

WHO IS HIDING THE TRUTH?
 DECEPTIVE WOMEN AND BIBLICAL ANDROCENTRISM

Esther Fuchs

Deceptiveness is a common characteristic of women in the Hebrew Bible. It is a motif that runs through most narratives involving women, both condemnatory and laudatory ones. From Eve to Esther, from Rebekah to Ruth, the characterization of women presents deceptiveness as an almost inescapable feature of femininity. The message that such characterizations convey is explicit in Ecclesiastes: "And I found more bitter than death the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters; he who pleases God escapes her but the sinner is taken by her" (Eccl 7:26).¹ In this exploratory essay, I would like to examine the close association of woman and deceptiveness in the context of power-structured relations between men and women in the Hebrew Bible. My main focus will be on the manner in which the biblical narrative uses literary strategies in order to foster and perpetuate its patriarchal ideology. This essay suggests that the presentation of women as characters who hide the truth reveals not only the extent of the Bible's androcentric bias but also the manner in which the biblical narrative suppresses the truth about woman's subjugation within the patriarchal framework.

One of the things that the biblical text fails to make explicit in its treatment of deceptive acts perpetrated by women is their close relationship to woman's inferior social position and political powerlessness in patriarchal society. Rebekah's deception of the old and blind Isaac does not so much as hint at the wife's powerlessness versus her husband. It does not take into account that deception is Rebekah's only means of granting her preferred son a blessing. The fact is that Isaac, despite his dramatized impotence, is superior to Rebekah in power, yet it is Rebekah who is presented as a powerful woman who outsmarts an ailing old man.²

¹ This and all the following quotations are based on the RSV (1952) unless otherwise indicated.

² For a feminist rehabilitation of Rebekah see Christine Carside Allen, "Who Was Rebekah? 'On Me Be the Curse, My Son,'" *Beyond Androcentrism—New Essays on*

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In the first place it is Rebekah who initiates the act of deception (Gen 27:5-6). Eavesdropping on Isaac's conversation with Esau, in which the father asks his son to bring him game and savory food before he gives him his blessing, Rebekah summons Jacob and *orders* him to follow her scheme: "Now therefore, my son, obey my word as I command you. Go to the flock and fetch me two good kids, that I may prepare from them savory food for your father, such as he loves; and you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies" (Gen 27:8-10). When Jacob protests that Isaac will surely recognize him for he is "a smooth" man, whereas Esau is "hairy," Rebekah remains undaunted: "Upon me be the curse, my son; only obey my word, and go fetch them to me" (v 13). The detailed description of the deception revolves around Rebekah, while Jacob plays the role of the obedient son. (The text does not condemn Rebekah for her deceptiveness. On the contrary, it implies that her actions are in harmony with Yahweh's plan. But if Rebekah acts in accordance with Yahweh's will, why does she resort to deception? The fact is that Rebekah deceives Isaac not because she is a devious wife but because legally she is inferior and subordinate to Isaac. Within biblical patriarchy, the institute of primogeniture and parental blessings applied strictly to males. Mothers could not give blessings to their children any more than daughters could receive them. Had Rebekah been able to express her love for Jacob through maternal blessings, she would not have needed to use deception. She would have in all probability blessed Jacob by herself. Although the narrative presents the woman as a strong-willed character, who outsmarts her husband and acts out her wishes, Rebekah is in fact as underprivileged as her son Jacob. Had Rebekah been socially and legally equal to her husband, deception would have been unnecessary.)

Potiphar's wife is another female character presented as an insidious and powerful wife. Rejected by her handsome Hebrew servant Joseph, the exasperated Egyptian court lady decides to win him by force: "she caught him by his garment, saying: 'Lie with me'" (Gen 39:12). The faithful Joseph refuses to betray his master and flees, leaving his garment in the woman's hands. The deceitful woman turns the symbol of Joseph's innocence into incriminating evidence: "The Hebrew servant whom you have brought among us, came into me to insult me; but as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment with me, and fled out of the house" (Gen 39:17-18). Although the narrative does not condemn Potiphar's wife directly, it does so implicitly through the detailed description of her deceptive histrionics. What the narrative does *not*

Women and Religion (ed. Rita M. Gross; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977) 183-216. Allen takes the view that Rebekah was grossly misjudged by biblical interpreters rather than by the text itself.

consider is the double standard it uses in its condemnation of Potiphar's wife. Had Potiphar himself seduced a maid servant he would not have been condemned for either betraying or deceiving his wife, since patriarchal monogamy applies exclusively to women.³ Since the wife's legal status vis-à-vis her husband was little more than that of a servant, only she stood to be condemned for her betrayal of her husband-master. It is doubtful that the biblical narrative would have found it necessary to report an incident in which the husband deceives his wife having seduced one of his maid servants, let alone condemn him for it.

