



# Mother or Womb? The Portrayal of Women as Mothers in Ancient Near Eastern Texts

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## BACKGROUND

The Torah was written by the Israelites around the years 922-587 BCE. At this time, there were many other cultures in the Ancient Near East including the Hittites, Canaanites, Sumerians, Akkadians, etc.<sup>2</sup> When comparing the Israelite culture with the texts and practices of its contemporaries, much can be determined about their collective worldview and cultural differences.

### Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) Worldview:

- Patriarchal society<sup>2</sup>
- Mostly agrarian society<sup>2</sup>
- Extensive literary corpus, especially in Ugarit<sup>2</sup> (Canaanite) of letters, legal documents, mythological texts, and correspondents between rulers<sup>4</sup>
- Practiced animal sacrifice and prayer to their gods<sup>2</sup>
- Practiced yearly festivals associated with farming<sup>2</sup>
- Often ruled by a monarchy<sup>2</sup>
- Believed in a pantheon of deities, along with specific familial deities<sup>2</sup>
- Active deities:
  - El—creator of the world & ‘father’ of the gods<sup>2</sup>
  - Baal—storm god, appears in texts across the ANE<sup>2</sup>
  - Asherah—El’s consort and mother of the gods<sup>2</sup>
  - Anat—Baal’s sister/consort<sup>2</sup>
  - YHWH—creator of the world, ‘father’ of Israel<sup>2</sup>



## METHODOLOGY

This project focuses on comparing the role of women in Ancient Near Eastern cultures with women in the Torah from a feminist perspective. To create comparable data, the following stories that focus on childless couples were chosen:

### Genesis 12; 15-18; 21

Time Written: 922-622 BCE  
 Location/Culture: Judah & Israel/Judean & Israelite  
 Main couple: Abraham and Sarah  
 Summary: YHWH promises Abraham and Sarah a child. They scheme to get a child without YHWH’s help, but ultimately YHWH delivers a child, Isaac, to Sarah.<sup>1</sup>

### Aqhat

Time Written: Middle 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE<sup>2</sup>  
 Location/Culture: Ugarit/Canaanite  
 Main couple: Daniel and Danitiya  
 Summary: Daniel requests a son from the gods, receives one, and then the gods give him a bow for this son Aqhat, the story’s namesake. This text is extremely broken with many lines missing.<sup>5</sup>

### Appu and His Two Sons

Time Written: Early 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE<sup>2</sup>  
 Location/Culture: Hatti/Hittite  
 Main couple: Appu and his wife  
 Summary: Appu requests a son from the Sun god and receives two sons. This text is extremely short and also very broken.<sup>3</sup>

Each story was analyzed with the same set of questions pertaining to the main actors, the actions and goals of women, the human-deity interactions, and the husband/wife interactions in the story.

## RESULTS

### Genesis 12; 15-18; 21

“Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” Genesis 12:1-2

#### Number of times YHWH comes to Abram

“The LORD appeared to Abraham...They said to him, ‘Where is your wife Sarah?...your wife Sarah shall have a son.’ And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him...So Sarah laughed to herself...The LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, not that I am old?’...But Sarah denied, saying ‘I did not laugh,’ for she was afraid. He said, ‘Yes, you did laugh.’” Genesis 18<sup>1</sup>

#### Observations:

- Abram makes no sacrifice
- YHWH comes to Abram unrequested multiple times
- YHWH talks directly to Sarah
- Sarah laughs, is afraid, and lies directly to YHWH

#### Analysis:

1. The Biblical text is more concerned about what YHWH wants with Abram than what Abram wants with YHWH. Thus, the text is theocentric.
2. YHWH interacts with men and women and uses them both for his purposes.

“Sarai said to Abram, ‘You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.” *Hagar, the slave, conceives a child by Abram and then looks “with contempt” at Sarah who “said to Abram, ‘May the wrong done to me be on you!...May the LORD judge between you and me!’”* But Abram said to Sarai, ‘Your slave is in your power; do to her as you please.’” Genesis 16:2;5-6<sup>1</sup>

#### Observations:

- Sarai and Abram converse
- Abram obeys Sarai
- Sarai has goals, emotions, and agency
- Sarai has power over her slave that Abram acknowledges

#### Analysis:

1. Abram and Sarai have a complex relationship with trade-offs and arguments.
2. Women are depicted with goals, power, and agency.

“He [Abraham] looked up and saw three men [YHWH] standing near him...And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.’ Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he [Abraham] took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them” Genesis 18:2;6-8<sup>1</sup>

#### Observations:

- Abraham instructs Sarah to make cakes
- Abraham gets a calf and helps prepare it(?)
- Abraham prepares curds and milk
- Abraham serves the three men (YHWH)

#### Analysis:

1. While Abraham does instruct Sarah to make food, he makes food as well and he himself serves YHWH instead of commanding her to do that, showing a more balanced relationship.
2. The story is focused on both Abraham and Sarah’s collective story.

