

# Biblical Narratives in *The Handmaid's Tale*

## Abstract

Through her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), Margaret Atwood fuels the debate surrounding the global plight of women. Atwood weaves many biblical concepts, names, and motifs relating to the status of women into the novel, with a particular focus on the concept of the handmaid, whose sole function is childbearing. Atwood thus warns against fundamentalist readings of the Bible and other canonical texts that are the foundations of our culture. In order to reach a fuller understanding of the contextual biblical sources of the novel, in this article I take an in-depth look at the biblical source of the name "Gilead", as Atwood chose to set her tale in the "Republic of Gilead". Furthermore, as the novel presents a radical social hierarchy among women based on their childbearing duties, I will also examine the biblical narratives foundational to the hegemonic male interpretation that gave rise, according to the novel, to this dystopian reality. In this terrifying novel, the transformation of women into childbearing handmaids is based both on the biblical story of the handmaids and on the proprietary relationship of men over women in the Bible. I argue that the novel's critical approach deconstructs the unspoken assumptions of a particular way of life.

## Keywords

Handmaidens, Women, Atwood, Bible, Gilead, Social Hierarchy

## Biography

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## Introduction

As I write these lines, women wearing red cloaks and white wimples that hide their faces have taken to the streets of the State of Israel to protest impending judicial reform that they believe will worsen the situation for women. Their choice of dress alludes to the Canadian author Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, published in 1985. In this novel, Atwood paints a radical picture of the future by employing many elements from our cultural past and present. When asked in 2015 whether the book is more relevant today than when published, Atwood responded that many people, especially in the United States, believe that it is more relevant now and noted that the novel's title was cited on social media in the last elections in 2012. She pointed out that absolutist regimes have generally expressed excessive interest in women's procreative powers.<sup>1</sup>

We need to ask ourselves whether it is reasonable to conduct a scholarly conversation about the status of women in the 21st century using a fictional work as a springboard for that discussion. Usually, such political questions are debated in forums dedicated to political or social thought and are not the province of scholars of literature.<sup>2</sup> According to Michael Keren, literature should be seen as a stage in the development and distillation of political ideas that rally the masses or, at least, infuse them with a sense of values.<sup>3</sup> As such, this literature deepens our engagement with contemporary issues even if it contradicts reality. Keren maintains that we must facilitate a productive dialogue between abstract theory and literature.<sup>4</sup> Paul Dolan proposes that it is not enough for politics to be viewed through the eyes of political scientists, historians, and even philosophers. In his estimation, the novel provides us with its own special kind of knowledge – “the unconscious experience of politics as a human, moral, psychological, and aesthetic phenomenon”.<sup>5</sup> Atwood does not agree with the widespread assumption that authors ought to be political actors or that they are so anyway, but she does believe that many authors confront the political system just as the boy revealed the emperor's lack of clothes. They point to the naked truth. A sign

1 The article *Reflections on the Story of a Slave Girl* was written in 2015 but was published as a collection of articles in 2022; see Atwood 2022, 284.

2 Keren 1999, 11.

3 Keren 2015, 7–16.

4 Keren 2015, 7–16.

5 Dolan 1976, 3.

of a society that is progressing toward liberty is that space is preserved for the human imagination and voice. For this reason, she believes that writing is of the utmost importance.<sup>6</sup>

By taking matters to the extreme, Atwood's dystopian novel becomes a moral cautionary tale, necessary because of humanity's great propensity for acclimation: "Truly amazing what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations."<sup>7</sup> The story takes place in the not-too-distant future, in which radical Protestant Christians foment a revolution and establish the Republic of Gilead, a theocratic military dictatorship located on the edge of what was once the United States of America. "That's how they were able to do it, in the way they did, all at once, without anyone knowing beforehand [...] That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn't even any rioting in the streets [...] The thing to do, they said, was to continue as usual."<sup>8</sup> In this society, people are separated based on status and gender, and they are required to dress in clothing signaling their function in society. During the chaos that had been created by a second American civil war, the revolutionaries took power and instituted a new world order based on the Old Testament and ultra-conservative values. The women were returned to the "normal" status that had been theirs since the dawn of time, as handmaids dedicated to childbearing – "The Commander said [...] all we've done is return things to Nature's norm."<sup>9</sup>

The leaders in *The Handmaid's Tale* pore over the Bible trying to find what they take to be useful instruction. The story is told from the point of view of an educated woman named Offred, who finds herself wearing a wimple and occupying the new status of a handmaid, serving as a concubine used for reproductive purposes by the men of the ruling class: "This way they're protected, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace."<sup>10</sup> In her epilogue, the author explains why it is necessary to learn about women's status from literary works and not just academic scholarship. She describes an academic symposium that takes place after the fall of the Gileadite regime, at which Professor Pieixoto – who along with his colleague Professor Knotly Wade discovered Offred's tapes in a sealed iron chest and transcribed them – speaks.

