

**Critical Praise for: *Subversive Sequels in the Bible*
Winner of the 2009 National Jewish Book Award**

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– Martin Lockshin, York University

“Judy Klitsner has written an inspiring, insightful, provocative book. Her attention to text, language and nuance are inspiring and compelling.”

– Zvi Grumet

Lookstein Center for Jewish Education, Bar-Ilan University

“You will never read the Bible in the same way... the juxtapositions she puts forth between biblical narratives are simply brilliant. Enjoy this fantastic book.”

– Elie Kaufner, Mechon Hadar

“Ms. Klitsner is an excellent teacher whose insights into biblical narrative will deepen the reader’s engagement and understanding.”

– David Silber
Drisha Institute for Jewish Education

“... a subversive yet stubbornly reverent approach to Bible study. Klitsner is a masterful guide on a thrilling voyage of discovery of hidden meanings and dynamics in the classical texts. Klitsner shakes up all our old certainties about our most ancient and seemingly familiar biblical narratives, with counterintuitive, but ultimately compelling insights. She casts this familiar universe in a very different, bright light.”

– Henri Zukier, New School for Social Research

“... provocatively explores the intricate manner with which biblical texts challenge each other... [it] also examines the radical consequences of such exchanges.”

– Tamara Cohn Eskenazi
Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion

“Klitsner brings a new and gripping approach to the pivotal narrative of biblical women. Most compelling is how certain chapters that read as chronicles of exclusion and inequality evolve into stories of inclusion and empowerment.”

– Daniel Landes
Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies

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Subversive Sequels in the Bible



Judy Klitsner

SUBVERSIVE SEQUELS
IN THE BIBLE

HOW BIBLICAL STORIES
MINE AND UNDERMINE EACH OTHER

Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies
Maggid Books

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Dedicated to the memory of

Shmuel Arieh ben Yehoshua Moshe

and

Devorah bat Mordechai Zev

both of whom cherished Jewish learning.

שמואל אריה בן יהושע משה
דבורה בת מרדכי זאב

*To my father, Israel Freistat, whose years,
like those of the patriarch Jacob/Israel,
were few and filled with struggle
and with the giving and receiving of unbridled love.*

*To my mother, Ruth Miriam Freistat,
who exemplified the hesed of Ruth,
the protective caring of Miriam,
and the adventurous "elekh" spirit of both biblical matriarchs.*

*And to my children:
Akiva, Noam, Nechama, Yisrael, and Amitai;
their spouses: Ariella, Eliad, and Laurie;
and to my grandchildren.
Their lives are composing my parents'
most eloquent possible sequel.*

לְעֲשׂוֹת רִצּוֹנְךָ אֱלֹהֵי חַפְצֵתִי וְתוֹרַתְךָ בְּתוֹךְ מֵעַי:

To do what pleases You, my God, is my desire;
Your Torah is in my innermost parts.

– *Psalms 40:9*

Contents

Preface xiii

Acknowledgments xv

Introduction xix

*Chapter 1: The Wings of the Dove:
Noah and Jonah in Flight from Self* 1

*Chapter 2: The Rebirth of the Individual:
The Tower of Babel and the Midwives of Israel* 35

*Chapter 3: Mysterious Priests and Troubled Patriarchs:
Melchizedek and Jethro and the Building of Leaders* 73

*Chapter 4: The Three Faces of Woman:
The Garden of Eden in Search of Sequels* 111

*Chapter 5: Forbidden Fruit and the Quest for
Motherhood: Havvah and Sarah* 131

*Chapter 6: The Tent, the Field, and the Battlefield:
Rebekah and Other Mothers* 159

Contents

Afterword 201

Bibliography 205

Classical Jewish Sources 209

Subject Index 215

Index of Biblical and Rabbinic Sources 225

Preface

A NOTE ON BIBLE TRANSLATIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Unless otherwise stated, my translations of the biblical text are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society Tanakh. In most cases, I deviate from the NJPS translation when I want to highlight word repetitions or to emphasize unusual or problematic language in the original Hebrew verse. What is lost in this approach is a certain degree of colloquial and syntactic smoothness. What is gained is an opportunity to access the many nuances of the original text, which often serve as a basis for deeper insight and creative exploration. In my translations, I have been particularly insistent on translating recurring words in a uniform way, rather than seeking synonyms to break up potential reader tedium. These repetitions form the basis of much of the work ahead. They serve as foundations in spotting patterns within passages and in locating parallels between texts.

Where I have differed from the NJPS translation, I have indicated as much, even if I have changed only a word or two. Thus, my frequent notes indicating “author’s translation” are usually NJPS translations with slight modifications. In one case I have altered the NJPS translation without note. In my analysis of Genesis 1–3, I have substituted the word “humanity” for “man” in cases where I felt the strict sense of the text warranted the change. I did not note this change, as I felt it was

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

consistent with the guiding principles of the NJPS literary style as seen in its many publications. I believe this decision is borne out in NJPS's *The Contemporary Torah*, a gender-sensitive translation of the Bible, in which, wherever necessary, masculine forms are replaced with more neutral terms.

With an awareness of sensitivities to the issue, I refer to God in this book in the traditional form, as "He," a translation of the Hebrew pronoun used in the Bible. I do this only in order to avoid stylistic awkwardness and not to attribute masculine gender to God.

All citations of classic Jewish commentaries are taken from the standard Rabbinic Bible (*Mikra'ot Gedolot*). Translations of Hebrew commentaries are the author's unless otherwise indicated.

The abbreviation "s.v." appears frequently in this volume. It stands for the Latin *sub verbo* ("under the word"), and is used to indicate the word or words in the biblical verse that the commentator is addressing.

In the coming chapters, I conduct close readings of biblical texts. Although I have provided English translations of all relevant passages, I strongly recommend reading this book together with an open Bible, and to whatever extent possible, consulting the original Hebrew.

