
Presidential Address

by

CAROL L. MEYERS

President of the Society of Biblical Literature 2013
Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature
November 23, 2013
Baltimore, Maryland

*Introduction given by Fernando F. Segovia
Vice President, Society of Biblical Literature*

Tonight it is my official task, my distinct honor, and my great pleasure to introduce to you, my fellow members of the Society of Biblical Literature as well as members of other learned societies in religion and theology in attendance, the person and work of Carol L. Meyers, the 122nd president of the Society.¹ These introductions are by no means an easy

¹The number of presidents, let alone the number of presidential addresses, is not unproblematic. The number 122 was arrived at in conversation with Dr. John Kutsko, the executive director of the Society, to whom I am most grateful for the research unearthed and provided. I reproduce here the relevant information and argumentation for future reference.

(A) The SBL website (<http://sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pastpresidents.pdf>) lists 129 presidents over the 133-year history of the Society. The list is inconsistent, however, especially with regard to the first decades. (1) A number of presidents serve over a range of years (1880–1887 Daniel Reynes Goodwin; 1887–1889 Frederic Gardiner; 1891–1894 Talbot W. Chambers; 1942–1943 Kirsopp Lake). (2) Others serve consecutive years (1890, 1891 Charles A. Briggs; 1894, 1895 J. Henry Thayer; 1896, 1897 Edward T. Bartlett; 1898, 1899 George F. Moore), one of whom does so twice (1889–1890, 1895–1896 Francis Brown). Third, a number are listed as serving the same year (from Daniel Reynes Goodwin through Edward T. Bartlett). If the date ranges for the first category are turned into individual presidencies, there would be more than 129 presidential years (1880–2013 = 133 years).

(B) If one follows and extends the list provided by Ernest W. Saunders in his institutional history of the Society (*Searching the Scriptures: A History of the Society of Biblical Literature, 1880–1980* [Biblical Scholarship in North America 8; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982], 117–18 [Appendix VI: SBL Presidents]), the count comes to 122, with Francis Brown serving two consecutive terms (1889–1890; 1895–1896). This list appears, to my mind, more accurate, showing how in the early years presidencies extended over an academic year rather than a calendar year. The calendar year system begins, it would seem, in 1897 with Edward T. Bartlett. (See also Patrick Gray, “Presidential Addresses of the Society of Biblical Literature: A Quasiquicentennial Review,” *JBL* 125 [2006]: 167–77.)

task, given the multiple and distinguished achievements and recognitions, both within the guild and without, garnered, over the course of many years, by the scholars who have received the enormous privilege of serving the Society in this capacity. Tonight is no exception. How, indeed, does one capture the life and output of our speaker? I shall try my best.

Professor Meyers enters the world of biblical studies, broadly writ, in the 1960s and '70s. Upon graduation from Wellesley College in 1964, where she earned a bachelor of arts degree with a major in biblical history, literature, and interpretation, she went on to pursue graduate studies at Brandeis University in Near Eastern and Judaic studies, with a concentration in biblical studies, receiving her doctorate in 1975. Immediately afterwards, in 1976, she joined the Department of Religion at Duke University, where she has remained a member of the faculty until today and presently holds the May Grace Wilson Professorship of Religion. Professor Meyers thus belongs to that generation of academics who have been forever and indelibly marked, in one way or another, by these tumultuous but vibrant years.

These scholars were formed socially and culturally in the momentous decade of the 1960s. This was a time of tectonic political transformations across the globe, as liberation movements multiplied and flourished across the Third World, with the heightening of the Cold War between the First and Second Worlds as backdrop. This was also a time of widespread social unrest in the United States, as civil rights movements proliferated and strengthened throughout the country, with the intensification of the Vietnam War as background. They then entered the academy in the crucial decade of the 1970s. This was a time, in the wake of the social and cultural turmoil of the preceding decade, when the world of the university began to undergo, across its entire disciplinary spectrum, radical changes in its ranks, in the faces and voices of its members, as well as in its discourses and in the methods and theories of its critical repertoire.

Religious studies in general and biblical studies in particular proved no exception to these material and discursive developments. In fact, such a turn in the field may be symbolically identified with the launching of the journal *Semeia* in 1974, the fortieth anniversary of which will take place next year.² It was precisely at this time, in the mid-1970s, that

(C) If one counts presidents, regardless of how many years they served or if they served more than one nonconsecutive presidential term (that is, counting Brown once), the total comes to 121.

(D) In addition, there are a number of "Honorary Presidents," twelve in all, who received such a distinction from 1969 to 1981 (1969; 1970; 1971; 1973; 1976; 1977; 1978; 1979; 1981) and served in addition to the regular presidents.

In sum, if one follows (C) and ignores (D), since these were not officers of and had no governing function in the Society, then the count is 121 and Carol Meyers constitutes the 122nd president of the Society.

²Its description captured the moment well, "an experimental journal devoted to the exploration of new and emergent areas and methods of biblical criticism." This description was included in every issue on the back page of the front cover, along with the editorial board and publication information. The full text is worth recalling:

Semeia is an experimental journal devoted to the exploration of new and emergent areas and methods of biblical criticism. Studies employing the methods, models, and findings of linguistics, folklore studies, contemporary literary criticism, structuralism, social anthropology, and other such disciplines and approaches are invited. Although experimental in both form and content, *Semeia* proposes to publish work

Professor Meyers brought her doctoral studies to completion and embarked on her professional and scholarly career. To my mind, she represents an ideal signifier of the times—a product of and an agent in such years of transformation. In terms of faces and voices, she belongs to the first generation of women who break into the patriarchal world of the academy and the field of studies. In terms of method and theory, she stands with that circle of scholars who begin to reach out to other fields of study, such as the social sciences and feminist studies, for grounding and inspiration in the study of biblical antiquity. I should like to expand on these various dimensions of her pioneering presence and work.

To begin with, the 1960s witnessed, among a variety of movements for civil rights, the rise of the second feminist movement, with a goal of social justice for women throughout society and culture, which were perceived as gendered to the core. A major aim of the movement was to increase the presence of women in colleges and universities—in baccalaureate programs, in professional and graduate studies, and, ultimately, in academic faculties and administrations. In this regard the story of Professor Meyers is one that is well known and widely shared by that first generation of women. This story she retraces step by step in a splendid interview published in *Wellesley*, the alumnae magazine for the college, in the late 1990s.³

First, while in doctoral studies at Brandeis, not only was she invariably the only woman in her classes, but also all of her professors were male. Subsequently, in her early years at Duke, she was the only woman on the faculty in the Department of Religion. Further, as a beginning scholar and teacher, the problematic of gender played no part at all in the curriculum. The first change in this regard, she notes, came when she was asked, by a number of her male colleagues, to develop a course on gender, which she proceeded to do and to which the title of “Women and the Bible,” so typical of the times, was assigned.

In the intervening forty years, the presence and status of women in the academy and the field have changed drastically, even if much remains to be done, as it certainly does. For such changes as have occurred, however, the figure of Carol Meyers has been pivotal—a pioneer who broke through the material barriers of gender and made it easier for later generations to follow suit as well. Such a path-breaking role has been honored on any number of occasions, of which I shall mention the two awards bestowed by her alma mater: the Severinghaus Award in 1991 for outstanding contributions to religion and the Alumnae Achievement Award in 1999 for her work in archaeology and biblical studies.

Second, with the 1970s came the first moves toward a reconceptualization and reformulation of the field through critical engagement, beyond the established parameters of historicism, with the human sciences such as literature and psychology, and the social sciences such as sociology and anthropology. This was a direction, specifically along the lines of sociocultural criticism, that Professor Meyers resolved to undertake early on in her career. In the interview for *Wellesley* magazine, she notes how she soon realized that such an interdisciplinary approach was of the essence in addressing the questions that her work on the texts and remains of antiquity had begun to raise. To this end, she recalls how, in the early 1980s, she applied for and was awarded an Independent Study and Research

that reflects a well-defined methodology that is appropriate to the material being interpreted.

³Barbara Shutt Beckwith, “Unearthing Facts on Women of the Past,” *Wellesley* (Spring 1999): 28–29, 80.

Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities—one of the many fellowships and grants that she has received over the years—that made it possible for her to spend a year at Oxford University pursuing studies in social anthropology, as Visiting Research Fellow at Queen Elizabeth House and Visiting Scholar at the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies.

Later on, in a study for a volume for which she also served as coeditor, she reflects on the impact of the social sciences on the study of the Hebrew Bible.⁴ She notes the explosive expansion of such research, which she traces to the impetus and legacy of the social unrest of the 1960s and '70s. She also highlights a key dimension of such interdisciplinary conjunction: approaching ancient Israel as a social entity, by way of patterns of social organization and economic realities—one that stands in complex and conflicted relationship to its representations in the Hebrew Bible.

In the four decades that followed this interdisciplinary turn in the field, the result has been, to call upon and expand on Meyers's own words, an ever more "comprehensive picture of Israelite life and beliefs"—beyond what theological, historical, or literary studies have produced or can produce (p. 489). In terms of critical dialogue with the social sciences, the person and output of Carol Meyers can only, again, be described as pivotal—a pioneer who put aside disciplinary constrictions and paved the way for the social study of ancient Israel. Such an optic marks her work with the texts and remains of antiquity throughout.

Third, through the 1960s and '70s, the ideology of feminism and the field of feminist studies were gradually forged in the struggles of the women's movement for social and cultural equality. The impact on the academy was wide-ranging and far-reaching. Its early stages are well known. In the 1970s feminism sets out to expose the dynamics and mechanics of patriarchy, with a focus on the representation of women by male authors. Thereupon, in the 1980s feminism turns to the world of women, concentrating on recovering and foregrounding the marginalized lives and roles, works and traditions of women. Such pursuit, along the lines of the second phase of gynocritical criticism, Professor Meyers made her own from early on as well, placing it at the forefront of her research into the texts and remains of biblical antiquity. In the interview for *Wellesley*, she describes the difficulties she encountered in putting together the new course offering on the Bible and gender: not only a thorough lack of knowledge regarding the topic, but also the nonexistence of a trajectory of scholarly literature. It was the comments and questions of the students and a rereading of the texts having to do with women, she points out, that made it possible for her to move forward.

In the later reflection on the intersection of social studies and biblical studies, she cites the phenomenal growth of work on the relationship of male and female roles in ancient Israel, and especially on what she characterizes as the "far more elusive role and experience" (p. 490) of the female, all of which she traces to the impact and legacy of the women's movement of the 1960s and '70s again. She also identifies a direction that such pursuit was to assume in her case: approaching the relationship between the sexes in Israelite origins through the optic of sociocultural approaches, thus analyzing it as an aspect of the social

⁴Carol L. Meyers, "Procreation, Production, and Protection: Male and Female Balance in Early Israel," in *Community, Identity, and Ideology: Social Science Approaches to the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Charles E. Carter and Carol L. Meyers; Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 6; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 489–514.

structures of Israel. This was for her a way to move beyond the patriarchal slant of the texts as well as to problematize the ideal representation of parity in gender roles advanced in some texts.

In the forty years that have passed since the feminist turn in the field, the result, to borrow from and expand on Meyers's own words again, has been an ever more "heightened" "interest in sexual roles and in evaluation of those roles for the biblical period" (p. 490). With respect to critical conversation with feminist studies, the figure and production of Carol Meyers emerges, yet again, as pivotal—a pioneer who broke through the discursive limits of gender and led the way in the analysis of women in the texts and remains of Israel's origins. Out of this project, which has also marked the whole of her life and work, much distinguished work has flowed, from the now classic *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* of 1988 (New York: Oxford University Press) to the recent *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* of 2013 (New York: Oxford University Press).

That Professor Meyers has come to such a position at all is incredible. To hear her tell the story, the process has been an entirely fortuitous one. As a young woman, growing up in the small town of Kingston in northeastern Pennsylvania and attending a Conservative synagogue in Wilkes-Barre across the Susquehanna River, she found the stories of the Bible to be unreal and off-putting. Later on, as a college student at Wellesley, she had declared a major in psychology, when she enrolled in the two-semester course in biblical studies ("Studies in the Old and New Testament") that was required at the time. The result was decisive: this curricular experience led her to a view of the Bible as a window to the history, culture, and literature of the times—and a change of majors. At about the same time, she signed up for a summer excavation project at the Hell Gap site in Wyoming, sponsored by the Peabody Museum of Harvard University. The result was similarly decisive: such field experience led her to pursue archaeological studies in conjunction with biblical studies. In preparation for such a course of action, she took a sequence of courses in Biblical Hebrew and learned cuneiform on the side, by deciphering tablets at the college under the guidance of one of her teachers. Approaching graduation, she ran against the established tradition in doctoral programs in biblical studies of accepting candidates who had gone to seminary or divinity school and had followed a postgraduate course of studies. However, given her training in languages at Wellesley, this requirement was dropped, and she was admitted at Brandeis. The rest is history.

What she portrays as accidental, however, one could easily read as teleological, if not providential. So it was, certainly, for biblical studies and archaeological studies, and for the Society of Biblical Literature as well. Over these four decades of reading texts and digging sites—years of shattering the material constraints imposed on women as scholars by securing a leading presence in its ranks, the traditional disciplinary borders by venturing into the social sciences in sustained and sophisticated fashion, and the established discursive restrictions on the problematic of gender by assuming the discourse of feminism—Professor Meyers has led our field of studies, again broadly writ, forward in multiple ways. All of us in the Society and beyond are much the richer and wiser for it. For this we express our profound gratitude and admiration, we celebrate her election as president, and we await with eager anticipation her presidential address, on a topic that pointedly brings together all these facets of her life, "Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?"

Was Ancient Israel a Patriarchal Society?

CAROL L. MEYERS

carol@duke.edu

Duke University, Durham, NC 27708-0964

The term “patriarchy” denotes the social-science concept of male dominance. This concept was formulated by nineteenth-century anthropologists using classical literature, especially legal texts, in their attempts to understand the history of the family. Biblical scholars interested in Israelite family structures soon took up the term. By the early twentieth century, sociologists (notably Weber) extended the concept of patriarchy to include society-wide male domination. This too entered scholarship on the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israel. However, the validity and appropriateness of this concept to designate both families and society have recently been challenged in several disciplines: in classical scholarship, by using sources other than legal texts; in research on the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israel, also by using multiple sources; and in the work of third-wave feminists, both social theorists and feminist archaeologists. Taken together, these challenges provide compelling reasons for abandoning the patriarchy model as an adequate or accurate descriptor of ancient Israel.

The title of this paper is not a rhetorical question meant to elicit the response “of course it was.” Rather, it is a call to reexamine a concept—patriarchy—that has long been used as a descriptor of ancient Israel. Since the late nineteenth century, if not before, the term “patriarchy” has been invoked by those seeking to understand the cultural context of biblical texts. And more recently, it frequently appears in feminist discourse that examines and often critiques the presentation of female figures in narratives and other texts in the Hebrew Bible.

This concept deserves closer examination for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the slippery nature of the term itself, which is rarely defined by biblical scholars who use it. The term does not appear in the Hebrew Bible, which has a vocabulary for family units but lacks a term that might be translated as “patriarchy.”¹ Thus, patriarchy is to be understood as a social science theory rather than a biblical construct. Consequently, its value as a model for understanding any

¹“Patriarchy” apparently did not enter English as the designation of a social or political form until the seventeenth century; see http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=patriarchy&allowed_in_frame=0.

society, let alone a premodern one, must be examined in light of changing perceptions of the patriarchal theory as well as increased knowledge about the societies to which it is applied. I argue that the validity of the patriarchy model for understanding the biblical past is problematic and that using it is no longer as compelling as when it first emerged in the scholarship on ancient Israel.

In this paper I will consider the concept of patriarchy by first looking at its place in the study of ancient Israel (section I)—its nineteenth-century origins and then developments in twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship. Next (section II) I will consider challenges to the patriarchy model in three areas: classical studies, research on women in ancient Israel, and feminist theory. Finally, a brief conclusion (section III) will include a suggestion for an alternative model.

