Genesis Women Talk 2: From Isaac and Rebekah to Jacob and Sons

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Introduction

In this second talk, we're going to pick up what I think you'll agree is a clear thread that runs through the creation narratives to the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, and that deals with the sexes and how they relate. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in this second session, I simply want to point out how the same basic perspective on men and women runs right through the rest of Genesis. What is that perspective? So far, we've seen that the following is generally true:

1. In Genesis, men and women are equals, designed to flourish together.
2. In Genesis, it is clear that men and women both tend to act sinfully, but often have different struggles and temptations. This is part of the impact of the Fall.
3. Men in Genesis tend to be weak and selfish leaders, and can tend to be brutish.
4. Women in Genesis are often victims, they tend not to treat each other well, but should be honoured and protected by men.

In the first half of Genesis, the foundational statements of Genesis 1 and 2 are then backed up with narratives that largely focus on couples—Adam and Eve, and Abram and Sarah (with Hagar as an interloper)—although we do also encounter Lot and his daughters. In the rest of the book, couples still play an important role, but we also find a widening concern for how men treat women in general.

I think it's fair to say that as we read on through the text, the individuals we encounter are increasingly messed up, and that their relationships seldom rise above the dysfunctional.

Perhaps the one couple who are an exception to that is Isaac and Rebekah, whose meeting is one of the great love stories in the Bible.

1. Isaac and Rebekah: True love … and true lies

In Genesis 24, an ageing Abraham's attention turns to finding a wife for Isaac, his son and heir. His primary concern is the fulfilment of the promise that God has made, which rolls into a secondary fear that Isaac will marry a native woman. At this point, the narrative slows to a crawl, as his godly, but equally aged servant makes a journey to find Abraham's extended family back in Paddan-Aram far to the north, which he does. In all the painstaking cultural comings and goings, two things are obvious: the old servant is passionately committed to the ways of Yahweh, and nobody else is all that bothered about God, even though his providence is clearly on display. You can see the tone of the narrative reflected in the beautifully told climax to the story from Genesis 24:62:

> Now Isaac had returned from Beer-lahai-roi and was dwelling in the Negeb. And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening. And he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold, there were camels coming. And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she dismounted from the camel and said to the servant, "Who is that man, walking in the field to meet us?" The servant said, "It is my

> master." So she took her veil and covered herself. And the servant told Isaac all the things that he had done. Then Isaac brought her into the tent of Sarah his mother and took Rebekah, and she became his wife, and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death. (Gen 24:62-67)

It is a beautiful story, but there is a nagging sense that not all is well. There is a worrying sense that God and his promise have somehow slipped out of view. Despite what surely should have been a formative experience in Mount Moriah in Genesis 22, there is very little to suggest that Isaac's faith was a reflection of his father Abraham's. Now to be fair, we don't know much of the life (or character) of Isaac, apart from his infamous interaction with Jacob and Esau, which we'll examine in a moment. But the narrative does hint that this may be because when it comes to spiritual highpoints in Isaac's life, there isn't really much to be said.

That much comes through in a couple of brief glimpses of the domestic life of the Isaacs, which are recorded, and these make some contribution to the picture that has been building up of the view of men and women in Genesis. The first comes at the end of chapter 25.

The genealogy of Isaac is introduced much earlier than expected in the flow of the text: usually the formula occurs at transitional moments, as the focus shifts from the individual concerned to their offspring. So for example, the "generations of Jacob" are introduced in Genesis 37:2 at the beginning of the Joseph narratives—by which stage, Jacob's story has basically been told and he has become a "bit part player". The introduction of the genealogy so early in the piece in Genesis 25:19 suggests that there really hasn't been much to say about Isaac. To his credit however, we do read this in Genesis 25:21: "And Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren. And the LORD granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived."

