters defy patriarchal authority and come to unhappy ends. Their narratives function as cautionary tales that support patriarchal

ideology, warning young women to curb their desires and serve the needs of their patriarchs. In this way, dangerous sisters are *rhetorically* powerful figures.

Surprisingly, sisterhoods fare better than sisters in the Bible. Like sisters, sisterhoods conform to the paradigms of the ideal and the dangerous. Just as ideal sisters serve the needs of the patriarchal household, ideal sisterhoods serve the broader needs of patriarchal society. Just as dangerous sisters threaten households, dangerous sisterhoods threaten society.

The Bible's dangerous-sisterhood stories function as cautionary tales that encourage appropriate marriages and that warn Israelite men against intermarriage with foreign women. Though the Bible does portray many dangerous sisterhoods, it also offers several significant portraits of ideal ones. Most surprising in the Bible's patriarchal context is that sisterhood offers an alternative model of family that privileges love and loyalty over lineage and legacy. Naomi and Ruth's ideal sisterhood reflects this model and serves as a remarkable paradigm for God's relationship with Israel.

Dangerous Sisters offers close literary readings of biblical sister and sisterhood narratives. Given the confines of this essay, I illustrate the two paradigms and sketch some defining elements of the Bible's sister stories through brief portraits of two ideal and two dangerous sisters. Since all

sisters are daughters, it is fair to ask what differentiates sister stories from daughter stories or from any of the Bible's stories that feature women.

Following these portraits, I comment on the unique focus and characteristics that mark the Bible's sister and, by extension, its sisterhood stories.

Ideal Sister Miriam

Miriam functions as an ideal sister in Exodus 2. We first encounter her among the many women in the early chapters of Exodus who represent a variety of professional and familial roles. The lack of personal names given to these women identifies each character with her role. Professionally, there are midwives, attendants, and a wet nurse. The familial roles are wife, mother, daughter, and sister. In one way or another, all of these women act to save baby Moses, whose life is endangered by Pharaoh's command to drown the Israelite infant boys. Yet it is the baby's sister Miriam who not only protects the child by guarding him as he makes his way down the Nile River in a basket, but who also ensures the thriving of her natal family. Once the baby is discovered by Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam bravely approaches Pharaoh's daughter and suggests bringing a Hebrew wet nurse to nurse the child.⁹ Thus the sister enables the mother to reconnect with her child and thereby helps preserve her natal household.

⁹ Exod 2:7.

By protecting her brother Moses and by ensuring his connection with his family, Miriam functions as an ideal sister who serves the needs of her natal family. She has no identity apart from her role serving Moses and functions in this narrative only as a sister. She is one of the few biblical characters who functions in the role of the sister throughout her narratives. Exodus 15:20 identifies Miriam as a prophet and as Aaron's sister. Numbers 26:59 records her birth along with Aaron and Moses and identifies Miriam as "their sister." Remarkably, Miriam is never portrayed as a mother or a wife, though as we will see below, her role as a sister does develop and grows more complicated. In Numbers 12, Miriam, the ideal sister, becomes Miriam, the dangerous sister.

Ideal Sister Rebecca

Rebecca functions as a powerful wife and mother in most of her narratives, yet she first appears in Genesis 24 as an ideal sister. Genesis 24 tells the story of how Abraham, through the agency of his servant, finds an appropriate bride for his son Isaac. Having traveled to Mesopotamia to find a suitable bride, the servant meets Rebecca and discovers that she would be an appropriate wife for Isaac because she is the daughter of Betuel, Abraham's nephew. Yet Betuel plays no meaningful role in the narrative.¹⁰ Instead, his

¹⁰ Betuel is mentioned in Gen 24:15, 24.

son Laban, Rebecca's brother, is front and center and negotiates the marriage on behalf of his sister. Laban's central role in the narrative renders Rebecca primarily as a sister whose betrothal benefits and enriches her brother and her natal household and, only by implication, the household of her father. In exchange for Rebecca, the servant gives Laban and his mother silver, gold, cloth, and other precious objects in Gen 24:53. The specific mention of Rebecca's mother in this verse makes Betuel's absence in the marriage negotiations even more noticeable.

As an ideal sister, Rebecca directs her independent will and desire in service to her natal household. This is made clear when the servant is ready to leave and Laban and his mother ask Rebecca if she is willing to go. Rebecca replies: "I will go."¹¹ Happily, mother and son send her forth as their *sister*, וישלחו את-רבקה אהתם,¹² and Rebecca leaves bearing the specific blessings of, and marked as, a good sister as Gen 24:60 relates:

They blessed Rebecca and said to her: "Our sister, may you grow into multitudes. May your offspring inherit the gates of their enemies."

Dangerous Sister Dinah

In many ways, Dinah is the antithesis of Rebecca. Genesis 24 tells the story of a sister's appropriate marriage, which is sanctioned by a brother and

¹¹ Gen 24:58.