6 Atwood 2010, 58–63.

7 Atwood 1985, 273.

8 Atwood 1985, 172.

9 Atwood 1985, 222.

10 Atwood 1985, 221.

The topic of the symposium is “Problems of Authentication in Reference to the Handmaid’s Tale”.<sup>11</sup> The fact that Atwood chose to conclude the book with this academic symposium attests to her criticism of the academic discussion of women’s rights that are done out of distance and alienation.

In his lecture, Professor Pieixoto tells the story in a manner entirely devoid of empathy, as he objectively – as it were – analyses the Gileadite Period:

In my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadeans. Surely, we have learned by now that such judgments are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (Applause).<sup>12</sup>

In her critique of the academic world, Atwood ascribes to it detachment, remoteness, and even hypocrisy, which, as Michael Keren notes, characterize those who deal with the problems of others and are certain that they will never find themselves in such circumstances.<sup>13</sup>

Atwood identifies her work *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a classic dystopia, for which she partly drew inspiration from George Orwell’s *1984*.<sup>14</sup> The author notes that much has been written about the “natural” inferiority of women, mainly by philosophers and founders of religions upon whose ideas Western society is based. Atwood sought to write a dystopia from a female perspective.<sup>15</sup> The crux of the author’s criticism is male interpretation of the biblical text, which she associates in the novel with the ruling group in the Republic of Gilead. She contends that the background for the novel was drawn from a variety of sources, not a few of which come from recent history, such as the Puritan era in New England, Ceaușescu’s dictatorship in Romania, the policy of polygamy for SS men, and the junta period in Argentina. An additional influence is, of course, the Bible, that complex creation which began as a collection of scrolls written in different periods by different authors and later became one book containing many conflicting messages. It conveys support

11 Atwood 1985, 302.

12 Atwood 1985, 303.

13 Keren 1999, 90–91.

14 Atwood 2022, 283.

15 Atwood 2022, 281.

for widows, orphans, the poor, and slaves, along with the destruction of enemies, including curses borne for generations. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the ostensible literal interpretation of the Bible serves to control women for political reasons.<sup>16</sup>

The book addresses a slew of questions fundamental to feminism: relationships between women, the reproductive role and the ability to procreate, sexuality, subjugation, violence against women and opposition to it, and a series of forewarnings that we must heed.<sup>17</sup> Atwood calls upon all of us not to ignore the systemic unfairness, violence, and discrimination against women:

We lived, as usual, by ignoring [...] Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it. There were stories in the newspapers of course [...] but they were about other women, and the men who did such things were other men. None of them were the men we knew [...] We were the people who were not in the papers. We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print.<sup>18</sup>

Atwood weaves many biblical concepts, names, and motifs relating to the status of women into the novel, with a particular focus on the concept of the handmaid, whose sole function is childbearing. The role of the Bible in the Republic of Gilead is not clear. The book itself is locked in a special wooden box, becoming a totem of the totalitarian system in every household. Not everyone has access to it. Daily life in the state is based on principles claimed by its founders to be rooted in the biblical model. The society is controlled by a male elite that relies on the precedents of the patriarchal history of Israel and the first letter to Timothy by Paul.<sup>19</sup> The author returns from the fictional future to the Christian-Jewish past from which Western culture developed and reminds us that this past, with its potential for extreme interpretations, has not vanished entirely. It remains present in the culture.

In this article, I now delve into the radical interpretation of the Bible adopted by the leadership of the Republic of Gilead, and into the narratives

16 Atwood 2022, 282.

17 Williamson 2017, 261.

18 Atwood 1985, 56.

19 Filipczak 1993, 171.

and motifs that appear in the biblical text and function as the background to this story, while always keeping in mind the critical understanding that arises from the interweaving of these motifs.

