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# Queen Mothers and Matriarchs: How the Role of the *Gevirah* Helps Us Understand Mothers in Genesis

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What is the role of the mother in the Bible? Often we see women desiring to be mothers (Sarah, Rachel, Hannah), fighting to make their favorite sons heir to the family legacy (Sarah, Rebecca, Bathsheba), confronting rivals (Sarah, Leah, Rachel), or simply working to make sure their children survive (Jochebed). We often see the mother as a fierce contender on a child's behalf. Only rarely do we see hints of the mother as wise woman: advisor to an adult child. Although the Book of Proverbs tells us – “do not forsake the Torah of your mother,” (Proverbs 1:8) it is rare to see a mother giving a child advice (except when it involves getting hold of a birthright, as with Rebecca and Jacob). Yet the ancient Israelites may have honored precisely that advisory role through the establishment of the *gevirah*, the queen mother, as a symbolic and/or political mother figure. Indeed, the queen mother as counselor appears in Proverbs 31:1-9, where the mother of King Lemuel advises her son about the rights of the poor and the evils of strong drink.

The *gevirah* of the Judean (and some believe, the Israelite) royal courts is the mother (or occasionally grandmother) of the reigning king.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars believe that the *gevirah* is an honorary title for the king's mother, without further significance.<sup>2</sup> Others are convinced that the queen mothers of Judah (and possibly the northern kingdom of Israel) exercised political and religious leadership on a par with their counterparts, the queen mothers of other Near Eastern regimes, serving as court officials and even as priestesses.<sup>3</sup> Evidence of this includes the throne of Bathsheba in Kings, the royal crown of Nechushta in Jeremiah, and Maacah's involvement in the cult.<sup>4</sup> Since the evidence is fragmentary, it is difficult to come to a conclusion about whether the queen mother's power was legally and ritually defined, or symbolic and charismatic. However, if we read the stories of Genesis (and early Exodus) with a careful eye, we discover that they hint at a great deal about the power of the *gevirah* as a cultural and spiritual image for the Israelite people – and the stories of the queen mothers tell us a great deal about the roles of mothers in the Torah.

Though few queen mothers appear in Kings and their stories are brief, there are obvious parallels between these royal women and the matriarchs of Genesis. Both groups of women act to establish their sons as heirs to the ruling power, or to choose heirs from among their sons. Both groups of women are portrayed as acting with some degree of initiative and independence. Further, both groups of women straddle a line between home-born and foreign, uneasily occupying the space of insider and outsider.

These parallels between the queen mothers and the matriarchs suggest that the stories of the matriarchs of Genesis (and to some extent, the women of the early chapters of Exodus) may have been to some degree influenced by stories of, or actual experience of, the role of the queen mother in the royal court.<sup>5</sup> Stories of the matriarchs acting ruthlessly to secure

an inheritance for their sons could certainly reflect the machinations of any aristocratic household, but these tales take on even more meaning when we consider that they may reflect the royal household, where inheritances mattered a great deal to the future of the nation.

However, the role of matriarch is not only to defend her chosen heir but to promote God's will by choosing the "right" heir, the one designated in prophecy. Sarah and Rebecca are both acting on prophecy when they promote Isaac and Jacob.<sup>6</sup> They are agents of deity. The parallels between women like Sarah and Rebecca and the *gevurah* may support the assertions of scholars that the queen mother played a sacred function in the court.

Scholars like Susan Ackerman have suggested, based on references in the Bible, ancient Near Eastern literature, and archaeology, that the notion of God having a feminine counterpart, an Asherah, remained part of Israelite religion up until the first Exile. In this analysis, the *gevurah* played a human role similar to the divine role of Asherah as mother of the gods.<sup>7</sup> Ackerman theorizes that the *gevurah* may have served as a priestess of Asherah during a period when Asherah received worship in the Temple. She further notes that legends of Asherah depict her as a provider of the heir to the throne, as in an epic myth where Baal says: "Lady Asherah, give me one of your sons, and I shall make him king."<sup>8</sup> Further, Daniel Dever's recent book *Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*<sup>9</sup> asserts, based on archeological evidence of home altars, that the women of an Israelite household had a ritual role within the local cult, making offerings in the home and at meals honoring the dead. This strengthens the possibility that the queen mother played a similar role within her household, providing both ritual leadership and political advice as a representative of the deity.

Whether or not one accepts the priestess theory, the notion of a divine mother with a regal role (Asherah, Isis, Cybele, etc.) was common throughout the ancient Near East and had a vast impact on the mindset of residents of the region. Indeed, these images eventually percolated into Christianity, and transformed Mary into the Mother of God, portrayed triumphant on a throne, holding her regnant son.<sup>10</sup> The matriarchs of Genesis may well represent a demythicized version of the Asherah figure; the mother who provides a son to govern the nation and order the cosmos. In that respect, the women of Genesis are similar to the queen mothers who, officially or otherwise, represent the same concept.

Yet there is a glaring difference between the queen mothers and the Genesis matriarchs. We hear about the queen mothers before and after their sons come to power; sometimes exclusively after their sons come to power. Bathsheba, for example, occupies a throne at her son's right hand and offers him advice. In the Song of Songs we have a reference to a queen mother crowning her son on his wedding day, basking in the glory of his adulthood.<sup>11</sup> We only hear about matriarchs before their sons become patriarchs. Once a young man becomes patriarch, his mother is never mentioned again, except in reference to her tomb. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah are all whisked away (through death or simple disappearance) before their sons' coronations, and in fact Pharaoh's daughter and Yocheved, the adoptive and biological mothers of Moses, receive the same fate.

This difference is too pervasive to be an accident. The Genesis/Exodus narratives seem to emphasize the role of the mother as a chooser of the heir, but eliminate her role as advisor to that heir once he comes into power. This shift gives honor to the mother as protector and supporter of the "royal" son, yet removes her as a political force in her son's "court."