The matter of definition must first be addressed. Patriarchy, literally “rule of the father” from the Greek words *patēr* (πατήρ) and *archō* (ἄρχω), has multiple meanings and is notoriously difficult to define.² Some definitions, claiming that women have the status of slaves in a patriarchal system, are harsher than others, which simply refer to a system of male dominance. A better approach is to acknowledge that patriarchy has two manifestations: the disproportionate control of the father in families or clans; and, by extension, the organization of an entire society in ways that exclude women from community positions.³ The first manifestation relates to the nineteenth-century origins of the concept, and the second is part of twentieth-century developments.

I. THE CONCEPT OF PATRIARCHY IN SCHOLARSHIP ON ANCIENT ISRAEL

Nineteenth-Century Origins

The use of the patriarchy model in studies of ancient Israel did not emerge in an intellectual vacuum. Rather, it entered the discourse of biblical studies mainly through the lens of anthropology.⁴ In the nineteenth century, with the burgeoning of historical-critical biblical studies, some biblical scholars sought to understand social aspects of the world of the Bible. They were interested in Israelite society but

²See, e.g., the various definitions in Majella Franzmann, *Women and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7–8. Cf. Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990), 159–61.

³E.g., <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/patriarchy> or <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/446604/patriarchy>. Cf. Jo Foord and Nicky Gregson, “Patriarchy: Towards a Reconceptualization,” *Antipode* 18 (1986): 194.

⁴The area of anthropology in which the concept of patriarchy emerged is known as social or cultural anthropology in England, and on the Continent it is called ethnology or sociology; see E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951), 1–5. Americans use the term “sociocultural anthropology.”

were frustrated by the incomplete and often contradictory materials in the Hebrew Bible.⁵ Thus they turned to the newly developing social sciences, especially to anthropology. This nineteenth-century engagement of biblical scholars with social-science theories was the first of two “waves” of biblical scholarship that turned to social-science disciplines.⁶

The anthropologists to whom biblical scholars turned worked mainly from an evolutionist perspective, assuming that all peoples passed through stages of development, from the primitive to the civilized.⁷ They were especially interested in the development of family structures. Lacking direct evidence of ancient societies, they drew extensively on Greek and Latin sources as well as some ethnographic reports. Some early theorists, such as J. J. Bachofen, argued that the earliest and thus universal form of the family was the female-dominated matriarchy.⁸ This idea gained currency among 1980s fringe feminists holding to the idea of an original mother goddess.⁹ But most scholars maintained the opposite view: that the father dominated in the original family form, patriarchy, a term they used in relation to families, not to society as a whole. Three figures were especially influential in this regard.

One is the English classicist and law professor Henry Sumner Maine, who, in 1861, published an influential book about ancient law, by which he meant law in ancient Greece and especially Rome. Drawing on Latin legal sources, notably the jurist Gaius (130–180 C.E.), he refers to the “life-long authority of the Father or other ancestor over the person and property of his descendants.”¹⁰ Elaborating on the role of the *patria potestas* (“the father’s power”), he reports that the father had

⁵The impact of anthropology on biblical scholarship is described by John W. Rogerson, *Anthropology and the Old Testament* (Growing Points in Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 1–21. See also Philip F. Esler and Anselm C. Hagedorn, “Social-Scientific Analysis of the Old Testament: A Brief History and Overview,” in *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context* (ed. Philip F. Esler; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 15–33.

⁶See Robert R. Wilson, “Reflections on Social-Scientific Criticism,” in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen* (ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; SBLRBS 56; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 505–22.

⁷Rogerson, *Anthropology*, 12; cf. Evans-Pritchard, *Social Anthropology*, 27–29.

⁸Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht: Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur* (Stuttgart: Kraus & Hoffman, 1861).

⁹These “goddess feminists” (e.g., Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987]) drew on books such as Maria Gimbutas’s *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 6500–3500 B.C.: Myths and Cult Images* (rev. ed.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). Gimbutas’s work is now recognized to have serious methodological flaws; see Lynn Meskell, “Goddesses, Gimbutas, and the ‘New Age’ Archaeology,” *Antiquity* 69 (1995): 74–86. For a critique of the goddess movement, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 35–39.

¹⁰Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society, and Its Relation to Modern Ideas* (5th ed.; New York: Henry Holt, 1873; first published, London: John Murray, 1861), 130.

the “power of life and death” (*vitae necisque potestas*) over his servants, children, and wife. He calls this “paternal despotism,” with the father having “the unqualified right of domestic chastisement.”¹¹

The second figure is the French scholar Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, who also drew on classical texts for his most famous book, *La cité antique*, first published in 1864.¹² In describing the family he emphasizes that the word *pater* means absolute authority, not just biological paternity, and should be understood as virtually synonymous with “king” (Latin *rex* or Greek βασιλεύς).¹³ He asserts that judicial authority resided with the father, who had ultimate and unlimited authority over the members of his household.¹⁴ A woman was thus considered a “mineure”—a minor with absolutely no household authority.¹⁵

The third figure is the pioneering American anthropologist and lawyer Lewis Henry Morgan. In his 1877 book *Ancient Society*, an anthropological classic, he explicitly links the patriarchal family type of the Greeks and Romans, with its characteristic paternal power and the concomitant servitude of other family members, to the family type of the “Hebrew tribes.”¹⁶ Morgan was the most explicitly evolutionist of the early theorists, and his developmental scheme, including his views about paternal power, influenced Marxist doctrines that in turn influenced second-wave feminism.¹⁷

(It is common to speak of three successive feminist movements: first-wave feminism, associated with the suffragist movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; second-wave feminism, which began with the 1960s civil rights movement and continued into the 1980s; and third-wave feminism, informed by postcolonial and postmodern theory, which emerged in the 1990s and continues to the present. Three phases of feminist biblical scholarship are linked to these three waves.¹⁸)

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 130, 133–34, 140. The concept of “the power of life and death” appears in Gaius and is repeated in other Roman sources; so Raymond Westbrook, “Vitae Necisque Potestas,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 48 (1999): 203.

¹² Fustel de Coulanges, *La cité antique: Étude sur le culte, le droit, les institutions de la Grèce et de Rome* (10th ed.; Paris: Hachette, 1883).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106, drawing on Cato the Elder (234–149 B.C.E.).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁶ Morgan, *Ancient Society; or, Researches in the Lines of Human Progress from Savagery through Barbarism to Civilization* (New York: Henry Holt, 1877), 466, 468–70.

¹⁷ On feminist theory and Marxism, see Catherine J. Nash, “Patriarchy,” in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (ed. Rob Kitchin; San Diego: Elsevier, 2009), 102–3.

¹⁸ See Ahida E. Pilarski, “The Past and Future of Feminist Biblical Hermeneutics,” *BTB* 41 (2011): 16–23; and Pamela J. Milne, “Toward Feminist Companionship: The Future of Feminist Biblical Studies and Feminism,” in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods, and Strategies* (ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole R. Fontaine; FCB 11; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 39–60.

Not long after these scholars published their influential works, Bernhard Stade, the prominent German historian and theologian who founded the *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, published a large-scale history of ancient Israel, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (1887–88).¹⁹ This two-volume work, which became the standard history of ancient Israel, is a social history as much as a political history, and it is probably the first publication by a biblical scholar in which the terms “patriarchy” and “patriarchal society” are used for ancient Israel. The strong influence of social-science theorists, especially Fustel de Coulange, is evident in Stade’s work. Following Fustel, he asserted that, like the Roman *patria potestas*, the Israelite *paterfamilias* had a great deal of power.²⁰ Stade’s reconstruction of Israelite society and religion had a significant impact on biblical scholarship, especially in Germany, where Julius Wellhausen was among those whom he influenced.

Twentieth- and Twenty-first-Century Developments

Despite the keen interest of leading nineteenth-century biblical scholars in the potential of anthropological research for understanding Israelite society, the engagement of biblical scholarship with the social sciences then waned for over half a century.²¹ Only in the mid-twentieth century did it reemerge, although the emphasis of this second wave was on prophecy and apocalyptic movements, not families.²² One of the few scholars to discuss family structures was Roland de Vaux in his prestigious *Ancient Israel*, published in French in 1958 and 1960, in English in 1961, and as a reprint classic in 1997.²³ This work contains many of the assumptions about patriarchal family structures that characterized the first wave of social-scientific biblical scholarship.²⁴ De Vaux asserts that “there is no doubt that . . . the Israelite family is patriarchal” and that men were masters of their wives and had absolute authority over their children—even at times the “power of life and death.”²⁵

¹⁹ Bernhard Stade, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (2 vols.; Berlin: Grote, 1887–88).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 390–95; cf. Rogerson, *Anthropology*, 14–15.

