

Genesis Women Talk 1: From Adam and Eve to Abraham and Sarah

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Introduction

For at least the past fifty years, it has been generally assumed that the Bible lived and breathed in, contributed to and proclaimed an oppressive and patriarchal view of women. To say that the Bible is sexist is to state the obvious. So as long ago as 1973, Phyllis Trible, who led the new wave of feminist biblical scholars, could write these words:

It is superfluous to document patriarchy in Scripture. Yahweh is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as of Jesus and Paul. The legal codes of Israel treat women primarily as chattel. Ecclesiastes condemns her “whose heart is snares and nets and whose hands are fetters,” concluding that although a few men may seek the meaning of existence, “a woman among all these I have not found” (7:23-29). In spite of his eschatology, Paul considers women subordinate to their husbands, and, even worse, I Timothy makes woman responsible for sin in the world (2:11-15). Considerable evidence indicts the Bible as a document of male supremacy. Attempts to acquit it by tokens such as Deborah, Huldah, Ruth, or Mary and Martha only reinforce the case. If these views are all which can be said or primarily what must be said, then I am of all women most miserable. I face a terrible dilemma: Choose ye this day whom you will serve: the God of the fathers or the God of sisterhood. If the God of the fathers, then the Bible supplies models for your slavery. If the God of sisterhood, then you must reject patriarchal religion and go forth without models to claim your freedom.

Trible’s solution, which has inspired a generation, was to *reread the text* in a way that reclaimed some of the women as icons of the feminist movement. In her book *Texts of Terror*, for example, she liberates Hagar, Tamar, the unnamed woman killed in the gruesome events of Judges and Jephthah’s daughter from the bondage of their patriarchal narrative settings—to become symbols of hope and inspiration, and almost messianic figures for those oppressed because of their gender.

Now there are many things that I think Trible gets wrong. Like many feminist readings, some of what she says about the text is highly misguided. But there is still something to learn here. She does effectively expose a false dichotomy. The choice is not simply between taking the text seriously and having to deal with all kinds of unpalatable attitudes to women, or dismissing the text, signing up the “sisterhood”, and in doing so, effectively saying goodbye to the usefulness as well as the reliability of the Bible. There is another way—which Trible highlights, but never really follows through.

Commenting on Genesis 2 and 3, she says that the text “negates patriarchy in crucial ways; it does not legitimate the oppression of women”. And I think she’s right: the narrative focusing on the creation of Adam and Eve is far from patriarchal. But this is where I think that Trible *fails to follow through on her own insight*. You could say she doesn’t go far enough. But I suspect she doesn’t follow this through, because her own insight actually undermines the entire feminist “re-imagine the Bible” project.

If Tribble is right—and she surely is when she says the text itself “negates patriarchy in crucial ways; it does not legitimate the oppression of women”—then you actually need not re-imagine Genesis at all. Perhaps unfortunately for her, Tribble’s insight leads to the glorious conclusion that it isn’t fair to describe the Book of Genesis as patriarchal *at all*.

Yes, it is set in a patriarchal culture, where men were clearly dominant in society. But in today’s two talks, I want to demonstrate that not just the Eden narratives, but the entire Book of Genesis subtly but definitely critiques its own world, and establishes a healthy pattern for interactions between men and women. Genesis itself provides us with a refreshing third way between patriarchy, on one extreme, and feminism, on the other.

I would argue—and this is really that’s what these plenary sessions are about—that the Book of Genesis deliberately lays the foundation of what we might call a biblical Complementarianism. It is here in this book that we see both how healthy marriages should operate, and how men and women should relate to one another in other relationships. Here is what it means to be equal but different. While it is true that Genesis, after the first three chapters, seldom addresses the issues of gender and roles directly, it is equally clear that it has a very definite theological agenda when it comes to understanding men and women. The book is punctuated by narratives that depict how things should—and very definitely should *not*—be.

So in these sessions, we’re simply going to work through the incidents involving men and women together in Genesis. In this session, which will take us up to the end of Genesis 25, we will start, obviously, with Adam and Eve and touch down briefly in Genesis 6, before considering Abram, Sarah, Hagar and Abraham’s other wives. As it happens, most of the focus in these chapters is on relationships between husbands and wives. In the second session, and the second half of the book, the focus broadens to other relationships between men and women.