Now I know that we have to be careful about arguments from silence, but it isn't exactly one of the great prayers of the Bible. And the sense that Isaac may have come up short in the godliness department is strengthened by the fact that the pregnant Rebekah is the focus of what happens next:

> The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the older shall serve the younger." (Gen 25:22-23)

It is striking, then, in contrast to the situation with Abraham and Sarah, it is *Rebekah* who receives the divine commentary on what's happening. There is much discussion about the mechanism by which she received this word (and what it meant to "inquire of Yahweh"), but I suspect the silence on that is deliberate. The most obvious point is that Rebekah is the more spiritually aware of the pair, and for the first time, God deals with the wife rather than the husband, once more exposing the fallacy in any simple attribution of patriarchy to Genesis. It is Rebekah who wears the spiritual pants in this relationship. However, the text also makes it clear that this is not a particularly good thing. Rebekah doesn't really come out of what happens next with any more credit than her husband!

Read on with me in the fateful words of Genesis 25:27-29:

> When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Now it is extremely tempting to read all sorts of things into these verses, and Rebekah's preferential, unqualified love for Jacob is made to look better by Isaac's explicit motive for preferring Esau–because he loved a good steak. There is nothing subtle, or relational, and

certainly not spiritual about it. Again, where Isaac appears in the narrative, there is a deafening silence on anything concerning the covenant promises to which he was heir. But to be fair, any speculation that Rebekah loved Jacob because he was more spiritual, or more concerned with God's promise, is stretching the text. It's true that Jacob wanted any benefits going, but to credit that to spiritual maturity in the light of everything that subsequently happens seems highly unlikely. It's better to rest with what is clear in the text: they are both dreadful parents.

When we get to chapter 26, that's confirmed, as it seems that Isaac has inherited some of his father's sinful tendencies, but none of his godly ones. This chapter is basically a reprise of chapter 12: after God intervenes "out of the blue" in verse 3, he repeats the promises he made to Abraham in verse 4:

> I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. (Gen 26:4-5)

Notice how Abraham's faithfulness in listening to God's voice has now been added as an extra layer to God's covenant faithfulness. But it's what happens next that's so strikingly familiar:

> So Isaac settled in Gerar. When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he feared to say, "My wife," thinking, "lest the men of the place should kill me because of Rebekah," because she was attractive in appearance. (Gen 26:6-7)

Notice this time there isn't even a slightly dubious justification for the subterfuge!

> When he had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out of a window and saw Isaac laughing with Rebekah his wife. So Abimelech called Isaac and said, "Behold, she is your wife. How then could you say, 'She is my sister'?" Isaac said to him, "Because I thought, 'Lest I die because of her.'" Abimelech said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us." So Abimelech warned all the people, saying, "Whoever touches this man or his wife shall surely be put to death." (Gen 26:8-11)

In the same way that Pharaoh and an earlier Abimelech made Abram look bad in Genesis 12 and 20, now another patriarch's morality—*and treatment of women*—is shown up with another Philistine king. However, this isn't quite the end of their story: Isaac's selfish brutishness, endangering his wife to save himself, is matched by Rebekah's manipulation.

Throughout the tortuous events of Genesis 27, Rebekah is masterfully pulling the strings. That's evident from her appearances at the beginning and the end of the story:

> Now Rebekah was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. So when Esau went to the field to hunt for game and bring it, Rebekah said to **her son Jacob**, "I heard your father speak to your brother Esau, 'Bring me game and prepare for me delicious food, that I may eat it and bless you before the LORD before I die.' Now therefore, **my son,** obey my voice as I command you. Go to the flock and bring me two good young goats, so that I may prepare from them delicious food for your father, such as he loves. And you shall bring it to your father to eat, so that he may bless you before he dies." But Jacob said to **Rebekah his mother**, "Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing." His mother said to him, "Let your curse be on me, **my son**; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me."

> So he went and took them and brought them to his mother, and his mother prepared delicious food, such as his father loved. Then Rebekah took the best garments of Esau her older son, which were with her in the house, and put them on Jacob her younger son. And the skins of the young goats she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck. And she put the delicious food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob. (Gen 27:5-17)

One of the saddest things about this narrative is the way in which family relationships are constantly emphasised: see how many times "my son", "your father", "your brother" and so on are used. Families shouldn't be getting on like this. It keeps going right to the end of the story:

> Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob." But the words of Esau her older son were told to Rebekah. So she sent and called Jacob her younger son and said to him, "Behold, your brother Esau comforts himself about you by planning to kill you. Now therefore, my son, obey my voice. Arise, flee to Laban my brother in Haran and stay with him a while, until your brother's fury turns away—until your brother's anger turns away from you, and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will send and bring you from there. Why should I be bereft of you both in one day?"
>
> Then Rebekah said to Isaac, "I loathe my life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries one of the Hittite women like these, one of the women of the land, what good will my life be to me?" (Gen 27:41-46)

I have to say that I can't see how either Rebekah or Isaac come out of this with any credit. Isaac seems devoid of virtually all sense—spiritual or otherwise—and his only redeeming feature seems to be some dim awareness that he can't go back on his blessing, because God is somehow in control. And Rebekah? Despite her much-vaunted love for her husband and awareness of God's covenant plans through the revelation she received in her pregnancy, she shows little evidence of faith or trust in God, or her husband, for that matter: she takes matters into her own hands, even when it involves manipulating her husband and her children. She doesn't like Hittite women, which may be covenant sensibilities, or it may be she just doesn't like Hittites.

Now of course, neither of the sexes has a monopoly on particular kinds of sin. However, as the Genesis narrative unfolds, the writer seems particularly sensitive to the likelihood of men to be selfish and boorish, and women responding by working around them in order to either get their own way or do what they think is best.

Now it is, of course, important to say that Genesis does not simply speak to men about men, and women about women. Rebekah's manipulative behaviour is a direct challenge to many blokes, me included. Many of us have the temptation to try to fix things, and when we go down that road, it always brings the possibility of manipulating people and events to make sure everything gets sorted the way we want to.

Fiona: And Isaac's favouritism challenges me in a couple of ways. First I am rebuked by my instinct to apply Isaac's sin to Gary, rather than to me.

Second, I realise that one of my daughters has a habit of trying to get what she wants from me by giving me a head or a foot massage, chatting to me about the item of clothing or the trip with friends as she skilfully relieves the tension in my weary bones. Sometimes she is successful. And as I think more deeply about that selfish motivation in me, God graciously points out other ways in which my selfish desires can shape my relationships with my three very different girls. It's easy for me to read the text, despise Isaac and keep him at a distance;

it's painful, but so helpful, to recognise the sin stains are ones I share—for we are all in danger of being led by our appetites.

So of course, all the text speaks to all of us. But we also need to realise that there are specific tendencies and temptations for many men, and a different, if overlapping, set for many women. The solution is very definitely not simply for men to man up and take charge and women to accept their lot, without manipulating others. It is much more nuanced than that. The picture that is painted in these chapters demands much more than a quick fix: it subtly portrays the need for these relationships to be redeemed, and for men and women to find a way to work with and not against each other, which becomes even more important when we trace the events flowing from Jacob's journey to Paddan-Aram.

3. Jacob, Leah and Rachel (and Bilhah and Zilpah): Two's company … five's a disaster

It's striking that the figure who behaves most like a classical male patriarch in the Book of Genesis is actually Jacob's uncle, Laban.

Jacob's initial encounter with his cousin Rachel resembles the "love at first sight" story of his parents. But very quickly, a transactional element is introduced, which, in effect reduces Laban's daughters to commodities. That's clearest in Genesis 31:43: "Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, 'The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine'". But it also undergirds the events of chapter 29:

> Then Laban said to Jacob, "Because you are my kinsman, should you therefore serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" Now Laban had two daughters. The name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah's eyes were weak, but Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance. Jacob loved Rachel. And he said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, "It is better that I give her to you than that I should give her to any other man; stay with me." So Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her. (Gen 29:15-20)

The implications of this arrangement are deliberately softened by the repeated affirmations of Jacob's love for Rachel. But that doesn't change the fact that Laban is presented as exploiting both his younger daughter Rachel as his chattel and his blood relative Jacob. But the twist in the story makes things significantly worse:

> Then Jacob said to Laban, "Give me my wife that I may go in to her, for my time is completed." So Laban gathered together all the people of the place and made a feast. But in the evening he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and he went in to her. (Laban gave his female servant Zilpah to his daughter Leah to be her servant.) And in the morning, behold, it was Leah! And Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? Did I not serve with you for Rachel? Why then have you deceived me?" Laban said, "It is not so done in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn. Complete the week of this one, and we will give you the other also in return for serving me another seven years." Jacob did so, and completed her week. Then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel to be his wife. (Laban gave his female servant Bilhah to his daughter Rachel to be her servant.) So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. (Gen 29:21-30)

The level of pathos in this story is significant. Sympathy for Jacob is eroded by Laban's cutting comment on his usurping of his own brother. In a sense, he gets his comeuppance,

although the seven-year periods involved do elicit our sympathy for the frustrated lovers. The silence concerning Leah's feelings in all this, however—and the fact that her new husband instantly commits to working for seven more years so that he can marry her sister—raises all kinds of questions concerning the emotional damage caused and the horrendous relational dynamics that surely must have affected family life in Paddan-Aram. Looming over all this is the simple fact that "polygamy" (including the involvement of concubines) in the chosen family has already caused endless problems—as we have already seen with Sarah and Hagar. The notes that Zilpah and Bilhah have been included by the ever-generous Dad Laban in the package flag that life is only going to get more complex in this already highly dysfunctional family unit.

Thus even where the patriarchal values of the ancient world are most obviously on display in the treatment of these women as property by both Jacob (in pursuit of true love) and Laban (in pursuit of financial gain and, presumably, future security for the family unit), these values are held up as being deeply problematic, creating all kinds of relational issues.

So how did all this affect these two sisters, who remain silent through these fourteen years? The continuation of the narrative from Genesis 29:31 fills out the picture in a heartbreakingly disturbing way: "When the LORD saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren" (Gen 29:31). Again, we don't get any details on how this played out, or even what the source or extent of the antipathy was. Presumably, it's Jacob (perhaps with Rachel) who hates Leah. But in any case, God's intervention shows that this is not an acceptable state of affairs. God acts with gentleness and tenderness in a way that makes up for the stellar failings of those he has chosen. Similarly, at the end of the narrative, when Rachel is suffering at the hands of her taunting sister, we're told that

> Then God remembered Rachel, and God listened to her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son and said, "God has taken away my reproach." And she called his name Joseph, saying, "May the LORD add to me another son!" (Gen 29:22-24)

God's remarkable care offsets the hostility of her sister and, presumably, the shortcomings of her husband.

In the intervening narrative, two things stand out once more: (i) Jacob's utter passivity, who apparently takes no responsibility at all for the chaos of his household, and (ii) the tragedy of two sisters tearing each other apart over the issue of fertility.

The story is carried along by the barbs flung between Rachel and Leah through the naming of their children:

> And Leah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Reuben, for she said, "Because the LORD has looked upon my affliction; for now my husband will love me." She conceived again and bore a son, and said, "Because the LORD has heard that I am hated, he has given me this son also." And she called his name Simeon. Again she conceived and bore a son, and said, "Now this time my husband will be attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." Therefore his name was called Levi. And she conceived again and bore a son, and said, "This time I will praise the LORD." Therefore she called his name Judah. Then she ceased bearing. (Gen 30:32-35)

Notice that up to this point, Jacob hasn't actually been mentioned by name. Beyond biological necessity, he plays no role in this unfolding mess—until we get to 30:1

> When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister. She said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I shall die!" **Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel, and he said, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?"** Then she said, "Here is my

> servant Bilhah; go in to her, so that she may give birth on my behalf, that even I may have children through her." So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife, and **Jacob went in to her.** And Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. Then Rachel said, "God has judged me, and has also heard my voice and given me a son." Therefore she called his name Dan. Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, "With mighty wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister and have prevailed." So she called his name Naphtali. When Leah saw that she had ceased bearing children, she took her servant Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as a wife. Then Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a son. And Leah said, "Good fortune has come!" so she called his name Gad. Leah's servant Zilpah bore Jacob a second son. And Leah said, "Happy am I! For women have called me happy." So she called his name Asher. (Gen 30:1-13)

The portrayal of Jacob here is not positive: all he does is have a selfish outburst of anger and repeat the mistake of his grandfather by silently taking advantage of his wife's offer of a concubine.