If we accept that the matriarchal narratives are in some way related to the *gevurah* narratives, we may recognize two models of the mother: a) a situation in which wives fight bitterly to secure power for their sons but then fade away when that task is over; and b) a situation in which mothers who successfully raise an heir become women of wisdom and prestige after their sons' assumption of power. The latter may represent the position of queen mothers and may also indicate an archetypal role of "wise mother" as described in the Book of Proverbs<sup>12</sup>; the former may represent an attempt by Genesis to alter, revise, and/or conceal that role.

It is interesting to note that, just as Genesis seeks to demythologize other aspects of creation, the mother too loses some of her power. Unlike the queen mother, whose barrenness prior to conception is never mentioned (except in the case of Michal, who never became a queen mother), the matriarch must always cry out to God to give her a child. Thus the original image of divine mother and son becomes a human image of prayer and supplication. The matriarch bridges the glory of the deified maternal role and the new Israelite understanding of God (in disembodied yet masculine form) as the source of life.

An analysis of the mythic roots of the queen mother/matriarch image presents a contrast to Judaism's self-concept as a monotheistic tradition, because it implies a divine or semi-divine mother concept existed in ancient Israel, and was then revised by various texts into human dramas (like those of the matriarchs) or mysterious sacred figures (like Lady Wisdom). However, it is important to recognize that the Jewish worldview has been shaped not only by an evolving understanding of God in the transcendent and masculine mode, but an evolving understanding of the feminine face of deity as well. Later talmudic and kabbalistic texts show the ways that this feminine face of God remained subtly imbedded in Jewish lore.<sup>13</sup> It is equally important to be aware that many of the attributes we associate with God (thunder, cloud, heavenly throne, etc.) are adapted from earlier legends of deities such as Baal,<sup>14</sup> yet those attributes come to function in new ways in Israelite and Jewish environments. So too, the divine mother archetype comes to function in new ways in the biblical worldview. This paper seeks to uncover the origins of the queen mother/matriarch image partly in order to understand how and why these human versions of the sacred feminine entered Jewish tradition. The images of the divine/human mother that emerge from biblical text seems to have offered biblical and post-biblical Jews a powerful religious symbol, albeit in a monotheistic context. This is perhaps why both Genesis and Kings make mothers of the heir a significant focus of their attention.

By comparing individual pairs and groups of matriarchs and *gevirot* (or quasi-*gevirot*) we may come to an understanding of how these two images reflect and contradict one another. This essay will look at Rebecca and Bathsheba, Rachel and Maacah, and (extending into Exodus) Pharaoh's daughter and Jehosheba. Each of these pairs has something in common, and each demonstrates how queen mothers and matriarchs may have functioned as spiritual symbols of the Israelite people.

### Thrones and Kitchens: Rebecca and Bathsheba

Even as an ordinary woman, taken by a king as a sexual partner for the night, Bathsheba acts purposefully. By writing to David that she is pregnant, she sets the plans for Uriah's death in motion and makes it possible for herself to become David's wife. Whether she intends this outcome is unclear, but her actions save her from being charged with adultery and forever change the course of her life. As David's wife, she suffers the loss of her first son – this is a punishment for David's murder of Uriah. Her second son is Solomon.

Years later, as David lies dying, the prophet Nathan sees that Adonijah, son of Haggith, has named himself the king's heir, and has planned a feast with all of the princes, his father's general, and a ranking priest. However, neither Nathan nor Solomon is invited.<sup>15</sup> Nathan concludes from this that Bathsheba and Solomon are in danger. He convinces Bathsheba that she must once again act to preserve her life.

Acting on Nathan's orders, Bathsheba goes to the king and says to him:

My lord, you swore by the Lord God to your maidservant that Solomon your son would rule after you and he would sit on your throne. Yet now Adonijah rules as king, and you, my lord the king, do not know it. He has offered many oxen, fatlings, and sheep, and has invited the sons of the king and Abiathar the priest and Joab commander of the army, but he has not invited Solomon your servant. Now, my lord the king, the eyes of all Israel are on you to tell them who shall sit on the throne of my lord the king after him. Or else, when my lord the king shall lie with his fathers, I and my son Solomon will be [regarded as] traitors. (I Kings 1:17-21)

Nathan enters the room after her, in a seeming coincidence, and confirms the facts of Bathsheba's account. David summons Bathsheba and says to her: "As the Lord lives, who has saved my life from every trouble, that which I swore to you, saying 'Solomon your son will rule after me and he shall sit on my throne,' I will fulfill that oath this very day!" Bathsheba bows low and replies: "May my lord the king live forever" – a highly ironic statement, given that David has days or weeks to live. (I Kings 1:30-31)

It is clear that Solomon is a genuine contender for the throne. Otherwise, why would his brother exclude him from the feast? And why would Nathan support his candidacy? However, Solomon is certainly not the eldest, and there is no direct evidence that Nathan and Bathsheba are telling the absolute truth about David's oath. The text portrays David as very old, unable to get warm, with a young woman to warm his bed. He does not appear to know about Adonijah's attempted coup. Bathsheba may be reminding him of a serious oath, or of pillow talk he made with her and did not completely intend. It is even possible that Bathsheba and Nathan have cooked up the story of the oath and foisted it on the old king. Since no story of the oath exists, we are left to speculate.

David does indeed fulfill his oath, and the priest Zadok crowns Solomon at the sacred spring. Solomon pardons Adonijah and promises not to kill him if he makes no further attempt to rule. However, some time later Adonijah goes to visit Bathsheba, and asks her to intercede for him with Solomon and get Avishag the Shunammite (David's bedwarmer) as a wife.

Bathsheba enters the throne room, where Solomon greets her and sets a throne for her at his right hand. Bathsheba replays Adonijah's request, which Solomon angrily refuses, claiming that this is an attempted coup: "Why do you request Avishag the Shunnamite for Adonijah? Why not request the kingdom for him?" (I Kings 2:22) Even though Bathsheba is granted her request in the first scene and denied it in the second, she is treated with far more honor in the second scene.