Working on these talks has made me reflect both on the wealth of material on men and women in Genesis, and also the relative paucity of texts elsewhere in the Bible that deal with these key issues. And interestingly, the texts that do talk about men and women—particularly in the New Testament—almost invariably reflect back on some of these early narratives. I think that strengthens the case for paying very close attention to this book as the foundational discussion of how we should relate to one another as men and women.

So let’s begin our journey in Genesis 1-3, where man messes it up.

1. Genesis 1-3: Man messes it up

For all the discussion of similarities between ancient Mesopotamian tales like the *Atrahasis Epic* and the *Gilgamesh Epic*, and the opening chapters of Genesis, there really is nothing quite like the biblical account of the origins of our race. And at several key points in the narrative, the text displays an attitude to men and women that completely undercuts anything that could be called “patriarchy”. For a start, there’s the radical equality of Genesis 1:27-28.

i) Radical equality (Gen 1:27-28)

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26-27)

There is nothing like this in any other ancient document that has been discovered to date. The closest comes in the *Atrahasis Epic*, where 14 pieces of clay are mixed with the blood of a slain god and placed in the womb goddess. After ten months of gestation, the goddess gives birth to seven male and seven female offspring. But this merely acknowledges the *existence* of the sexes, rather than doing what Genesis does and insisting on their fundamental *equality* before God. There is no comparable statement of their shared status and value.

The US academic Carly Crouch has argued fairly persuasively that this equality—both sharing the divine image—is rooted in the concept divine sonship, which then spills over into sharing in the functional role of ruling in God’s place. In other words, Genesis 1:27-28 is a striking and unparalleled statement of the shared standing of men and women before God. This is where its teaching on the sexes begins. It is a very long way from the kind of patriarchal stance that is normally attributed to the Bible.

I do think it’s worth pausing to emphasise that in all our efforts to articulate and defend a Complementarian view of men and women, if that is your conviction, we mustn’t forget to emphasise and champion the *equality* of the sexes. As evangelicals, we have a fairly chequered record on this, and need to work hard to make sure that we strongly affirm the equality of men and women, rather than being pushed further than we should be out of reaction to those who hold to what’s generally called an Egalitarian position. Part of me wants to say that we are Egalitarian too; it’s just we are differentiated Egalitarians, but I’m not sure that’s going to catch on.

And this is not just a matter of semantics: not only is the equality of the sexes clearly taught in Genesis 1, but it is theologically vital—particularly when it comes to discussing the atonement and the incarnation, for example. Jesus became fully human, not half a person, because he was male. The doctrines that flow from Jesus’ humanity are only coherent if male and female are equal, rather than subsets of humanity. But there are many people who know far more about that than me, so I’ll flee quickly from the realms of systematic theology back to the safe ground of the non-patriarchal world of Genesis 2, where the radical equality of chapter 1 flows easily into the contours of complementarity in Genesis 2.

ii) *The contours of complementarity (Gen 2:18-25)*

Unfortunately we don’t have time to unpack every detail of Genesis 2, but I think there are five things that stand out as the basic stance of chapter 1 is picked up and developed.

First, according to Genesis 2:7, 15-17, it becomes clear that the man was made first. No particular significance is attached to that at this stage. It is a simply fact.

Second, perhaps unexpectedly, even though the man is in relationship with God, there is something “missing” from his experience. Or as God says in verse 18, “it is not good for the man to be alone”. The repeated verdict of “good” announced over creation (male and female) in chapter 1 cannot yet be announced over the human race; there is still something more to come. It seems that the “male and female” of 1:27 is constitutive of the divine image. Obviously there is significant discussion around this issue, but for our purposes, it is enough to notice that the woman is of fundamental theological importance. There is something more here than ancient patriarchy.

Third, there is innate dignity in the “helper” created by God. The language surrounding the “ezer” or helper is striking: the Hebrews tended to be fairly fussy about bandying around terms applied to God. The fact that the Psalms are quite happy to say that God is our *ezer* is strong evidence that this term describes someone who can strengthen and help by bringing something that is lacking in us. It is a description of a stronger partner, not a weaker one. The phrase “corresponding to” captures the idea of a mirror image or complement, and it is here where the idea of two sexes that are complementary starts to emerge.