At this point, hard though it is to believe, things take a turn for the worse:

> In the days of wheat harvest Reuben went and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, "Is it a small matter that you have taken away my husband? Would you take away my son's mandrakes also?" Rachel said, "Then he may lie with you tonight in exchange for your son's mandrakes." When Jacob came from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, "**You must come in to me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." So he lay with her that night.** And God listened to Leah, and she conceived and bore Jacob a fifth son. Leah said, "God has given me my wages because I gave my servant to my husband." So she called his name Issachar. And Leah conceived again, and she bore Jacob a sixth son. Then Leah said, "God has endowed me with a good endowment; now my husband will honor me, because I have borne him six sons." So she called his name Zebulun. Afterward she bore a daughter and called her name Dinah. (Gen 30:14-21)

This is a real low point—of which there are many in this part of Genesis: Jacob, the head of the family, allows his sleeping arrangement to be bought with some plants thought to have aphrodisiac qualities—apparently without so much as a murmur. This is hardly an unthinking defence of ancient social mores. This is a fairly blunt exposé of a tragic situation arising from wrong attitudes to women, male selfishness and a clash of two sisters attempting to rescue an impossible situation through their own dubious resourcefulness. This a painful caricature of and declension from the mutuality and partnership that Genesis itself has held up as the ideal.

So what are we to do with all this?

Fiona: It's a stomach-churning mess of sin sludge! I want to race through these chapters as quickly as possible and get to the story of Joseph. But this is God's word and so I have to be willing to sit with the weight of it all.

What really strikes me is the emotional intensity of the drama—jealousy and the heartache of rejection, competition, gloating, misery and despair, women using their children as pawns in the battle. It's familiar territory: when a friend who doesn't know Jesus started to read the Bible, she texted me one night at 11:45pm having just read the whole of Genesis and said, "Those women have all my moves. I'm not letting my husband read this stuff ever!"

The ugly emotional narrative rings true: as daughters of Eve, we are prone to jealousy, quarrelling, competition and gloating; we experience rejection, misery and despair; and we

can be horrendously cruel to one another. This is our fallen landscape, and as a follower of Jesus, I need to let the Holy Spirit expose any of this kind of sin lurking in me.

So I am to see the sheer misery and pain of conflict in our sin-sick world reflected in these pages, and I am to mourn the awfulness of sin-warped relationships—to allow that I may be causing pain to others and to repent of that, and then to look to our faithful God—the God who sees and hears Leah, the God whom she praises, the God who is tender and compassionate, and who works through broken people.

3. Jacob, Dinah and her brothers: whatever you do, do nothing

In the time we have left, we're going to look at two of the most disturbing chapters in not just Genesis, but the entire Old Testament. Genesis 34 (the defiling of Dinah) and Genesis 38 (the story of Judah and Tamar) are both fascinating "interruptions" to the flow of the book, with clear and interlinked theological purposes, and they take our discussion far beyond marriage.

Genesis 34 is a brutal, unresolved episode that breaks the account of Jacob's latter dealings with Esau, and the confirmation that it is Jacob's line, not Esau's, that is blessed by God—the line from which the rescuer promised in Genesis 3:15 will come. It has a dual purpose: on the one hand, the visceral details and coldly calculated violence is further evidence of the cancerous spread of sin in the world. On the other, Jacob's implicit and explicit neglect of his family prepares the way for the catastrophic events that kick off the Joseph narrative in chapter 37. But what's interesting, for our purposes is, like chapter 38, in this text, the entire incident revolves around the neglect and mistreatment of a woman.