Acknowledgments

In the ten years since this book was first published, I have enjoyed, and greatly benefited from, my interactions with many of its readers. It has been my pleasure to travel to distant and diverse venues, book in hand, and to receive a steady stream of thoughtful comments, questions and suggestions from intelligent laypeople of all stripes, all of whom take their Bible very seriously. I am grateful to these readers, and to the many readers I have not met, whose continued interest in the Bible's internal, often subversive, conversation has led to this reprinting. I want to thank Maggid Books and the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies for their joint publication of this volume, with special thanks to Mike and Rebecca Gordon for their generous sponsorship.

* * *

In the long process of constructing this work about the Bible, I frequently identified with the sentiment expressed by the biblical Jacob: *katonti mi-kol hahasadim*, I am unworthy of all the kindnesses. I am greatly indebted to the scholars, teachers, family members and friends, whose generosity helped bring this volume to fruition.

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

I am privileged to have studied with my generation's outstanding Bible scholar and pedagogue, Nehama Leibowitz, of blessed memory. Nehama's methodology – including careful attention to literary nuance and anomaly and close attention to fine distinctions in parallel texts – is all-pervasive in this work, as is her spirit of passion and respect for the written word. I am grateful to my very gifted teacher, David Silber, for opening my eyes to the wonderful surprises and deep insights to be culled from straightforward, unapologetic readings of the matriarchal and patriarchal narratives and to the expansive interpretive potential of intertextual readings.

When I list the educational influences in my life, I must include my students at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, who, over the past two decades, have not ceased to inspire and challenge me. Unencumbered by, and often unimpressed with, conventional or traditional interpretation, they have enabled me (and at times have left me no choice other than) to continue approaching oft-studied texts in fresh, new ways, seeing the text, as Rashi instructs, “as if it had been given today.” With the help of their probing questions and creative suggestions, many of my ideas have undergone regular rethinking and revision. The results of this process permeate the six chapters of this book.

I am grateful to the administration and faculty of the Pardes Institute for fostering an environment of open inquiry in which new ideas are free to flourish.

I want to express my sincere thanks to my mentors and colleagues, whom I am fortunate to count as close friends. Daniel Schwartz and Martin Lockshin – two distinguished scholars, who are also active contributors to their communities – were somehow never too busy to read my manuscript in its various stages of lucidity, to offer insightful critique, constructive suggestions, and much-needed encouragement. Avivah Zornberg – extraordinary teacher and author with an uncommon gift for revealing profound human truths in our ancient texts – was a generous listener, a kind critic, and as always, a supportive friend.

In addition, the following colleagues and friends offered greatly valued assistance: Ruth Lockshin, Baruch Feldstern, Cory Shulman Brody, Marc Brettler, Larry Krule, Susan Fader, Laya Silber, Eugene

Acknowledgments

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I am grateful to the three wonderful editors who have helped me in different stages of this project. Ilana Kurshan, Ilene Prushure, and Benjamin Balint were enthusiastic, intelligent, and understanding readers, and each contributed to the coherence of the book.

I would like to thank the staff at Maggid Books, a division of Koren Publishers Jerusalem, and its wonderful CEO, Matthew Miller. It has been a pleasure to work with Maggid's many skilled professionals, including Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Shari Fisch, Shlomo Peterseil, Aryeh Grossman, Yehudit Singer, Tani Bayer, and Ita Olesker. I would like to offer special thanks to Deborah Harris for her help in delivering me to Maggid's welcoming doorstep.

For inspiration in my chapters about the matriarchs, I have drawn on the remarkable living example of my mother-in-law, Jane Klitsner, as well as on the multifaceted matriarchal model set by mother Ruth Freistat, *z"l*. I am thankful to them and their maternal exemplars, Anna Traxler and Hannah Schectman, *z"l*.

My father-in-law, Marvin Klitsner, is sorely missed. The model of moral excellence and fearless integrity that he set during his life helped me to identify and to write about the crucial elements of outstanding leadership.

My deepest gratitude is to my husband, Shmuel (Steven) Klitsner, whose scholarly and practical contributions to this work are too great to enumerate. I have no doubt that the optimistic approach to gender equality that I have expressed in this book stems in large part from my own privileged position of living with an *ezer kenegdi*, a life partner who demonstrates a virtually endless capacity to both support and challenge me. Throughout the process of writing, he fulfilled this dual role valiantly, acting as my greatest helper and most incisive critic. (In the latter role, he made sure to point out when some of my more outlandish textual parallels on the topic of women and fertility suffered from "stretchmarks.")

To my husband and children, I am thankful for the great patience and resourcefulness exhibited during the years of my preoccupation with this work. They gave me time when I needed it, good-humored distraction when I craved it, and moral support when I was depleted of it. But

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

above all, I am thankful to them for the very dynamic paths our lives have taken. Their blessed nonconformity has helped me to understand that stories with unexpected turns and with ongoing revisions are the most fascinating stories of all.

* * *

I am grateful to Urim Publications for granting permission to print an expanded version of my article “From the Earth’s Hollow Spaces to the Stars: Two Patriarchs and Their Non-Israelite Mentors” in chapter 3 of the present work. The original article appeared in *The Torah of the Mothers*, edited by Ora Wiskind Elper and Susan Handelman. Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2000.

I am grateful to the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies for their permission to print an expanded version of my article “The Spiritual Quest of the Matriarchy” in chapter 6 of this work. The original article appeared in *The Pardes Reader*, edited by Felice Kahn Zisken. Jerusalem: The Pardes Institute, 1997.

Introduction

Irrefutably, indestructibly, never wearied by time, the Bible wanders through the ages... It speaks in every language and in every age... In fact, it is still at the very beginning of its career, the full meaning of its content having hardly touched the threshold of our minds; like an ocean at the bottom of which countless pearls lie, waiting to be discovered...

– Abraham Joshua Heschel¹

Heschel's words stand as a challenge to the modern reader. Indeed, for two thousand years we have kept our ancient text alive. We study it and revere it; we chant it weekly. But have we allowed it to “speak in every language in every age”? Do we trust that if we plunge deeply enough into its oceanic depths, we will reach the treasures that await us there?

Despite Heschel's claims as to the Bible's timeless relevance and accessibility, its words are frequently baffling. Sometimes the Bible's

1. Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, 242.