²¹ One exception is Louis Wallis, who calls the Israelite and Semitic family patriarchal, with the father ruling in all phases of household life (*Sociological Study of the Bible* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1912], 41).

²² Wilson (“Reflections,” 507–10) suggests reasons for the decline and resurgence of “social science criticism.”

²³ De Vaux, *Les institutions de l’Ancien Testament* (2 vols.; Paris: Cerf, 1958–60). The English version is *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. John McHugh; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), and the reprint edition was issued by Eerdmans.

²⁴ The same was true in mid-twentieth-century classical studies. For example, the prolific classicist Michael Grant refers to “the absolute mastery of the early Roman *paterfamilias*” (*Gladiators: Pageants of History* [London: Delacorte, 1967], 114).

²⁵ De Vaux (*Ancient Israel*, 20) invokes the life–death language in reference to Gen 38:24, where Judah condemns his daughter-in-law to death.

In a 1960 book with an explicitly anthropological approach, Raphael Patai also subscribes to the idea of patriarchy, with the father ruling the family.²⁶ Major reference works of this era contain similar statements: the “Family” entry in the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (1976) refers to the patriarchal family, “which was ruled by the authority of the father”;²⁷ and the “אָבִיבִי” (“father”) entry in the first volume (1974) of the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* refers to the “almost unlimited authority” of the father in Israelite families.²⁸

Although relatively few mid-twentieth-century biblical scholars drew on anthropology, they did turn to sociology. One result was that they began to use patriarchy in its extended sense, to refer to society-wide male dominance. The chapter on “Patriarchalism and Patrimonialism” in Max Weber’s 1921–22 book *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Economy and Society*), which was arguably the most important sociological work of the twentieth century, likely contributed to this expanded view of patriarchy.²⁹ Weber’s broad influence on biblical studies endures to this day; despite many modifications to his work, he is perhaps the most significant social theorist for Hebrew Bible studies.³⁰ Martin Noth, for example, was especially influenced by Weber.³¹ His *Geschichte Israels* (1950), which became a standard book on Israelite history for generations, asserts that the “family was subject to the *patria potestas*” and that the “social order in Israel was patriarchal.”³² Somewhat later, another influential book, Norman Gottwald’s *The Tribes of Yahweh* (1979), refers to the patriarchal nature of the Israelite extended family (*bêt ’āb*) and also the “pervasively patriarchal” character of Semitic culture.³³ Both of these examples use patriarchy in reference to the family and also to society as a whole.

²⁶Patai, *Family, Love and the Bible* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1960), 114–24.

²⁷O. J. Baab, “Family,” *IDB* 2:238, 240.

²⁸Helmer Ringgren, “אָבִיבִי,” *TDOT* 1:8. This volume appeared first in German in 1970.

²⁹Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich; trans. Ephraim Fischhoff et al.; 2 vols.; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978; originally published in German in 1921–22), 2:1007–69. The International Sociological Association voted Weber’s book the most important sociological book of the twentieth century; see http://www.isa-sociology.org/books/vt/bkv_000.htm.

³⁰So John F. Priest, “Social Science Methods,” in *Methods of Biblical Interpretation: Excerpted from the Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (ed. John H. Hayes; Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 282. See also Rainer Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel: An Introduction* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 8–12.

³¹See A. D. H. Mayes, *The Old Testament in Sociological Perspective* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1989), 49, 63.

³²Noth, *The History of Israel* (trans. Stanley Godman and Peter Ackroyd from the 2nd German ed. [1954]; 2nd ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1960; 1st German ed., 1950), 108. A new German edition appeared in 2011 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht). To be sure, Noth’s use of Weber was dominated by his interest in overall social and political features rather than family structure.

³³Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250–1050 B.C.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 315, 745 n. 206.

At the end of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century many scholars still adhered to the patriarchal model. For example, Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager's well-received *Life in Biblical Israel* (2001) calls the Israelite family patriarchal, with family authority residing with the *paterfamilias*;³⁴ and the entry on "Family Relationships" in the award-winning Pentateuch volume (2003) of the *Dictionary of the Old Testament* has a section on "Patriarchy" and refers to the *paterfamilias*.³⁵ In both instances, the use of *paterfamilias* continues to evoke the old patriarchal model based on classical texts. Another example, the article on households in the acclaimed *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (2006) calls Israelite households "formally patriarchal" with the senior male holding power over household members.³⁶

Still, adherence to the patriarchal model did abate somewhat in the late twentieth century, perhaps because studies of women's roles in ancient Israel had begun to contest aspects of the patriarchal paradigm. For example, the entry on "Family" in the 1992 *Anchor Bible Dictionary* disputes the notion that fathers had absolute authority and rejects the idea that they wielded life-and-death power over their children.³⁷ A 1993 book, *The Social World of Ancient Israel*, recognizes significant maternal "power and authority" in household decisions.³⁸ The chapter on the monarchic period in the 1997 book *Families in Ancient Israel* repudiates both the general notion of paternal supremacy and the idea of the father's life-and-death powers.³⁹ Similarly, the chapter on ancient Israelite families in the 2003 book *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World* takes to task interpreters who consider certain biblical narratives to be "normal expressions of patriarchy," asserts that "father" does *not* mean "ruler," and proposes that the term "patriarchy" be avoided altogether.⁴⁰

³⁴ King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 36, 38. They do acknowledge, however, that a father could not execute offspring (p. 38) and that mothers had some household authority (p. 50).

³⁵ Victor H. Matthews, "Family Relationships," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 293–94. This assessment diverges from Matthews's view in Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel, 1250–587 BCE* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993).

³⁶ Warren Carter, "Households, Householders," in *New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld; 5 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2006–9), 4:903.

³⁷ Christopher J. H. Wright, "Family," *ABD* 2:767.

³⁸ Matthews and Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel*, 23. The authors do, however, still use the term "patriarchy."

³⁹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family in First Temple Israel," in Leo G. Perdue, Joseph Blenkinsopp, John J. Collins, and Carol Meyers, *Families in Ancient Israel* (Family, Religion, and Culture; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 70. Blenkinsopp doubts that the narrator is interested in "legal verisimilitude" and notes that there is no evidence in the Hebrew Bible of burning as the death penalty for sexual transgressions.

⁴⁰ 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), 41, 43.

Nevertheless, it is striking that this somewhat diminished appeal to traditional patriarchal models has found little resonance among many feminist biblical scholars. For example, the otherwise balanced *Anchor Bible Dictionary* article on women in the OT repeatedly refers to Israelite patriarchy.⁴¹ Similarly, the introduction to a reader on women in the Hebrew Bible (1999) asserts that biblical texts “function to preserve patriarchal society.”⁴² Perhaps the sharpest assertion of Israelite patriarchy is the claim (2000) that biblical texts are “anchored in a particular ideology of male domination” and promote a “male-supremacist social and cognitive system”; moreover, in this view, “patriarchy as the fundamental social system of ancient Israel is justified, universalized, and naturalized in the biblical text.”⁴³ An essay in a book on gender and the Hebrew Bible (2006) reports that the social, economic, and political systems of ancient Israel were patriarchal and hierarchical, an arrangement that worked to “benefit men directly and to benefit their families *only* [my emphasis] at the father’s pleasure.”⁴⁴ And the introduction to the new edition of the widely used and highly respected *Women’s Bible Commentary* (2012) refers to the “patriarchal assumptions” of the society around the texts.⁴⁵

Note that the patriarchy model appropriated by these feminist biblical scholars is the expanded version—a system of pervasive male privilege and dominance in both the family and society. They are following in the footsteps of the second-wave feminists mentioned above.⁴⁶ In their critiques, these theorists insist that patriarchy is not restricted to the anthropological concept of the father’s absolute decision-making power in family life but rather represents “the social structures and ideologies that have enabled men to dominate and exploit women throughout recorded history,” with all men having power to “exploit and use” women.⁴⁷ For example, in her widely read and influential but deeply flawed book *The Creation of*

⁴¹ Phyllis A. Bird, “Women: Old Testament,” *ABD* 6:951–97.