Susan Ackerman has provided an in-depth analysis of this story in which she notes that in the first scene, Bathsheba acts in a subservient way. She prostrates herself before the king, stands waiting while he speaks with Nathan, and refers to him by honorifics, saying: "my lord the king" no less than six times. In fact, she is forced to cope with the humiliation of having David's young and beautiful bedwarmer Avishag in the room with her as she pleads for Solomon to be named heir.

However, when Bathsheba returns to the throne room to confer with her son Solomon, everything is different. This time it is Solomon who bows to his mother (just as Hittite kings were said to do when encountering their mothers).<sup>16</sup> He sets a chair for her to sit in his presence (*kiseh*, chair, often means throne).<sup>17</sup> Most strikingly, Bathsheba does not say "my lord the king" even once.

Even though Bathsheba's request that Adonijah be allowed to marry Avishag is outrageous and (Solomon believes) diminishing of his sovereignty, Solomon does not punish her for it – though he kills Adonijah for asking such a thing. In fact, Bathsheba's public relaying of Adonijah's request (which she must know will be rejected) may be her opportunity to humiliate her former rival, Avishag, in turn. Avishag will never be the mother of an heir, while Bathsheba has reached the pinnacle of her career as a royal woman.

It seems clear that the two scenes show us Bathsheba's change in status from king's wife to queen mother. The tale may even be an origin story for the throne of the queen mother (placed to the king's right). We see that the king's etiquette toward his mother is considerable: he bows to her, and does not receive his usual honorifics when in conversation with her. We also see from Solomon's behavior that he does not have to take her advice. The king outranks his mother. Yet the role of the queen mother appears powerful, and certainly honorable.

Scholars have noted the similarities between Bathsheba and the matriarch Rebecca. Although their stories differ considerably, both women act decisively to secure a coveted inheritance for a son who is not the obvious heir. Both women seem to be on God's side, making sure that God's wishes regarding inheritance are carried out. Rebecca carries out a prophecy she has received that her younger son must dominate the elder, while

Bathsheba, by supporting Solomon, helps to carry out the prophecy that David's son shall build a Temple.

Like Bathsheba, Rebecca receives an unexpected opportunity to marry an important man (though Rebecca has considerably more choice in the matter).<sup>18</sup> Rebecca agrees to marry her cousin Isaac, and travels to Canaan to take Sarah's place as matriarch. It takes many years for her to conceive, and when she finally does conceive, the children struggle in her womb. She consults an oracle and receives the message: "Two nations are in your womb/two peoples will part from your belly. One people shall be mightier than the other, and the elder shall serve the younger." (Gen 25:22) In the course of time, Rebecca gives birth to twins: Jacob and Esau.

Perhaps because of the prophecy, Rebecca, prefers her younger son Jacob, although her husband Isaac prefers Esau. Jacob, too, has ambitions, and tricks Esau into selling his birthright to Jacob. When Rebecca hears that Isaac (now old and blind) is planning to bless Esau, she chooses to force Isaac's hand through deception. Knowing that Isaac has sent Esau hunting, Rebecca prepares meat. She instructs Jacob to dress in Esau's clothing and carry the meat in to his father. When Jacob balks, certain he will be caught, Rebecca suggests using the hairy skins of the slaughtered goat to simulate Esau's furry arms.

Armed with Rebecca's meat and Esau's feel, Jacob does indeed succeed in convincing his father to bless him. The quavering Isaac, upon discovering the deception, can only give his favored Esau a lesser blessing. Esau is so angry that he wants to kill Jacob. Once again, Rebecca steps in, advising Jacob to flee to her younger brother's home in faraway Haran: "Stay with him a few days, until your brother's rage abates, and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will send and take you back from there. Let me not lose you both in one day!" (Gen. 28:44-45) Rebecca provides cover for Jacob's flight. She complains to Isaac that she hates Esau's Hittite wives and does not want Jacob to marry a Hittite. Isaac himself conceives the idea to send Jacob to Rebecca's family to find a wife, and packs Jacob off to his uncle's.

Rebecca plays the role of both Nathan and Bathsheba. She perceives a threat to her favorite son's inheritance and concocts a scheme to make sure that he gets what she believes should be his. While Bathsheba and Nathan's plan is only suspicious, Rebecca's plan is actually deceptive – yet she succeeds in supplanting Esau as heir and substituting Jacob. So too, Bathsheba succeeds in making her son Solomon king, in spite of the competition. While Bathsheba speaks with the king directly, Rebecca speaks with her son, encouraging him to trick his father. However, both women use their persuasive tongues to influence events.

Both women also save their sons' lives. Solomon is in danger from Adonijah, while Jacob is in danger from his brother Esau – in both cases, because the brothers are rival heirs. Bathsheba and Nathan save Solomon by getting him official royal support, while Rebecca saves her son by finding a plausible reason for him to flee the household. Bathsheba and Rebecca do not only gain an inheritance for their sons – they actually preserve their lives.

The two stories are also similar in that the "king" (David in one case and Isaac in the other)

is old and incapacitated. David is "old, advanced in years, and though they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm." (I Kings 1:1) Isaac is "old, and his eyes were too weak to see." (Gen. 27:1) This disability and age make the declaration of an heir urgent, and also weaken the king's power sufficiently to allow others to intervene and guide events. The mother becomes pivotal when the patriarch begins to lose power.