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

narrative voice is so expansive that its stories appear unnecessarily verbose and repetitive. At other times, the text's style is so terse that basic questions concerning the motives and actions of its characters are left unexplained. At times, the internal logic of a story breaks down; sometimes the information given in one story contradicts that of another. Rules of grammar and syntax are consistent, until we find that occasionally they are not. And most troubling of all, even if we manage to decode its language and familiarize ourselves with its style, we may find ourselves distanced and at times offended by its morality. How is a modern sensibility to relate to a text in which God responds to a sinful world by destroying it wholesale? What are we to make of a narrative – one that ostensibly speaks “in every language and in every age” – that exhibits a preference for male protagonists, prophets and leaders, and that has God and man marginalizing the female characters within its pages?

There are no simple or formulaic answers to these questions, but I will propose a particular type of textual analysis, literary in nature, that at the very least reframes the questions themselves.² As if aware of its own problematics, the Bible contains a lively interaction between its passages that allows for a widening of perspective and a sense of dynamic development throughout the canon. As we will see in the six chapters of this book, if certain gnawing theological or philosophical questions remain after studying one narrative, a later passage may revisit those questions, subjecting them to a complex process of inquiry, revision, and examination of alternative possibilities. I call these reworkings “subversive sequels.” Like all sequels, they continue and complete earlier stories. But they do so in ways that often undermine the very assumptions upon which the earlier stories were built as well as the conclusions these stories have reached.

For example, the woman in Genesis 3 is portrayed in ways that may deeply affront a modern sensibility. God holds her largely to blame for man's downfall, telling Adam, “Because you *listened to the voice of your wife* and ate of the tree ... cursed is the ground ...” (Gen. 3:17).³ As a result

2. For an expansion on a literary approach to Bible interpretation, see the next section in this introduction.

3. Author's translation.

of her actions, woman is pronounced subservient and weak: “Your urge shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you” (v. 16). How are we to relate to a narrative that is so dissonant to our ears? Historically, readers have moved in two directions. They have either rejected the validity of such texts, dismissing them as anachronistic and irrelevant, or have accepted them as authoritative and unyielding – as some expression of eternal truths. In *Subversive Sequels*, I have suggested a third option, in which the Bible’s words carry the gravitas of revered tradition, but are nonetheless subject to an internal process of radical revision that takes place throughout the canon. As we will see in chapter 5 of this volume, Genesis 21 will revisit Genesis 3 in order to recast it in a new light. While in Genesis 3, God faults man for “listening to the voice of his wife” (3:17), in Genesis 21 God actively instructs the male protagonist to “listen to the voice” of his wife in *all that she says* (21:12).⁴ Such rescripting underscores the variety of biblical attitudes toward male-female interaction, as well as the Bible’s affinity for movement and change. Although the initial tale of woman’s subordination remains on record, it becomes part of a larger chronicle of woman’s emerging inclusion and enablement.

While fundamental questions such as biblical attitudes in gender relations may continue to confound and disturb, they now belong to a chorus, at times harmonious and at times discordant, that comes from within the sequels of the canon. As careful readers of the text, we add our own interpretive voices to this multi-tonal concert that began in the pages of the Bible itself.

CLOSE READINGS: A LITERARY APPROACH

On the way to the subversive sequel, and as part of an ongoing effort to submerge ourselves in the text’s infinite depths, we will embrace a literary approach to interpretation. In doing so, we will pay close attention to formal literary elements such as structure, context, grammar, syntax, tone, sound, convention, repetition, and imagery, as well as to aspects of content such as theme, motif, metaphor, character analysis, and much more. Although much of this literary focus is on minute detail, such an approach holds vast potential to afford deeper understanding of the

4. Ibid.

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

text's messages. Literary readings of the Bible are not new; they were widely employed by the ancient midrash and in medieval commentary. Robert Alter, one of the foremost modern practitioners of this approach, elaborates on its significance:

What we need to understand better is that the religious vision of the Bible is given depth and subtlety precisely by being conveyed through the most sophisticated resources of prose fiction... The biblical tale, through the most rigorous economy of means, leads us again and again to ponder the complexities of motive and ambiguities of character, because these are essential aspects of its vision of man, created by God, enjoying or suffering all the consequences of human freedom... Almost the whole range of biblical narrative... embodies the basic perception that man must live before God, in the transforming medium of time, incessantly and perplexingly in relation with others; and a literary perspective on the operations of narrative may help us more than any other to see how this perception was translated into stories that have had such a powerful, enduring hold on the imagination.⁵

In addition to demonstrating a keen sensitivity to textual nuance, both ancient and modern proponents of the literary method call our attention to a complex network of literary connections – referred to by moderns as intertextual links – among biblical passages. These connections contain vast interpretive potential, as suggested by the following midrashic anecdote:

When Ben Azzai sat and interpreted [the biblical text], fire surrounded him... Rabbi Akiva went to him and said, "I heard that when you interpreted, fire flashed around you... were you involved with the secrets of God's heavenly chariot?"⁶ He said,

5. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 22.

6. The midrash refers to the rabbinic notion of studying the *ma'aseh merkavah*, a speculative inquiry into the esoteric details of God's unknown domain. See Mishna *Hagiga* 2:1.

“No, I was sitting and linking together the words of the Torah, and linking the words of the Torah with the words of the Prophets, and the words of the Prophets with the words of the Writings. The words were as joyous as the day they were given at Sinai, and they were as sweet as they were at their original pronouncement.”⁷

In this view, the literary interconnections within the Bible have the power to provide insights even more profound than those emanating from the most esoteric religious compositions. While many interpretive methods yield deep insights into the text, those who embrace the Bible’s intertextuality may, according to Ben Azzai, feel the scorching heat of God’s fire lapping at their feet.