⁴² Alice Bach, “Introduction—Man’s World, Woman’s Place: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (ed. Alice Bach; New York: Routledge, 1999), xiv.

⁴³ Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Bible as a Woman* (JSOTSup 310; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 12–13.

⁴⁴ Kathleen M. O’Connor, “The Feminist Movement Meets the Old Testament: One Woman’s Perspective,” in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld* (ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 13–14.

⁴⁵ Sharon H. Ringe, “When Women Interpret the Bible,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley; 3rd ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 3–4.

⁴⁶ For example, judging from the references in the introduction to her book *Sexual Politics* (notably nn. 27–29 [pp. 19–20]), Fuchs has been strongly influenced by second-wave feminists, who in turn often reflect Marxist appropriation of patriarchy as part of the evils of capitalism; see my *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 27–29.

⁴⁷ See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 115.

Patriarchy, Gerda Lerner defines patriarchy as “male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society.”⁴⁸ In the discourse of feminist theorists, patriarchy came to mean the “domination of all men over all women.”⁴⁹ Many feminist biblical scholars apparently followed suit.

In sum, the concept of patriarchy taken up by Hebrew Bible scholars in the nineteenth century still influences the understanding of Israelite households. We still see references to patriarchy and the appearance of *paterfamilias* and *pater potestas*. And the all-inclusive concept of male dominance and concomitant female victimhood, as articulated by second-wave theorists, appears in the publications of many feminist biblical scholars.⁵⁰

But is this persistent appeal to the patriarchal model justified? Perhaps not, for recent developments in three areas—studies of classical society, research on Israelite and biblical women, and third-wave feminist theory—challenge its appropriateness as a descriptor of Israelite society.⁵¹

II. CHALLENGES TO THE PATRIARCHAL PARADIGM

Classical Studies

Because the concept of patriarchy as the rule of the father originated in analyses of ancient Greek and Latin sources, challenges to those analyses are significant. Already in the 1960s, a classicist noted that the “all-powerful *paterfamilias* of Rome ... is too crude a figure to correspond to the nuances of reality.”⁵² Perhaps most important was the realization that different areas of household life cannot be lumped together; that is, male control in one area does not necessarily mean control in all areas.⁵³ Another development came several decades later, when the reality of the father’s life-and-death power was shown to be an abstract concept and “not a fact of social history.”⁵⁴

⁴⁸Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (Women and History 1; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 239. For a penetrating critique of Lerner, who violates her own rules about historical methodology in her analysis of biblical and other ancient texts, see Susan Kray, “New Mode of Feminist Historical Analysis’—Or Just Another Collusion with ‘Patriarchal’ Bias?” *Shofar* 20 (2002): 66–90.

⁴⁹See Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 212.

⁵⁰To be sure, other feminist biblical scholars provide examples of women exercising power and authority in households and in the larger society; however, they do not explicitly critique the patriarchal model.

⁵¹Anthropologists too have challenged the nineteenth-century patriarchal model. Maine’s theory, for example, has been “fully discredited”; so Alan Diamond, “Introduction,” in *The Victorian Achievement of Sir Henry Maine: A Centennial Reappraisal* (ed. Alan Diamond; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4.

⁵²John A. Crook, “Patria Potestas,” *CQ* 17 (1967): 122.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 113–14.

⁵⁴Yan Thomas, “*Vitae necisque potestas*: Le père, la cité, la mort,” in *Du châtement dans la*

Perhaps the most thorough discrediting of the patriarchy paradigm came in the 1990s, when it became clear that new knowledge about the social realities and cultural representations of classical civilizations would not support the traditional depiction of patriarchy in classical societies. Roman historian Richard Saller has been instrumental in this regard.⁵⁵ He recognized that most of the nineteenth-century theorists had legal training (e.g., Maine and Morgan, as mentioned above) and based their analyses on ancient *legal* texts, which they believed functioned as do European and American legal systems. They ignored evidence in other sources and thus missed information about social reality. Examining a broad range of *non-legal* texts reveals aspects of daily life in which fathers do *not* exercise absolute authority. As Saller says, “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.”⁵⁶ In short, he says, it is a “gross oversimplification to represent Roman fathers as endowed with unlimited power.”⁵⁷ Not even the ancient Romans themselves viewed the family as “an extreme, wholly asymmetrical patriarchy that placed all power in the hands of the father.”⁵⁸

It is especially important to note that the relationship between a man and his wife in Roman society did not involve the same absolute authority that a father may have had over his children. Wives are never mentioned in any of the Roman texts mentioning putative life-and-death power.⁵⁹ Saller shows that the term “patriarchy” does not apply to the husband–wife relationship.⁶⁰ Moreover, elite Roman women often managed property and exercised power over their households.⁶¹ The gendered term *paterfamilias* refers to household management and not biological paternity; it thus obscures the relative empowerment of at least some women.⁶² Note

cité: Supplices corporels et peine de mort dans le monde antique. Table ronde (Rome 9–11 novembre 1982) (ed. Yan Thomas; Collection de l'École française de Rome 79; Rome: École française de Rome, 1984), 512, 545, 500.

⁵⁵Richard P. Saller, *Patriarchy, Property and Death in the Roman Family* (Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy, and Society in Past Time 25; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); see esp. ch. 5, “*Pietas* and *patria potestas*: obligation and power in the Roman household,” 102–32. Suzanne Dixon reaches similar conclusions (*The Roman Family* [Ancient Society and History; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992]).

⁵⁶Saller, *Patriarchy, Property*, 2.

⁵⁷Ibid., 72; see also Dixon, *Roman Family*, 147, 160.

⁵⁸Saller, *Patriarchy, Property*, 228.

⁵⁹This was pointed out by Westbrook, who nonetheless suggests that, following ancient Near Eastern precedent, Roman men might kill their wives for adultery or certain public offenses (“*Vitae Necisque Potestas*,” 208).

⁶⁰Saller, *Patriarchy, Property*, 129.

⁶¹Richard Saller, “Pater Familias, Mater Familias, and the Gendered Semantics of the Roman Household,” *CP* 94 (1999): 196.

⁶²Ibid., 186–87; Dixon, *Roman Family*, 151.

that Xenophon's treatise on household management presents the economic roles of wife and husband as complementary, with a woman having household authority and sometimes even "exercising authority over her marital partner."⁶³ That depiction finds support in the analysis of Roman and Greek household space by third-wave feminist archaeologists, who have challenged the traditional concept of sequestered powerless women by providing evidence of female control of significant aspects of household life.⁶⁴ They have shown that capitalist Victorian household patterns, in which the workplace was outside the home and men had control over wives and children dependent on their earnings, had been superimposed on premodern societies in which the household was the workplace for all family members.

Classicists have also challenged the expanded view of patriarchy as absolute male control over society-wide institutions. Men undeniably had more numerous and more visible roles in community life, but women were not categorically excluded. Religious roles in particular have been the subject of considerable research. There is evidence that ancient Greek women took part in public religious activities, arguably an arena of politics, and held leadership positions in certain cults or festivals.⁶⁵ Further, Roman women were actively involved as participants or officiants in mainstream public cults, not simply marginal women's cults.⁶⁶ Other community roles have been identified in archaeological materials—iconography and inscriptions—that depict women in a variety of extra-household roles that are far less visible in literary and legal texts.⁶⁷

To be clear, classical scholarship does not claim equality for women. Rather, it contests the validity of the patriarchy concept, which originated in nineteenth-century scholarship based on limited sources. Using a variety of textual and archaeological sources, classicists have problematized the patriarchy designation.

⁶³Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Xenophon, Oeconomicus: A Social and Historical Commentary with a New English Translation* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 34, 36, 247.

⁶⁴Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood, "Feminist Gender Research in Historical Archaeology," in *Women in Antiquity: Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Archaeology* (ed. Sarah Milledge Nelson; Gender and Archaeology 13; Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2007), 282–84. Cf. Lisa C. Nevett, *Domestic Space in Classical Antiquity* (Key Themes in Ancient History; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Marilyn W. Goldberg, "Classical Athenian City Houses," in *The Archaeology of Household Activities* (ed. Penelope M. Allison; London: Routledge, 1999).

