




# Showcasing the essence of motherhood and women in families: Insights from the Old Testament

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## Abstract

This paper highlights that the notion of motherhood encompasses a wide range of perspectives within families. The significant role of mothers in contemporary Hebrew legal and moral systems is fundamental to this discussion. Motherhood extends beyond biological ties, involving responsibilities such as providing education, nutrition, a hygienic environment, and quality time with both parents. The reverence for motherhood is evident in biblical passages such as Exodus 20:12, Leviticus 19:3, 5:16, Deuteronomy 21:18, and 21:21. In Jewish tradition, the mother of the king holds a position of high esteem, as reflected in texts such as 1 Kings 2:29, Proverbs 10:1, 15:20, 17:25, 29:15, 31:1, and 31:31. For instance, King Solomon demonstrated profound respect for his mother, Bathsheba, by standing to honour her when she entered the throne room and seating her at his right hand to engage in important discussions.

**Keywords:** motherhood, women, mothers, families, Old Testament.

## Introduction

Motherhood is an intriguing subject of scholarly inquiry, as noted by Huopalainen and Satama (2019:102). It encompasses a wide range of themes, including embodiment, gender performance, materiality, affectivity, femininity, sexuality, power dynamics, structural issues, and patriarchal oppression. Notably, motherhood is seen as a rich bodily experience that stimulates the senses (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019:99). However, defining motherhood remains a complex challenge. The Cambridge Dictionary defines a 'mother' as "a female parent," with the suffix -hood meaning "a state or condition of being, character, or nature," while motherhood itself is described as "the state of being a mother or the qualities or spirit of a mother" (Merriam-Webster, Inc. 2021). In addition to these definitions, motherhood involves creating an intimate environment filled with comforting aromas that evoke feelings of home and security. In patriarchal societies, women often face disadvantages due to the gendered and hazardous nature of social responsibilities imposed upon them. Some scholars argue that discussions of motherhood tend to reduce it to a patriarchal institution, imposing the role of motherhood on women. This overemphasis on dominant maternal ideologies can obscure and distort its original meaning (Frizelle & Kell, 2010:27).



According to Miller-McLemore (1994:20), motherhood is characterised by mothers engaging in essential caregiving activities and offering mutual support. The term "mother" fulfils every child's fundamental need, evoking feelings of joyful, unconditional love and care. Additionally, motherhood is a deliberate endeavour that encourages self-reflection, leading to maternal contemplation (Rose, 2015:11). As a result, motherhood emerges as a unique phenomenon and, as Miller-McLemore (1994:21) asserts, remains largely an "untapped resource of theological reflection."

## **Methodology**

The research method will be mainly a literature study. Practical theology is an academic discipline that examines and reflects on religious practices with the purpose to understand the theology underlying such practices and to consider how theological theory and theological practices could be aligned to facilitate necessary changes and improvements. The decision taken about the theory-praxis relationship influences how the singularities are explored analytically but for the purpose of this study, a literature review will apply. The descriptive literature study will be carried out through data gathering based on secondary sources such as academic publications, journal articles, websites, and national and international scientific resources.

## **Biblical-theological views and the significance of mothers in the Old Testament - Six exemplary characters**

### ***Jochebed***

The Old Testament is replete with amazing characters whose lives prove that God uses individuals to help grow the faith of others. One such figure is Jochebed. Who is identified in the Midrash and was righteous and God-fearing and God's preordained instrument in protecting Moses's life at a time of an enormous threat to the emerging nation. The Torah refers to Jochebed as the "daughter of Levi" (Numbers 26:59): "The name of Amram's wife was Jochebed daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt." Jochebed (Exodus 2: 1-10 and 6:20) was the mother of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, and she demonstrated great tenacity and wisdom by hiding Moses in bullrushes to protect him from the Egyptian decree of the Pharaoh that all baby boys were to be thrown into the Nile, because he feared that the Jews might become too powerful. Jochebed hid her newborn child Moses for three months until she could hide him no more. To save her son's life, Moses in a basket and allowed it to flow in the River Nile. Pharaoh's daughter who was bathing in the river discovered the baby Moses and adopted him (Kadari, n.d.). Miriam, the sister of Moses volunteered to nurse the child to which Pharaoh's daughter agreed, and then Miriam called her mother, who was then appointed to take care of him. So, we see that Jochebed nursed her son until he was old enough and was brave enough and trusting, to release him. Moses grew up to become the leader of the Exodus, leading his people out of the land of Egypt to the Promised Land. Jochebed's example teaches us that she was a special caring mother who nurtured Moses and thus paved his way for a hugely important future leadership role. She was a true matriarch and a role model of faith and wisdom and remains an exemplary figure.