**APPLICATION OF A LITERARY APPROACH:
TEXT AND INTERTEXT IN THE STUDY OF THE AKEDA**

One of the most familiar, yet inscrutable narratives in the Bible is the story of the *Akeda*, the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22). If we were to use a literary approach to interpret this narrative, we would note that one of its outstanding features is the repetitious presence of certain words that weave their way throughout the passage, gently guiding us toward central themes that the text wishes to highlight.⁸

7. Leviticus Rabbah 16:4. We find other allusions to the centrality of an intertextual approach elsewhere in the midrash, for instance, in the Jerusalem Talmud *Rosh Hashanah* 3:5: “The text is expansive in certain places and deficient in others.” While the plain meaning of this statement is that information that is missing in one passage is at times explicitly supplied in another, we might extend it to the midrashic practice of learning about an inexplicit narrative from its clearer literary parallel. A later statement on the complementary nature of intertextual parallels may be found in the 32 hermeneutical principles attributed to R. Eliezer son of R. Yossi Ha-Gelili (the principles are chiefly aggadic, and are generally considered to be post-Talmudic). Principle 17 states, “A text is not fully expounded in its place, but is fully expounded in another.” Other midrashic concepts that call for intertextual readings are *hada hu dikhtiv*, “this is as is written [elsewhere in the Bible]” and *middah keneged middah*, a poetic quid pro quo of crime and punishment.
8. On the recurrence of such key “guiding words” as conduits to meaning, Buber has commented: “Such measured repetition, corresponding to the inner rhythm of the text – or rather issuing from it – is probably the strongest of all techniques available for making a meaning available without articulating it explicitly... Those

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

For instance, the insistent recurrence throughout the chapter of the verb *r'-h*, to see, marks Abraham's progress in understanding the divine will. At the chapter's opening, Abraham's vision is distant, as he "sees the place from afar" (Gen. 22:4). Yet by the end of the passage, his view is clear and immediate. He "sees" the ram, which he understands must be substituted for his son (22:13). Abraham's unfolding vision acts as a metaphor for his developing grasp of God's true intentions. Ultimately, he discovers that despite God's initial command to offer Isaac up on an altar, God does not, in fact, desire human sacrifice. It is at this point that Abraham names the place "the Lord will see," claiming that from this point forward divine-human visibility may be both clear and reciprocal: "And Abraham named that site 'the Lord will see,' whence the present saying, 'On the mount of the Lord He will be seen'⁹ (v. 14).¹⁰

But close readings with an emphasis on word repetition often prove inadequate, as they do not always address the most gnawing philosophical questions posed by the text. In the case of the *Akeda*, we are met with an ostensibly happy ending in which God and man are in visual and ideological harmony. Yet we remain troubled by the very premises on which the story is based: God's unethical demand for Abraham to slaughter his son and Abraham's seemingly unquestioning compliance with this dubious decree.

In search of responses to outstanding issues such as these, we reach beyond the scope of the passage itself and into to the realm of intertext, in which we seek out literary relationships between various passages within the canon. Perhaps by holding this enigmatic passage up

who listen will hear the higher meaning in the similarity of sound. A connection is established between one passage and another and thus between one stage of the story and another – a connection that articulates the deep motive of the narrative event more immediately than could a pinned-on moral." Buber, *Scripture and Translation*, 116. Throughout this volume on the Bible's subversive sequels, we will pay close attention to the text's use of the guiding word – *leitwort* in German – in an effort to heed its inherent messages.

9. Author's translation.

10. See Buber, *On the Bible*, 42. Buber elaborates on the function of the key word "to see" throughout the Abraham narrative.

against its literary parallel elsewhere in the Bible, we might draw closer to understanding its perplexing messages.

Our search is guided by an anticlimactic epilogue to the *Akeda* story in Genesis, which provides a key to the intertextual link:

Some time later, Abraham was told, “Milcah too has borne children to your brother Nahor: Uz the first-born, and Buz his brother and Kemuel the father of Aram; and Cesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel” – Bethuel being the father of Rebekah. (Gen. 22:20–23)

If we look closely at these names, we note that they serve as a point of departure for another text, one that appears much later in the canon, and that will engage in a literary interpretive dialogue with the story of the binding of Isaac. Specifically, names of the characters in the Genesis story resurface, reconfigured as place names tied to key characters in the Book of Job. These similarities are especially noteworthy in that the names in question rarely appear elsewhere in the Bible.¹¹ Moreover, the sheer number of cross-references of such obscure names between these two biblical books renders them worthy of comparison.

The first such link takes the name of Nahor’s first born, **Uz**, and recasts it in the Book of Job as the name of the title character’s place of residence:¹² “There was a man in the land of **Uz** named Job” (Job 1:1).

Another character from the end of the Abraham narrative that finds his way into the Book of Job is **Buz**, brother of Uz. Buz is listed as the place of origin of one of Job’s friends: “Then Elihu son of Barachel the **Buzite**, of the family of Ram, was angry – angry at Job because he thought himself right against God” (Job 32:2).

11. Aside from the *Akeda* story, Uz appears as a name in two other places in the Pentateuch; two of these names are then repeated in Chronicles. Uz is the name of a place in two verses outside of Job. Buz appears as a name in three places outside of the *Akeda* and Job narratives. As a name, Cesed appears only in the *Akeda* story; the nation Casdim appears many times.

12. In the Bible, it is common for names of people to reappear as names of places. For example, see Gen. 10:4, 6, in which the names Javan, Mitzrayim, and Canaan refer to individuals. Later, they will all become well known as the names of nations.

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

Still another brother, **Cesed** receives a literary nod: “This one was still speaking when another came and said, ‘A Chaldean formation, *Casdim*¹³ (plural of *Cesed*), of three columns made a raid on the camels and carried them off and put the boys to the sword; I alone have escaped to tell you” (Job 1:17).