When we discuss the status of women in the Bible, we must be careful not to generalize, because the biblical narrative contains a panoply of diverse voices. We discover in the Bible two parallel phenomena, a patriarchal social structure in the children of Israel's families and alongside it, a group of female leaders and leading women in ancient Israelite society. In general, we find a small but diverse group of women in biblical literature: seductresses (Eve), handmaids (Hagar, Bilhah, Zilpah), betrayers (Delilah), the homicidal Jezebel, and along with them prophetesses (Miriam, Huldah) and women who filled significant societal and public roles and served as symbols of might, wisdom, and courage (Shifrah and Puah, Deborah and Yael, Ruth and Naomi, and more).<sup>20</sup>

The power dynamics between man and woman are delineated at the very beginning of the biblical text and then undergo changes and fluctuations. For this reason, as the author warns us, they are subject to a wide range of interpretations.<sup>21</sup> In the first story of creation, man and woman are portrayed as equals – both are created in the image of God, and both are given dominion over the Earth and its creatures:

Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness [...]" So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Gen. 1:26–28; JPS (1985), used throughout)

However, the second creation story differs: Adam is created first, from the earth, and woman is only created after neither the beasts of the field nor the birds of the sky were found suitable as "helper" (Gen. 2:20). Woman is then created to fill the deficiency of man.<sup>22</sup> The name given to her by Adam reflects her origin:

20 Shenhar 2008, 11–13.

21 Atwood 2022, 254–255.

22 Zakowitz 1987, 14–32.

And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken” (Gen. 2:22–23)

The lesson drawn from this story in the New Testament is even more pronounced: “Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim. 2:11–13, NRSV, rev. edn).

Nevertheless, man’s authority over woman is not absolute, as he leaves “his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). However, as the story unfolds, the woman tempts her husband to eat from the forbidden fruit, and as part of her punishment, man is given dominion over her: “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16).

The biblical text undoubtedly reflects the particular social arrangement of the era in which it was formed. When discussing the stories of Sarah and Hagar, Leah and Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah, among others, Athalya Brenner notes that these are women in pairs, married or living under the legal protection of one male figure.<sup>23</sup> This complex arrangement undoubtedly signifies the existence of a patriarchal-polygamous society, replete with traditional domestic challenges inherent in such a situation for the individuals involved. Each pair of women is defined as rivals linked by both familial ties and societal competition, as if there were no alternative social behavior patterns for them in such a situation.<sup>24</sup>

Judith Plaskow writes of the status of women in Jewish sources, “Women’s specific disabilities are symptoms of a far more basic problem in that the Otherness of women is embedded in the central categories of Jewish thought.”<sup>25</sup> Even after they have been secularized and are no longer connected to the religious world they came from, deep structures remain in a culture. When certain concepts appear frequently in canonical literature such as the Bible and last for a long time, they attest to psychological, societal, and cultural structures used by individuals and groups to guide their behavior.<sup>26</sup> Atwood

23 Brenner 1986, 259.

24 Brenner 1986, 258–259.

25 Plaskow 2005, 785.

26 Nir 2016, 11.

calls upon us to return to the biblical roots of Western culture and to evaluate the extreme interpretations that have been given to these texts over the generations in the different traditions. Engaging in such contemplation will enable us to take a fresh look at our ideological positions and accept responsibility for them.<sup>27</sup> As psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung argued, when a “Weltanschauung” is deeply rooted in religious experience, it has an innate ability to maintain itself within the secular experience.<sup>28</sup>

## Gilead

The novel takes place in the Republic of Gilead. The Bible tells us that Jephthah the Gileadite was the son of a prostitute, so his brothers, the sons of his father’s legitimate wife, drove him away from the house of his father, Gilead.<sup>29</sup> In the biblical narratives, the son of an illegitimate wife invariably possesses an inferior status to that of the sons of the legitimate wife. After Jephthah is banished from his home, he journeys north to the Land of Tob, on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. There, an assortment of “low” men coalesce around him and he gains notoriety as a successful brigand chief.<sup>30</sup> When the Ammonites wage war on the Gileadites, the elders of Gilead are forced to ask Jephthah to become their chieftain, to save them from the Ammonites. Jephthah only grants their request when they agree to make him the lord of all the inhabitants of Gilead.<sup>31</sup> He then wages war against the Ammonites and prevails.