### ***Rebekah***

Walton and Keener (2016:16) assert that Abraham's instruction to his servant to find a wife for his son Isaac from within his kin reflects the practice of endogamy, which focuses on preserving inheritance within the family and marrying within a related social group. Rebekah, a descendant of Jesus and a matriarch like her mother-in-law Sarah, is introduced in Genesis 24. She was the daughter of Bethuel, who was the son of Nahor, and thus a grandniece of Abraham. Her brother was Laban (Genesis 22:20-23). Abraham specifically directed his



servant, Eliezer, to seek a spouse for Isaac from among his kin in Canaan (Genesis 24:3). Walton and Keener (2016:57) state that Abraham's servant implored God to reveal a suitable wife for Isaac.

Rebekah, who is described as a beautiful young virgin with an amiable disposition, good manners, and a supportive nature, made a strong impression on Eliezer (Wilson, 2019:38). She not only provided him with water but also attended to his entourage, including the animals. Her etiquette and hospitality were so notable that Eliezer inquired about her family, particularly her parents (Wilson, 2019:38). Walton and Keener (2016:57) emphasise that Rebekah's hospitality was a highly regarded trait, as women in Hebrew families were expected to fulfil the role of hostesses and demonstrate such qualities.

Genesis 24:15 identifies Rebekah as the daughter of Bethuel and Milcah, with Bethuel being the son of Abraham's brother Nahor. After conversing with her, Eliezer gifted her a gold nose ring and two bracelets. In Genesis 24:25, Rebekah further displayed her generous nature by inviting Eliezer to her family's home, offering food for his animals and lodging for him. While Rebekah's mother and brother initially resisted her immediate marriage to Isaac, requesting she stay an additional ten days, Rebekah chose to trust Eliezer and left promptly to become Isaac's wife. Wilson (2019:38) notes that Rebekah's courage and faith led her to leave her family and embrace life with Abraham's unfamiliar household. Her actions demonstrated trustworthiness, honesty, and an adventurous spirit (Wilson, 2019:38). Genesis 24:67 documents the union of Isaac and Rebekah. According to Arnold (2009:217), Rebekah became Isaac's spouse after the death of Sarah, Isaac's mother.

Genesis 27:8-17 recounts Rebekah's deception of her husband, Isaac, to secure the blessing for Jacob instead of Esau. Wilson (2019:39) notes that Rebekah "violated a significant social taboo" by engaging in such deceit. Her actions were condemned by the Law of Moses, as seen in Deuteronomy 27:18, which pronounces: "God's curse upon anyone who misguides the blind." The story of Isaac and Rebekah and their subsequent marriage continue the lineage of Jesus and the promise of life after the death of Sarah (Adelman, 2025:11). Rebekah being the daughter of Nahor, the brother of Abraham making his daughter-in-law his niece, and seed carrier for Jesus (Adelman, 2015:11). Despite her transgression, Rebekah was chosen by God as a direct ancestor of Jesus. Adelman (2015:17) mentions that of all the barren women, God listened to the prayer of Isaac, the husband to Rebekah when he prayed to Yhweh in the presence of his wife for her to conceive. Simkovich (2017:1) states despite the barrenness of Rebekah, God confides the future of her offspring in her and not Isaac. Rebekah, according to Simkovich (2017:1) took matters into her own hands to consult with Yhweh and God answered her directly. This act of obedience to God by Isaac opened the womb of his wife to conceive and the fact that Rebekah went past her husband straight to Yhweh was the turning point for God to overturn her seed lessness. She finds favour from God in my opinion. Her preference for Jacob as Isaac's heir stemmed from God's revelation to her in Genesis 25:23: "Two nations are within you; you will give birth to two rival peoples. One will be stronger than the other; the older will serve the younger." According to Simkovich (2017:1) Rebekah never shares what God has revealed to her about the rivalry between Jacob and Esau.

Rebekah's favouritism towards Jacob began at his birth when he grasped Esau's heel (Genesis 25:26). She felt compelled to ensure the fulfilment of God's prophetic declaration concerning Jacob's destiny. Charry (2012:267) affirms the prophecy concerning the twins, the conflict within Rebekah's womb, and the future dominance of the younger over the elder. Wilson (2019:39) asserts that despite the immorality of favouritism, both parents engaged in it. The author contends that God permitted Rebekah to take sides, which is why He did not condemn her for her lies and deceit. She is supposed to be condemned by these actions, but God was gracious. God is benevolent, demonstrating love and forgiveness to those who seek Him, despite their shortcomings. He is patient and abundant in compassion, providing redemption rather than prompt retribution. Instead of condemnation, He offers avenues for



renewal and restoration, illustrating His wish for reconciliation with His creation. Grace is the unearned favour and benevolence of God, bestowed not due to our merit but as a manifestation of His love. It facilitates forgiveness, rejuvenation, and blessings exceeding our merit.

Rebekah played a pivotal role in mentoring her son Jacob, preparing him to become the patriarch of the Israelites. She was instrumental in devising and executing the plan for Jacob to fulfil God's purpose by becoming a progenitor of Jesus. As a divine instrument, Rebekah ensured the realisation of God's word, as recorded in Genesis 25:19-27. She guided Jacob in deceiving their father, Isaac, to secure the firstborn blessing that Jacob had already obtained from Esau. However, Jacob himself fell victim to deception twice in his life. The first instance occurred when his father-in-law deceived him into marrying Leah instead of Rachel (Genesis 29). The second occurred when his sons falsely claimed that his beloved Joseph had been killed by wild beasts (Genesis 37).