These subtle echoes from one story to the next guide us toward a broader comparison of the two narratives. Upon closer examination, we note that the linguistic interconnections extend not only to names of people and places, but to basic concepts as well. For example, the climax of the story of the binding of Isaac comes when God bestows a rare accolade upon Abraham: ¹⁴ “Now I know that you are **God-fearing, *yere Elohim***”¹⁵ (Gen. 22:12). Similarly, at the beginning of the book that bears his name, Job is described as “blameless and upright; he was **God-fearing, *yere Elohim***, and shunned evil” (1:2). Lest we miss the connection between Job and Abraham, at the book’s end Job claims that he is but **dust and ashes, *afar va-efer*** (42:6), a self-reference employed by only one other biblical figure, Abraham. “Abraham spoke up saying, ‘Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but **dust and ashes, *afar va-efer***’” (Gen. 18:27). Moreover, despite their suffering, both men find peace at the end of their lives. “And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, **old and contented, *zaken ve-s-v-‘*** (Gen. 25:8).” Similarly: “So Job died **old and contented, *zaken u-s-v-‘ yamim***” (Job 42:17).¹⁶

If the number of linguistic similarities between the two stories is striking, the rare nature of the shared terms and concepts is yet more impressive. But what are we to make of all these connections? As we have seen, a central tenet of the literary school of interpretation is the notion that the Bible, in its constant replaying of its stories, invites comparison and interpretation of certain passages in the light of others. The

13. The plural form of *Cesed* points to another Abraham-Job comparison: Abraham’s birth place is *Ur Casdim* (plural of *Cesed*). Gen. 11:28.

14. Abraham and Job are the only two individual biblical characters to be defined either by the text’s narrative voice or by God as *yere Elohim*.

15. Author’s translation.

16. Abraham and Job are two of only four biblical characters for whom this formula is used.

language parallels we have seen point to more significant parallels of structure and theme.¹⁷

In the stories of Abraham and Job, some basic similarities are obvious, such as the featuring of God-fearing men who face a mortal threat by God to their offspring. But the two stories play upon each other in more complex ways as well. For example, while the *Akeda* ended with God's faithful servant receiving the title "God-fearing," the Book of Job *begins* by bestowing this distinction upon its hero. This sequencing suggests the presence of a sequel in that the Book of Job begins where the story of the *Akeda* ended.

But the Book of Job is no ordinary sequel to the Abraham narrative. While the conventional sequel extends the original, bringing it to its logical conclusions, the biblical sequel, which is often subversive in nature, takes the original story back to its beginnings. It then challenges the very premises on which the story is built and reworks many of its conclusions. As we have seen, the *Akeda* left us with an uneasy equilibrium. Although God threatened to overturn the divine system of justice by demanding the death of an innocent youth, in the end, God restores order as His angel instructs Abraham to spare Isaac. The subversive sequel refuses to accept this unnaturally sanguine conclusion, instead demanding further analysis. This type of sequel poses a series of "what if" questions: What if – as is frequently the case in the real world – the evil decree is not miraculously repealed at the last moment and the innocent actually suffer? We wonder what the God-fearing human hero might say, were his mouth to be unsealed and he could protest the injustice. Would God tolerate his objections? Might God reverse, or even apologize for, undeserved human anguish?

The Book of Job takes up these questions by placing its hero in circumstances that are similar to those of Abraham, but exacerbated. As we have seen, both stories feature the suffering of righteous men as their children are imperiled by God. But the story quickly spins in a radically new direction when, in the Book of Job, God actually allows

17. Many, but not all of these connections have been noted and expounded by Yeshayahu Leibowitz in *Judaism, the Jewish Nation, and the State of Israel*, 393–94.

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

the blameless children to die. Moreover, ratcheting up the injustice, the hero loses not one, but ten children.

These differences lead to the most striking point of contrast between the two stories, which is Abraham's silent compliance with God's plan to kill the innocent as opposed to Job's outspoken objections to God's injustice. Abraham proved his ability to call God to task in Sodom when he boldly insisted that a just God must act justly (Gen. 18:25). But at the *Akeda*, Abraham's assertive stance gives way to an unquestioning compliance with God's morally perplexing decree.¹⁸ In the end, God is pleased with Abraham's willingness to obey Him (22:12) and seemingly with Abraham's silence as well. In contrast, as Job's life is unjustly shattered, the hero rejects all attempts to accept God's actions as justified and instead demands answers from God with ever-increasing audacity. Yet despite his contentious words, so antithetical to the wordless obedience of the God-fearing Abraham, God upholds Job's responses over those of his friends, God's apologists. God instructs Job's friends to bring sacrifices and to have Job pray for them, "since you have not spoken to Me correctly as did My servant Job" (42:8). In this, the subversive sequel to the binding of Isaac narrative, to be God's beloved servant no longer requires voiceless acceptance of all God's actions and decrees. Rather it is to protest God's injustice and to demand a quality of life commensurate with one's deeds.

The subversive sequel adds a dimension of exegesis that is inaccessible through close readings and ordinary intertextual comparisons alone. By focusing not only on similarities between texts, but on the ongoing revisions of the Bible's stories, the subversive sequel measures the dynamic movement that takes place between one story and another. In the example of Abraham and Job, this type of analysis tracks the hero as he evolves from God's stalwart soldier into an unrelenting critic of the divine right to wreak injustice upon the world.

18. Abraham's compliance may be detected in the string of action verbs (in Gen. 22:3), unaccompanied by questions or objections, that constitute his response to God's command. "Abraham *arose* early in the morning and he *saddled* his ass and he *took* his two lads with him as well as his son Isaac and he *split* the wood for the burnt offering and he *arose* and he *went* to the place of which God had told him" (22:3).

GOD AND THE SUBVERSIVE SEQUEL

The subversive sequel reveals the development not only of its human protagonists, but of God as well. From the *Akeda* to the Book of Job, God's responses to the tormented hero have dramatically changed. While God congratulates Abraham for his unquestioning acceptance of the divine will, He commends Job for his insistent challenging of God's actions.

For many readers, the notion of the dynamic nature of humanity may be far more palatable than ascribing an evolutionary nature to God. But the concept of God's development is not new in Jewish tradition. It is evident in numerous Kabbalistic¹⁹ and midrashic²⁰ texts, and modern scholars have found ample evidence of it throughout the Bible's pages.²¹ By viewing God as a literary character and by monitoring His development between one biblical story and the next, we are privy to one of the central and most consistent messages of the canon as a whole, namely, the ideal of constant movement and growth.