Before he goes off to war, Jephthah makes a promise: “And Jephthah made the following vow to God: ‘If you deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return from the Ammonites shall be God’s and shall be offered by me as a burnt offering’” (Judg. 11:30–31). However, when he returns home after his victory:

there was his daughter coming out to meet him, with hand drum and dance! She was an only child; he had no other son or daughter. On seeing her, he rent his clothes and said, “Alas, daughter! You have brought me

27 Foucault 1977, 152.

28 Jung 1987.

29 Judges 11:1–2.

30 Judges 11:3.

31 Judges 11:4–10.



low; you have become my troubler! For I have uttered a vow to God and I cannot retract.” (Judg. 11:34–35)

His daughter, unaware of his vow, had innocently come out to greet her father, playing a musical instrument and dancing, and thus had sealed her fate. Jephthah’s daughter understands that a vow made to God cannot be annulled even when its fulfillment requires human sacrifice.<sup>32</sup>

Jephthah allows his daughter one last request:

He let her go for two months, and she and her companions went and bewailed her maidenhood upon the hills. After two months, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. She had never known a man. So it became a custom in Israel for the maidens of Israel to go every year, for four days in the year, and chant dirges for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite. (Judg. 11:38–40)

In mourning his daughter, Jephthah mainly relates to the fact that “she had never known a man”, and he therefore weeps for her “maidenhood”. Biblical women are often described as fertile, virginal, or barren. In Atwood’s Gileadite society, the language of male infertility has been excised from the lexicon: “There is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that’s the law.”<sup>33</sup> Fertility is the women’s domain – they are either fruitful or barren. The barren women are deemed “Unwomen” and sent to the Colonies, where the average life expectancy is three years: “Go to the Colonies [...] With the Unwomen, and starve to death.”<sup>34</sup> Aliza Shenhar points out that in the Bible as well, we find no sterile men. For the biblical narrator, barrenness is always presumed to be the woman’s fault.<sup>35</sup>

The biblical narrator expresses no admiration for Jephthah’s daughter’s obedience, for her willingness to accede to the demands of her society. For generations, obedience has been deemed a virtuous, female quality. This quality is also demanded of the women in the Gileadite Republic, taken to an extreme: “Yes, ma’am, I said again, forgetting. They used to have dolls, for

32 Judges 11:36–37.

33 Atwood 1985, 74.

34 Atwood 1985, 10.

35 Shenhar 2011, 18.

little girls, that would talk if you pulled a string at the back; I thought I was sounding like that, voice of a monotone, voice of a doll.”<sup>36</sup>

Some believe that the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter hints at the ancient practice of consecrating virgins for cultic use.<sup>37</sup> Jephthah makes no mention of the tragedy befalling his daughter; rather, he sees the tragedy as his own, and he even blames her for coming out to greet him when he returns victorious. The link between the “Republic of Gilead” – the name Atwood chose for her fictional country where women have been turned into handmaids – and the original biblical Gilead is clear. Jephthah was driven from his father’s home in Gilead because his mother was a prostitute and the hierarchy of sons is based on their female progenitors’ hierarchy. Jephthah sacrifices his daughter in much the same way that all the women in Gilead were sacrificed – they lost their freedom and became childbearing handmaids. Jephthah’s daughter laments that “she never knew a man”. To know a man and bear his child is the primary purpose of the Gileadite women in the novel.

## Social Hierarchy—The Biblical Foundations

The Bible portrays creation as fundamentally hierarchical in multiple domains. God is at the top of the ladder, distinct and superior to all the other deities: “You shall have no other gods besides Me” (Exod. 20:3). On the second rung is humanity, the crowning glory of creation. The Western tradition, based on biblical cosmology, deems human beings superior to all other creatures. This conceptual paradigm is evident in Descartes – human beings are the crowning glory of creation and God granted them freedom of choice or a will that is comprehensive and perfect enough.<sup>38</sup> The rest of the ladder distinguishes between human beings – the Chosen People and the other nations, along with particular individuals selected by God. The Bible makes many references to the concept of the Chosen People, for instance, “of all the peoples on earth the Lord your God chose you to be His treasured people ” (Deut. 7:6).