Solomon appears quite grateful to his mother for her plea on his behalf, reverencing her in a variety of ways. Bathsheba does not play a large role in the rest of the Solomonic narrative, but she is present. She enters the throne room. She herself has a throne and a regal position: she may even have official duties. The Song of Songs hints at a further role for her, describing a wedding scene where Solomon's mother crowns him on his wedding day:

Go out and see, daughters of Zion, Solomon the king  
in the crown with which his mother crowned him  
on the day of his wedding, the day of the joy of his heart.  
(Song of Songs 3:11)

Jacob, however, never mentions his mother again (except to identify himself as Laban's relative upon his arrival in Haran). Neither does the biblical text ever speak of her. Rebecca never sends for Jacob as she has promised. When Jacob returns to Canaan, many years later, with his four wives and thirteen children, he reconciles with his brother, then goes to visit his old father: "Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre-Kiriat-Arba, which is Hebron, where Abraham and Isaac lived. The days of Isaac were a hundred and eighty years old; then he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people old and full of years, and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him." (Gen. 35:27-29)

There is no mention of Rebecca at all in the tale of Jacob's homecoming. The only way we know that she was buried alongside Isaac is that Jacob mentions the fact on his deathbed decades later. (Gen. 50:31) What makes this even stranger is that Genesis does mention the death and burial of Rebecca's nursemaid Deborah, who presumably came to Canaan from Haran at the time of Rebecca's marriage. (Gen. 35:8) Ruth Fagen has suggested that Deborah's death is a kind of stand-in for Rebecca's death, because if Rebecca were mentioned, her presence would "overshadow" Jacob. Rebecca is so powerful in the Genesis narrative that apparently even dying would call too much attention to her.<sup>19</sup>

Both Bathsheba and Rebecca are fierce mothers who fight for the children they love (though Rebecca is far more ambiguous in that she rejects her own elder son).<sup>20</sup> Their struggles are crucial to the choice of the heir, and both of them do "God's work" in that they seem to carry out biblical prophecy through their actions. They are like the mother of Lemuel of Massa, mentioned in the book of Proverbs, who advises her son on the duties of kingship. (Proverbs 31:1-9) They represent both the passions of motherhood and the Divine hand in the outcome of events. However, one woman is rewarded for her active role in determining the heir, while the other does indeed lose both sons in a single day: it appears that Rebecca never sees Jacob again. Certainly there is no throne for her, though she does merit a matriarchal grave.

This difference is not simply a coincidence, because it is replicated in every other matriarchal narrative. All matriarchs leave the stage once the heir has been confirmed, while no queen mothers do. Matriarchs never remain to advise their sons (with the possible exception of Hagar, who finds her son a wife from the land of Egypt). Is this a subtle call by Genesis for the reduction of the maternal role? If we read Rebecca as a queen mother, her task is “fulfiller of the prophecy,” “early supporter of her son’s candidacy,” “advisor of the heir,” but not “advisor of the regnant patriarch.” Why would the Genesis writer(s) advance an opinion on this matter? To explore this further, we must turn to the next queen-mother/matriarch pair: Rachel and Maacah.

### Insider/Outsider: Rachel and Maacah (and Michal)

Rachel is the most loved of all the matriarchs. Jacob in fact tells us how much he loves and misses her as he adopts her grandsons (Joseph’s sons Ephraim and Manasseh) and prepares for his own death. Yet she is also the most controversial, in that Rachel, alone among the matriarchs, has possession of *terafim* – stone deities of some kind. She – and the royal women of David’s house who have similar stories – may represent the connection of women to heterodox folk worship and the perceived dangers of giving spiritual power to mothers.

As a young woman, Rachel marries Jacob. She is his second wife, as her father Laban has tricked Jacob into marrying her older sister Leah first. Like Sarah and Rebeccah, Rachel is barren, while Leah bears many children. Rachel is desperate to conceive, and offers her husband a concubine as a childbearing substitute, just as Sarah did with Hagar. More fertility wars ensue, with Leah also contributing a concubine. Finally, Rachel becomes pregnant, and gives birth to Joseph.

At some point after this, Jacob decides to return to his home in Canaan. He consults with his wives Leah and Rachel, and they agree to slip out of the house when their father is not looking, along with their children and property. In preparation for their departure, Rachel steals her father’s household gods: “Laban went to shear his sheep, and Rachel stole her father’s *terafim*.” (Gen. 31:19)

As Jacob’s family flees, Laban comes looking for these gods, and when he catches up to the caravan, he accuses Jacob of stealing his household deities. Laban searches the camp. Rachel sits on the *terafim* and claims she is menstruating.<sup>21</sup> This is usually regarded as a funny biblical slur on the stone gods: imagine a woman menstruating on them! Yet it also connects the *terafim* to her childbearing power, her womanhood, which protects her from punishment: her father shies away and does not search the cushion on which she sits.

When the search turns up nothing, Jacob indignantly protests innocence. Yet he has condemned his beloved wife without realizing it, because he has promised Laban: “Anyone with whom you find your gods shall not live!” (Gen. 31:32) Shortly afterward, Rachel dies in childbirth with Benjamin, Jacob’s twelfth son. The unspoken implication is that she has been punished for her connection to these foreign gods, and for stealing them from her father. Rachel is buried on the road, not in the family tomb, a further degradation of her

matriarchal position.

Rachel’s story has certain connections to the story of the queen mother Maacah, and also to the story of Michal, Saul’s daughter. Maacah is daughter of Absalom, and is listed in Kings as mother of Abijam and mother of Asa. This is not exactly possible, as Abijam and Asa are father and son, consecutive kings of Judah. Maacah may be mother only of Asa (II Chron. 13:2 lists Michayah daughter of Uriel as Abijam’s mother) or she may be mother of one and grandmother of the other, making her a queen mother who serves during multiple kings’ reigns.

Maacah is a patroness of the local Asherah cult. She has some sort of statue or object (*mifletzet*) set up in Asherah’s honor. (I Kings 15:13) We know that this is not simply an aberration, because as Ackerman points out, the image is returned to the Temple and not destroyed until the days of Josiah, when it is taken out to the Wadi Kidron to be burned. This official royal support for Asherah offends Asa, and as part of a larger religious purge, he deposes Maacah from the role of *gevira* – *vegam et ma’akhah imo vaysireha migevirah asher as’tah mifletzet la’asherah* (also Maacah his mother he removed from being *gevira*, for she had made a detestable object for Asherah). (I Kings 15:13) It is not clear what a *mifletzet* is, or whether it is part of her personal worship or the Temple cult. However, later in the Book of Kings we hear of an Asherah cult object in the Temple, so it is likely that here, also, the object is part of the national cult.