⁶⁵Matthew Dillon, *Girls and Women in Classical Greek Religion* (London: Routledge, 2002), 7–106.

⁶⁶See Celia E. Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic* (Studies in the History of Greece and Rome; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁶⁷Spencer-Wood, "Feminist Gender Research," 273–77.

*Studies of Israelite Women:
The Household and the Wider Community*

Examining the patriarchy paradigm as used for ancient Israel poses problems not present in classical studies. To be sure, like classical sources, the Hebrew Bible is mostly the product of urban male elites, not the 90 percent who were rural agriculturalists. Unlike classical texts, however, the Bible took shape centuries after the existence of the society depicted in many of its passages.⁶⁸ Moreover, it is only one document, in contrast to the many different classical sources spanning centuries. Thus, the study of Israelite society—especially family life, which receives relatively little biblical attention—means using some biblical materials and also relying heavily on archaeological data, which can supplement and even challenge the impression one gets from texts alone.⁶⁹

The relevant archaeological materials come from excavations of households, the setting in which most people, women *and* men, experienced daily life.⁷⁰ However, raw archaeological data do not themselves indicate the dynamics of household life. They must be interpreted, and the interpretive lens is provided by gender archaeology, which is concerned with *people*, not only their artifacts and dwellings. It seeks to identify aspects of gendered life in the past, notably by redirecting the traditional focus on men's activities to those of women.⁷¹ Further, in its insistence

⁶⁸For problems in using the Hebrew Bible as a source for information about women, see my "Archaeology—A Window to the Lives of Israelite Women," in *The Bible and Women: An Encyclopaedia of Exegesis and Cultural History*, vol. 1.1, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: Torah* (ed. Irmtraud Fischer, Mercedes Navarro Puerto, with Andrea Taschl-Erber; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 63–67.

⁶⁹Note Peggy L. Day's insistence ("Introduction," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* [ed. Peggy L. Day; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989], 5) on distinguishing between the biblical text and Israelite culture: "The text may claim to speak for the culture, but it is neither coextensive with nor equivalent to the culture.... Thus [we must inquire] into women's activities without adopting the text's perspective."

⁷⁰The term "household," as used in this article, has three components: the domicile (and other buildings), people (family members and others, such as servants), and possessions (land, tools, and other artifacts and vessels); see my *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 104–5. Household archaeology is a small but significant sector of Syro-Palestinian archaeology; see, e.g., the articles in *Household Archaeology in Ancient Israel and Beyond* (ed. Assaf Yasur-Landau, Jennie R. Ebeling, and Laura B. Mazow; Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 50; Leiden: Brill, 2011).

⁷¹See my *Rediscovering Eve*, 31, 118; and my "Engendering Syro-Palestinian Archaeology: Reasons and Resources," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66 (2003): 185–97. *Gender archaeology* is sometimes used synonymously with *feminist archaeology*, which is more specifically aligned with feminist epistemologies. Useful descriptions with bibliographies can be found in *Archaeology: The Key Concepts* (ed. Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn; London: Routledge, 2005); Mary Louise Stig Sørensen, "Feminist Archaeology," 116–21; and Sarah Milledge Nelson, "Gender Archaeology," 127–33. Note that the word "gender" in gender archaeology can be considered a constructed term encompassing diverse biological categories; see, e.g., Ruth D. Whitehouse, "Gender Archaeology

on discovering the relationships of women with others, it often contests facile claims, based *only* on texts, about female subordination. In so doing, it often also disputes common assumptions about social systems, not only household life.⁷²

Interpreting the remains of households provides information about the lived experience of their inhabitants.⁷³ Let me explain how the interpretive process works. For example, archaeologists uncover the tools of daily life; but gender attribution—that is, determining whether women or men were more likely to have used the tools—means consulting ethnographic data and also textual references and iconographic depictions. Further, once women’s tasks are identified, assessing how those tasks were valued relies on ethnographic evidence from traditional societies, not on how those tasks are viewed today in industrialized societies.⁷⁴

What did women contribute to household life? The tasks of women and men overlapped in certain circumstances but were not the same. Women were responsible for what some gender archaeologists call “maintenance activities,” a term for the set of “practices and experiences concerning the sustenance, welfare, and long-term reproduction” of the household.⁷⁵ These practices are the basic tasks of daily life; many required specialized knowledge and were essential to regulate and stabilize both household and community life.⁷⁶ They include economic, social, political, and religious activities—far too many to be considered in this paper.⁷⁷ Here I describe briefly women’s economic activities, many of which leave traces in the archaeological record and can thus be interpreted with respect to gender roles and relationships.

Economic activities were an integral part of household life in ancient Israel as in all traditional agrarian societies. It can be shown that women were largely responsible for food processing, textile production, and the fashioning of various

and the Archaeology of Women,” in *Archaeology and Women: Ancient and Modern Issues* (ed. Sue Hamilton, Ruth D. Whitehouse, and Katherine I. Wright; Publications of the Institute of Archaeology, University College London; Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007), 27–40.

⁷²See Janet E. Levy, “Gender, Heterarchy, and Hierarchy,” in Nelson, *Women in Antiquity*, 192.

⁷³See my “Double Vision: Textual and Archaeological Images of Women,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel*, forthcoming.

⁷⁴Using ethnographic analogies depends on the similarity between an ancient society and a premodern one observed before the impact of modernity. On the use of ethnographic analogies, along with references to detailed discussions, see my “Double Vision” and also my *Rediscovering Eve*, 32–34, esp. n. 42.

⁷⁵See my *Rediscovering Eve*, 126–27, which draws on the work of, inter alios, 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.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 3.

⁷⁷For detailed information on the many maintenance activities of Israelite women, see my *Rediscovering Eve*, 125–70.

household implements and containers (grinding tools, stone and ceramic vessels, baskets, weaving implements, and sewing tools).⁷⁸ Many of these tasks were not only time-consuming and physically demanding but also technologically sophisticated. In the aggregate, they likely required more technological skill than did men's. As anthropologist Jack Goody noted, because women could transform the raw into the cooked and produce other essential commodities, they were seen as having the ability to "work ... wonders."⁷⁹

Women's role in commodity production was essential for household survival, for ancient Israel probably lacked a developed market economy for most of the Iron Age.⁸⁰ Ethnographic evidence strongly suggests that when women dominate indispensable household processes, they are positioned to exercise a considerable amount of household power.⁸¹ Those responsible for preparing life-sustaining food, for example, have a say in household activities relating to both production and consumption.⁸² They also control allocation of household space and implements.⁸³

In short, depending on their age and experience, Israelite women had managerial roles, supervising the assignment of tasks and the use of resources in their own households and, in certain circumstances, across households.⁸⁴ To put it another way, senior women functioned as the COOs (Chief Operating Officers) of their households.⁸⁵ They were hardly oppressed and powerless. Nor were they subordinate to male control in all aspects of household life. Rather, in subsistence

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 127–35.

⁷⁹ Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Themes in the Social Sciences; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 70.

⁸⁰ Some large settlements may have had markets by the Assyrian period, but most households operated at a subsistence level and would not have participated in a market economy. See my *Rediscovering Eve*, 47, 56, 112, 116–17; see also King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 192–93.

⁸¹ E.g., Carole M. Counihan, "Introduction—Food, and Gender: Identity and Power," in *Food and Gender: Identity and Power* (ed. Carole M. Counihan and Steven L. Kaplan; Food in History and Culture 1; Amsterdam: Harwood, 1998), 2, 4.

⁸² Julia A. Henson, "The Engendered Household," in *Handbook of Gender in Archaeology* (ed. Sarah Milledge Nelson; Gender and Archaeology; Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 2006), 173.

⁸³ Yizhar Hirschfeld, "The Traditional Palestinian House: Results of a Survey in the Hebron Hills," in *The Palestinian Dwelling in the Roman-Byzantine Period* (Collectio minor, Studium Biblicum Franciscanum 34; Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press and Israel Exploration Society), 152, 182.

