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Food Insecurity and Gendered Vulnerability: Sarai/Sarah and Rebekah in Genesis

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Ateneo de Manila University
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Food Insecurity & Gendered Vulnerability – Sarai/Sarah and Rebekah in Genesis

Ma. Maricel S. Ibita, Ph.D, STD

Ateneo de Manila University.

Good day, everyone! Thank you for the introduction, Prof. Tsalampouni. Welcome again to our Bible, Ecology and Sustainability Research Unit of the European Association of Biblical Studies here at Sofia University in Bulgaria. **I am Maricel Ibita from the Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines and my research and presence today acknowledge with gratitude the conference subsidy provided by the Office of Research, Creative Work and Innovation. My topic for today is Food Insecurity & Gendered Vulnerability – Sarai/Sarah and Rebekah in Genesis.**

Introduction:

These critical times typified by postglobal economics and politics, postnational migration, posthuman ecological emergency, post-truth, and the COVID-19 pandemic have multiplier effects on the vulnerabilities of certain sectors in the society. The wickedness of these problems coupled with military-political conflicts, ecological degradation, and widespread

of diseases results in a multi-layered physiological-psychological, socio-economic, and gender concerns which could be exemplified by food insecurity and is suffered mostly by women. These contemporary concerns find echo in the narratives of how famine in the Scriptures endanger women and children, just like the three Genesis stories of Sarai/Sarah and Rebekah. I, therefore, suggest that an intersectional-ecological reading of these stories will yield for us alternative insights on the characters of these women protagonists and the implications they have on countering sexual exploitation and promoting women flourishing during critical times. In this presentation, I will employ the principles of ecological hermeneutics as outlined in the Earth Bible Project – suspicion, identification and retrieval - in synchronically reading the utility of wife-sister motif during famine in Genesis 12:10-13:1, 20:1-18; and 26:1-13. In suspicion, I will address the question of whether Abram/Abraham and Isaac were pimps or protectors of their wives. I will then succinctly characterize Sarai/Sarah and Rebekah to identify the intersection of vulnerabilities they faced in terms of socio-economic class, ethnicity, and gender in this triple incidence of famine. Finally, I will endeavor to retrieve the response of these heroines in face of gender vulnerability amidst famine and how can they inspire us to flourish in rebuilding a more inclusive and safer (post)COVID-19 world, particularly for women, as we work for the attainment of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, principally Zero Hunger (2), Good Health and Well-being (3) and Gender Equality (5).

Let us take a look first at what the NGO, Plan International, reported last January 2023. They said that:

“Sexual violence, exploitation and child marriage: Girls and women risk becoming “invisible” victims of devastating global hunger crisis

Girls and women are at greater risk of gender-based violence as a result of global food shortages. For them, girls risk becoming “invisible” victims as a combination of the climate crisis, conflict in Ukraine and other countries, and economic shocks have left 50 million people worldwide on the brink of starvation.”

[Beyond Hunger: The gendered impacts of the global hunger crisis - World | ReliefWeb](#)

Plan International’s earlier study revealed that:

Women and girls account for 70% of the world’s hungry and when food is scarce, girls are often among the worst affected. Girls are more likely than boys to be taken out of school when families come under strain and for those who continue to attend school, hunger can severely impact their learning. Girls are also at heightened risk of child and forced marriage, as well as violence.

For Relief Web,

Various studies have pointed out at 3 Cs as the causes of hunger in contemporary times: the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and the various military conflicts around the world.

World Vision, another NGO, noted that global hunger which alarmingly increases globally is now characterized by the causes and facts that you see on the screen. (see [Global hunger: 7 facts you need to know | World Vision](#)). For today, let us focus on the 3Ds of no.4, that distressing, dangerous decisions against girls and women are often made by families to have enough food.

This situation is not new. Women have always been at the forefront of hunger and vulnerability. A disturbing semblance could be read in Genesis when the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac exposed Sarai and Rebekah to risks during a famine. Like father, like son? Like mother, like wife?

The[ir] report called ‘World Hunger and its Impact on Girls’, presents findings from the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study that has been following the lives of girls and their families in nine countries since the girls’ births in 2006. The research presented took place across 2021 and 2022 when the girls were aged 14-16. Girls and their caregivers were interviewed. The study covers Brazil, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Benin, Togo, Uganda, the Philippines, Cambodia and Vietnam. While these countries are not classified as high risk for food insecurity, the data from the study shows that the current global food crisis is affecting girls and their families even beyond the most at risk countries.

[Real Choices, Real Lives: World Hunger and Its Impact on Girls - World | ReliefWeb](#)

The European Union noted that this 2024, the countries you see on the screen are the most vulnerable against hunger.