Maacah receives both the designation “mother” and the designation “*gevira*” – and is deposed from her official role as *gevira* (though presumably not from her biological role as mother). This may imply an official cultic and/or courtly role for the queen mother, from which one could be deposed. It may also imply a connection between Asherah and the queen mother, as Ackerman suggests.

We must also note that Maacah’s son is a younger son, like Rachel’s son Joseph.

We do not hear from Maacah again. Like Rachel, she is removed from the scene following her association with idols. However, Maacah’s son deposes her after a period of official patronage of the Asherah cult. In fact, if Maacah is related to both Abijam and Asa as I Kings asserts, it is many years before she is removed from office. Rachel, in contrast, furtively hides her *terafim*, receives her punishment from heaven without her husband ever knowing what happened, and dies long before her son Joseph comes to power as vizier of Egypt. Rachel never has a chance to influence her son – or to be challenged or deposed. She leaves the scene long before this becomes possible.

In understanding the respective roles of Maacah and Rachel, it is important also to look at Michal, daughter of Saul and wife of David. As a young woman, Michal impetuously protects David from her father, Saul, when Saul seeks to kill him. She lets David down from the window, takes her *terafim*, places them in her bed, and augments them with a blanket and a bundle of goat’s hair. With this substitute “David,” she puts off her husband’s pursuers long enough for him to flee. (I Sam. 19:11-17) When Saul protests her conduct, Michal claims David forced her to save him.

After David flees, Saul orders that Michal marry one of Saul's courtiers. David reclaims her after defeating the army of Saul and his sons, but the two quarrel: David dances wildly and immodestly in the procession guiding the Ark into Jerusalem, and Michal chides him. David insults and belittles her, and the text reports that "Michal had no child to her dying day." (II Samuel 7:23) Because Michal offends David, she does not receive the opportunity to become a queen mother and be part of the ruling powers in the next generation (either because she is barren or because David rejects her as a sexual partner).

The scene in which Michal saves David does not require *terafim*, and it is hard to understand why they appear, unless they are associated with royal women to begin with. Interestingly, both Rachel and Michal use *terafim* to deceive their fathers, while Maacah is deposed by her son. These generational conflicts may reflect a patriarchal fear of women's religious practice as a threat to patriarchal power. They may also indicate a pervasive association between royal or matriarchal women and "heterodox" deities, supporting the theory that the *gevurah* maintained a symbolic or actual connection with the mother of the gods.

If this connection between human mother and deified mother indeed existed, the story of Rachel seems both to explain that connection and to threaten it. Rachel steals her father's gods and brings them into Jacob's house – a comment on the Deuteronomic notion that women bring foreign worship to Israel. Certainly Jezebel, who is both royal consort and queen mother, is the quintessential example. However, Rachel's swift removal from the scene implies that, while her motherhood is welcome, her *terafim* are not. Like the other mothers of Genesis, Rachel disappears – in fact, she disappears too soon to even help her son claim an inheritance. Joseph must struggle more than any son of a patriarch to claim his place as leader of his family, perhaps because Rachel is not around to help him.

Rachel's desire for motherhood is poignant and the text portrays it in a positive light. As she gives birth to Benjamin, the midwife promises her: "It is another son for you." Rachel becomes the image of motherhood, and even exercises a kind of providence over the nation long after her death. Jeremiah, in his ode to Rachel, imagines her weeping for her exiled children and receiving comfort from God: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping – it is Rachel weeping for her children. . . . Thus says God: 'Refrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for there is hope for your future . . . and your children will return from the enemy land.'" (Jer. 31:15-17) In this scene, Rachel exercises the same motherly ability to plead for her children and fulfill prophecy as does Rebecca.

Maacah, Rachel, and Michal all cause problems for their fathers and/or husbands. Yet they also produce sons and/or save their husband's lives. They seem to reflect an ambiguous insider/outsider posture in which the same woman is both a protector and a threat. It is perhaps for this reason that Rachel is removed so early from the Genesis narrative. She maintains her tragic appeal by never becoming a power that threatens her husband or son. Instead, she gives her life to produce a second son for Jacob, fulfilling her role as provider of heirs to the ruling patriarch. Also, by giving birth to Joseph, Rachel sets in motion the prophecy given to Abraham that his children will go down to Egypt. (Gen. 15:13-15) Like

Sarah and Rebecca, Rachel becomes an agent of God's will.

Once again, Genesis defines the role of mother as fulfiller of prophecy and mother of the heir. This is a spiritual role, and Rachel, the woman who occupies it, has spiritual qualities: she prays constantly for a son and, when God finally remembers her through the birth of Joseph, piously exclaims: "May God add another son for me." (Genesis 30:24) Like Maacah, the queen mother of Judah, Rachel has associations with non-monotheistic worship and with independence of mind, but these are quickly erased by her tragic death. If we read Rachel as a *gevurah*, we see that she does not take the role of advisor to her son, and does not become a political or religious power – though her son does become heir, and her husband remembers her with honor and memorializes her. Genesis succeeds, in this case as well, in depicting a de-mythologized, de-politicized mother who acts on behalf of the Divine but fades when her son is ready to take center stage.

This stands in contrast to Maacah, who supports the Asherah cult and takes a religious and political role from which her son feels he needs to depose her. Maacah seems to represent a problematized version of the mother as spiritual and political advisor. Indeed, fear of the mother as an influential religious and governmental power may be precisely what drives the Genesis narrative to reduce the mother's advisory role, even as it maintains the mother as defender and fulfiller of God's will.

#### The Queen-Mother-By-Proxy: Pharaoh's Daughter and Jehosheba

The connection between women of the Torah and queen mothers of the book of Kings extends into the book of Exodus. Moses, the deliverer and leader of the people, actually has two mothers. His biological mother, Jochebed, and his adoptive mother, Pharaoh's daughter (known in Jewish tradition as Batya) both conspire to save his life and rescue him from the decree of Pharaoh that all male Hebrew infants be killed. In this respect, they fulfill the Genesis definition of the matriarch: they support the young heir against his enemies, and they fulfill a Divine prophecy: that a redeemer will arise to free the Hebrews.