A long time ago, I studied Chemistry at university. That may be enough to send a shiver down your spine, but stick with me. If you ever did any chemistry at school, the phrase “optical isomers” or “enantiomers” may ring a bell: these are compounds that are identical in every way—same atoms and molecules, same bonds, same formula—except they occur as mirror images, which were innocently called “cis” and “trans” forms—basically a right-handed and left-handed version. That’s the picture here: identical, but mirror images of each other. Incidentally, in chemistry, it’s vital to remember that optical isomers, although basically the same, can react very differently—a fact that was tragically forgotten in the case of the drug Thalidomide, given to pregnant women. One of the forms—the right-handed one—was a safe and effective sedative. The mirror image caused birth defects. The tragedy was that women were given a mixture of both forms with catastrophic results. Two things can be the same, and equal, but behave in different ways.

Fourth, the intimate details of the way in which the woman is created undercuts any denigration of women. The word “rib” is notoriously difficult to translate. The Hebrew word “*tzela*” leads us to different conclusions. The word appears 40 times in the Hebrew Bible. In 23 of those, it means a “side”, not a “rib”; in 15, it means a “side room”. The only places it is translated as “rib” are the two occurrences here in the story of the creation of woman. So what are we to do with this? Recently, some (Ziony Zevit) have argued that this is referring to the “baculum”, a bone only men have between their legs. Others have argued that the Adam in chapter 1 encompasses both sexes, and one—the female—is separated from this being in chapter 2 to create woman. This, however, seems very hard to justify from the text. So what are we to do with this? It seems safest to take the word at face value: the woman is taken from the “side” of the man, implying from deep within him. The implication seems to be that man and woman could not be more integrally related, even though they are distinct.

Fifth, the first words spoken by the man in the narrative hardly display a patriarchal attitude. On seeing the woman in 2:23, “Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”” Although the priority of the man is once again plain, there is nothing to suggest that the man is treating the woman as inferior. There is a basic reciprocity, which is reflected in 2:24-25: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.” The fact that the man leaves his family may even be seen as safeguarding the woman from undue pressure and influence from the man’s relatives, and if anything, is an implicit criticism of the man.

Genesis 2, then, while laying a foundation for a Complementarian understanding of the sexes, displays nothing that suggests that Genesis has simply imbibed the patriarchal atmosphere of the world in which it is set and, presumably, written.

iii) Surprising subtleties in Genesis 3

This, then, takes us to the seminal events described in Genesis 3. Given the fact that the *world* of Genesis is essentially patriarchal, one would expect that in this text, above all others, a patriarchal perspective would be presented, and that the blame for the catastrophic events in the Garden would be laid squarely at the door of Eve. But this is far from the case. There are several key things to notice.

a) The “absence” of Adam

In Genesis 2:15, the man had been charged with “working and keeping/watching over” the Garden. In 3:1, the “incursion” of the most crafty “beast of the field” raises questions about Adam’s supervision and, perhaps, even his care for his wife. This could only be dismissed as speculation, or an argument from silence, if it weren’t for the “punchline” in 3:7: “she took

of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate”. It is this revelation that explains why, in the remainder of the chapter, Adam is held primarily responsible for these events, even though, in the initial stages, it looks as if the primary fault lies with Eve.

b) The attribution of blame

This same perspective on Adam’s ultimate responsibility is reflected in the exchange that follows. The fact that God asks Adam to account for the events does imply that he is responsible. When Adam blames God and the woman “you put here”, who, in turn, blames the serpent in 3:10-12, God addresses each of the parties in turn, with the clear implication that ultimate responsibility lies with the one addressed last—that is, Adam. In an ancient context, this is surprising. There is no sense in which the woman is made a scapegoat. In fact, the woman is said to have a key contribution to make to the resolution of the situation.

