

How gender roles play a part in the holy bible

Sociology



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Rebecca as a Revolutionary of Free Will

In author Amy Kalmanofsky's work "Gender-Play In The Hebrew Bible", Kalmanofsky spends an entire chapter dissecting the story of Rebecca and Isaac (Genesis 24-27) as it conforms to and defies traditional biblical marital roles. Although Rebecca acts assertively and assumes numerous non-traditional patriarchal roles, Kalmanofsky claims that the story of Rebecca and Isaac enforces the gender hierarchy that privileges males. However, I believe that by examining the context in which the Bible was written and comparing Rebecca's actions to those of Eve, Rebecca actually successfully challenges and redefines the patriarchal familial structure, as well as enforcing female dominance in a male-driven society.

First, it is important to consider how Rebecca and Isaac function independently in order to observe how their married relationship is revolutionary. Isaac is frequently seen as the perfect picture of the submissive. For example, he stays in Jerusalem instead of travelling to find a wife and sends his father Abraham instead. As a result of this he is often closely associated with Jerusalem and seen by some as the embodiment of the Holy City. It is important to note that Jerusalem was treated by God as a man would treat his wife; protective and disapproving when "she" did any wrong by him. This feminizes Isaac and associates him with a role culturally traditional to females at the time. While it is virtually indisputable that Isaac plays a very passive role in the Bible, Kalmanofsky argues that this is an asset. She writes, "Isaac's weakness is a positive characteristic that not only enables him to be in a relationship with God, but that enhances his character" (138). However, in the narrative of Rebecca, I argue that this

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weakness enables Rebecca to assume the patriarchal role, which hurts Isaac. If Isaac was not praised for being quiet and passive, he would have not favored his son Enoch instead of his divinely chosen son Jacob, and therefore would not have forced Rebecca to deceive him. While Kalmanofsky argues that this deception made Rebecca a vehicle for a male divine figure, I believe that Rebecca made the choice to trick Isaac of her own volition, but her patriarchal personality originally stemmed from Isaac's passiveness. This is the ultimate display of the patriarchal takeover; Rebecca literally performs a traditional man's duties because her husband is unwilling and unable to. She flourishes in these moments and it becomes crucial to her character as "Rebecca the doer".

In addition to examining Rebecca's patriarchal roots, it is also essential to understand Rebecca's character and the significance of her actions through the cultural context of the time. While it would be easy to write off Rebecca's actions as merely headstrong, it is absolutely fundamental to recognize that these were in the literal sense, revolutionary. This is my main disagreement to Kalmanofsky's argument that Rebecca remained confined by a patriarchal society. Rebecca pushed boundaries through her decision to deceive her husband, and furthermore, was never punished for her actions. If Rebecca had not conned Isaac, their family progeny would have ended, and the family honor would have been compromised. The significance of Rebecca taking this into her own hands is not to be overlooked. Rebecca not only disobeys a man, but her husband, who traditionally was the ultimate source of authority for married woman during that time. Kalmanofsky argues that this action served to enable Isaac to give his blessing to Jacob, but it was Isaac's will to

give his blessing to Enoch. If Rebecca was meant to enable Isaac, she would have been happily accepting of his desire to bless Enoch. While the magnitude of Rebecca's actions is not to be undermined, the aftermath of her tale is what strikes me as the most significant. Rebecca is one of a few women who have appeared in the Bible early on; the other most influential woman up to this point being Eve. Eve, similarly to Rebecca, also choose to knowingly deceive her husband Adam by giving him forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Because of this, she suffered severe consequence of painful childbirth and the lifelong dominance of her husband. Her actions literally caused all women to suffer under a male-dominated society. In contrast, there was no discussion or punishment for Rebecca's actions. In Genesis 27: 33, the only mention of anger from a patriarchal figure is when "Isaac trembled violently" once he had realized Rebecca's ploy. While Kalmanofsky argues that this is because Rebecca was being used as a female pawn by a male God, I believe that although God did speak to Rebecca about her responsibility to uphold the familial progeny, Rebecca's free will allowed her to choose to disobey Isaac. Rebecca says, "My son, let the curse fall on me" in Genesis 27: 13, referring to potential divine consequence that the family may suffer from deceiving her husband. It is clear to the audience that Rebecca does not fully know whether or not her actions are in accordance to a divine ruling. Rebecca is undisputably a warrior of action within her narrative, and chooses to disobey her husband as well as accept the risk of wrath from God. Because of this, it is imperative to recognize that she does not play a pawn for God, but instead makes her own decision to take on an alpha patriarchal role. Kalmanofsky's argument that Rebecca acts as a device for enabling men is flawed because of Rebecca's

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acknowledgement of her uncertainty, but her difficult decision to act on her instincts despite the rigid gender expectations of the time proves her to be an independent patriarch and a revolutionary female in the Hebrew Bible.

Rebecca is without a doubt one of the most controversial female figures in the entirety of the Hebrew Bible, but by examining her choices to accept the possibility of extreme social consequence by defying her husband and divine consequence by possibly defying God, one can see how Rebecca successfully challenges and redefines the meaning of a Biblical patriarch and resists a male-driven society. The significance of Rebecca facing zero consequences for her actions at all is groundbreaking because it establishes a sort of unapologetic female dominance that introduced the concept of women acting according to their free will. Although Kalmanofsky argues that Rebecca is another fresh form of the female enabler, her risk and reward prove that Rebecca solely enables her own ideas, and nobody else's.