### Aqhat

“[Now Daniel, man of Rapiu]\*, the hero, [man of the Harnemite,] Girded, gives food to the gods, [girded gives drink to] the deities, Throws down [his garment] and lies, Throws down [his cloak] for the night. One day passed, [and a second --] ... then on the seventh day Baal draws near in compassion” *Aqhat* Column 1, lines 0-6; 15-16<sup>5</sup>  
*Baal requests a son from El on Daniel’s behalf. El blessed Daniel, but not directly. El sends a messenger to Daniel to inform him of his blessing of a son.*  
*\*brackets signify uncertainty in the translation*

#### Observations:

- Gave food and drink to the gods
- Sacrifices for seven days
- Doesn’t talk directly to El, must communicate through lesser gods

#### Analysis:

1. The Canaanite text is more concerned about what Daniel wants with the gods than what the gods wants with Daniel. Thus, the text is anthropocentric.
2. The deities only interact with men, not with women, and there is distance between man and the gods.

*In conception: “the joy of the bed [ ] The delights of the bed of childbirth [ ] Daniel settles to count her months.”* *Aqhat* Column 2, lines 41-43<sup>5</sup>  
*Wife unnamed until after she has a child. No mention of her wanting a child or having a dialogue interaction with Daniel or the gods.*

#### Observations:

- Daniel’s wife is not even mentioned when she and Daniel are conceiving their child
- Daniel’s wife is unnamed in this section
- Daniel’s wife does not have agency to the point that she’s functionally not a character in this story

#### Analysis:

1. Daniel and his wife do not have a complex relationship. In fact, they don’t have any explicit recorded interactions.
2. The woman in this text has no goals, power, or agency.

*Daniel “Observes the coming of Kothar, Observes the march(?) of Khasis...Calls aloud to his wife: ‘Attend, Danatiya the Lady: Prepare a lamb from the flock for the relish of Kothar and Khasis, For the hunger(?) of clever Hayyan. Dine and wine the gods, Uphold and honor them, The lords of Memphis, allotted by El(?)’.* Danatiya the Lady attends. She prepares a lamb from the flock For the relish of Kothar and Khasis, For the hunger(?) of clever Hayyan. After Kothar and Khasis arrive, They hand Daniel the bow, On his lap they lay the arrows.” *Aqhat* Column 5, lines 10-11; 15-31<sup>5</sup>

#### Observations:

- Daniel instructs Danatiya, his wife, to prepare food for the gods and to serve them
- Danatiya does exactly as Daniel commands (the lines are repeated exactly) with no dialogue of her own
- Daniel doesn’t serve the gods himself
- Daniel is the one who receives the bow

#### Analysis:

1. Daniel is in command of his wife and she obeys him immediately, showing a patriarchal relationship.
2. The story is focused on Daniel’s interactions with the gods.

“Appu rose from his bed, took a white lamb, and set out to meet the Sun God. The Sun God looked down from the sky, changed himself into a young man, came to him, and questioned him: ‘What is your problem that I may solve it for you?’” *Appu and His Two Sons* paragraph 8<sup>3</sup>

#### Observations:

- Appu sacrifices a white lamb to encounter the Sun God
- The Sun God is focused on solving Appu’s problem

#### Analysis:

1. The Hittite text is more concerned about what Appu wants with the gods than what the gods want with Appu. Thus, the text is anthropocentric.
2. The deities only interact with men, not with women.

“Appu awoke from his sleep, and his wife questioned him: ‘You have never had success(?) before. Have you now been successful(?)?’ When Appu heard this, he replied: ‘You are a woman and think like one. You know nothing at all.’” *Appu and His Two Sons* paragraph 7<sup>3</sup>

#### Observations:

- Appu’s wife is unnamed
- Appu’s wife is depicted as clueless about the workings of conception
- Appu calls his wife a woman in an insulting way and implies that all women know nothing

#### Analysis:

1. Appu and his wife have an almost antagonistic relationship that is not complex.
2. The woman in this text has no goals, power, or agency.

There is no preparing food for the deity in Appu’s story

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## CONCLUSION

❖ The deity of the Bible, YHWH, uses and responds to men and women equally and is focused on YHWH’s desires, highlighting a theocentric agenda, while deities in other ANE texts only respond to men and the deity is a tool for human men to achieve their goals (anthropocentric).

❖ Women in ANE texts do not have personage until they bear a child, and even when they have borne a child, they don’t have any characteristics besides “wife” or “mother” and have no agency. Women in the Bible are portrayed as fully developed characters even before they have a child, and they have emotions, goals, and agency.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you firstly to the Lew Wentz Foundation for granting me this scholarship and the opportunity to participate in undergraduate research! Thank you to Jessica Doyle who was so patient with me through the many ups and downs of this project. Thank you to Latasha Tasci and the Office of Scholar Development for advocating for undergraduate research! And thanks be to God. All glory to him forever. Amen.