c) The woman’s role in salvation

Genesis 3:15 is an important verse for all kinds of reasons, but for now, I simply want to draw attention to the simple, but easily missed fact that the woman’s role is vital: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and *her* offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel”. The highlighting of the role of the woman here seems to go beyond mere physiological necessity, and underlines the fact that Eve (and her descendants) will have a crucial role in reversing the consequences of the choices made under Adam’s watch—a fact that Adam himself seems to placard in 3:20 as he names his wife.

d) The nature of the curses

It is easy to miss the fact that although both the serpent and the ground are cursed (in the case of the ground, “because of Adam”), no curse is uttered against the woman in 3:16: “To the woman he said, ‘I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.’” Now, given what God says about childbirth, the absence of a curse may be small comfort, but it cannot simply be dismissed. The action taken against Adam seems to be a different level.

It is also interesting that no reason is specified for her increased suffering. In his forthcoming CSC volume on Genesis 1-11, Ken Matthews comments:

Moreover, there is no cause specified for her suffering, whereas the serpent is charged with deception (v. 14) and the man with eating disobediently (v. 17). This is due to the woman’s culpability through deception, in contrast with the willful rebellion of the serpent and man. Also the oracle has a gentler word for the woman since her punishment entails the salvation of the human couple by announcing the birth of the Deliverer and the ultimate defeat of the serpent (v. 15). Whereas the man’s action condemned the human family, Eve will play the critical role in liberating them from sin’s consequences. This is realized in part immediately since the woman gives birth to new life (e.g., 4:1, 25), but v. 15 indicates that the final conflict will also be humanity’s victory by virtue of the woman’s role as childbearer.

In Genesis 3 then, the same basic understanding of human beings as equal before God continues to emerge. Both share in a relationship with God. Both are addressed by God. But the man and the woman face distinct challenges, and have distinct contributions to make to God’s work in the world. We could even say that distinct roles and responsibilities are

starting to come into view. If anything, the treatment of the woman is gentler and more hopeful than that of the man, which suggests that, if anything, the writer of Genesis deals more harshly with men, despite the prevailing cultural biases.

Interim conclusions: Applying Genesis 1-3

So what are we to do with these basic insights from the earliest chapters of the Bible?

Fiona: What does Genesis 1-3 say to me as a woman?

- The delight of being made in God's image, the wonder that he should dignify us, his creatures, with such an honour, and the added bonus of being hand crafted, as it were, by God who just said the words and the universe was created, yet when it came to us, he rolled up his sleeves and fashioned us as the pinnacle—the very best bit of his creation.
- The joy of Adam's response that Eve a worthy companion, that understanding of a shared privilege and a relational harmony
- The radical equality of God's creative blueprint: I'm rebuked by the presumption with which I read of this and am encouraged to marvel at it and celebrate it!
- The nature of Eve's disobedience: her failure to trust God's goodness prompts me, when I disobey, to pause and ask, "What am I failing to trust God for in this moment?" And in that lack of trust, Eve led her husband into sin. It's sobering isn't it: when I stop trusting God, I am not just putting myself in jeopardy, but potentially leading Gary astray too!
- The reminder that the woman and the seed is not about female fertility, but the beautiful truth that Jesus the rescuer came through a representative of my gender.

Gary: What does Genesis 1-3 say to me as a man?

- It cuttily exposes my sinful propensity to avoid hard decisions and to hide, when I really need to step up and take responsibility for protecting and cherishing Fiona and my family.
- It encourages me to verbalise my deep delight in Fiona and to appreciate her as a most precious gift from God
- It demands that I continually examine myself to make sure that I am treating my sisters as co-image bearers, and not simply acquiescing with sexism or male privilege under the guise of being Complementarian.

2. Genesis 4:23-24; 6:1-4: Men behaving badly

As the effects of sin permeate the world, according to Genesis, male violence starts to proliferate.

i) Lamech's hideous song (Gen 4:23-24)

In the account of the line of Cain, five generations in, we come across the charming individual known as Lamech (not the father of Noah, who is in the line of Seth). Interestingly, Lamech had a key role in the growth of civilisation:

And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. (Gen 4:19-22)

However, the text is also quick to assert that human “progress” also included increasing sinfulness—and in particular, increasing violence:

Lamech said to his wives:

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;

you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:

I have killed a man for wounding me,

a young man for striking me.