As a Hebrew mother, Rebekah was responsible for teaching her children to follow the Law and to honour God by observing His commandments. She set a precedent for young Israelite women, emphasising the importance of executing God's redemption plan. For modern women, Rebekah's life offers significant insights into obedience and reverence in fulfilling God's will. She exemplified humility and personified the archetype of a devoted mother. Although Rebekah never met her deceased mother-in-law, Sarah, she held a respected position in Hebrew society as Isaac's wife, embodying the qualities expected of a daughter-in-law in Hebrew culture.

Bøsterud (2021:3) characterises Rebekah as a woman of great influence, directing the actions of the men around her as though they were marionettes, as seen in Genesis 24:1-67; 25:19-28, and 26:1-11. Nevertheless, the authors of this paper contest Bøsterud's depiction of Rebekah as a master manipulator, as insinuated by his suggestive characterisation.

### ***Rachel***

The younger daughter of Laban and wife of Jacob, Rachel was the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, who ultimately became two of the twelve tribes of Israel (Genesis 35:24; Genesis 46:15–18). The narrative in Genesis recounts how Laban deceived Jacob, making him labour for seven years to marry Rachel, only to give him Leah, his elder daughter, instead (Genesis 28:23-25). Despite this deception, Jacob's deep affection for Rachel led him to work an additional seven years for her (Wilson, 2019:39). Like her mother-in-law, Rebekah, Leah initially faced infertility (Wilson, 2019:39). However, God intervened, enabling both women to conceive, and their offspring became part of the lineage of Jesus (Genesis 21:1-4; 25:21; 30:22).

Rachel was Jacob's favoured wife, and he cherished her more than any of the other women in his life. Like Rebekah, Rachel exhibited duplicity when she stole her father Laban's household idols (Wilson, 2019:40). In Genesis 31:32-35, Rachel deceived both Jacob and Laban regarding her theft. Tragically, Rachel died while giving birth to Benjamin during the journey to Bethel. Throughout her life, Rachel experienced jealousy and animosity toward Leah due to her own barrenness and Leah's fertility (Wilson, 2019:40). Wilson (2019:40) argues that Rachel's status as Jacob's favoured wife impacted his integrity, resulting in her son Joseph becoming his preferred child. Despite Rachel's flaws, Wilson (2019:42) notes that God chose her to be the progenitor of a significant leader and governor in Egypt. Her leadership qualities suggest that Rachel was well-suited for a mentoring role. Bøsterud (2021:3) adds that the love Jacob had for Rachel overshadowed the deceptions in her narrative. Rachel was considered to be a powerful intercessor for the people of Israel.





## **Tamar**

The story of Tamar is recounted in Genesis 38. Tamar, unlike Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, who were infertile, eventually gives birth to twin sons who are directly linked to the bloodline and lineage of Jesus (Wilson, 2019:42). Amid (2009:216) identifies Tamar as a Canaanite woman from Timna. She was married to Er, Judah's son, who died prematurely due to his wickedness, displeasing God, leading to his demise (Genesis 38:7). According to Levirate marriage laws, if a man died without a male heir, his brother was required to marry the widow to produce a son in the deceased brother's name. The reasoning behind this was to ensure the continuation of the bloodline and family name (Ryan, 2019; Genesis 38:8). Tamar later married her brother-in-law, Onan, who refused to have children with her and wasted his seed, leading to his death (Genesis 38:10). It is important to acknowledge that God is who He declares Himself to be. The God of Israel will extend grace, mercy, and love to those He chooses. Despite His deep affection for creation, He has the power to end our lives. Judah feared that his youngest son, Shelah, would meet the same fate if he allowed him to marry Tamar, as mentioned in Genesis 38:11. After Judah's wife passed away, Tamar tricked Judah into sleeping with her by changing her appearance and covering her face with a veil to avoid recognition. They had intercourse, Tamar conceived, and she bore twins (Genesis 38:27-30), named Perez and Zerah.

The name Perez means "breaking out" (Genesis 38:29; Bible, 2009:44). Wilson (2019:42-43) asserts that Tamar, like Rebekah, used deception to secure an inheritance, ensuring that Perez would be recognised as the firstborn, even though Zerah's hand emerged first. Despite this, Perez forcefully asserted his precedence at birth to obtain the firstborn's blessing.

Tamar exemplifies one of the "flawed branches of Jesus's genealogical lineage" (Wilson, 2019:43). McKay (1999:218) explains how Tamar used deceptive means to secure her children's inheritance from Judah. By concealing her identity and misleading Judah, Tamar ensured that Jesus would descend from the lineage of Judah through Perez (Genesis 38:29; Matt 1:2-6a). Fuerst (cited by Wilson, 2019:43) contends that when Judah wronged Tamar, she took proactive steps to rectify the injustice. In her desperation, Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute to secure an inheritance for her sons (Genesis 38:26). She is listed alongside five other mothers in the genealogy of Jesus (Wilson, 2019:44).

Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 9:1, 13:1, and 23:30 support Amid's (2009:216) claim. Hamilton (2012:41) corroborates the account of Tamar and Judah, noting that Matthew 22:23-28, Mark 12:18-22, and Luke 20:27-32 describe the Levirate custom, in which a widow was required to marry her deceased husband's brother if he died without leaving a son. Additionally, Tamar faced the threat of stoning if she was found guilty of improper behaviour due to her sexual relationship with her father-in-law. However, Tamar took this step only after her mother-in-law had passed away, meaning her actions were not considered adultery. This situation highlights the legal barriers Tamar faced in marrying Hebrew men, as intermarriage with non-believers was prohibited under the Old Testament laws (Genesis 24:3; Exodus 34:15-16; Deuteronomy 7:1-4; Ezra 9:1; 10:1-44) (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005).

In conclusion, Tamar's actions, though controversial, were ultimately advantageous given her circumstances. Had she not acted as she did, she would have remained childless, without a husband, and likely faced social ostracism. Social ostracism as in the case of Tamar, entails exclusion or rejection by a group or community, frequently resulting from disparities in behaviour, beliefs, or status. It may result in feelings of isolation, rejection, and emotional turmoil, adversely affecting mental health and the sense of belonging. Throughout history and in contemporary settings, social ostracism has served as a potent mechanism to enforce conformity or penalize individuals deemed as deviating from group norms. Tamar's story highlights the resilience of women and mothers, showing that despite their fallibility, they often take necessary steps for survival, especially when it comes to protecting their family. God



used Tamar's deception to continue the lineage of Jesus, as was divinely intended. Bøsterud (2021:3) describes Tamar as a wise woman who employed subterfuge to ensure the survival of her offspring.

### **Rahab**

The account of Rahab is detailed in Joshua 2. Upon succeeding Moses as leader, Joshua sent spies to Jericho. Rahab, an ancestor of David and the mother of Boaz (Matthew 1:2-6a), played a pivotal role in Jesus' lineage. Despite her occupation as a prostitute, God used Rahab to protect and conceal His spies, which ultimately secured her a place among the "heroes of faith." Unlike the defiant residents of Jericho, Rahab survived its destruction.

Rahab was not raised in a Hebrew family; she was a Gentile, specifically a Canaanite, and worked as a prostitute (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005:2084). She was unaware of God's identity and lacked a relationship with Him (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005:309). Several factors explain why the spies visited Rahab's residence: as a prostitute, her home was likely frequented by many men, making it a place where Joshua's spies could gather valuable information without raising suspicion (Joshua 2:1). Her house was also built into the city wall, providing an easy escape route if needed (Joshua 2:15).

God directed the spies to Rahab because He saw her receptive heart and recognised her potential role in the victory over Jericho (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005:303). The inhabitants of Jericho became aware of God's identity and His capabilities against His adversaries (Joshua 2:10-11). When the king of Jericho inquired about the spies, Rahab misled him, telling him they had already left. Her deception was motivated by her reverence for God (Joshua 2:3-5). Instead of relinquishing the spies to the soldiers, she hid them on her roof beneath a mound of flax (Joshua 2:6-7). Though lying is considered a sin, neither the Bible nor God explicitly identifies the sin perpetrated by Rahab (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005:304). Rather, Rahab is praised for her faith in God and for protecting His people from the king of Jericho.

Moreover, several theories have been proposed to explain why the Bible does not explicitly condemn Rahab's act of deception. One theory suggests that God pardoned her falsehood because of the faith she demonstrated in Him (Joshua 2:8-12). Another view posits that God used Rahab's actions to mislead the enemy (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005:304). Additionally, Rahab was not a Jew and therefore was not bound by the moral standards of the Mosaic Law, as outlined in Exodus 20:16, 23:1, 7, and Ephesians 4:25. Her deception is considered minor because she upheld a higher principle by protecting God's people (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005:304).

Rahab thrived under pressure, choosing to save the spies not only for her own safety but also for that of her family, as seen in Joshua 2:12-13. In Joshua 2:9, she expressed her faith by declaring, "I know that God has delivered this territory into your possession and that a profound dread has descended upon us." Rahab's faith in God led her to rely on Him for the protection of the spies and the success of the conquest of Jericho (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005:2084). Campbell (2018:21) also emphasises Rahab's proclamation of faith in God, highlighting her pivotal role in biblical history.

In summary, the commitment made by the spies in Joshua 2:14 – "Our lives for your lives" – where they promised the safety of Rahab's family in exchange for her silence, was fulfilled as recorded in Joshua 6:22. Rahab placed her full trust in the God of Joshua, becoming a model for other Jericho inhabitants to embrace faith in the Hebrew God. Despite the challenges she faced, she maintained unwavering faith in God's ability to provide (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005:309). Wilson (2019:44) argues that Rahab's decision to aid Joshua and the spies in the conquest of Jericho served as her "salvation." Rahab was honoured by God because of her



faith (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005:309). She later married Salmon, a member of a prominent family in Israel (Bøsterud, 2021:4).