God, who is to be distinguished from the omniscient narrative voice of the text, is complex as a literary character. At times He is transcendent and infallible. He instructs His followers to be holy "for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). This God figure is worthy of direct

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19. See Idel, *Kabbalah, New Perspectives*, 159. Idel defines the notion of theurgy as God being literally affected – He is diminished or empowered – by human actions. Thus God is constantly changing.
 20. In the midrashic view, God's development is expressed in different aspects of God that are manifest in different situations. For example, the following appears in Genesis Rabbah 12:15 (quoted by Rashi, Gen. 1:1, s.v. *bara Elohim*) and in the anonymous *Midrash Aggadah* (referred to in *Torah Shelema*, vol. 1 p. 33, footnote 209, referring to Gen. 1:1, s.v. *bereshit bara*): "God initially considered creating the world with the quality of justice alone; when He saw that the world could not survive, He combined it with the quality of mercy."
 21. For example, Muffs, *The Personhood of God*, 4, claims the following: "God was a king who in His youth behaved one way and in His older age, poetically speaking, yet another. Having learned from His mistakes, He now allowed His mercy...to overcome His anger. God could be worshipped by man since He was so much like Him. He constantly appeared in many and ever-changing roles lest He be frozen and converted into the dumb idols He himself despised. God was a polyvalent personality who, by mirroring to man His many faces, provided the models that man so needed to survive and flourish." I am grateful to David Hartman for directing me to Muffs' book.

emulation. As the Talmud states: “Just as He is gracious and compassionate, so should you be gracious and compassionate.”²²

Yet in other instances, God is described in imperfect, shockingly human terms: God is “sad” (Gen. 6:6), and “jealous” (Exod. 20:5). God may even “regret” His ways (Gen. 6:6) and learn from prior experience – as seen in God’s decision never to repeat the type of wholesale destruction enacted in the Great Flood (Gen. 9:21), and as seen later in our analysis of Noah and Jonah. How are we to reconcile these divergent images of the biblical God?

Perhaps these conflicting views are both presented to humanity for emulation. The first is an ideal: a distant, largely unattainable goal for human striving. The second, found primarily in the narratives of the Pentateuch, is translated into terms that human beings can more easily relate to and comprehend.²³ The attributes ascribed to God in these passages do not delimit and define the transcendent. They are meant to call to mind our own emotions, reactions, and even our growth patterns.²⁴ God may be seen as furious and destructive in one situation. He may then “correct” that behavior by reacting with equanimity and patience in a similar instance. By His very changeability, this God models a dynamic response to circumstance. Extending the midrashic dictum on emulating God, “Just as He is gracious and compassionate, so

22. *Shabbat* 133b.

23. The idea that the Bible translates statements about the divine into language that is comprehensible to human beings is in line with the rabbinic statement that originates in the Talmud (*Berakhot* 31b): *Dibbera Torah kileshon benei adam*, the Bible speaks in language that is understandable and recognizable to its human readers. The entire structure of the Kabbalistic and Hassidic conceptions that distinguish between the infinite (*ein sof*) and God’s emanations is geared to allow for a static abstract God to coexist with the dynamic, immanent God found in the Bible and in the religious experience of historical circumstance.

24. Muffs expands on the idea of the Bible’s portrayal of God reflecting human perspectives and emotions. Muffs claims that the Bible purposely presents a diverse array of prophets, each of whom “sees what he can of the infinite spectrum of the divine self. In the last analysis, we are only capable of knowing that which is akin to ourselves. This is why it was necessary to send many prophets, of different emotional makeups: together, they enable us to fathom the Divine from many points of view.” Muffs, *Personhood*, 87.

should you be gracious and compassionate,” we might say, “Just as He is dynamic so should you be dynamic.”

SUBVERSIVE SEQUELS: HOW BIBLICAL STORIES MINE AND UNDERMINE EACH OTHER

Throughout the coming pages, we will follow the process described above, reading individual passages closely, and then presenting parallel texts that serve as their subversive sequels. To illustrate this method, I have chosen two basic themes. The first three chapters of the book address questions related to the self. These include the struggle for individuality and the relationship between the individual and community, between Israelite and non-Israelite, and between the individual and God. The final three chapters are concerned with gender relations, highlighting God’s role in the evolution of those relations.

In chapter 1, we will compare two stories that share the themes of hazardous waters, the threat of wholesale destruction and the transformative potential of the human being. The first of the pair, the story of Noah, is the more straightforward narrative; through our close reading we will reveal new insights into Noah’s psyche. The second of the two stories, the Book of Jonah, is much more cryptic, given that the motives and attitudes of its protagonist are quite elusive. We will analyze the more difficult story of Jonah by identifying it as a subversive reworking of the earlier story, noting the many ways in which it questions and overturns the assumptions and conclusions of the Noah narrative. In these two stories, God acts as a model for change, while humanity remains uncertain of its ability to transform itself.

In chapter 2, an unlikely pair of stories is compared, both of which feature the building of massive structures, and both of which highlight a fear of wide-scale human proliferation. The enigmatic story of the Tower of Babel will find elucidation in the chronicle of the Israelite enslavement in Egypt (Exod. 1). Both stories include the erasure of names, which suggests subjection through the suppression of the individual. Both stories culminate in the resurgence of individuals – Abraham in the Babel narrative and the Hebrew midwives in the Exodus story. These figures will restore names to the narrative by defying conventional ideologies. We will see, then, how the Exodus story serves as subversive sequel to the

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

Tower of Babel narrative, for in the second story, instead of succumbing to the forces of conformity (as in the story of Babel), humanity finds the courage to rescue itself, asserting individuality in the face of totalitarian repression. This chapter will shift the focus from God to humankind as the primary instrument of change, since it highlights the role of individuality in humanity's search for godliness.

Chapter 3 will examine the limits of individuality, tracing the fortunes of two iconoclastic patriarchs, Abraham and Moses. This chapter emphasizes the role of the non-Israelite²⁵ outsider, noting how both patriarchs receive guidance in moments of crisis by mysterious priests: Melchizedek, Priest to God Most High and Jethro, Priest of Midian. By comparing and then contrasting these episodes, a nexus is disclosed between individual vision and communal leadership in the life of the Israelite leader.