According to the report, the 10 countries with world’s largest food crisis in 2023 were the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Sudan, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen, the Syrian Arab Republic, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Myanmar. These are the same countries as in 2022 with the exception of Bangladesh, which replaced Ukraine in the list.

[Alarming number of people worldwide suffer high levels of acute food insecurity - European Commission \(europa.eu\).](#)

In 2021, most studies noted that three Cs fuel the global food insecurity: COVID-19 health crisis, conflicts or war, and the climate emergency. However, they warned:

Do not, however, think that food insecurity only happens in the global south. The richer countries in the North also suffer hunger. A 2019 study of Poland & Bootch found out that food insecurity exists in developed countries and hunger results from injustice and violation of human rights. They note that in Australia and Japan (21.7% of households, ~4.6 million people and 15.7%, ~19.8 million, respectively in 2012—based on 50–60% of the national poverty line); Canada (7.7%, ~1.9 million in 2007/8); the European Union (8.7% or 43.6 million when 27 countries are included); and the US (15% of the population, ~50 million)

One of the disturbing and devastating decisions that a person or a family may make is called FOOD PROSTITUTION or Sex for Food as national newspaper Rappler noted ten years ago in 2014.

[google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwit4l3w1Z6HAXWdk1YBHeVHBPwQFnoECCUQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rappler.com%2Fmoveph%2F65735-food-prostitutes-death-hunger-feeding-program%2F&usg=AOvVaw11v7qm3uTaO559-hMDf8&opi=89978449](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwit4l3w1Z6HAXWdk1YBHeVHBPwQFnoECCUQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.rappler.com%2Fmoveph%2F65735-food-prostitutes-death-hunger-feeding-program%2F&usg=AOvVaw11v7qm3uTaO559-hMDf8&opi=89978449). This predicament is also seen in Zimbabwe in 2021 ([Child prostitution surges in hunger-hit Zimbabwe DevelopmentAid](#)). In India, it is called “survival sex” ([221-224 DHANISHA K.S.pdf \(rjelal.com\)](#)). Former sex workers in Mexico had to return to the trade because of the COVID-19 pandemic ([In Mexico, hunger and unemployment force many former sex workers back into trade amid COVID-19 pandemic – Firstpost](#)).

[google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwit4l3w1Z6HAXWdk1YBHeVHBPwQFnoECCkQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fmwnation.com%2Fpoverty-hunger-fuelling-prostitution%2F&usg=AOvVaw3dGt8y1ICx_f6bv5SKXZvz&opi=89978449](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwit4l3w1Z6HAXWdk1YBHeVHBPwQFnoECCkQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fmwnation.com%2Fpoverty-hunger-fuelling-prostitution%2F&usg=AOvVaw3dGt8y1ICx_f6bv5SKXZvz&opi=89978449)

This cycle of starvation and prostitutions is a dilemma, be it in Israel, in Swaziland ([Starvation vs. Prostitution - Opinion - Haaretz.com](#); [221-224 DHANISHA K.S.pdf \(rjelal.com\)](#)) as it becomes a last resort for adults and children pimped even by their families. At the height of the pandemic, online sexual abuse of children forced by parents to do sexually suggestive acts also shot up, as we have seen in the Philippines ([View of Online Child Sexual Exploitation in the Philippines: Moving beyond the current discourse and approach | Anti-Trafficking Review \(antitraffickingreview.org\)](#); [Online sexual exploitation of children in the Philippines: A scoping review – ScienceDirect](#); [Cybercrime Module 12 Key Issues: Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse \(unodc.org\)](#)). These online abuses are done through “grooming”, posting of child sexual abuse materials, and even live online child sexual abuse ([Cybercrime Module 12 Key Issues: Online Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse \(unodc.org\)](#))

One of the distressing examples during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic are some parents exposing their children to online prostitution because of the money it generates to support their basic needs and the faulty idea that the children are safe just because the pedophiles from richer countries which prowl against them are “not seen” onsite.

In his almost decade-old encyclical on the care for our common home, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis underlined that: To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system.

Laudato Si, 111. Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the immediate problems of pollution, environmental decay and the depletion of natural resources. There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm. Otherwise, even the best ecological initiatives can find themselves caught up in the same globalized logic. To seek only a technical remedy to each environmental problem which comes up is to separate what is in reality interconnected and to mask the true and deepest problems of the global system.

Let us now analyze the famine stories in Genesis involving Sarai and Rebekah from the lens of ecological biblical hermeneutics, following the steps suggested by the Earth Bible Project, the trailblazer of this approach in contemporary times: Suspicion, Identification, Retrieval.

II.