Moses' first mother, Jochebed, sees as soon as her son is born that he is "good" or "beautiful" (*tov*). She hides him for three months, and when she can hide him no longer, she floats him on the Nile in a basket. His sister Miriam watches to see what becomes of him. The daughter of Pharaoh, on her way to bathe in the Nile, sees the child and has compassion for it. Moses' sister (presumably Miriam) steps in and offers a possible plan of action – she, Miriam, will run and fetch a Hebrew woman to nurse the child. Batya may be well aware that this is a ruse to allow the child's mother to rear him. Batya approves this plan. When Jochebed arrives at the scene, Batya offers the Hebrew woman wages to nurse the child – supporting a family as well as saving an infant. (Exodus 2:2-19)

"The boy grew up (*vayigdal hayeled*) and his mother brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became a son to her, and she named him Moses, for she said: "I have drawn him out of the water."<sup>22</sup> The language of this line connects Pharaoh's daughter to the matriarchs. "The boy grew up" links to Isaac, of whom we hear "the boy grew up" (*vayigdal hayeled*). There is also a connection to Hagar and Ishmael, for after Ishmael is saved we

also hear *vayigdal* (he grew up). Further, the naming-speech Pharaoh's daughter offers connects her to the many other matriarchs who use naming-speeches (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah). Pharaoh's daughter not only adopts Moses but stands in for a matriarch: her task is to protect her son and allow him to grow up and fulfill his destiny.

However, in the next lines, Pharaoh's daughter vanishes, as does Moses' mother. As soon as Moses grows up, he enters the world of men, confronting the slavemasters of Egypt and then fleeing to Midian, where a new family (that of Jethro the priest) adopts him. He marries, has children, and then receives a vision of God, in which he comes to understand his coming role in the Exodus. When he returns to Egypt, he finds a brother, Aaron, and many other relatives, including his sister Miriam. However, his two mothers are gone, and we do not hear of them again.<sup>23</sup> Once again, the matriarch has vanished now that her son is of an age to claim his inheritance.

A strikingly similar story occurs in II Kings 11, and it involves a number of queen mothers and their proxies. Athaliah is the queen mother of Ahaziah king of Judah. She is also Jezebel's daughter. Athaliah discovers that Jehu has killed her son Ahaziah and that she is in imminent danger of being deposed. She engineers a palace coup, kills off her grandsons, and reigns as queen herself. While Ben-Barak asserts that Athaliah cannot properly be described as a queen mother, as she seizes power in a coup, it seems unlikely that she could command sufficient officials and military personnel to run a coup if she had no official role.<sup>24</sup> Her seizure of power is a support for the idea that the *gevurah* held royal office.

Jehosheba, a sister of Ahaziah, saves Ahaziah's son Joash from Athaliah's rampage. "Jehosheba, daughter of King Joram and sister of Ahaziah, stole Joash son of Ahaziah from among the king's sons who were being killed, and put him and his nurse in a bedroom, and hid him from Athaliah so that he did not die." (II Kings 11:2) Jehosheba secretes the boy and his nurse inside the Temple itself, and hides them for six years.

According to II Chron. 22:11, Jehosheba is the wife of the high priest Jehoiada. This is why she lives in the Temple precincts. We must also note that, if she is a sister of Ahaziah, she is probably the daughter of Athaliah. (Women described as sisters are usually full sisters, as we see in the case of Absalom and Tamar in II Samuel 13:1.) However, instead of supporting her mother's bloody rule, Jehosheba preserves the true heir. When the boy is old enough, Jehosheba's husband Jehoiada reveals him to the military and asks for their support. The army supports Joash, and Jehoiada crowns him. Jehoiada then orders the execution of Athaliah, who rends her garments and cries: "Treason, treason." (II Kings 11:14)

Jehosheba's story is parallel to those of Jochebed and Pharaoh's daughter. Like Jochebed and Pharaoh's daughter, Jehosheba hides an infant from a tyrant who wants to kill him. Like Pharaoh's daughter, Jehosheba provides a nurse (*meineket*) for her adopted son. Like Jochebed, Jehosheba is part of a priestly/levitical family. And like Pharaoh's daughter, she is the daughter of the tyrant whom she defies through her actions. In the end, Jehosheba's *protégé* overthrows the tyrant, just as Moses does in the Book of Exodus.

Jehosheba is also similar to Jochebed and Pharaoh's daughter in that she disappears from

the narrative once Joash becomes king – her husband, Jehoiada, takes over as Joash's supporter and advisor. However, Joash does in fact have a queen mother. Her name is Zibiah (Tziviyah) of Beer-sheba and she appears in II Kings 12:2, listed as the mother of the new king. (The king's mother is always listed along with him at the beginning of a reign; this is one support for the notion that the queen mother had symbolic and/or official power as a court official.) Jehosheba has been queen-mother-by proxy, just as Pharaoh's daughter was matriarch-by-proxy for Moses.<sup>25</sup> It is unclear where Zibiah has been all this time, or even whether she is alive or dead, but she receives the title of mother of the king once Joash is crowned.

The Exodus story of Pharaoh's daughter and the Kings story of Jehosheba do not present the same obvious differences as the Genesis/Kings stories do. The queen-mother-by-proxy and the matriarch-by-proxy are equally brave and effective. Neither of them appears to become an advisor to her adopted son following his ascension to power. Pharaoh's daughter, Jochebed, and Jehosheba are all examples of the mother-role in which the mother fights for the child's survival and inheritance and then fades into the background.

In fact, Jehosheba is a foil to her mother Athaliah and grandmother Jezebel, who seize power in ways that threaten the Israelite/Judean monarchies. Like Maacah, Athaliah is a power the Book of Kings fears and rejects. She is portrayed as that most inhumane of women – one who kills her own sons and grandsons. In fact, after her first son is dead, she does the opposite of what mothers do. She utterly fails to protect the male heirs to the throne. Jehosheba steps into the breach and acts as a matriarch should, supporting and defending the heir until he is ready to enter the male world on his own.