If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold,

then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.” (Gen. 4:23-24)

The song is pretty odious full stop, but actually, the worst thing about it is that Lamech’s vile boasting is *made to his wives*. This doggerel comes wrapped in the threat of sexual violence. However, there is no doubt that from the perspective of the writer, this makes Lamech’s hubris all the more contemptible. It is a strong critique of male oppression. The same could be said of the much-discussed statements of Genesis 6:1-4.

ii) *Opening the flood-gates (Gen 6:1-7)*

After the descendants of Cain (Gen 4) and Seth, the line of promise (Gen 5), are laid out, we are given a snapshot of life in this primeval period. As one might expect from the “soundtrack” of Genesis 4:23-24, it is not pretty.

When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives any they chose. (Gen 6:1-2)

There is some discussion about the precise identity of the two groups in verse 2—“the sons of God” and the “daughters of men”. I think it is clear from the text that these are real people, and in all likelihood, the “sons of God” are those in the line of Seth, outlined in the previous chapter, with the daughters of men referring to the females either from the line of Cain, or simply humanity in general. Either way, the situation is that the men are forcing themselves on the women. The fact that the actions of 6:2 are to be condemned is clear from God’s verdict in 6:3: “Then the LORD said, ‘My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years’”. God acts to limit the damage by reducing the lifespan of human beings.

The note in 6:4 concerning the Nephilim (see also Numbers 13:31-33, although the question of the spies’ trustworthiness is important there!) underlines that these were rough times, when the strong did what they liked. This brutality was indicative of a deep-rooted problem, which God himself outlines in 6:5-7 as a justification of the dramatic act of judgement, which was the Flood.

For our purposes, however, the key thing is that Genesis presents the mistreatment of women as a regular part of life before the deluge and as a contributing factor in the ensuing judgement of God. Once more, the culpability here is clear: it is men who are behaving badly, and women who are the victims of their boorish and bullying behaviour.

3. Genesis 19:30-38: Desperate housewives?

Before we come to think about the Abraham narratives to finish, I want to look briefly at Lot and his daughters, which proves to be a useful key to reading the much more complex stories to follow in the rest of Genesis. Let me refresh your memory:

Now Lot went up out of Zoar and lived in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to live in Zoar. So he lived in a cave with his two daughters. (Gen 19:30)

The criticism of Lot here, as is often the case in Genesis, is implicit, but very clear nonetheless: his fear, which has the scent of faithlessness post-Sodom, appears to allow for no thought for—let alone provision for—his daughters. His weakness and selfishness are the primary problem. His daughters, on the other hand, are then driven to take desperate steps to remedy the situation.

And the firstborn said to the younger, “Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father.” So they made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father. He did not know when she lay down or when she arose. The next day, the firstborn said to the younger, “Behold, I lay last night with my father. Let us make him drink wine tonight also. Then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father.” So they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose and lay with him, and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. He is the father of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and called his name Ben-ammi. He is the father of the Ammonites to this day. (Gen 19:31-38)

On the one hand, I think the narrative encourages sympathy for these women, trapped in that cave with their father. However, despite their victimhood, it is also obvious that their actions, despite being resourceful, have significant long-term consequences not simply for their family, but for the people of Israel.

The conflict envisaged in Genesis 3 here seems to play out in terms of the passivity of a man (in this case, a father) clashing with the understandable desire of women to take control of their own destiny. The results are not good. But once more, it would be simplistic to dismiss this narrative as anti-women. Neither Lot nor his daughters come out with significant credit. We will see this pattern recur as we read on.

4. Genesis 12-26: Abram’s faith and failures

Abram/Abraham is one of the towering figures of the Old Testament. But we would do well to remember that for the writer of Genesis, he, like the rest of us, is justified by faith, rather than by works—which, when it comes to the way in which he treats his wife (or to be more accurate, wives and concubines)—is a good job.