The opening verses of chapter 34 raise multiple questions:

> Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to see the women of the land. And when Shechem the son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, he seized her and lay with her and humiliated her. And his soul was drawn to Dinah the daughter of Jacob. He loved the young woman and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, "Get me this girl for my wife." (Gen 34:1-4)

Dinah's solo journey raises some questions, as does the fact that she was exposed to the predatory attention of Shechem. His actions (saw, seized, lay with, humiliated) reflect an abuse of power that is consonant with treating women as sex objects. The account is clearly an implicit criticism of such attitudes in the world of Genesis, which is not softened by the conflicting emotional postscript of verses 3-4. The fact that Shechem has decided that he quite likes her would have been as unpalatable in the ancient world as it sounds today. But Jacob's response is shockingly inadequate:

> Now Jacob heard that he had defiled his daughter Dinah. But his sons were with his livestock in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came. And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him. (Gen 34:5-6)

Under normal circumstances, one would expect the patriarch to lead the response to such a shocking action, as Abraham himself does when Lot is captured in Genesis 14. But Jacob does nothing. He just waits. The narrative begs the question, "What is he waiting for?" The answer remains elusive. The fact that Jacob "held his peace" implies an unhelpful level of passivity, which is highlighted by the much more understandable reaction of Dinah's brothers:

> The sons of Jacob had come in from the field as soon as they heard of it, and the men were indignant and very angry, because he had done an outrageous thing in

> Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing must not be done. (Gen 34:7)

No details are supplied of how news reached the brothers, but it is clear that Jacob has taken no steps to communicate with them, and as a result, Hamor is intercepted by Dinah's siblings, rather than Jacob himself. As Hamor attempts to negotiate both the marriage of Shechem to Dinah, and wider settlement treaties, "The sons of Jacob answered Shechem and his father Hamor deceitfully, because he had defiled their sister Dinah" (Gen 34:13). What happens next is fairly gruesome: the brothers trick Shechem into circumcising himself and persuading the rest of the men in the city to do the same in the hope of long-term economic benefit. We pick up events in verse 25:

> On the third day, when they were sore, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword and took Dinah out of Shechem's house and went away. The sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister. (Gen 34:25-27)

Their father's response to all this is disturbing:

> Then Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. My numbers are few, and if they gather themselves against me and attack me, I shall be destroyed, both I and my household." But they said, "Should he treat our sister like a prostitute?" (Gen 34:30-31)

Once again, patriarchal attitudes are certainly present in the text. But where they raise their ugly heads (in Hamor, Shechem and Jacob), they are presented in a very dim light. The unanswered question of Simeon and Levi at the close of the chapter highlights a very real issue, and makes clear that even though their response is brutal in the extreme, it evokes more sympathy than the inaction (and lack of care) shown by Jacob for the vulnerable Dinah.

Jacob in the narrative is self-protective, uncaring, weak, self-interested and self-preoccupied—which in turn, led to terrible outcomes for Dinah, the Shechemites, and, no doubt, had a damaging effect on his sons. He is portrayed in a terrible light, and his inaction is a subtle call to care for the vulnerable, the disadvantaged and the weak, and to purse justice in a way that is based on and which aims for right relationships. Which brings us to the final episode in Genesis 38.

4. Judah, Onan and Tamar: Do as I say, not as I do

The primary reason for inserting the events involving Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38 (where it interrupts the story of Joseph at a key moment) is to shine a spotlight on the tribe of Judah (as in Genesis 49:6). This chapter is a strong theological hint that, despite the important of Joseph as an individual, his primary contribution to the unfolding drama of God's rescue is to keep the line of promise going by rescuing his brothers (and Judah in particular). But that doesn't exhaust the significance of the chapter. It also provides the final piece of evidence that Genesis reflects a view of men and women that is profoundly critical of the prevailing attitudes that could be summed up as patriarchy.

The story begins with an unflattering picture of Judah, fourth son of Jacob, which is vaguely reminiscent of Shechem in Genesis 34:

> Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua. He took her and went in to her, and she conceived and bore a son, and he called his name

> Er. She conceived again and bore a son, and she called his name Onan. Yet again she bore a son, and she called his name Shelah. Judah was in Chezib when she bore him. (Gen 38:2-5)

The lack of detail given implies that Judah was primarily driven by physical attraction or desire. (The language is reminiscent of Genesis 3. See also the Potiphar's wife incident, and David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11.) Although, given the fact the verbs are extremely common, it is hard to demonstrate a direct correspondence.