The comparison between the second chapter of Exodus and II Kings 12 suggests that Genesis seeks to revise the role of mother precisely to make sure her role continues to be a supporting role. The desire for the mother to be present and make the heir safe is in conflict with the fear that the mother will seek to take center stage. The stories of Maacah and of Athaliah suggest this fear. Jehosheba, Pharaoh's daughter, and their counterparts are antidotes to this anxiety about the mother's influence: they provide examples of women who hold power, yet choose to exercise it on behalf of vulnerable male infants rather than on their own behalf. In fact, Jehosheba and Pharaoh's daughter both reject their own parent in order to protect God's chosen heirs. These are the mothers with whom the Genesis text – and perhaps even the Kings text – feels most comfortable.

The "mother's influence" on some level represents the power of women – whether it is religious power, political power, or simply the power to give birth. The text does not wish to abolish this power, seeing it as crucial to the support of kings and patriarchs. Indeed, the power is sacred, carrying as it does some symbolic resonance with the divine mother. Yet the power of the mother cannot be confirmed, because of its dangers. The power can be used to seize control, invoke other deities, even kill. Therefore Genesis makes a compromise, cutting off the lives of the matriarchs before problems of sovereignty-sharing arise.

### Jeremiah's Rachel and Hamutal: The Vanishing Mother Reappears

Perhaps the most compelling text that connects the role of queen mother with the role of the matriarch is Jeremiah's poetic description of Rachel weeping for her children. Jeremiah knows the queen mother and her royal estate. As he calls down mourning on the people of Judah, he declares: "Say to the king and the queen mother: lower yourselves, sit low, for the crowns of your glory have been taken from your head." (Jer. 13:18)<sup>26</sup> He also well knows of the Queen of Heaven and her following among Israelite women. (Jer. 44:15-19) It is interesting, therefore, that Jeremiah also depicts Mother Rachel as a chief mourner for the exiles.

A voice is heard in Ramah, wailing, bitter weeping,  
Rachel weeping for her children, for they are gone.  
Thus says the Lord: Stop your voice from weeping,  
Your eyes from crying,  
For there is a reward for your labor, says God,  
They shall return from the enemy land.  
There is hope for your future, says God –  
Your children shall return to their land.

Jer. 31:15-16

Whom does Rachel, the long-dead matriarch, represent? It seems clear she is a mythic version of the queen mother. She cares for the nation, which is her family. She weeps on behalf of her children until God restores them to their inheritance, the land of Israel. Jeremiah invokes Rachel as a comfort and support to the suffering people: a human yet quasi-mystical mother; an alternative to the Queen of Heaven, yet also a version of her.

In fact, Jeremiah's Rachel does what all matriarchs and queen mothers do: she ensures a future for her children. She uses her eloquence, as Bathsheba and Rebecca do, to make things turn out the right way. Although in Genesis Rachel dies long before she is able to help Joseph win his throne, Jeremiah returns her to life, so that she may defend her larger progeny, the Israelite nation. This Rachel is a link between the Genesis matriarchs, the queen mothers, and the Near Eastern mother-myths that help to define and animate both.

It is no accident that in later rabbinic lore and even later kabbalistic texts, this weeping Rachel becomes a model for the weeping *Shekhinah*, a divine mother-figure who wanders with her exiled children, sheltering them and seeking to restore them to their place.<sup>27</sup> Although Rachel's drama is a human one, sages and mystics recognized in the mourning Rachel an echo of the original divine mother/sister who is her prototype: Sirtur mourning for Tammuz, Anat for Baal, Isis for Osiris.<sup>27</sup> Later generations re-mythicized the image and developed their own version of the "queen mother"; the queen and bride *Shekhinah*.<sup>29</sup> This "kosher" version of the divine mother could co-exist with monotheism yet still provide the people with comfort and protection.

We see a Rachel-like image of the lamenting queen mother in the lament of Ezekiel:

What a lioness was your mother among the lions! Crouching among lions she reared her cubs. She raised up one of her cubs, he became a grown lion, he learned to hunt . . . Nations obeyed a call against him; he was caught in their snare . . . When she saw that she was frustrated and her hope was lost, she took another of her cubs and made him a lion . . . Nations of the surrounding countries set themselves against him. They spread their net over him, he was caught in their trap. . . . They carried him off to the king of Babylon. Your mother was like a vine in your blood, planted beside streams, with luxuriant boughs and branches, and she had a mighty rod, a ruler's scepter . . . She was hurled to the ground. An east wind dried up her fruit . . . Now she is planted in the desert . . . She is left without a mighty rod, a scepter with which to rule.

(Ezekiel 19:10-14, portions)

This lament describes the royal mother, the *gevirah* who raises sons, chooses heirs, and rules alongside her offspring with a mighty rod. The text refers specifically to Hamutal, daughter of Jeremiah of Libnah, who raised up two sons to the kingship, and was exiled along with her second son to Babylon (II Kings 23:31; 24:18). Notable is the phrase "a vine in your blood," which seems to refer to the *gevirah* as an abundant producer of royal sons, as in the Psalm: "Your wife will be like a fruitful vine." (Ps. 128:3) Significant also is the queen mother's scepter, which identifies her as a ruler, not only a mother to rulers. The narrative also has mythic dimensions, in which the *gevirah* is Zion herself, defeated yet graceful and lion-like. As with Rachel, the myth of the sacred mother and the position of queen mother appear to coincide. The *gevirah* is a symbol of the mother-nation. Indeed, Lady Wisdom of the Book of Proverbs is a similar figure: a counseling mother who offers sound advice, yet also an advisor to God at the dawn of creation.