### **Hannah**

The narrative of Hannah is found in 1 Samuel 1. She was married to Elkanah, who also had a second wife, Peninnah. Merrill (2018:123) identifies Peninnah as Elkanah's secondary spouse. Like the matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, Hannah initially struggled with infertility. However, through divine intervention and faith in God, all these women became mothers in the lineage of Jesus. Merrill (2018:123) notes that, despite Hannah's inability to conceive, Elkanah's affection for her remained unwavering.

Hannah differs from the other matriarchs in that she fervently prayed for a son and brought her distress directly before God (1 Samuel 1:10). She persistently prayed (1 Samuel 1:12), and in response, God opened her womb, leading to the birth of Samuel (1 Samuel 1:19-20). True to her vow, Hannah named her son Samuel and dedicated him to God's service, raising him in the temple (1 Samuel 1:11). After weaning him, she brought him to the temple at Shiloh for instruction under Eli (1 Samuel 1:24-27).

Wilson (2019:45) points out that, although Hannah's distress was alleviated by the birth of her son, she had to endure further heartache by relinquishing him to God. Her profound faith in God is her most defining characteristic and legacy, and it shaped Samuel, who became one of God's foremost prophets (Wilson, 2019:45). In ancient times, infertility often made a woman feel inferior, not only to a secondary wife but also to her husband, family, and community (Wilson, 2019:45).

The First Book of Samuel 9–13 indicates that Hannah was fervent in worship and skilled in prayer. Her dedication to prayer led her to faithfully uphold the vow she made to God after Samuel's birth. Hannah pledged to God that she would consecrate her son to Him for life, and that his hair would remain unshorn. Hannah pledged this commitment subsequent to beseeching God for a son. She was a devout woman aspiring to be an exemplary mother, yet she felt sorrowful due to her childlessness. Hannah's vow exemplifies significant aspects of ancient women's religiosity. Following Hannah's childbirth of a son, she designated him Samuel, signifying "heard of God". According to 1 Samuel 2:5, after Hannah presented Samuel at the temple in Shiloh, God blessed her with restored fertility, leading to the birth of seven more children. Samuel, under the mentorship of Eli, became the last judge and prophet of Israel (Wilson, 2019:45).

In conclusion, the Old Testament vividly portrays matriarchs who, despite facing significant challenges, fulfilled their roles as mentors to other mothers. These women, marked by resilience and strength, rose as leaders, demonstrating leadership whenever their families called upon them.

### **The essence of families in society**

The Bible establishes the foundational family structure in Genesis 2:20-25, where God ordains the first marriage, designating Adam and Eve as husband and wife (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005). Eve then conceives, giving birth to Cain and Abel, thereby forming the first family unit (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005:12). The term "family" or "families" is defined in the *Tyndale Life Application Study Bible* lexicon as "a household unit of related individuals, potentially encompassing an entire clan or tribe" (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005:2327).

Bardis (as cited in Meyer, 2018:1) asserts that Roman culture and the integration of diverse barbarian customs during the Middle Ages significantly influenced the development of the Christian family. According to Bogardus (cited in Meyer, 2018:1), Jesus supported and



promoted the family structure through His teachings. Families, as Coert et al. (2021:2) explain, are social units linked by biological ties and shared DNA. They can be established through marriage, adoption, or other circumstances, and family structures vary, including nuclear families, child-headed families, extended families, single-parent families, and multi-generational families (Coert et al., 2021:2).

The concept of family can be understood in two ways: (a) the primary social unit, typically consisting of two parents raising their children, and (b) any unique social units that deviate from but are considered equivalent to the traditional family (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2019). A single-parent family is defined as a parent and their offspring (Merriam-Webster Inc., 2019). The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2019) reflects the evolution of the family concept to include all household members, and legally, a family encompasses "individuals connected by blood, marriage, or adoption."

Kane (as cited in Freeks, 2021b:4) defines the family as a unique social group with the specific purpose of providing care to ensure the success of its members. Schirmacher (2019:14) observes that families undergo continuous transformations. Many scholars have explored the evolving nature and complexity of family structures and dynamics (Clark & Clark, 2010:37; Freeks, 2011:83-84). In South Africa, family structures are shifting due to various factors, including paternal absence, which poses a significant social challenge (Kesebonye & P'Olak, 2020:383).

Freeks (2021:5) asserts that families should serve as "havens" in a "heartless" world marked by "father absence, brutality, indifference, and bureaucracy," to which children are increasingly exposed. Families are often regarded as environments where violence is widespread (Freeks, 2021:5). Socialisation begins within the family unit, where fathers, mothers, and children engage collaboratively and inspire each other in their parental roles (Freeks, 2018:154). Families are tasked with formulating their own ambitions, defining their trajectories, and collectively attaining the desired results (Freeks, 2021:5).