¹² Gen 24:59.

strengthens a natal household; Genesis 34 tells the story of an inappropriate marriage, unsanctioned by brotherly consent and demanding violent revenge. At the start of the narrative, Dinah leaves home [וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה] to see the daughters of the land. Dinah's independence as well as her desire for female companionship mark her as a dangerous sister and mark the daughters of the land as a dangerous sisterhood. In the narrative's patriarchal ideology, the dangerous sister gets what she deserves for independently leaving the protection of her natal home. Instead of seeing [לראות], Dinah is seen by Shechem [וירא אתה שכם], taken by him, perhaps into his home [ויקח אותה], and sexually violated [וישכב אתה ויענה]. By the close of the narrative, the independent, once active sister, becomes a dependent and completely passive figure. Mirroring or mocking Shechem and Dinah's initial audacious acts, the brothers *take* their sister and *bring her out* of Shechem's house [ויקחו את-דינה מבית שכם ויצאו].

Although Dinah returns tamed to her natal home, irrevocable damage has been done to her and to Jacob's household due to Simeon and Levi's vigilante slaughter of the Hivites, as Jacob's reproach to his sons reveals: "You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land."¹³ At the end of Genesis 34, Jacob's house is vulnerable.

¹³ Gen 34:30.

Though Jacob blames his sons for the state of his household, his sons blame their sister. They did what they had to do. Whatever the consequent damage to their household, they could not allow their sister to be treated like a whore.

Dangerous Sister Miriam

As mentioned above, Miriam functions in Exodus 2 as an ideal sister who protects and sustains her natal household. Yet in Numbers 12, Miriam becomes a dangerous sister who asserts her independence by speaking against Moses's choice of a Cushite wife and by challenging his prophetic status. Although brother Aaron also challenges Moses, only Miriam, the sister, is punished. God strikes Miriam with leprosy and banishes her from the camp. Her punishment fits both her crime and her marginal status as a sister within the patriarchal household. Her challenge against Moses's prophetic status, results in her being shunned by God and removed from the camp.

Miriam's assertion that Moses introduced an inappropriate bride into the family, results in Miriam being removed from her family. When appealing to Moses to heal their sister, Aaron compares her leprous body to a fetus ejected from its mother's womb.¹⁴ With this image, Aaron suggests

¹⁴ Num 12:12.

that Miriam has been aborted from her family. Moses prays on Miriam's behalf. Once healed and punished, Miriam returns to the camp, yet it remains unclear whether she is ever fully reintegrated into her family. The verb used to describe her reintegration into the community, קָאָה , typically appears in the expression "gathered to one's kin" connoting death. Both Aaron and Moses are said to be gathered to their kin upon their deaths.¹⁵ Yet the expression is noticeably absent in Num 20:1, which is the very next mention of Miriam and records her death. The absence of this expression at her burial suggests that dangerous sister Miriam had been accepted back into the Israelite community, but not into her natal family.

These brief portraits of ideal and dangerous sisters illustrate the expectations and the anxieties associated with sisters in the Bible and reflect a fear of female agency. Their focus is on the natal household that sisters, as temporary members, can either strengthen or weaken. Of course, fears of female agency and desire are not directed only against sisters in the Bible. All women provoke these fears within the patriarchal context of the biblical narrative. Yet a woman's particular role in the narratives shapes the way fears are manifest, and her specific role raises particular anxieties. Since sisters are also daughters, their stories share common elements with daughter

¹⁵ Num 20:24 and 27:13.

stories. Yet, they introduce unique elements, challenges, and anxieties related to a sister's sibling status, in relation to brothers or to other sisters.

As the paired sister stories of Rachel and Leah, Michal and Merav, Israel and Judah, and Lot's daughters show, the interpersonal relationship among sisters is a complicating factor. The interpersonal relationship among women is naturally a factor in the sisterhood stories as well. The portraits offered above reveal the centrality and particular complexities of the brother-sister relationship. In these portraits, the brother, and not the father, appears to be the primary patriarch in the sister's life. Miriam saves her brother's life. Laban negotiates Rebecca's marriage. Dinah's brothers avenge her sexual violation.

These portraits reveal defining features of the Bible's sister stories, which remain evident even when they are adapted to stories about collective sisterhoods. Sister stories focus on the patriarchal natal household, manifest fears of female agency and desire, and are concerned with, or framed by, the sibling relationship. Sisterhood stories manifest a similar dynamic with a broader focus on Israelite society. Here, too, these narratives reflect the fears of the biblical text of female agency and desire; and the stories are concerned with the interpersonal relationship among women.

Scholars have often failed to notice that sisters and sisterhoods are critical figures in the biblical narrative. Sisters build the house of Jacob and establish the house of David. Most remarkably, it is Ruth and Naomi's sisterhood that establishes the Davidic dynasty and provides a paradigm for the divine-human relationship. Sisters and sisterhoods are not superfluous, but are essential figures in the Bible.