Schneider, Tammi J.

*Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis*


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Schneider’s extensive study of the women in Genesis revitalizes and enhances the current understanding of these women and the book of Genesis as a whole. This work serves to demonstrate how inadequate the term “Patriarchal History” is to describe these texts and revolutionizes the way this biblical book should be read.

While short, the introduction provides the groundwork for the chapters to come. In it, Schneider outlines her new methodological approach, “verbing the character,” which was developed by her and named by former student Leah Rediger Schulte. This hermeneutic explores the character, who must be the subject of at least one verb, by using the following four criteria: their description, which include relational epitaphs; the subject verbs; the object verbs or prepositional phrases; and the relationships that are described in the texts. For this study she uses the Masoretic Text as found in the *BHS*, which is important as her study highlights the literary cohesiveness among the stories.

Following the introduction are four sections that detail different types of women found within the book of Genesis. Because the focus of the book is on promise, the women do not appear in chronological order but rather in categories that relate to their relationship with promise. Thus the first section is entitled “Matriarchs” and includes Sarah, Rebekah,
Leah, and Rachel. The second section focuses on the same portion of text as the first but is about the “Mothers of Potential Heirs (or Slaves, Concubines, Daughters, and Daughters-in-Law).” Part 3 contains material that precedes the giving of the promise (Gen 1–11) and is called “Mothers Who Predate the Promise.” The fourth part looks at three women who fit the category of “Women Who Do Not Bear.”

Sarah is the first character explored by Schneider using her new method, and the results are similar to what she found in *Sarah: A Mother of Nations*. The difference between Sarah’s relationship with the Deity and her husband is made very clear in this new analysis and is a significant contribution to the understanding of this character. Schneider omits 20:5 from her analysis because it is hearsay, but this reveals a limitation within her proposed method.

In the next chapter, the focus turns to Rebekah, who receives an overwhelmingly positive review, and the author understands *tobat mareh meod* as referring to Rebekah’s whole personage, not just physical beauty. While it is the smallest section within the chapter, the piece that deals with Rebekah’s relationships is the most insightful and controversial, as Schneider claims that all of Rebekah’s relationships are all positive, including the ones with Isaac, Esau, and Laban.

Leah is the focus of the following chapter because Schneider claims she has been traditionally interpreted through the lens of Rachel, and this has led to a false understanding of this character; thus, since she is the first to marry Jacob and the first to bear children, Schneider feels justified in examining Leah before Rachel. The contrast between Leah’s actual status as a first wife and the way she is referred to in the text is highlighted. The assessment of this character is that she was a dutiful and obedient wife. She was the ultimate mother of promise in this generation through the birth of Levi and Judah and as evidenced by the genealogical preference for Leah’s children. At the end of this analysis, Leah is ultimately a sympathetic character whose only real benefactor is God, as she remains unloved by her husband, resented by her sister, and used by her father.

In the chapter addressing Rachel, Schneider highlights that she is not buried with the other matriarchs and that the traditionally positive interpretations of Rachel change when compared with the prior analysis of Leah. The overall assessment of Rachel is negative, and Schneider even suggests that she was not to be considered a mother of promise, as her relationship with God appears nonexistent and her descendants, the northern kingdom, are ultimately destroyed. This section of the book is concluded with a brief chapter that explores the commonality of each of the matriarchs. The most important
commonalities found involves the role of God in their choosing, and their ability to bear is highlighted even to the point of downplaying or eliminating the role of the spouse.

Part 2 begins the second half of the book and focuses on potential mothers to the promise. Included in this section are Hagar, Esau’s wives, Zilpah, Bilhah, Dinah, Mrs. Judah, Tamar, and Asenath. The major commonality of these women is that their children could be a threat to those in the line of promise. The individual chapters in this part are quite short, mostly due to the brevity of material about these characters within the biblical narrative. There are no common descriptors within this group; some are foreign, some have family, some are servants, but none of these categories applies to all of them. As subject and object, the only thing all these women share is that they are “taken” at one point in their narrative. Schneider claims that the examination of these women demonstrates that the role of mother is primary to any other role these women play and that each of the women provides insight into legitimate and illegitimate unions within the narrative.

Part 3 deals with mothers who predate the promise. This part includes Eve (though not the woman of the garden), Adah and Zillah, Milcah, Mrs. Lot, and Lot’s daughters. These chapters are even shorter than those in the previous section, and one wonders if there is enough material to do the “verbing the character” method. In addition, Schneider’s separation between the woman in the garden (which is treated in section 4) and Eve is not completely convincing. Schneider concludes that these women do not share any commonalities other than the text’s concern with their children; therefore, she interprets motherhood as their primary role; however, Mrs. Lot presents a problem to this theory. Also, the logic here appears circular; since the category is defined by motherhood, it is no surprise that this is a shared element, and thus the diversity might actually provide more insight than the commonality.

Women who do not bear children are the focus of part 4. Three women are studied here—the woman in the garden, Deborah, and Mrs. Potiphar—which makes this group the smallest of all. The most significant feature of this section is how small and diverse it is. This serves to highlight the pervasiveness of motherhood within the book of Genesis and how important this role is for understanding women in these narratives.

While there might be minor points of challenge or disagreement with Schneider’s very comprehensive study, overall she has presented a very convincing and complete portrait of the women in Genesis. This book provides several services to the academic community. It has the potential to be used as a textbook for a variety of courses, yet it is thorough, well-documented, and deals with the original language of the text and thus is a good resource for further scholarly research.