The notion of family is anchored in the Christian Bible, beginning with the creation of the first family in Genesis 2:18-25 and Genesis 3:20, followed by references to their offspring in Genesis 4:1-2, establishing the family as the foundational social structure (Tyndale House Publishers, 2005). Yi (as cited by Freeks, 2021:6) emphasises that families are the "primary agents of socialization" ordained by God. Consequently, the family serves as God's fundamental unit for the home, the church, and society (Freeks, 2021:6).

A particularly poignant and tragic account in contemporary South African history is that of Ellen Pakkies, who, in 2007, sorrowfully took the life of her 20-year-old drug-addicted son, Abie (Joshua, 2018). While some may be quick to judge Ellen, citing biblical passages that emphasise a mother's love for her children and the gravity of a parent taking their child's life, such an approach risks oversimplifying her situation. Comparisons might be drawn to the story of Abraham, whose faith in God spared Isaac's life. However, using these narratives to judge Ellen's actions reflects a lack of responsibility, ethical nuance, and empathy toward the complex realities faced by many women in South Africa today. Therefore, theological and ethical reflections on biblical narratives must take into account the lived experiences of individuals grappling with difficult, painful circumstances.

### **The role of mothers**

Waltke (2007:237) asserts that God created humans as male and female (Genesis 1:27; cf. Matthew 19:4). The first creation narrative is found in Genesis 1:1–2:4a, while the second is in Genesis 2:4b–25. In the second creation account, God establishes the Garden of Eden and emphasises the importance of human companionship. Genesis 2:18 highlights that God created the couple to reproduce ("be fruitful and multiply") and to exercise dominion over the





earth. God sanctified their union, declaring that it was not good for Adam to be alone. He then instructed them to procreate (Genesis 1:28). In the second creation narrative, God further declares that it is undesirable for man to be solitary and that He would create a "helper" for him (Genesis 2:18). Genesis 1:28 also marks the first reference to motherhood in the Bible, as God granted women the ability to bear children.

McCormack (2005:38) reports that a "low-income" mother she interviewed described a "good mother" as one who prioritises her children's needs and ensures their well-being. Exemplary mothers, she explained, dedicate time to their children's welfare, work to shield them from difficulties, and support their families. Frahm-Arp (2016:146) notes that Pentecostal/Charismatic churches in South Africa derive their understanding of "mother" and "mothering" from four biblical passages: 1 Timothy 2:13-15, Ephesians 5:21-6:9, Proverbs 31:9-31, and Titus 2:5. This dissertation examines the exegetical interpretations of these biblical texts to explore the characteristics of an exemplary mother as understood within these specific biblical frameworks.

According to Frahm-Arp (2016:153), mothers strive to ensure their children receive a quality education, have access to nutritious food, live in a clean and sanitary environment, and benefit from meaningful interactions with both parents, who are actively involved in their children's lives and activities. Frahm-Arp (2016:146) further posits that motherhood is integral to a woman's identity, suggesting that a vital aspect of womanhood involves being a mother. Women also play a crucial role in mentoring within the family context.

Wilson (2019:34) emphasises that God delights in women serving one another with love. God desires that Christian women build loving relationships to effectively mentor or "disciple" other women. This mutual support helps women form a deeper connection with God and enhances their understanding of His presence by exploring His nature and ways of serving. Women who are disciples of Christ are called to provide assistance, support, and encouragement to their sisters in faith (Wilson, 2019:33). The mentoring and instruction among women foster an "expression of love and compassion" (Wilson, 2019:33). Wilson also asserts that mentoring is a commitment among women to help one another grow and develop into the individuals God intends them to be (Wilson, 2019:33).

Furthermore, in Genesis 3:16, God issued a judgement upon Eve, stating: "I will amplify your distress in conception and your anguish in childbirth." Despite the hardships she faced, Eve understood that without divine assistance, she would not have been able to bear her children. Eve gave birth to Cain and Abel, and after Abel's death, she bore Seth (Genesis 4). Eve is recognised as the first woman in the genealogy of Jesus (Wilson, 2019:36). The Bible features many formidable women who played significant roles in raising and guiding children, serving as exemplary models for contemporary women. Even those who do not have children can assume the role of a nurturing figure, often stepping into the gap left by an absent father. Additionally, the Bible features women who served as preachers and prophets. Judges 4:4 designates Deborah as a prophetess appointed by God to fulfil the role of a judge.

Porter (as cited by Plant, 2016:74) contends that midwives held a leadership role in ancient Egypt, playing a critical part in childbirth by supporting women in labour. Notably, the Pharaoh commanded two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to assist in the extermination of all male Hebrew infants at birth. However, as recorded in Exodus 1:17, "The midwives revered God; they did not comply with the king of Egypt's orders but allowed the boys to survive." The midwives exhibited courage, a characteristic unique to a leader.