Chapters 4–6 examine the ever-evolving role of women in the Bible. While most readers recognize the Bible's presentation of human beings as complex and multifaceted, when the spotlight falls on the half of humanity that is female, there is a tendency to seek a more circumscribed and uniform biblical attitude. On one level, this inclination can be challenged when it is shown that biblical women are every bit as diverse as biblical men. Their stories contain elements of majesty and subjugation, of harmony and strife, of godliness and rebellion. As her many layers are peeled away, we will find that woman, like man, defies easy categorization and constricting definition.

Yet on another plane, there is some support in the Bible for a uniform standard of woman. In the Garden of Eden, her character is often called "the woman," suggesting that she is prototypical of all women. Moreover, there is a profoundly foundational quality to the Eden story, which evokes a feeling that all other stories of women must somehow relate back to this one.

In order to do justice to these paradoxical qualities the chapters on biblical women will differ from the others in this volume. To begin with, an entire chapter is devoted to an analysis of a single text, the Garden

25. For want of an alternative that is not too cumbersome, I am using this anachronistic term in relation to Melchizedek and Jethro.

of Eden narrative, instead of immediately pairing it with another. This focus is warranted by the unusually complex nature of the Bible's first woman and by her uniquely archetypal role in relation to other biblical women. As we will discover, many other women-centered narratives refer back to the Garden and its fundamental messages about woman.

Once we understand the Bible's first woman more fully, we will begin to question the finality of her narrative's details and conclusions. Must her foundational role dictate the nature of subsequent texts involving biblical women? Or are there hints from the very outset that some corrective is called for? Chapter 5 will uncover literary hints at repair, as it pairs the story of the first woman with that of the matriarch Sarah. Sarah's story of infertility and persistent struggle plays in unexpected ways on the tropes of Eve, "the mother of all the living," as well as on the other facets of primordial woman. Although the two stories will have much in common, Sarah's chronicle will in many ways serve as subversive sequel to the earlier narrative.

Chapter 6 will, in one sense, continue the paradigm of the subversive sequel and will in other ways broaden its scope. First, two narratives are compared that share a great deal in language and in theme: the stories of Sarah and Rebekah. Then, because of the fundamental centrality of the Bible's first woman, Rebekah's chronicle will be compared to the Eden story as well. This will enable us to see how Rebekah advances and retreats not only in relation to Sarah, but in relation to the Bible's original woman.

Next, this chapter will venture beyond the doubling of narratives we have seen until now, toward tripling, and ultimately toward a chain of narrative sequences. Each story will manipulate the one before it; it will then be reworked by the one after it; the next will revise its predecessor yet again. This type of ongoing sequencing suggests that biblical stories are much longer and far more intricate than they first appear. Multiple sequels indicate a canon comprised of many layers; the more layers we uncover, the greater the potential for broadening and deepening our grasp of biblical messages. In our study of the women of the Bible, we will come to view each woman's story as links in a chain of a larger "woman's story" that weaves its way through the canon. The combinations of texts expose a dynamic process engaged in by God, man, and

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

woman as they revisit and often reverse their early actions and reactions. Woman's story, while frequently linked to that of the original biblical woman, will ultimately prove to be as wide-ranging and dynamic as the chronicle of humanity itself.

READING BIBLICAL WOMEN

In our close readings of women-centered texts, we will re-examine some long-standing assumptions, avoiding as much as possible apologetics and agenda-driven interpretations that may interfere with close readings. There are potential pitfalls on all sides. At times, traditional readings overlook the plain sense of the text when the behavior of a female character seems to run counter to prevailing norms of religious etiquette. On the other end of the spectrum, feminist readers may tend to find signs of patriarchal oppression even when the plain sense of the text does not indicate it. Contemporary feminist Bible scholar Phyllis Trible comments on this latter type of encumbered interpretation:

The women's movement errs when it dismisses the Bible as inconsequential or condemns it as enslaving. In rejecting Scripture women ironically accept male chauvinistic interpretations and thereby capitulate to the very view they are protesting. But there is another way: to reread (not rewrite) the Bible without the blinders... The hermeneutical challenge is to translate biblical faith without sexism.²⁶

Ideologically driven readings can lead to conclusions that unnecessarily rankle the sensibilities of modern readers and cause them to render the entire Bible irrelevant. The alternative is to sidestep these interpretations and return to the text itself, in a search for messages that are more enduring and truer to the text's language and context. As Trible contends, "Depatriarchalizing is not an operation which the exegete performs on the text. It is a hermeneutic operating within Scripture itself. We expose it; we do not impose it."²⁷

26. Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing," 218.

27. *Ibid.*, 235.

Subversive Sequels in the Bible exposes layers of the text that are frequently overlooked as we reread several of the Bible's most well-studied passages and as we note the development from one story to the next. As we do so, some basic assumptions about biblical attitudes toward women will be called into question. At the same time, alternative models will emerge within individual passages and from the dynamic interaction among texts.

METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS AND CATEGORIES

The thorniest methodological question raised by this work is that of historical sequence. If there were many hands in the writing and editing of the Bible over the course of many centuries, how can I claim that one section purposefully plays upon another? More troubling, how can I base the method of sequencing on the order in which passages appear in the Bible? What if we have evidence that a work that appears later in the canon was actually written at an earlier date?

Unfortunately, it is hard to address such questions dispassionately, as they are often closely tied to ardently-held ideological positions. Those who assume unified divine authorship find the claims of historical Bible critics blasphemous, while those who are certain of the inviolable truth of the documentary hypothesis have contempt for the naïveté of the faithful.

I would like to transcend this ideological debate by again adhering to the literary school of interpretation. With a literary approach, we redirect our attention from "excavative"²⁸ methods: that is, the historical placement of biblical texts and sociological contextualization of particular passages, helpful though these methods might be. Instead, we move toward an appreciation of the canonized Bible as it appears before us. Here again is Robert Alter:

I have no quarrel with the courage of conjecture of those engaged in what Sir Edmund Leach has shrewdly called "unscrambling the omelet," but the essential point for the validity of the literary perspective is that we have in the Bible, with far fewer exceptions

28. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 13.