Having considered the deceptive woman as mother and wife, it is now time to turn to the deceptive daughter in the biblical narrative. One of the most prominent examples in this regard is Rachel. The Bible tells us that Rachel steals her father's idols (*tērāpîm*) without explaining her motives (Gen 31:19). As much as the narrative derides the treacherous Laban and his idol worship, the validity of Rachel's actions remains highly questionable, especially when contrasted with Jacob's uprightness. Despite his continuous exploitation by Laban, Jacob departs from his father-in-law's house taking only what legally belongs to him. One wonders, however, if Rachel would have to deceive her father were she entitled to his inheritance as a son would be.⁴ Since daughters are not allowed to share their father's inheritance, the only way in which Rachel could appropriate any of her father's possessions was through theft. As she and Leah put it themselves: "Is there any portion or inheritance left to us in our father's house?" (Gen 31:14). While the text describes in detail Rachel's devious trick, sitting atop the camel on the stolen gods and claiming that she cannot get up because "the way of women is upon" her (31:35), it remains silent about her motivation. It is of course possible that Rachel steals her father's gods out of spite or vindictiveness, a motivation well justified considering her father's treatment of her; nevertheless, this justification would not have counterbalanced—even if it were explicitly stated in the text—the negative implications generated by her presentation as a deceptive daughter.

The histrionic device used by Achsah, the daughter of Caleb, in order to win fertile land from her father is another episode presenting the deceptive daughter in a highly ambiguous light. In all likelihood Achsah would not have had to use pretense in her attempt to secure property for herself had she not been a woman (Josh 15:18). Achsah, who was "given" by Caleb, her father, as prize to Othniel (Josh 15:17) for conquering Kiriath-sepher, is

³ On the position of wives in biblical patriarchy, see Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York and Toronto: McGraw-Hill, reprinted 1965) I. 24–40. See also Phyllis Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," *Religion and Sexism* (ed. Rosemary R. Rueher; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) 41–88.

⁴ *Ancient Israel*, I. 24–26.

compelled deceptively to coax her father into giving her what a son would have obtained by right.⁵

Even when women's motivation for deceiving is defensible, their very act of deception produces an ambivalent effect that is bound to compromise their character as a whole. Lot's daughters deceptively inebriate and have illicit intercourse with their father for a good reason, to continue the human race (Gen 19:31-32). Yet, the deceptive means by which they seek to fulfill their goal casts a questionable light on their conduct. The final evaluation of their conduct is implied by the fact that their sons become Israel's archenemies: Ammon and Moab. In the final analysis Lot's daughters act in accordance with their foremost duty within the framework of biblical patriarchy. Had they been male, they may have been able to act with the magnanimity of Shem and Japheth, who respectfully cover their naked father, Noah, as he lies drunk in his tent; rather than exploit his nakedness (Gen 9:23).

To challenge the authority of her father the biblical daughter almost invariably resorts to deception. Sons, on the other hand, use direct means as well. Jonathan challenges his father Saul on behalf of David, whereas Michal, in order to save David's life, uses deception (1 Sam 19:12-17).

In most cases woman's deception of man is motivated by fear and impotence, but the biblical text rarely refers to this factor. In contrast, it is careful to point out fear when it serves as the motivating principle behind man's deception of man. Thus the Bible stresses that Abram deceives Pharaoh concerning the true identity of Sarai, his wife, out of fear for his life. Recognizing his inferior political status as Pharaoh's subject, Abram urges his wife to collaborate with him: "Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life be spared on your account" (Gen 12:13). Isaac too pretends that Rebekah is his sister "for he feared to say 'my wife'" (Gen 26:7). Woman's fear of man, on the other hand, is not made explicit as her motive for deception.