### **The role of mothers in Hebrew families**

The Hebrew household functioned as the principal medium for conveying the "Prophetic Word of God" (Drennan, 2020:15). Within this domestic realm, parents bore the essential duty of



imparting the teachings of God to their offspring (Drennan, 2020:15). Block (cited in Drennan, 2020:16) asserts that mothers in Hebrew households exhibited a robust sense of self-worth and significantly contributed to cultivating inspiration within the family unit. They participated in naming their children and fervently defended their daughters, preserving their virtue. Mothers assumed diverse roles as child-bearers, household administrators, educators, mediators, and emblematic figures of Israel (Drennan, 2020:17).

In Judaism, the mother was and is generally the heroine and force behind family and religious values and all Jewish practices. The prophet Ezekiel (19:2) associates her as the lioness that protects (Rothstein, 2016). In ancient Israel, mothers wielded considerable power and authority within households, influencing decision-making and managing matters related to children and land (Drennan, 2020:17). Beyond their role in childbirth, mothers also played a part in fostering the fertility of other women in the community (Drennan, 2020:17). Every mother held a type of "domestic authority," serving as the principal manager of the household (Drennan, 2020:17). The bond formed between mother and child during pregnancy positioned mothers as the initial educators of their progeny (Drennan, 2020:17). Consequently, mothers naturally assumed the roles of educators and mentors, both to their own children and to other young women (Drennan, 2020:17).

While fathers were responsible for teaching young men how to provide for and support their families, mothers focused on equipping young women with parenting skills in preparation for family life. Drennan (2020:18) asserts that mothers were tasked with imparting a range of skills and knowledge to their children, including practical skills, communication, domestic responsibilities, agricultural activities such as gardening and livestock care, literacy, and storytelling (Drennan, 2020:18).

The mother also assumed an "ecclesiastical role" within the Hebrew family, particularly in matters of ritual purity. Mothers were responsible for guiding their daughters with the following: "menstruation, [they] consecrated sexual relations, conception, and the discharge of blood during childbirth for young women" (Drennan, 2020:18). In addition to these sacred duties, mothers ensured the home was clean, managed meal preparation and consumption, and met all requirements for creating an acceptable living environment (Drennan, 2020:18). Above all, the primary duty of mothers was to raise their children in reverence to God.

Additionally, Resane (as cited by Van Wyk & Chisale, 2021:2) highlights those ancient patriarchal systems excluded women from land ownership. The daughters of Zelophehad challenged this system, as detailed in Numbers 27:1-11, by advocating for their right to inherit land. Resane's insights aim to inspire women in patriarchal societies to embrace justice education that promotes equality and social justice (Van Wyk & Chisale, 2021:2). The authors believe this approach will empower women to become equal landowners alongside men.

Pietersen (2021:768) argues that the reinterpretation of the Deuteronomistic and Covenant Codes marginalised women within Israelite society and its family-oriented economy. He uses Exodus 20:7 and Deuteronomy 5:21 to demonstrate that, although Scripture gives the wife a distinct and prioritised status, she eventually became regarded as her husband's possession. Deuteronomy views houses as the sole domestic property, suggesting that the wife is not listed among household items and, therefore, is not considered her husband's property. Deuteronomy 15:12-18 and Exodus 21:2-11 assert that male and female slaves should be treated equally; however, this was not reflected in actual practice. Deuteronomy 22:28-29 outlines cases of women being violated, with their sexual rights disregarded, and as indicated in Exodus 22:16-17, a man who committed such an act was required to pay a "mohar price" as compensation (Pietersen, 2021:781). In these instances, the father held the authority to select a husband for his daughter, effectively revoking her rights in the process (Pietersen, 2021:781).



Moreover, Malina (1996:50) observes that the configuration of ancient Mediterranean families differed across communities, with some maintaining a "traditional endogamous communal structure" and others preferring "nuclear family" arrangements. In specific cultures, such as the Israelites, endogamous marriage within the family was prevalent. Polygamy, similar to practices in Islam, was also legally sanctioned in these societies (Malina, 1996:50). Furthermore, Malina notes that ancient Mediterranean societies typically imposed more stringent upbringing standards for girls than for boys. They frequently enacted more rigorous safety protocols to safeguard boys, who were regarded as more valuable than girls within their cultural framework. He explains that in the cultural context of ancient Mediterranean societies, it was believed that God did not directly communicate with women unless they were unmarried and under paternal guardianship, as illustrated by the daughters of Philip in Acts 21:8-9. In contrast, married women were perceived to receive divine communication in the presence of their husbands, as delineated in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 (Malina, 1996:53).

In addition, ancient Mediterranean societies instilled in their children the belief that premarital sexual relations were sinful (Malina, 1996:49). Malina (1996:49) explains that women were raised to resist any sexual advances from men when alone, emphasising their moral responsibility to do so. According to the author's interpretation, women were considered incapable of consenting to such advances. In ancient Egypt, household management was entrusted to wives or women, who were responsible for the careful execution of housekeeping tasks (McKay, 1999:222).