To concretize the call of *Laudato Si* for ecological education and spirituality, I propose that a vital component of changing our mindset and respond to the ecological crisis is to have a transformational ecological education. It means rethinking religion in general and rereading Christian Scriptures by means of contemporary ecological biblical hermeneutics, in particular. Of course, other religious traditions can also be done this and applied to their own sacred scriptures. Please take a look at Figure 1 as I expound below.

In *ecothological* education, we will use contemporary ecological biblical hermeneutics as lens in interpreting the text. It focuses on the relations with and among the divine, humans and non-humans. As Francis underlined in *Laudate Deum*, a follow-up exhortation on ecology:

the world that surrounds us is not an object of exploitation, unbridled use and unlimited ambition. Nor can we claim that nature is a mere “setting” in which we develop our lives and our projects. For “we are part of nature, included in it and thus

in constant interaction with it”, [18] and thus “we [do] not look at the world from without but from within” (no.25).

This insight can also be applied to critically interpret our sacred scriptures, own cultural myths, our constitutions, legal texts and international treaties, classical stories, poetry and songs! As you can see in the circular figure, it is vital in ecological hermeneutics to read your text – visual, aural, written-any text – and see what kind of story we have and how are the characters represented or depicted so that ecological healing of the mind, of our words and actions can happen.

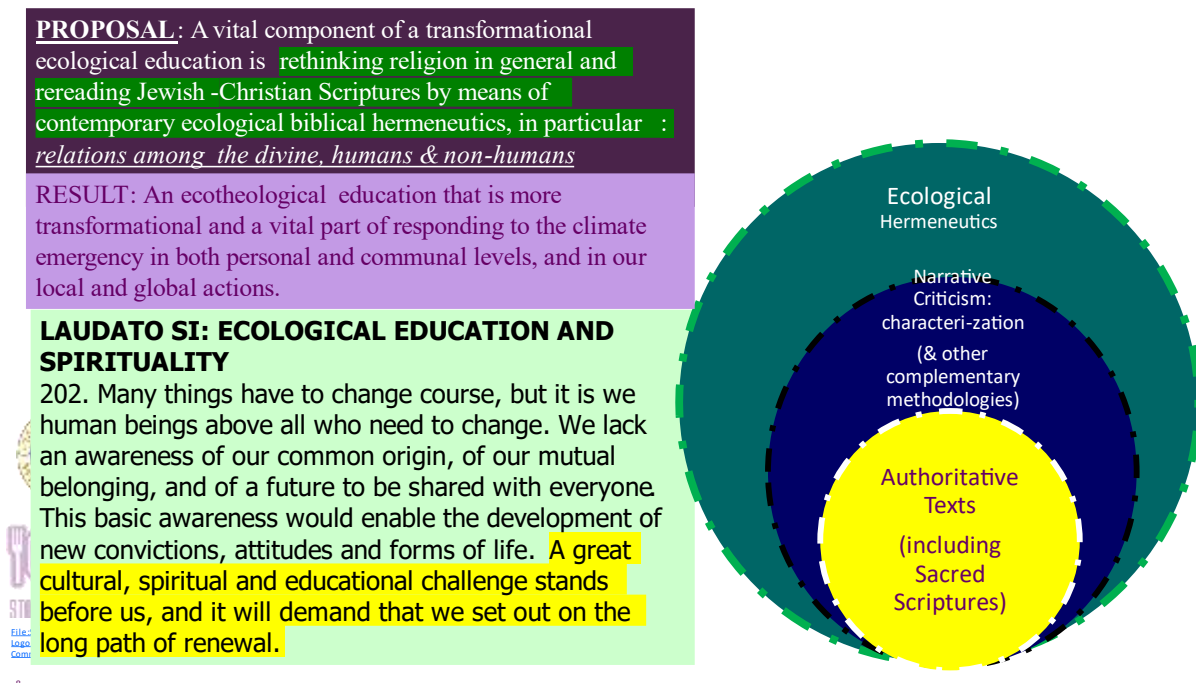


Figure 1: Response of Humanities to the Ecological Crisis

Anchoring our reading in narrative analysis, especially characterization, we focus on the various characters which can be God, humans or non-human creation. As you could see on Figure 2 where we have the template of characterization, we closely read the words and actions of each character, and analyze its result based on their dynamics which shows how characters dynamically interact between and among each other. Here we can underline the unique relations as you can see in Hilary Marlow’s ecological triangle which I modified to include underlining relationships, see Figure 2. The close reading is also guided with a hermeneutical lens which feminist reading uses, namely, suspicion, identification, and retrieval. Here, we particularly focus on the women – Sarai and Rebekah – and the other non-human creatures.