⁸⁴ This is especially true in lower-class peasant households; see David D. Gilmore, "Men and Women in Southern Spain: 'Domestic Power' Revisited," *American Anthropologist* 92 (1990): 964–65. Avraham Faust shows that most people were lower-class peasants in Judah, somewhat less so in Israel (*The Archaeology of Israelite Society in Iron Age II* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012], 270–71).

⁸⁵ If the senior male was incapacitated or absent, the senior female likely also served as acting CEO (Chief Executive Officer); see *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation* (ed. David E. S. Stein et al.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2006), 403.

households in traditional societies comparable to ancient Israel, when women and men both make significant economic contributions to household life, female–male relationships are marked by interdependence or mutual dependence. Thus, for many—but not all—household processes in ancient Israel, the marital union would have been a partnership. The different gendered components of household life cannot be lumped together; men dominated some aspects, women others.

A number of biblical texts, even with their androcentric perspective, support this conclusion. Women’s managerial agency can be identified in some legal stipulations of the Covenant Code, in several narratives, and in Proverbs.⁸⁶

Two legal stipulations (Exod 21:15, 17; cf. Prov 20:20) mandate capital punishment for offspring—presumably adult children in complex families—who strike or curse their parents; the household authority of mother as well as father is upheld.⁸⁷ The narrative about Micah’s mother (Judges 17) depicts a senior woman’s decision-making power, her right to perform efficacious religious acts, and her ability to commission cultic objects that increase the value of the household shrine. The narrative about Abigail (1 Samuel 25) shows her to be a woman with access to resources that she uses cleverly to save her household from David’s wrath; she acts on her own initiative without consulting her husband, gives orders to household servants, and speaks with the wise and diplomatic rhetoric of a woman accustomed to being in charge. And the Shunammite narrative (2 Kgs 4:8–37; 8:1–6) depicts a woman acting autonomously when she invites the prophet Elisha to her household, reconfigures household space, moves her family away to escape the consequences of a drought, interacts readily with the king as well as the prophet, and negotiates the restoration of property taken over by squatters when the family is away. Finally, in Proverbs (31:10–31), the “strong woman” (*ʿēšet-ḥayil*, NRSV “capable wife”) is portrayed as an efficient and successful household manager, exhibiting resourcefulness and acumen in economic processes.

In sum, gender archaeology and biblical texts together provide compelling evidence for the managerial power of Israelite women in the household setting. In addition, the use of *bêt ʿēm* (“mother’s household”) as a counterpart to *bêt ʿāb* (“father’s household”) in several women-centered passages also suggests women’s household authority.⁸⁸ The term “patriarchy,” as a designation of general male domination and the oppression of women, would thus be inappropriate and

⁸⁶For more details on these passages, along with references, see my *Rediscovering Eve*, 187–92.

⁸⁷These stipulations probably originated in village (peasant rather than urban) life; see Douglas A. Knight, *Law, Power, and Justice in Ancient Israel* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 128–29. Perhaps because this book deals with law, Knight, like the nineteenth-century anthropologists whose ideas of patriarchy were based on legal texts, repeatedly refers to patriarchy. Yet the inadequacy of the patriarchy designation appears in his many examples (e.g., pp. 175, 181, 230) of exceptions to complete male dominance.

⁸⁸See Gen 24:28; Ruth 1:8; Cant 3:4; 8:2; cf. 2 Kgs 8:3; Prov 9:1; 14:1; 31:21, 27. See my *Rediscovering Eve*, 112–13.

inaccurate. Identifying female agency challenges the idea, embedded in the patriarchy model, that women were helpless victims of a male-dominant system.⁸⁹

A similar case, looking at biblical evidence alone, can be made for women's community roles. We see that women were not excluded from all professional positions serving the wider community.⁹⁰ Their positions were in fact numerous and varied; about twenty different ones are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.

Some women apparently held leadership positions such as judge (Judg 4:4–5) and sage (2 Sam 14:1–20; 20:14–22); and several royal women—because of their class as much as their gender—exercised political power as a *gēbîrâ* (“great lady”; e.g., 1 Kgs 15:11; Jer 13:18; 29:2). Women contributed to the cultural realm: as poets, reflected in the attribution of poems and songs to women (Deborah, Miriam, Hannah, Lemuel's mother in Proverbs, the woman in Canticles); as performers, according to references to female singers, dancers, and instrumentalists (e.g., Exod 15:2–21; 1 Sam 18:6–7; 2 Sam 19:35 [Heb. 19:36]; Eccl 2:8; Jer 31:4); and as mourners (e.g., Jer 9:17–20 [Heb. 9:16–19]). Some of these cultural activities might be considered secular; but others, such as victory songs praising God's salvific acts and perhaps also funerary laments, were in the realm of religion. Other religious roles included menial ones, for example, the enigmatic women at the entrance to the tent of meeting (Exod 38:8; 1 Sam 2:22); cultic ones (e.g., Ezek 8:16–17, where women along with male priests carry out a complex of ritual activities); and authoritative ones, notably the women prophets—four named ones (Deborah, Miriam, Huldah, and Noadiah), two unnamed ones (Isa 8:3; Joel 2:28 [Heb. 3:10]), and all those perhaps subsumed under the masculine plural *nēbî'im* (“prophets”).⁹¹ Another reference to women prophesying (Ezek 13:17–23) depicts them negatively but probably reflects a time when they were highly regarded religious specialists.⁹²

Most of these professional women possessed considerable expertise and made significant contributions to their communities, and many provided authoritative services. They were hardly all dominated or controlled by male hierarchies. Moreover, those who worked within female cohorts or guilds (i.e., performers, lamenters, certain prophets) had their own hierarchies, with senior women or those with greatest expertise directing and teaching less-skilled women or apprentices. Thus, the society-wide designation “patriarchy,” implying that women were completely excluded from community positions in ancient Israel, also seems inappropriate and incorrect.

⁸⁹See Sarah Milledge Nelson, *Gender in Archaeology: Analyzing Power and Prestige* (2nd ed.; Gender and Archaeology 9; Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2004), 154.

⁹⁰The professional roles of Israelite women mentioned here are described in my *Rediscovering Eve*, 171–79. See also *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (ed. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), entries for the women and texts mentioned in the next paragraph.

⁹¹Wilda Gafney argues that *nēbî'im* is sometimes gender inclusive (*Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008], 160–65).

⁹²Jonathan Stökl, “The *מְתַנְבְּאוֹת* in Ezekiel 13 Reconsidered,” *JBL* 132 (2013): 61–76.

Feminist Critiques

Many concerns about the patriarchy paradigm have been raised by third-wave feminist scholars, both social theorists and gender or feminist archaeologists. Their discussions of patriarchy, which strive to correct the essentialist, absolutist, and dichotomizing tendencies of second-wave theorists, are far too extensive to be recounted here. Rather some of the most salient issues are mentioned briefly:

- A fundamental problem is that the idea of patriarchy rests on a naturalized view of women as inferior to men and thus incapable of making decisions, controlling resources, or providing leadership. Weber, for example, linked male dominance to “the normal superiority of the physical and intellectual energies of the male.”⁹³ Residues of such flawed essentialist views underlie current notions of patriarchy, weakening the legitimacy of the model.
- A closely related problem is the assumption of patriarchy’s universality—that it existed everywhere, across time and space. Ethnographers have been instrumental in showing that the range of women’s activities and the degree of their social and economic power vary enormously across cultures.⁹⁴ The idea of absolute male dominance cannot be uncritically superimposed on all societies as a universal and natural condition.
- The patriarchy model rests on a male/female dichotomy. When concepts of sexuality as a binary are deconstructed and wider variability and fluidity in sexual identity and practices are acknowledged, the root binary of patriarchy is disrupted.⁹⁵
- Applying the patriarchy label to traditional societies generally means applying the values of capitalist societies—values that valorize male individuality. In so doing, the importance of women’s social and economic contributions to traditional societies, which are much less individualistic, goes unrecognized.⁹⁶
- The notion of biological paternity forming the foundation of society-wide dominance goes back to Weber, but this link between fatherhood in a kinship group and male rule in a polity is now seen to be neither necessary nor universal.⁹⁷

⁹³ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1007.