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

that the historical critics would allow, a very well-made omelet indeed.²⁹

Who concocted this omelet in the first place? Alter considers this question to be somewhat beside the point:

If in general the literary imagination exhibits ... a faculty for molding disparate elements into an expressively unified whole not achieved outside of art, this power is abundantly evident in the work of the so-called redactors, so that often the dividing line between redactor and author is hard to draw, or if it is drawn, does not necessarily demarcate an essential difference.³⁰

My hope is that the literary connections I draw in this book will be equally compelling to those who view the Bible as the work of one divine author and to those who see it as an artfully crafted composite work woven together by very gifted redactors. In the latter case, the time of historical writing of any given passage is less significant than its literary positioning in the biblical canon. It is thus legitimate to speak of “earlier” and “later” narratives, irrespective of the time of their authorship.

Ultimately, questions of historical authorship notwithstanding, the coherent literary structure that is the Bible stands on its own, and it is with a profound sense of awe and respect for its majestic standing that I ask not *when* or *how* the Bible was written, but *what* are the meanings contained in its pages.

Those who are accustomed to traditional Jewish Bible study may wonder whether the type of reading I have outlined purports to be the “*peshat*” of the text: that is, does it claim to convey the plain meaning of the text, based on its grammar, syntax and context? Or perhaps it is “*derash*,” an applied, often homiletic reading-in, which adds to the text’s plain meaning in order to educate the reader in some way, and which often aims to present a more comprehensive understanding of whole passages.

29. Alter, *The Literary Guide*, 25.

30. *Ibid.*

Thankfully, in recent years, these constricting categories have begun to break down, as a new approach, termed “Bible at eye level,” has taken hold. Martin Lockshin describes this phenomenon as a balance between “under-reading” and “over-reading.” In this approach, one does not fail to comment when the text, including whole stories, requires the interpretive filling of narrative gaps. Yet neither does one read in references that go far beyond the plain implications of the written word.³¹

In the coming pages, I aim to strike this balance. Like the strict *peshatist*, I will engage in careful data gathering, paying close attention to literary nuance. Yet, so as not to fall into the minimalist trap of under-reading, I will not shrink from adding a speculative layer to my findings, drawing connections and positing theories about the motives and actions of biblical characters. This layer is not technically *derash*, as it has its foundations in close reading, and will not contradict the plain sense of the text in order to make a point. My offerings do not presume to be sole or definitive readings of passages, but rather possible interpretations that rest on strong literary foundations. If I must confine myself to familiar labels, I have sought to develop a *peshat* that is infused with the expansive and creative ethos of *derash* in the hope of deepening a conventional understanding of the dynamics of the Bible’s main focus, its characters.

An additional methodological concern lies in setting limits in the hunt for the parallel passage. On what basis might one identify a passage as parallel, or as a sequel to another? The lines are admittedly undefined. I have tried to restrict my choices to convincing and compelling thematic and linguistic parallels, while basing my analysis on words and phrases that are relatively rare or that are unusually insistent in parallel stories. I am fully cognizant of the dangerous pull toward overindulgence in flimsily based parallels, or “parallelomania,” a warning sounded by a master of the biblical parallel, Yair Zakovich.³² I have tried to resist this temptation; my readers will judge how successfully I have done so.

31. Martin Lockshin, “A Bible Commentary for the 21st Century?” 9.

32. Zakovich has done a great deal of pioneering work on parallels in the Bible, most notably in his small volume, *Through the Looking Glass: Reflection Stories in the Bible*. Zakovich’s parallels focus mainly on literary justice: he demonstrates how later stories deliver apt punishments for misdeeds committed in earlier, parallel narratives.

Subversive Sequels in the Bible

Another question that arises from my methods is this: am I suggesting that subversive sequels measure only forward motion in the actions and attitudes of biblical characters? Although I have chosen to examine stories that illustrate a positive progression, the opposite can most certainly be true as well. One example that comes to mind is a comparison of the story of Judah and Tamar with that of David and Bathsheba. Parallels in word and theme abound as the second story dismantles and replays the first – all in shockingly negative ways. Undoubtedly, there is intentionality behind this ordering. But that, perhaps, is a subject for another volume.

BIBLE VS. TORAH

My aim in the six chapters of this book is to illustrate how close readings and the study of sequels reveal the Bible as a book of surprisingly enduring relevance to humanity, a book about which we can wholeheartedly echo Heschel's sense that it is "never wearied by time." As we delve into the Bible's narratives, we find characters, God included, who in the different versions of their stories are seen to struggle, err, and approach familiar challenges in courageous new ways. With the model of the subversive sequel, we readers may come to see the Bible as an inspiring blueprint for humanity, which challenges us to emulate God's dynamic example.

One final remark: The proliferation of Bible study in the late 20th and early 21st centuries is a fact to be welcomed and celebrated. But in many settings our foundational text has been reduced to a dry, academic pursuit rather than a living, breathing vehicle to religious and moral meaning. The English word for the canon, "Bible" – literally "book" – does not begin to capture its uniqueness. A book is read and studied, its background and context researched. Much more encompassing of its essence is the book's own term for itself, "Torah," the Hebrew word for "teaching," which suggests an educational relationship from book to reader. In this volume I have attempted to convey my relationship with the Bible as "Torah," a book that is in many ways studied like all other books, but whose ultimate purpose is to guide and inspire, to be deeply affecting in the human search for a godly existence.

Chapter 1

The Wings of the Dove: Noah and Jonah in Flight from Self

*They are ill discoverers that think there is no land, when
they can see nothing but sea.*

– Francis Bacon

Noah and Jonah: two prophets¹ navigate perilous waters aboard their boats, apart from the doomed populations they might have saved. Names, words, and themes are shared freely by their narratives. In both, rampant injustice, *hamas*,² threatens to seal the people's fate;

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1. Neither Noah nor Jonah is ever called "prophet" in the text. Yet because both receive God's word and, in different ways, convey it to others, I apply this label to them.
 2. *Hamas* has a wide range of connotations: violence, as in Gen. 49:5; a personal wrong, as in Gen. 16:5; injustice, as in Jon. 3:8; wickedness and ruthlessness, as in Mic. 6:12. I am translating it as "injustice" throughout this work, despite the fact that it will