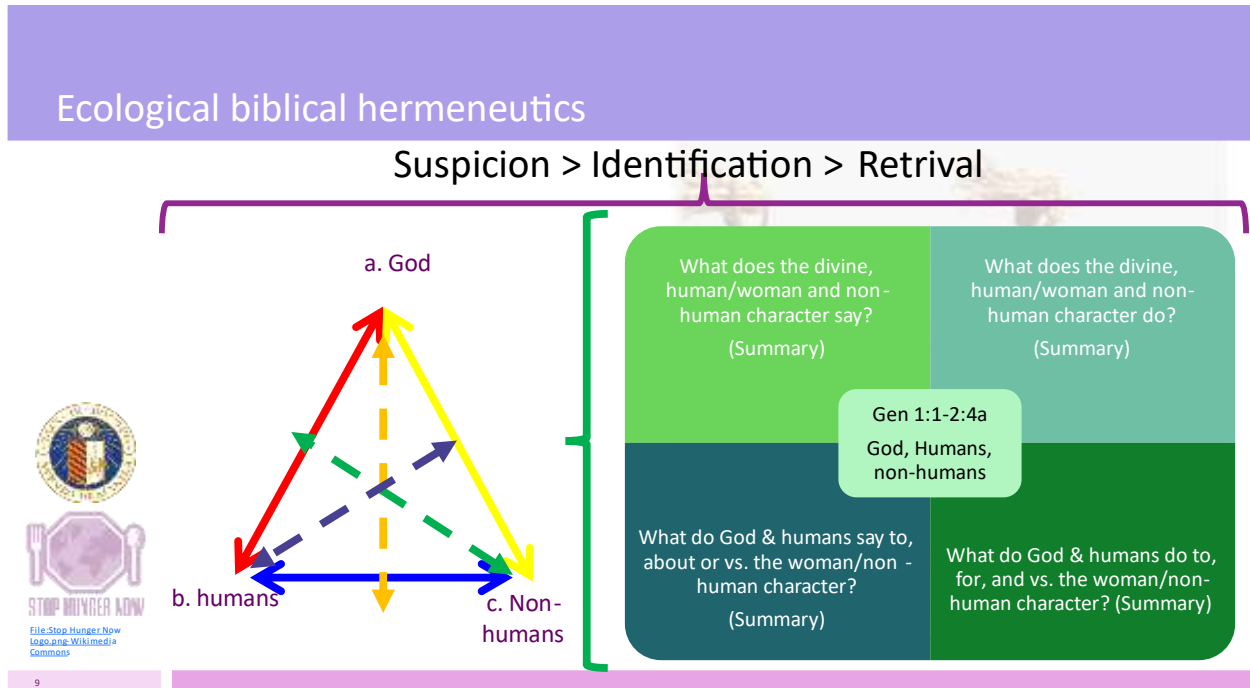


Figure 2: Modified Ecological Triangle & Characterization Template

So how do we do employ ecological hermeneutics to our sacred scriptures: on Old Testament, New Testament and also including intertestamental texts?

II. SUSPICION

Let us now subject the Lies of the Patriarchs, Risks for the Matriarchs under suspicion. You can follow the RSV flow of the story as I point out some observations on Figure 3.

Sarai

¹⁰ **Now there was a famine in the land** . So **Abram** went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. ¹¹ When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to **Sarai his wife**, "I know that you are a woman beautiful to behold; ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account."

¹⁴ When Abram entered Egypt the **Egyptians** saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵ And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. **And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.**

¹⁶ And for her sake **he** dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, he -asses, menservants, maidservants, she -asses, and camels.

¹⁷ But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

¹⁸ So **Pharaoh** called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹ Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone."

²⁰ And **Pharaoh** gave men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, **with his wife and all that he had** . (Gen. 12:10-20 RSV)

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Figure 3: Characterization of Sarai in Gen 12:10-20

The first text we have happened in Gen 12, just after the immediate following of Abram to the LORD's command of leaving Haran and his father to a promised land and descendants. If that was his hero moment, this episode is Abram's zero moment in terms of his relation with Sarai.

For Abram, indicated by black font:

1. Sarai: a woman beautiful to behold
2. As Abram's wife, she will be the cause of his death when other men see her
3. So she was instructed to "lie" about their relationship for the man's "going well" *because of her* and for his safety

For the brown and red-font, these are the responses of the Egyptians in Egypt and for Pharaoh in relation to Sarai:

1. Sarai was very beautiful
2. Princes of Pharaoh praised her so she was taken to Pharaoh's house
3. For her sake: Pharaoh dealt well with Abram and gave him sheep, oxen, he-asses, men and maidservants, she-asses and camels.

The LORD, signified by Blue font, however:

1. afflicted P and his house with great plague because of Sarai, Abram's wife
2. Because of this, Pharaoh confronted Abram of what he did, the why of his lie on Sarai as his wife. Then, Pharaoh returned Sarai to Abram
3. But Pharaoh ordered his men concerning Abraham: he left Egypt with his wife and ALL that he had.