The notion of chosenness also occurs in the Bible in the context of tribes and other groups. God distinguishes the tribe of Levi from the other tribes: “I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites” (Num. 3:12). The

36 Atwood 1985, 16.

37 Shenhar 2011, 187–189.

38 Descartes 2001, 97–103.

priests are chosen from the already-chosen Levite tribe: “Take a [separate] census of the Kohathites among the Levites, by the clans of their ancestral houses” (Num. 4:2). Aaron the priest, from whom all subsequent Israelite priests descend, is the son of Amram the son of Kehat the son of Levi. Their chosenness destines them “to perform tasks for the Tent of Meeting. This is the responsibility of the Kohathites in the Tent of Meeting: the most sacred objects” (Num. 4:3–4). In the Bible, individuals are also described as chosen. God’s choice of an individual may well be a source of joy to the chosen one, but if they perceive their chosenness as deserved, that hubris will endanger both them and their surroundings.<sup>39</sup>

As we have noted, the Bible places humanity at the pinnacle of creation, above all of nature. In the creation story, human beings receive divine permission to conquer and master nature: we recall that “God blessed them and God said to them, ‘Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth’” (Gen. 1:28). In the West, humanity’s relationship with nature’s other living creatures is one of mastery.<sup>40</sup> Sigmund Freud referred to this sense of superiority over all other living creatures that humanity in the West had arrogated to itself as humanity’s delusion of grandeur.<sup>41</sup>

Peter Singer, Elizabeth Fisher, and others have argued that women’s subjugation to the domination of men ultimately stems from two factors: (1) the hierarchical assumption that humanity has mastery over the animals and (2) the domestication of the animals. Fisher maintains that the vertical hierarchical structure that situated the human master above the animals fueled humanity’s tendency to cruelty and prepared the human psyche for enslaving human beings. Denying animals rights accelerated the process of depriving human beings of their rights.<sup>42</sup> John Stuart Mill, the nineteenth-century philosopher, argued that according to England’s ancient laws, the man is considered his wife’s master. Mill believed that the status of women in the English law of his day was worse than that of slaves. There are almost no legal systems, including Roman law, in which a slave is expected to work all day and at any given moment as women are expected to do.<sup>43</sup>

39 Schweid 2004, 165.

40 Luria 2007, 64.

41 Cited in Patterson 2006, 17.

42 Fisher 1979, 190–192; Singer 1998, 3–36.

43 John Stuart Mill 2009, 17.

In Gileadite society, women are divided into two basic hierarchical categories: “legitimate women” and “illegitimate women”, with the latter living outside of mainstream society. The legitimate women include the wives of the commanders at the top of the women’s hierarchical structure; the handmaids, fertile women whose social function is to bear the commanders’ children in place of their wives (“We are two-legged wombs, that’s all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices”<sup>44</sup>); and the aunts, the women tasked with training the handmaids. These aunts work to further the causes of religion and the regime, and they preach the justice of the social order: “They can hit us, there’s Scriptural precedent.”<sup>45</sup> The illegitimate women are composed of barren women, widows, feminists, lesbians, nuns, and any woman who opposes the regime or the social order: they are all women who cannot be assimilated into Gilead’s regimented, gendered division. Handmaids who do not manage to give birth after three two-year placements join the ranks of illegitimate women. Jezebels are women who have been forced into prostitution and function as entertainers for the male elite. They are usually attractive and well-educated women who have not managed to adapt to the handmaid role. They have been sterilized – a process denied the other women. They work in brothels, unofficially run by the government, and they are named for the biblical Queen Jezebel: “it doesn’t matter what sort of vice we get up to”.<sup>46</sup>

The Jezebels are talented and corrupt, like their biblical namesake. The biblical Jezebel championed the cult of Baal in Israel. She is portrayed as a domineering first lady who overshadowed and negatively influenced her husband: “Indeed, there never was anyone like Ahab, who committed himself to doing what was displeasing to the Lord, at the instigation of his wife Jezebel” (1 Kgs. 21:25).

However, Jezebel found herself with a forceful adversary in Elijah the prophet. In response, she hunted him without mercy, forcing him to flee across the border into neighboring countries. Biblical women are rarely accorded the kind of glorious death in the spotlight that Jezebel got.<sup>47</sup> The author of the Book of Kings does not harbor any affection for Jezebel; however, he does portray her as a woman who knew how to die like a queen. Even though Jezebel was aware that she was going to die and that Jehu had

44 Atwood 1985, 136.

45 Atwood 1985, 16.

46 Atwood 1985, 252.

47 2 Kgs. 9:30–37.