⁹⁴ See, e.g., Vrushali Patil, “From Patriarchy to Intersectionality, A Transnational Feminist Assessment of How Far We’ve Really Come,” *Signs* 38 (2013): 850–51; cf. Nash, “Patriarchy,” 103.

⁹⁵ So, e.g., Spencer-Wood, “Feminist Theory and Gender Research,” 46.

⁹⁶ Almudena Hernando, “Why Did History Not Appreciate Maintenance Activities?” in Montón-Subías and Sánchez-Romero, *Engendering Social Dynamics*, 12–13. See also the discussion of collective identity in ancient Israel in my *Rediscovering Eve*, 118–21.

⁹⁷ Patil, “From Patriarchy to Intersectionality,” 854–55; cf. Julia Adams, “The Rule of the

- The patriarchy paradigm assumes that household dynamics are monolithic, but specific forms of male dominance cannot be generalized as indicators of total male control. Feminist archaeologists have documented the disconnect between putative ideologies of male dominance and the diversity and fluidity of actual gender practices.⁹⁸
- The concept of patriarchy renders the past static by superimposing the notion of fixed sets of statuses and relationships on a lived reality that inevitably involved subtle and shifting patterns. Similarly, it renders invisible the multiple ways in which women are social actors—ways not always visible in a society's normative documents. Actual gender practices are distinct from patriarchal gender ideology, if there even is such a thing.⁹⁹
- The patriarchy model involves a unidimensional concentration on gender in its characterization of both families and societies. It thereby neglects other forms of social asymmetry—those linked to social class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or age—that disadvantage men as well as women. Feminist theorists thus emphasize that analyzing power relations means (1) taking into account the complex intersection of various dimensions of a person's identity, and (2) acknowledging the subordinate status of many men as well as women in relation to these other categories.¹⁰⁰
- Invoking patriarchy means considering women helpless victims, thus effacing the many ways in which women circumvent or foil male mechanisms of power.¹⁰¹
- Proclaiming that women in an ancient, non-Western society were oppressed in a patriarchal system arguably encodes a belief in the cultural superiority of modern democracies.¹⁰²

Father: Patriarchy and Patrimonialism in Early Modern Europe," in *Max Weber's Economy and Society: A Critical Companion* (ed. Charles Camic, Philip S. Gorski, and David M. Trubek; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 240–41.

⁹⁸E.g., Spencer-Wood, "Feminist Theory and Gender Research," 52–54.

⁹⁹Ibid., 51. Cf. Jacques Berlinerblau's challenge to the very idea of ancient ideologies ("Ideology, Pierre Bourdieu's Doxa, and the Hebrew Bible," *Semeia* 87 [1999]: 193–214).

¹⁰⁰Patil, "From Patriarchy to Intersectionality, 850. See also Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways*, 116–17.

¹⁰¹This was noted already by second-wave feminists; see Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, "Introduction," in *Woman, Culture, and Society* (ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), 2, 9–10.

¹⁰²For example, Aihwa Ong objects to the modernist binary of unfree tradition versus free modernity ("Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Re-presentations of Women in Non-Western Societies," *Inscriptions* 3–4 [1988]; http://culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_3-4/aihwaong.html).

Altogether, these problems mean, as one theorist proclaims, that the discourse of patriarchy requires a “feminist, post-structuralist overhaul.”¹⁰³ A far more complex model is required to represent the mutable dynamics of the lived experiences of individuals across the social and political spectrum.¹⁰⁴

III. CONCLUSION: BEYOND PATRIARCHY

Much biblical scholarship, especially but not exclusively feminist biblical scholarship, continues to consider ancient Israel patriarchal. Moreover, the term “patriarchy” in reference to ancient Israel, although rarely articulated, typically assumes both male dominance of the household and male control of society-wide functions. Largely unrecognized by biblical scholars is the fact that the patriarchy concept, which was formed by anthropologists in the nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, is not holding up well in classical studies. In addition, close examination of the roles of Israelite women, using the interpretive processes of gender archaeology and attending to certain biblical texts, indicates that the patriarchy concept occludes the presence of significant domains of female agency in household and society-wide contexts in ancient Israel. Moreover, third-wave feminist theorists have identified many significant problems with the patriarchy model.

It is time for us to acknowledge that patriarchy is a Western, constructed concept, not a “social law” or an immutable feature of all societies. As a constructed model, it is essentially an oversimplification and systematization of data used for comparative purposes. And as for all such models, new information can and should mean that it has outlived its usefulness.¹⁰⁵ It is my contention that it no longer provides a valid heuristic formulation for representing Israelite society.

Because the patriarchy paradigm is not flexible enough to accommodate the reality of daily household activities and interactions, it interferes with attempts to understand the complex gendered patterns of life in ancient Israel and in so doing presents an unduly negative view of women’s lives in the biblical past. Moreover, it obscures the existence of groups—servants, slaves, non-Israelites—whose members often led far more circumscribed lives than did most women. But let me be clear: eschewing the patriarchy model does not mean claiming that there was gender equality in ancient Israel. Israelite patrilineality, for example, clearly favored men in the transmission of a household’s inheritance across generations through male lines, a pattern that underlies the male control of female sexuality that appears

¹⁰³ Adams, “Rule of the Father,” 254.

¹⁰⁴ Anna Pollert, “Gender and Class Revisited; or, the Poverty of ‘Patriarchy,’” *Sociology* 30 (1996): 640.

¹⁰⁵ See Philip F. Esler, “Social-Scientific Models in Biblical Interpretation,” in Esler, *Ancient Israel: The Old Testament in Its Social Context*, 3–4.

in biblical texts and also in ethnographic observations of traditional societies.¹⁰⁶ But patrilineality is not the same as patriarchy.¹⁰⁷ And male control of female sexuality does not mean male control of adult women in every aspect of household or community life. In short, male dominance was real; but it was fragmentary, not hegemonic.¹⁰⁸

I began with a question, Was ancient Israel a patriarchal society?; and my answer is no, ancient Israel should not be called a patriarchal society, for the term “patriarchy” is an inadequate and misleading designation of the social reality of ancient Israel. I conclude with another question and a brief reply. If the patriarchy model has outlived its usefulness as a social-science model for representing Israelite society, is there another model that can better accommodate the diversity of women’s experiences and acknowledge their control of certain household and society-wide functions? Let me suggest a more recent social-science model. Many anthropologists now invoke the concept of *heterarchy*.¹⁰⁹ This concept, which has been productively employed by gender archaeologists among others, concedes the existence of hierarchies but does not situate them all in a linear pattern. Rather it acknowledges that different power structures can exist simultaneously in any given society, with each structure having its own hierarchical arrangements that may cross-cut each other laterally. As a far more flexible model than patriarchy, heterarchy is a heuristic tool that perhaps can better accommodate, at least for now, the complexity of gender dynamics and thereby acknowledge that Israelite women were not dominated in *all* aspects of Israelite society but rather were autonomous actors in multiple aspects of household and community life.

¹⁰⁶Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve*, 200–201. In agrarian societies in which a household’s livelihood depends on its property (*naḥālā*, “inheritance”), the acute need for men to be sure their offspring were their own is manifest in regulations giving men control of female sexuality. Biblical legal stipulations concerning virginity, adultery, prostitution, levirate marriage, and childbirth seek to assure that property remains within the male lineage; even Gen 3:16 (“he shall rule over you”) likely concerns sexual control and not absolute male dominance (see *ibid.*, 95–102). Tikva Frymer-Kensky notes that Deuteronomic laws are fair to women except in matters of sexuality (“Deuteronomy,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary* [ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; 2nd ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 591).

¹⁰⁷Françoise Zonabend, “An Anthropological Perspective on Kinship and the Family,” in *Distant Worlds, Ancient Worlds*, vol. 1 of *A History of the Family* (ed. André Burguière, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Martine Segalen, and Françoise Zonabend; trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison, Rosemary Morris, and Andrew Wilson; 2 vols.; Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 43.

¹⁰⁸See Sherry B. Ortner, *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 172–76.

¹⁰⁹This is explained in my “Hierarchy or Heterarchy? Archaeology and the Theorizing of Israelite Society,” in *Confronting the Past: Archaeological and Historical Essays on Ancient Israel 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 Levy, “Gender, Heterarchy, and Hierarchy.”