Genesis, with its compelling and fascinating matriarchs, is a strong supporter of the maternal role as crucial to the Israelite people. Genesis, Exodus, and Kings all honor mothers as choosers and defenders of the patriarchs and rulers of the nation. Yet Genesis narratives, and related stories like those of Pharaoh's daughter, truncate that role, allowing mothers to disappear rather than become equals or rivals to their sons. Nor do mothers in Genesis receive leeway to influence the religion of the nation with their feminine cults. In the Torah, the image of the matriarch is preferred to that of the queen mother, with her problematic access to power. The matriarchs, not the queen mothers, become the focus of midrash, legend, and hagiography.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, as is common when myth takes its revenge, the Jewish people does not entirely forget the repressed role of "queen mother." As previously noted, this image returns in the person of the *Shekhinah* (who is bride to God and also mother to God's heir, the Jewish nation). In particular, we see echoes of the *gevirah* in the Sabbath bride/mother of the kabbalists, who does not disappear when her people go out into the world but rather remains to assist them.<sup>31</sup> Many Jews welcome this sheltering Sabbath presence every Friday night during the service of Kabbalat Shabbat. This invisible queen and bride brings her children their Sabbath inheritance week after week, defends them from their enemies, and sustains them with rest, doing her duty as a mother, a matriarch—and a *gevirah*.

- <sup>1</sup> See I Kings 15:13; II Kings 10:13; II Chron. 15:16; Jer. 13:18, 29:2.
- <sup>2</sup> Ben-Barak, Zafira. "The Status and Right of the Gebirah." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 110/111 (1991), p. 23-34.
- <sup>3</sup> Ackerman, Susan. "The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 112/3 (1993), 385-401; Terrien, S. "The Omphalos Myth and Hebrew Religion," *Vetus Testamentum* 20, (1970), 315-338; N.E.A. Andreasen, "The Role of the Queen Mother in Israelite Society," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45 (1983), 179-194.
- <sup>4</sup> See footnote 1.
- <sup>5</sup> Given that many of the patriarchal and matriarchal narratives are generally thought to be composed by J, whom some Bible critics (cf. Bloom, Harold, *The Book of J.*) imagine to be a Davidic or post-Davidic source writing in a court setting, this is historically possible.
- <sup>6</sup> Gen. 17:15-16; Gen. 25:23.
- <sup>7</sup> Ackerman, Susan. "The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel." *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 112/3 (1993), 385-401; Freedman, D.N. "Yahweh of Samaria and His Asherah." *Biblical Archaeologist* (50), 1987, 241-249.
- <sup>8</sup> KTU 1.6.1.44-46.
- <sup>9</sup> Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (June 2005).
- <sup>10</sup> The Shekhinah of the 11th-17th century *kabbalists* has some aspects in common with these figures as well: she is the Divine bride, the mother of the people, and the intercessor on behalf of her human children.
- <sup>11</sup> Song of Songs 3:11.
- <sup>12</sup> See Proverbs 1, 4, 8, 9.
- <sup>13</sup> For example, rabbinic references to the *Shekhinah* as God's spouse in Lamentations Rabbah, the Zoharic conceptions of deity as male and female, etc.
- <sup>14</sup> Human, Dirk J. and Vos, Casparus Johannes Adam. *Psalms and Liturgy* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), p. 242; Niehaus, Jeffrey J., *God at Sinai: Covenant and Theophany in the Bible and Ancient Near East* (Zondervan, 1995), p. 158.
- <sup>15</sup> David's loyal fighting men are also excluded from Adonijah's feast, implying that Adonijah is not the legitimate heir.
- <sup>16</sup> Dietrich, M., Loretz, O., and Sammartin, J. *Die Keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit* (Kevalaer: Butzon and Bercker, 1976).
- <sup>17</sup> Ackerman, 385-401.
- <sup>18</sup> Although Rebecca's marriage is voluntary, she and Sarah both go through interludes of being "taken" by powerful men, just as Bathsheba does.
- <sup>19</sup> In the Book of Jubilees, however, Rebecca has a lengthy reunion with her son as well as a deathbed speech (Jubilees 31 and 35).
- <sup>20</sup> It must be noted that Sarah too has a similar narrative: she supports her son Isaac's candidacy against Ishmael and his mother Hagar, and she persuades her husband to exile her rival and his son. She also fulfills the prophecy that a son of Sarah will be heir to Abraham. She is even called a *gevirah*: an angel who speaks to Hagar refers to Sarah as Hagar's *gevirah*, her mistress. Sarah too disappears

- from the narrative once Isaac's role as heir has been solidified. She too does not survive to offer advice to her adult son as he takes his father's place as patriarch.
- <sup>21</sup> Gen. 31:35.
- <sup>22</sup> Exodus 2:10.
- <sup>23</sup> Jochebed does appear in a genealogy in Exodus 6:20, which is how we know her name. However, her husband, rather than she, is the focus of the verse, and while he receives a life-span, she does not. It is unclear when Jochebed dies.
- <sup>24</sup> Ben-Barak, 23-34.
- <sup>25</sup> There are other queen-mothers-by-proxy. One example: the wise woman of Tekoa advises David using a story about herself as mother, and appears to take a motherly role toward him. (II Samuel 1:14-20).
- <sup>26</sup> Here, the queen mother is Nechushta daughter of Elnatan, who appears in the narrative of the Judean royal court's exile. (II Kings 24:8) Ackerman sees her as associated with the cult of the Nechushtan (bronze serpent) because of her name.
- <sup>27</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Rosh haShanah 31a, Lamentations Rabbah Prologue 24, Pesikta deRav Kahana 166.
- <sup>28</sup> Lewis, Justin. "The Jewish Goddess(es)." [http://telshemesh.org/fire/the\\_jewish\\_goddesses\\_justin\\_lewis.html](http://telshemesh.org/fire/the_jewish_goddesses_justin_lewis.html).
- <sup>29</sup> See Patai, Raphael, *The Hebrew Goddess*, for a full discussion of links between the *Shekhinah* and ancient divine female personae.
- <sup>30</sup> However, Bathsheba does appear in a number of *midrashim* in the role of the ideal mother (cf. Midrash Mishlei, end).
- <sup>31</sup> Cf. Zohar I, 48a.