The biblical text ignores the factor of woman's subordination to man underlying her nefarious behavior pattern. Instead of pointing up the inevitable link between her alleged deceptiveness and her powerlessness, the biblical text dramatizes her deceptiveness as her most lethal and effective weapon against man. The deceptive woman is normally condemned when she wields deception to gain something for herself. Delilah, for example, deceives Samson in exchange for money: "And the lords of the Philistines came to her and said to her: 'Entice him and see wherein his great strength lies, and by what means we may overpower him, that we may bind him to subdue him; and we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver'" (Judg 16:5). The characterization of Delilah reflects the Israelite fear and distrust of the foreign woman. Delilah's successful

⁵ *Ancient Israel*, 1. 53-55.

deception of Samson spells a lesson in national as well as in sexual politics; do not trust women, especially if they happen to be foreign and beautiful. Jezebel is not only a foreign woman but also a powerful queen. As such she presents a threatening image in the biblical frame of reference. The Bible imputes to Jezebel as well an act of deception. She is said to have staged a false trial against Naboth the Jezreelite for refusing to sell his vineyard to Ahab, the king (1 Kgs 21:8-11). For her deceptiveness and her idolatrous transgressions Jezebel is brutally penalized: "So they threw her down; and some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses and they trampled on her" (2 Kgs 9:33).

The biblical double standard becomes clear when we compare Jezebel's deception of Naboth with King David's deception of Uriah. Not only does David deceive an innocent man, he deceives one of his most loyal and dedicated subjects (2 Samuel 11). Both rulers covet a possession that does not belong to them. In the case of Jezebel it is Naboth's vineyard, in the case of David it is Bathsheba, Uriah's wife. Jezebel accuses Naboth falsely and brings about his death, while David orders Uriah dead in order to appropriate to himself the Hittite's wife. Yet David is given a chance to repent, be punished, and finally be absolved. Not only is he forgiven for his deception, murder, and unlawful appropriation of another's property, but he is allowed to keep this property and make her into a wife. Jezebel is not given a similar chance.

Deception in male-related contexts is condoned, even recommended when the underprivileged deceiver struggles for dominance over his superior or oppressor. Women's deception on the other hand is condemned when it appears to be self-serving. Women retain a semblance of respectability when their deception assists a weaker male in a power struggle against a stronger one. (Incidents depicting women deceiving men for the sake of another woman are non-existent in the Bible). When Rachel deceives Laban, she sides with her exploited husband, Jacob. Michal deceives Saul for the sake of the persecuted David, and Rebekah deceives Isaac for the sake of Jacob.

On the national level, women assisting the Israelites against their usually mightier enemies are exonerated and even extolled. Thus Rahab, who deceives her own people and assists the Israelite spies, is a positive role model (Joshua 2). Similarly Jael the Midianite, who deceptively kills Sisera the Canaanite, is praised for her valor and cunning: "Most blessed of women be Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. He asked water and she gave him milk, she brought him curds in a lordly bowl. She put her hand to the tent peg and her right hand to the workmen's mallet; she struck Sisera a blow, she crushed his head, she shattered and pierced his temple" (Judg 5:24-26).

Solidarity with one's late husband is another factor that commonly rewards woman for her deceptive acts. Examples are Tamar and Ruth,

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who deceive in order to insure the patrilineage of their late husbands. Tamar dresses up as a prostitute and seduces Judah, her father-in-law. When discovered pregnant, Tamar is ordered by Judah to be put to death (Gen 38:24). This indicates the risk Tamar takes in her effort to perpetuate the name of Er. The paradox is that Tamar deceives Judah for his own sake. For her self-abnegation and loyalty to her husband, Tamar is rewarded by giving birth to Perez, King David's progenitor. Tamar's deceptiveness is construed as a heroic deed, not as a product of female guile. In the final analysis Tamar is exalted for her acceptance of the patriarchal status quo. Instead of protesting the unjust lot of a widow bound to remain unmarried, Tamar endorses these constraints and even uses deceit to ensure their perpetuation.

Ruth is yet another heroine who uses deception, although in a milder form, in order to marry Boaz, a relative of her late husband Mahlon. Rather than approach Boaz directly, Ruth first disguises her own identity and, only in the middle of the night when he wakes up startled to find her sleeping by his feet in the barn, reveals her identity and asks for his protection (i.e., marriage) (Ruth 3:9). Ruth's cunning initiative and loyalty to Mahlon reward her with giving birth to Obed, the grandfather of King David (Ruth 4:21-22).