^{RSV} **Genesis 20:1** From there [Mamre] Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. ² And **Abraham said of Sarah his wife**, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

³ But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man's wife."⁴ Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, "Lord, wilt thou slay an innocent people?"⁵ Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.⁶ Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me; therefore I did not let you touch her.⁷ Now then restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you, and all that are yours."

⁸ So Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told them all these things; and the men were very much afraid.

⁹ Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done!"⁹ And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?"¹⁰ Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.¹¹ Besides she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife!¹² And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.'"

¹⁴ Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and restored Sarah his wife to him.¹⁵ And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you."

¹⁶ To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your vindication in the eyes of all who are with you; and before every one you are righted."

¹⁷ Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children.¹⁸ For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah Abraham's wife (Gen. 20:1-18 RSV)

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Figure 4: Sarah in Genesis 20:1-18

The story in Gen 20 is not associated with a famine but we need to briefly look at it since these two stories on Sarai, now Sarah, will be somehow merged in the famine narrative concerning Rebekah in Gen 26. Let us quickly list our observations: Black fonts refer to Abraham, Blue to God, Red to Abimelech, Purple to Sarah.

1. Here we have the supposedly "changed man" Abram to Abraham lying again about Sarah his wife being his sister so Abimelech, king of Gerar, who sent for and took Sarah.

2. In his dream, however, God bestowed judgment on Abimelech because of his taking a married woman. It is intriguing that in this dialogue, Abimelech sounded like the hero Abraham who bargained for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen 19. In relation with Sarah, Abimelech seems to be the just one here: he reasoned out to God, he confronted Abraham, and he righted the status of Sarah in v. 16 – a thousand pieces of silver for her vindication!
3. For his part, Abraham was at zero point here against his hero moment in Genesis 19. Just like in how he immediately followed the Lord in Gen 12 then later in the chapter endangered Sarah and the promise of descendants, so Abraham is again in his zero moment. He lied about her not being his wife to save his skin. He justified in v. 11 that Sarah is full sister from the father side but not from the same mother. Abraham admitted instructing Sarah to present this “half-truth” to those they meet at every place.
4. In comparison with the Pharaoh in Gen 12, Abimelech also gave Abraham sheep and oxen, male and female servants, and returned Sarah as wife to him. In contrast, however, Abimelech allowed Abraham to dwell in Abimelech’s land while the Pharaoh sent him away.
5. Fascinatingly, Abimelech, addressed Sarah here and informed her that he gave “your brother” Abraham a thousand silver pieces to vindicate her in the eyes of all.
6. While the story begun with sibling claims, the story ends with Abraham praying to God who then healed Abimelech, his wife and female slaves from infertility because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.

Rebekah	
RSV	Genesis 26:1 Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines.
2	And the LORD appeared to him, and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you.
3	Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfil the oath which I swore to Abraham your father.
4	I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give to your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves:
5	because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."
6	So Isaac dwelt in Gerar.
7	When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister"; for he feared to say, "My wife," thinking, "Lest the men of the place should kill me for the sake of Rebekah"; because she was fair to look upon.
8	When he had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw Isaac fondling Rebekah his wife.
9	So Abimelech called Isaac, and said, "Behold, she is your wife; how then could you say, 'She is my sister'?" Isaac said to him, "Because I thought, 'Lest I die because of her.'"
10	Abimelech said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us."
11	So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, "Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death."
12	And Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. The LORD blessed him,
13	and the man became rich, and gained more and more until he became very wealthy.
14	He had possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him.
15	(Now the Philistines had stopped and filled with earth all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father.)
16	And Abimelech said to Isaac, "Go away from us; for you are much mightier than we."
17	So Isaac departed from there, and encamped in the valley of Gerar and dwelt there. (Gen. 26:1-17 RSV)

Figure 5: Rebekah in Genesis 26:1-17

Let us now look at Figure 5. A close reading of Gen 26 on the story of the risking of Rebekah, we observe the following in relation to Gen 12 and Gen 20:

1. The Blue highlight tells us of a disclaimer that this famine is different from that of Gen 12, with Isaac going to the land of the Philistines.
2. The Blue font shows that Contrary to the Gen 12 account, here the LORD has more voice – consisting of an Abraham inclusion: a warning against going to Egypt (a clear disapproval of Abram's action before), the charge to sojourn in Gerar, the repetition of promised land and descendants to Abraham and by whom the nations of the earth shall bless themselves, all these because of Abraham's obedience to the charges, commands, statutes, and laws of the divine.
3. The Brown font compares how the men of Gerar also found Rebekah fair to look upon with the Egyptians. Just like his father Abraham, Isaac also thought about his safety and his life; thus, the lying about the "sister" again.
4. In Red fonts, we see Isaac's actions towards Rebekah (fondling her) was seen by Abimelech. The Philistine king confronted Isaac about the sister-wife lie.