Olyan (2011:72-73) argues that credible evidence supports the subordination of women to men, citing Genesis 1:27, which states, "male and female, He created them," implying a hierarchical relationship where men hold superiority. Additionally, Genesis 2:7 describes how God created Adam first, followed by Eve, who was formed from his rib, reinforcing the idea of her subordination to man. However, it is essential to avoid exerting excessive authority over wives, mothers, sisters, and all women, as this can lead to gender-based violence (GBV).

### **The significance of mothers in the contemporary world**

"The role of mothers is defined as highly valued and celebrated throughout history, as they were the only ones capable of reproducing the human species and were strongly associated with the earth as the source of all life". (AI generated definition in the Role of Mothers, *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Second Edition), 2015).

Hylen (2019:25) asserts that, in ancient times, a woman's value was tied to her virginity in youth and her ability to procreate in adulthood. Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish philosopher, remarked, "Women are best suited for an indoor life that remains within the confines of the home..." (Hylen, 2019:25). However, in the modern era, Hylen notes that women occupy public roles, often supporting unemployed spouses or leading single-parent households. The authors agree with Hylen's perspective, which highlights two key points: (a) women contribute to family income, and (b) they possess property. Additionally, Hylen (2019:26) points out that even in Philo's time, many women owned property, ran businesses, and held civic and religious positions.

Moreover, Hylen (2019:27) argues that many women held significant leadership roles within their communities, countering the view of some scholars who propose abolishing female leadership positions. He asserts that if such an elimination were to take place, the mention of female deacons in 1 Timothy 3:11 would also need to be removed from Scripture, as it recognises women's leadership roles. Hylen contends that women, guided by principles of honesty, have an obligation to assume leadership roles within their households and communities, regardless of whether they are seen as equal partners or homemakers. He emphasises that women bear the responsibility of positively influencing society for the well-being of children (Hylen, 2019:41).



## **Uncovering biblical equivalence**

The role of women in ministry has evolved significantly over time. Tucker (2005:24) highlights female martyrs who sacrificed their lives for their Christian beliefs, steadfastly refusing to renounce their faith in God. She explores how these women endured torture and were killed by men due to their unwavering commitment to God (Tucker, 2005:25). Tucker contrasts their courage with Peter's denial of knowing Jesus during His arrest, as recounted in Matthew 26:31-35 and 26:69-74.

The same account is corroborated by the other disciples in Mark 14:27-31, 14:66-72; Luke 22:31-34, 22:56-62; and John 13:36-38, 18:15-18, and 18:25-27. While some women boldly affirmed their faith in God, others wavered and renounced their belief in Christ (Tucker, 2005:25). Mothers within the church played a crucial role in the success of the early Christian community. For instance, Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, was revered by the Early Church for her steadfast prayers for her rebellious son, referred to as "the Confessions" (Tucker, 2005:26).

## **Evangelical women in ministry a century ago**

Hassey (2005:39) notes that Mabel C. Thomas, an ordained pastor in Kansas, was responsible for preaching, conducting weekly Bible teachings, and baptising converts. Hassey (2005:40) also examines ministers such as Moody and Gordon, emphasising their reliance on the support of women in preaching roles. Notably, in 1889, Baptist pastor A. J. Gordon founded the Gordon Bible College, which was open to both men and women, focusing on individuals being Spirit-filled. Pastor Gordon's wife noted that the college equipped women to "respond to any call of the Spirit." In 1929, the Moody Bible Institute awarded degrees to its first female pastor graduates, who went on to publicly serve as pastors, evangelists, and ordained preachers (Hassey, 2005:41).

## **Conclusion**

Figures such as Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, among others in the Old Testament, played crucial roles in preserving the continuity of the Messiah's patrilineal genealogy (Lee, 2020:22). This underscores the importance of genealogy, which establishes one's lineage, bloodline, and heritage. As Christians, our inheritance of God's kingdom is assured if we remain faithful to His will. Conversely, deviating from His path hinders our inheritance of what God has ordained for us.

The small sample of women from Old Testament scripture examined in this paper led exemplary lives as leaders, mentors, and mothers, serving as role models not only for their husbands and male relatives but for all in their immediate vicinity and beyond. There are of course numerous other examples. The Holy Bible in the Old and New Testaments provides ample evidence of mothers who demonstrate effective leadership when given the opportunity albeit that the focus here has been on Old Testament. These women, especially in the absence of father figures, were willing to sacrifice their own well-being to protect and sustain their families during difficult times.

We gain valuable insights from the Word of God regarding women like Abigail, who courageously took on leadership when her husband Nabal erred grievously. By interacting with her servants, Abigail averted disaster and saved many lives from David's wrath. Every woman in the Holy Bible played a vital role in safeguarding the well-being of their families, particularly when men were absent. The authors contend that every man can benefit from the wisdom and guidance of a capable woman at his side, as exemplified by Abigail's influence on David in honouring God.





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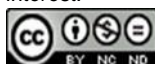
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