Woman's deception is acceptable and even recommended when her motives are selfless and when she attempts to promote the cause of man. Yet the ascription of deceptiveness even to the most exalted female role models tarnishes their luminousness. Rebekah's support of Jacob is in compliance with Yahweh's preference, but the detailed dramatization of her unscrupulous deception of her helpless husband and unsuspecting son detracts from her moral stature and imprints her with an indelible culpability. Jael's courageous loyalty to the Israelites is indeed highly praised in the biblical text, but the repeated dramatization of the deceptively hospitable welcome she extends to the exhausted Sisera injects her image with a foul taste of treachery. It is true that she is extolled as a national heroine, but she also emerges as a threatening figure in the context of relations between men and women. If the negative characterization of foreign powerful women conveys a clear didactic message to the male reader, the positive characterization of treacherous women conveys an ambivalent message concerning the female "race." The safest thing for man to do is to distrust woman, or as the book of Ecclesiastes put it: "... he who pleases God escapes her" (Eccl 7:26).

The discriminatory treatment of deceptive women is reflected in two major strategies manipulated by the biblical text: the suppression of motivation, especially when the deceptive act is directly related to woman's inferior status and political powerlessness, and the negative presentation of women who deceive for causes that are not meant to enhance male power.

This discriminatory treatment produces female portraits intended, among other things, to validate the suspicion that women's apparent impotence is nothing but a deceptive disguise, that underneath their vulnerable coyness lurks a dangerously calculating mind. This suspicion is dramatized in "positive" role models, such as Jael or Rahab, as much as in negative ones, such as Delilah and Jezebel. It underlies the characterization of the biblical matriarchs as much as it does the nameless harlot in Solomon's trial. To the extent that female biblical characters are fictional, the repeated ascription of deceptiveness to them reveals not only a distrusting gynophobia but also a political statement that seeks to perpetuate the subordination of women based on their alleged moral deficiency. The character of Eve is a case in point. The narrative ignores the fact that having been created from and for Adam (according to Genesis 2), Eve is already a priori subordinate to him. It also disregards the possible link between this state of subordination and her susceptibility to the serpent's words; having missed the direct instructions of God, which could possibly counteract her impressionability, Eve receives the divine injunction through the mediation of Adam. For her deceptiveness and disobedience, which could be linked to her a priori subordination, she is penalized with a greater degree of subordination to her husband (Gen 3:16). By ascribing moral inferiority to the first woman, the story of Genesis seeks to justify her social inferiority and to promote the ideology that supports man's supremacy over woman.

The strategic manipulation of narrative for ideological purposes is not different essentially in narrative contexts that may conceivably represent historical events and characters. By allowing women only a secondary literary status, the biblical narrative foregrounds woman's deceptiveness to a far greater extent than it does in the case of male biblical heroes. Thus Rahab, Jael, Delilah, and Jezebel are characterized mostly through the dramatization of their deceptive acts, whether positively or negatively evaluated. Rachel's and Rebekah's deceptive acts are also far more emphasized than, for example, the deceptive acts of Abraham, Jacob, or David, if only by the mere fact that as secondary characters they are not allowed to evolve and change. The scenic dramatization of women's virtue is not detailed enough to counterbalance the impact of their deceptiveness, and, very often, their virtuous and deceptive acts are inextricably intertwined in a single scene that speaks for their entire character.

Celebrated or denigrated, the characters of deceptive women, which constitute the majority of female characters in the Bible, serve as an effective ideological tool that perpetuates the suspicion and distrust of women, and that validates women's subordination through discriminatory literary techniques. Our awareness of the double standard underlying both their presentation and their evaluation helps us realize that the

recurrent association of femaleness and deceptiveness reflects a gynophobic and patriarchal attitude rather than an inherent moral deficiency that predisposes women to dishonesty. The alleged female deceptiveness is not a product of woman's innate insidiousness but a result of the power-structured relations between men and women as reflected in the artistic construction of the biblical narrative. The real deception is not committed by biblical women but by the androcentric text, which ignores or suppresses the motivations of the female character, especially when they are related to her powerlessness vis-à-vis men, and which applies discriminating evaluative bench marks to her conduct. The biblical text ignores the fact that if indeed prevalent, female deception of men stems from women's subordinate social status and from the fact that patriarchy debars them from direct action. By uncovering this hidden fact we may be in a better position to understand and reevaluate what appears to be one of the most ambiguous characteristics of women in the Hebrew Bible.)