5. Abimelech's castigated Isaac and warned him about the repercussions his lying could have resulted to Abimelech's people. The king also issued a warning and a penalty of death because of this discovery of Isaac's lies.
6. The LORD's blessings to Isaac consist of fruitful farming (hundredfold), richness, flocks and herds, and a great household. However, instead of the Philistines blessing themselves because of Isaac, the Philistines envied them resulting in them filling up with earth the old wells dug by Abraham's servants.
7. To abet any escalation, Abimelech sent away Isaac because of this economic and social power – and dwelt in the valley of Gerar.

Other observations:

1. Just like in Gen 12, the fairness of Rebekah was the catalyst of this story. Just like Gen 12, We also do not hear Rebekah's voice.
2. As Abimelech was on time to warn the Philistines about Isaac and Rebekah, this action did not result in them being plagued for the sake of Rebekah. The warning of Abimelech was enough to safeguard them.
3. Because of this warning, Isaac was able to sow the land and have a hundred percent return, became so rich as to possessing flocks and herds, and a great household.

Suspicion: Protector or pimps?



14

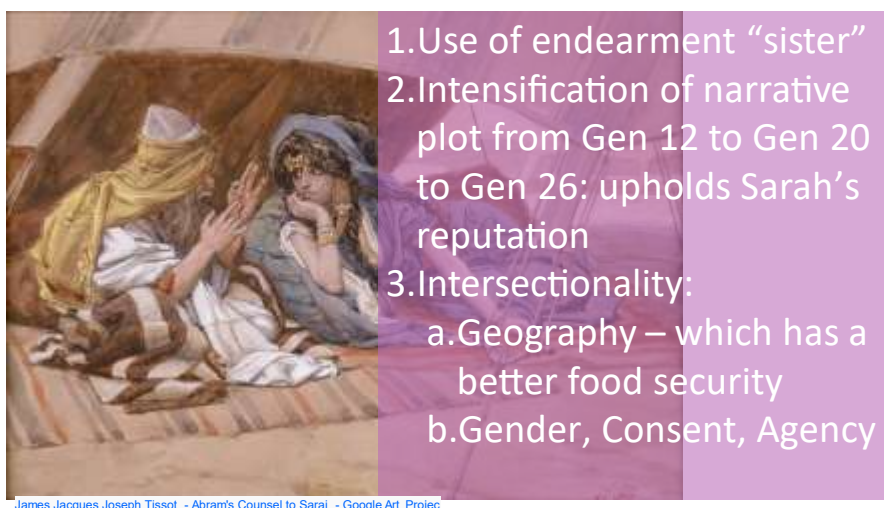


Figure 6: The Patriarchs: Protector or Pimps of the Matriarchs

With the brief scratching of the surface of these narratives, we may ask: were the patriarchs protector or pimps of the matriarchs? I have on Figure 6 a summary of important matters to consider:

1. The use of endearment “sister” for a beloved woman is widespread in Egyptian love poetry so the two-fold meaning served Abraham’s purposes (Zakovitch, 2008), with the LORD having to extricate Sarai by afflicting Pharaoh and his household
 2. In Gen 20, there is somehow an underlying justification of Abraham’s action. Moreover, the reasoning of Abimelech to God and his address and restitution to Sarah seems to uphold her honor not only in Gen 20 but also in Gen 12.
 3. In the larger narrative plot of Genesis 12, 20 and 26, the bestowal of riches moved from Pharaoh who later Abram and Sarai out of Egypt, to Abimelech giving goods to Abraham and allowing him to dwell in the land, to the LORD bestowing blessings to Isaac through his farming success and growth of his household.
4. Intersectionally, we also see the vulnerability of women in these famine stories.
- a. Geography - in both Gen 12 and Gen 26, the patriarchs were somehow forced to migrate to Egypt and Gerar respectively because of famine. The involuntary journey seemed to overall protect the patriarch and his household but threats against their lives distressingly put the matriarchs at risks while rewarding the men with properties – both humans and non-humans (see Uusimake, Intersectional..Female Mobility 749-750)
 - b. Gender & Agency – in these stories, we find the women exposed to risks during a famine. What is even more disturbing is that for such a dangerous and distressing situation, the women were not seen nor were listened to by their male companions. Their consent were not asked, their agency taken away from them, their beauty and sexuality used for economic gain (Natalie Harder). It was either the divine (the LORD) or the other powerful men who had to rescue Sarai in Gen 12 or uphold Sarah’s honor in Gen 24 and Rebekah’s in Gen 26. (see Uusimake, Intersectional). This weakness of the women characters show how disasters such as famine deprives them of agency – such a contrast, for example, with Rebekah’s own decision making in her consent to marry Isaac and travel to join him in Gen 24.