When Er was of age, Judah arranged a marriage for him. The verdict on Er is as blunt as it is opaque: "But Er, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD put him to death" (Gen 38:7). In the first place, Judah does the right thing and encourages Onan to do what was later codified in Deuteronomy 25:5ff, and which subsequently cause much angst for Henry VIII—but that's another story: "Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother" (Gen 38:8). But this ended badly too, as he contrived to deprive his sister-in-law of a child: "And what he did was wicked in the sight of the LORD, and he put him to death also" (Gen 38:10).

At this point, Judah's self-interest kicks in:

> Then Judah said to Tamar his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up"—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and remained in her father's house. (Gen 38:11)

As far as Judah is concerned, that is that. Tamar is languishing in her father-in-law's house, without status, without family, without a future.

The story continues in Genesis 38:12:

> In the course of time the wife of Judah, Shua's daughter, died. When Judah was comforted, he went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, he and his friend Hirah the Adullamite.

Remember the last time we read about Judah making a trip here in verse 2? Back then, he saw, took and went in a Canaanite woman. Whether or not that was his intention, this time, Tamar saw her chance. The fact that she thought this might be an effective strategy does suggest that Judah was not the most moral of individuals, and the explicit statement in verse 14 that Shelah was now grown up and there was clearly no chance of him being made to marry her makes clear that she was running out of options. So

> she took off her widow's garments and covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and sat at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. … When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. He turned to her at the roadside and said, "Come, let me come in to you," for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. (Gen 38:14-16)

Yet another example of men behaving badly—and of a woman being driven to taking matters into her own hands.

Tamar, of course, is extremely resourceful: she manages to secure Judah's credit card as a pledge for payment for "services rendered". Everything goes to plan, including the understated fact in verse 18 that "she conceived by him". Judah is a little puzzled when he can't find her to honour his pledge, but decides to cancel his credit card and cut his losses; he has tried to honour his debt, and he says, "Let her keep the things as her own, or we shall be laughed at. You see, I sent this young goat, and you did not find her." (Gen 38:23).

However, Judah soon discovers the story is not over. The climax of the story is darkly satisfying:

> About three months later Judah was told, "Tamar your daughter-in-law has been immoral. Moreover, she is pregnant by immorality." And Judah said, "Bring her out, and let her be burned." As she was being brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, "By the man to whom these belong, I am pregnant." And she said, "Please identify whose these are, the signet and the cord and the staff." Then Judah identified them and said, "She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah." And he did not know her again. (Gen 38:24-26)

Of course, it turns out that twins are born: Perez and Zerah, who both get a mention, along with their mother Tamar, in the genealogy of both King David and the Lord Jesus. But it is important to realise that in the broad sweep of Genesis, this chapter does even more than that: it contributes to what, I hope you'd agree, is a substantial and nuanced depiction of what life in a fallen world is and should be like for men and women.

Conclusion

Thank you for your patience as we've meandered through Genesis. Let me sum up what we've seen:

1. Men are often and repeatedly guilty of acting selfishly, brutishly and yet also weakly, not taking responsibility for their actions or families.
2. Women are often victims, but are also more than capable of being extremely manipulative, with the aim of protecting themselves, getting what they want, or both.
3. In other words, men and women appear to be differently affected by the Fall. We have different sinful tendencies, which means that relationships between the sexes do tend to fall into broad patterns.

Genesis, then, is the foundation for a biblical Complementarianism that insists on the dramatic equality of men and women, but also is prepared to celebrate, anticipate and even call out our differences and sinful tendencies.

So where does that leave us? In response to one of the most annoying questions ever asked (about the seven brothers who were all married in turn to the same woman), Jesus says this:

> "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching. (Matt 22:29-33)

In Genesis, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is so obviously involved in and committed to relationships between men and women in the mess of this world. That is a great comfort!

It is even better to know that Christ has stepped into our world, and in the power of the Spirit, has already given us everything we need for life and godliness in all our relationships—as husbands and wives, as men and women. But Jesus also says more: a day is coming when there will be no more marriage, because all our relationships will be as rich and intimate as the best marriage—as easy and dependable as the best of friendships—because they will all have been fulfilled and expanded and enriched unimaginably by the savour and power and immediate presence of Jesus, the one in whom and to whom we are united forever. We always look forward to more, not less. The Book of Genesis launches us on that trajectory, and in Christ, we are almost there.