Carefully interwoven with the extravagant grace of God shown to Abram (pre-eminently in the regularly repeated covenant promises), are sad, outrageous and, at times, downright disturbing stories of the way in which he treats Sarai, his wife, and the other women in his life. *And all of these events are presented in a critical light by the text itself.*

i) Abraham and Sarah with Pharaoh and Abimelech (Gen 12, 20)

It can surely be no accident that the grace and model response in faith of Genesis 12:1-9 is followed up immediately by the bad behaviour of Abram when faced with a potential threat to his life because of Sarai’s beauty in 12:10ff. The narrative is not subtle in pointing out the patriarch’s flawed and selfish decision-making process.

The initiative for the “ruse” is entirely of Abram’s own making, and is completely devoid of any concern for his wife:

When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.” (Gen 12:11-13)

It is hard to read verse 13 in any other way than Abram being selfish. This reading is further strengthened by the fact that it comes on the back of the promises of God earlier in the chapter.

Abram himself highlights the beauty of his wife, and yet exposes her to sexual danger by distancing himself from her. In addition, given the emphasis on descendants in the promise, he is placing any fulfilment of the promise in jeopardy. This is confirmed when Sarah is taken into Pharaoh’s “house”. It would seem unlikely that this is simply as a house guest; Sarai is either in Pharaoh’s harem or being prepared for this. Abram however? “And for her [Sarah’s] sake he [Pharaoh] dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels” (Gen 12:16). Notice this is not a fleeting visit to Egypt! Time allows Abram to accumulate significant resources on the back of his poor treatment of his wife. Sarai is facing real sexual threat. Abram is asking his female servants to pop another grape in his mouth. Once again, however, the author is quick to highlight this poor behaviour.

The fact that Yahweh intervenes and Pharaoh himself rebukes Abram for behaving like this (12:17-20) confirms that as far as Moses is concerned, Abram is being a ratbag! Pharaohs don’t often get to look good in the Bible, but this is one of those places. Sarai in all this is a passive victim (her compliance isn’t even noted) whose only error seems to have been going along with her husband’s selfish schemes.

In Genesis 20, Abraham’s actions are reprised in a way that is, if anything, even more critical of the Patriarch. The abrupt summary of events in Gen 20:2 (“And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, ‘She is my sister.’ And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.”) has the effect of saying, “Here we go again!” This time, however, God himself intervenes in 20:3 to warn Abimelech, and simultaneously confirms that the issue in both chapters 12 and 20 is the danger to the line of the “seed” being compromised by someone other than Abraham sleeping with his wife.

Abraham’s fuller explanation is not compelling (serving as a confession of “unfaith”) and vaguely worrying in its defensiveness:

Abraham said, “I did it because I thought, ‘There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’ Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. And when God caused me to wander from my father’s house, I said to her, ‘This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, ‘He is my brother.’” (Gen 20:11-13)

His preoccupation is with his own safety—even should that come at significant cost to his wife. Incredibly, it also reveals that this was a semi-regular occurrence. This was a *policy*. Once again, the vindication of Sarah by Abimelech serves both as an implicit condemnation of Abraham (who, this time, is shown up by a Philistine!) and also confirmation that the narrator is clearly siding with the vulnerable and exploited woman (“To Sarah he said, ‘Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated.’” [Gen 20:16]).

ii) Abraham, Sarah and Hagar (Gen 16-21)

The incidents with Pharaoh and Abimelech, which frame much of the Abraham narrative, are sadly not unique; his other interactions with women display similar ambiguities and contradictions.

The interactions between Abram, Sarai and Hagar dominate much of the central section of the Abraham cycle. They do not start well as, once more, Abram doesn't exactly cover himself with glory.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. (Gen 16:1-2)

The echoes of Genesis 3 are pretty clear in this passage: once again, the male concerned is entirely passive. Despite God's explicit promise of 15:2-3 that his own son (rather than Eliezer of Damascus) will be his heir, there is no hint of any ongoing discussion with Sarai. When she makes her suggestion of using Hagar as a surrogate, Abram simply "listened to the voice of Sarai" (16:2). His contribution to the "process" is simply noted and then he retreats from the scene. This leaves the reader with the strong sense that Abram's main concern is simply with the production of an heir, rather than the ramifications of his actions.