A closer reading of these texts will allow us to identify the intersections of food insecurity and gender vulnerability.

III. IDENTIFICATION

Identification : Lies of the Patriarchs, Risks for the Matriarchs

Sarai
¹⁰ Now there was a famine in the land . So **Abram** went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. ¹¹ When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to **Sarai his wife**, "I know that you are a woman beautiful to behold; ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account."
¹⁴ When Abram entered Egypt the **Egyptians** saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵ And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.
¹⁶ And for her sake **he** dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, he -asses, menservants, maidservants, she -asses, and camels .
¹⁷ But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.
¹⁸ So **Pharaoh** called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹ Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone."
²⁰ And **Pharaoh** gave men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had. (Gen. 12:10-20 RSV)

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Figure 7: Sarai and Non-Humans in Genesis 12:10-20

In this identification of the relationship and intersections of food insecurity and gender vulnerability, we pay closer attention to those in green and purple fonts: Sarai or Rebekah and the non-humans. In Gen 12, we observe that though the story is about Sarai, she is too objectified in this narrative.

1. She has no voice/words even if she was told to lie.
2. She was treated as a shield for Abram's life.
3. She was a trading object which increased Abram's possessions of the humans (men and maidservants) and non-humans (sheep, oxen, he- and she-asses, and camels) colored in green. All of these animals and servants could have made Abram's household comfortable, food secure (milk, meat), season protected (wool), and assisted in various tasks (asses and camels).

^{RSV} **Genesis 20:1** From there [Mamre] Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. ² And **Abraham said of Sarah his wife**, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

³ But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man's wife."⁴ Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, "Lord, wilt thou slay an innocent people?"⁵ Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.⁶ Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me; therefore I did not let you touch her."⁷ Now then restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you, and all that are yours."

⁸ So Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told them all these things; and the men were very much afraid.

⁹ Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done!"⁹ And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?"¹⁰ Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.² Besides she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.³ And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.'"

¹⁴ Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and restored Sarah his wife to him.¹⁵ And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you."

¹⁶ To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your vindication in the eyes of all who are with you; and before every one you are righted."

¹⁷ Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children.¹⁸ For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. (Gen. 20:1-18 RSV)

Figure 8: Sarai and Non-Humans in Genesis 20:1-18

If you focus on Figure 8, we discern here in Gen 20 that:

1. in comparison with the Pharaoh in Gen 12, Abimelech also gave Abraham sheep and oxen, male and female servants, and returned Sarah as wife to him. In contrast, however, the Pharaoh sent them away while Abimelech allowed Abraham to dwell in Abimelech's land while.
2. Fascinatingly, however, Abimelech at least addressed Sarah here, she was seen! He informed her that he gave "her brother" Abraham a thousand silver pieces to vindicate her in the eyes of all.
3. While the story begun with sibling claims, the story ends with Abraham praying to God who then healed Abimelech, his wife and female slaves from infertility because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.
4. Thus: the endangerment of the promise of descendants and land to Abraham was equaled to the punishment of Abimelech, his wife, female slaves who were agents of procreation and production.

Now, how about Rebekah?

Identification : Lies of the Patriarchs, Risks for the Matriarchs

Rebekah	
RSV	<p>Genesis 26:1 Now there was a famine in the land, besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went to Gerar, to Abimelech king of the Philistines.</p> <p>² And the LORD appeared to him, and said, "Do not go down to Egypt; dwell in the land of which I shall tell you.</p> <p>³ Sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfil the oath which I swore to Abraham your father.</p> <p>⁴ I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give to your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves:</p> <p>⁵ because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."</p> <p>⁶ So Isaac dwelt in Gerar.</p> <p>⁷ When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister"; for he feared to say, "My wife," thinking, "Lest the men of the place should kill me for the sake of Rebekah"; because she was fair to look upon.</p> <p>⁸ When he had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw Isaac fondling Rebekah his wife.</p> <p>⁹ So Abimelech called Isaac, and said, "Behold, she is your wife; how then could you say, 'She is my sister'?" Isaac said to him, "Because I thought, 'Lest I die because of her.'"</p> <p>¹⁰ Abimelech said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us."</p> <p>¹¹ So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, "Whoever touches this man or his wife shall be put to death."</p> <p>¹² And Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. The LORD blessed him,</p> <p>¹³ and the man became rich, and gained more and more until he became very wealthy.</p> <p>¹⁴ He had possessions of flocks and herds, and a great household, so that the Philistines envied him.</p> <p>¹⁵ (Now the Philistines had stopped and filled with earth all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of Abraham his father.)</p> <p>¹⁶ And Abimelech said to Isaac, "Go away from us; for you are much mightier than we."</p> <p>¹⁷ So Isaac departed from there, and encamped in the valley of Gerar and dwelt there. (Gen. 26:1-17 RSV)</p>