This essential passivity (and even denial of responsibility) is highlighted in what happens next. Not unpredictably, Hagar "looked with contempt on her mistress" (Gen 16:4b). When Sarai raises the matter with her husband, his response is simply "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please" (16:6). He basically says, "It's nothing to do with me!" The account continues: "then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her" (16:6b). While Sarai's actions are hardly commendable, they are at least understandable from an emotional standpoint. Abram's lack of engagement is presented in a highly critical way, and once again, in a manner that is hardly consistent with a patriarchal view of society. The writer of Genesis seems more concerned with highlighting his weakness and selfishness, than critiquing the actions of the vulnerable women involved.

God's own kindness to Hagar in the wilderness from 16:7ff is further evidence of the tenderness with which women are viewed in Genesis.

It is not, of course, that women in these chapters are treated as beyond reproach, but there is consistent evidence that God deals tenderly with those whom society habitually disadvantages. Another fascinating example of this comes in the interchanges involving God's messengers, Abraham, Sarah and God himself in Genesis 18:9-10. After the message is conveyed to Abraham that Sarah would bear a child within twelve months, Sarah, overhearing the announcement, understandably chuckles to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" (Gen 18:12) But it's what happens next that's so intriguing:

The LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied it, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was afraid. He said, "No, but you did laugh." (Gen 18:13-15)

I cannot think of anywhere else in the Bible where someone lies directly to God and is dealt with so gently! But that is how God deals with this much loved, if flawed, woman.

The laughter theme recurs in a painful narrative where the tension between Sarah and Hagar finally comes to a head.

And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. (Gen 21:8-11)

There is an ambiguity here, but on balance, it’s most likely that Abraham is angry that Sarah is complicating things by complaining about Ishmael and Hagar. Abraham just doesn’t want to deal with this. He basically wants an easy life. God’s response is startling:

But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.” So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Let me not look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. (Gen 21:12-21)

Yet again, the father of the nation of Israel does not come out of these events well. He is weak and passive, but God’s extravagant grace redeems the situation, as he deals so very tenderly with Hagar. God is clearly at work in the mess. But it is a mess, and there is no sense in which Abraham, the patriarch, is being held up as an example of model behaviour—a sense that is confirmed by the note at the beginning of chapter 25.

iii) Abraham and his other wives (Gen 25)

Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan fathered Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Ephher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah. Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country. (Gen 25:1-6)

It seems that the mess of relationships in Abraham’s life is even greater than we have seen. Abraham’s great downfall is the way in which he treats his wives, which is both explicitly and implicitly condemned.

So what are we to do with all this? Abraham, for all the positives of his response of faith to God’s grace, is weak and selfish, he exposes his wife to danger, and he tries to avoid problems.

Sarah is treated with great tenderness, but tends to take things into her own hands and, at times, treats other women very badly.

Conclusion

Fiona: What Genesis 1-25 teaches me about being a wife and about my husband:

- About being a wife: the danger of my not trusting God, taking the initiative to sort stuff myself, and then my ability to convince Gary that this is the right course of action. Lot's daughters and then Sarai's plan involving Hagar show how damaging this is.
- When my husband does not lead, or leads from self-interest, I need to trust in my tender, loving heavenly Father who sees me, and he will intervene for both of our good and his glory. It's not my job to lead!

Gary: What Genesis 1-25 teaches me about being a husband and about my wife:

- As a man who has deeply selfish tendencies, I need to constantly examine my motives, and live against my own enduring selfish grain for the sake of Fiona in the power of the Spirit. Fiona cannot flourish if I negate my responsibility and force her into apposition, where it is easy, attractive or even necessary to try to fix things.

I hope you can see that Genesis 1-25 is Complementarian, rather than patriarchal!

Five biblical-theological comments to close:

1. God's grand plan involves both men and women.
2. No ordinary person can ultimately be relied on; we are all broken, and that comes out in our relationships.
3. There are broad tendencies that can be observed in how men and women behave, and we need to take these seriously (while remembering that we are all "original" sinners).
4. In the mess, these chapters do present a coherent picture of how things *should* be, which is then fleshed out by Jesus himself and put within our reach through his death and resurrection, and the gift of the Spirit.
5. Christ comes as a perfect human being with the goal of restoring our relationship with God and, ultimately, all our human relationships.