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Figure 9: Rebekah and non-humans in Genesis 26:1-17

In this close reading of Gen 26 on the story of the risking of Rebekah on Figure 9, we observe the following ecological implications in relation to Gen 12 and Gen 20:

1. In this story, it is God who gives fruitfulness: of the land and of people.
2. Abimelech's warning serves as temporary peace/shalom in terms of Isaac-Philistines: thus, the undisturbed sowing and reaping of harvest by hundredfold.
3. Conflict between men – Philistines and Isaac – results in endangerment of human lives and the environment such as the filling of the wells with earth. What could have been its result: lack of water and drought, violence and death, unproductiveness of the land, and famine again – a cycle of unpeace for human and nonhuman creation. Here the voiceless Rebekah will again be both endangered by food insecurity and water insufficiency.

So, how do we retrieve the endangered ancestresses and how can they accompany us in our quest for a more ecological and sustainable world?

IV. RETRIEVAL

Retrieval of Distressing Passages



Mark E. Biddle: A lot of historical, literary and theological debates.

C.A. Keller & D. Petersen:

Gen 12: Contrast between YHWH and Abram's plans

Gen 20: dialectic of sin

Gen 26: patriarchal triumph in a foreign land

Susan Niditch: folklore analysis

Gen 12: underdog/trickster motif

Gen 20: status quo

Gen 26: homiletical or theological



Wider Context:

1. Relationship to blessing and curse promise to the patriarchs
2. Wider meaning based on the Sitz -im- Buch of Genesis
3. The three stories are openings for either a relationship of blessing or curse among the characters

Conclusion: A wider meaning could be gleaned if the stories are understood within its Sitz-im-Buch. All of the three stories signify opportunities for the actors to be open to either a relationship of blessing or curse.

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Noting the wider context of these stories in Genesis, it would be beneficial for our interpretation when we can retrieve or generate fresh ideas from these texts.

In his article *Endangered Ancestress*, Mark Biddle underlines the complexities of these texts as there are a lot of historical, literary and theological debates surrounding them. For example, we see that for Keller and Petersen, Gen 12 presents a contrast between the LORD and Abram; Gen 20 offers a dialectic of sin or offense against God, and Gen 26 hails patriarchal triumph in a foreign land. For Niditch who analyzed it from folklore lens: Gen 12 is about Abram the underdog or trickster, the status quo courtly interest in Gen 20, and a more homiletical or theological take on Gen. 26.

Biddle, Mark E. "The 'Endangered Ancestress' and Blessing for the Nations." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109, no. 4 (1990): 599–611. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3267365>.

In her Jewish Women Archive article "Sarai and the Silence Breakers", senior student Natalie Harder expressed her rattled reaction to these three distressing passages and cites R. Naama Dafni-Kellen's advice on how to handle scriptural texts which one profoundly disagrees with: ignore it, put it in its historical context, or rewrite it. (See [Sarai and the Silence Breakers Jewish Women's Archive \(jwa.org\)](https://www.jwa.org/2018/02/sarai-and-the-silence-breakers))

But how can we ignore these kinds of texts when they are authoritative? Their historical contexts show us how the biblical texts are indeed written in a patriarchal society. What remains for us is to rewrite...or reread the passage with our contemporary context in mind:

famine and gender risks, including food prostitution or what some may even say as survival sex.

While Harder was dealing with the #MeTooMovements and our topic today is the dangers that women and girls face in times of food insecurity, Harder's insight on allowing the stories to come out and listen to them is very important. It is in doing so that we become SILENCE BREAKERS. There should not anymore be famine of words. Listening also means writing *midrashim* about these women because we believe the story-tellers and we provide safe space for them, we work towards support for women and children in living in dangerous zones, and we can continue working for the mitigation of and adaptive responses towards famine brought by the climate crisis.

More concretely, while global institutions seek to attain food security, safe water, and gender equality and non-governmental organizations respond to food security and hunger, to poverty, to gender equality and partner with other concerned groups to attain the UNSDGs by 2030, we as biblical scholars can also do our part.

1. Do not be afraid to tackle distressing texts or texts of terror in the Scriptures.
2. Expand our research disciplines and collaborate with colleagues from natural and social sciences.
3. As one recent experience I have had of female scholars who were not able to do research or update themselves because of war, or being in-between jobs, we as colleagues and scientific institutions need to look for alternative resources to support colleagues experiencing the onslaughts of the 3Cs of Food Insecurity: the long-term effects of COVID-19 pandemic, armed conflicts, and the climate crisis.

Thank you very much. I look forward to your comments, questions and suggestions.