already killed her son the king, she wished to look her best: “When Jezebel heard of it, she painted her eyes with kohl and dressed her hair, and she looked out of the window” (2 Kgs. 9:30). Her brief retort to Jehu also drips with mockery: “Is all well, Zimri, murderer of your master?” (2 Kgs. 9:31), alluding to Jehu’s murderousness and expressing her desire for his imminent downfall – Zimri ruled for seven days before he was murdered in turn.<sup>48</sup> However, the narrator also pays back Jezebel measure-for-measure for her pride. At Jehu’s command, the eunuchs throw Jezebel out of the window, “They threw her down; and her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, and they trampled her” (2 Kgs. 9:33), and her flesh was consumed by the dogs, fulfilling Elijah’s prophecy, “The dogs shall devour the flesh of Jezebel in the field of Jezreel” (2 Kgs. 9:36).

## Women as Childbearing Handmaids in the Bible

In the Gileadite Republic, powerful men use women’s bodies as tools to further their own political and personal ends. This radical approach, based on the objectification of women as bodies and as sexual objects through the use of power, including rape, appears in the Bible several times: the concubine in Gibeah,<sup>49</sup> the rape of Tamar,<sup>50</sup> and the case of Dinah – “Now Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the daughters of the land. Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country, saw her, and took her and lay with her and disgraced her” (Gen. 34:1–2). The fact that Shechem, the rapist, having lain with Dinah and disgraced her, falls in love with her prevents us from painting him in an exclusively negative light. Our feelings toward Shechem become more ambivalent, and since his request to marry Dinah is in accord with biblical law, we become somewhat more forgiving of the cultural milieu in which he grew up.<sup>51</sup> Susanne Scholz argues that rape was an element of the power structures of the period.<sup>52</sup>

Dinah is silent, and when the men from her family take responsibility for handling the affair, she is referred to as the “daughter of Jacob”. Hamor,

48 1 Kgs. 16:15.

49 Judg. 19–21.

50 Sam. 2:13.

51 Shenhar 2011, 10–103; Elboim 2022, 63–72.

52 Scholz 2017, 164–166.

Shechem's father, comes with his son to request Dinah's hand in marriage; however, he does not mention the disgraceful act his son perpetrated on Dinah and he expresses no regret.<sup>53</sup> This refusal to even acknowledge the despicable act adds insult to injury and attests to the attitude toward women and to how much men of status and power permit themselves.<sup>54</sup> Jacob's sons propose that the Hivites circumcise themselves to unite with the Hebrews and become one people. They do so.

On the third day, when they were in pain, Simeon and Levi, two of Jacob's sons, brothers of Dinah, took each his sword, came upon the city unmolested, and slew all the males [...] The other sons of Jacob [...] plundered the town, because their sister had been defiled [...] Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, "You have brought trouble on me, making me odious among the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites [...] But they answered, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" (Gen. 34:25-31)

Women in Gileadite society have no rights and they are not allowed to leave the environs of the house. "Men highly placed in the regime were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness by having produced one or more healthy children."<sup>55</sup> Because fertility and the birth rate in the population had fallen steeply due to environmental factors – "plummeting Caucasian birth rates [...] not only in Gilead"<sup>56</sup> – the government created the handmaids as a new class of women whose role was to bear children for the elite male members of society. The primary purpose of every woman is childbearing. "I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely."<sup>57</sup>

Offred, the hero of the story, who records a memoir about her life in the Gileadite Republic, tells us about the biblical verse that has been imprinted on the women's consciousnesses to ensure they understand the purpose of their lives.

53 Sternberg 1973, 193-231.

54 Shenhar 2011, 105.

55 Atwood 1985, 306.

56 Atwood 1985, 306.

57 Atwood 1985, 62-63.

“You want a baby, don’t you?” “Yes,” I say. It’s true, and I don’t ask why, because I know. *Give me children, or else I die.*<sup>58</sup> There’s more than one meaning to it.<sup>59</sup>

It’s the usual story... God to Adam, God to Noah. Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. Then comes the mouldy old Rachel and Leah stuff we had drummed into us at the Center. *Give me children, or else I die. Am I in God’s stead, who hath withheld from thee the fruit of the womb? Behold my maid Bilhah. She shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her.* And so on and so forth. We had it read to us every breakfast [...]<sup>60</sup>

When the story begins, Offred has just been consigned to her third handmaid position. Every month at the appropriate time during her menstrual cycle, a religious ceremony is performed in which the Commander has sex with Offred while her head rests between the legs of Serena, his wife. At the beginning of the ceremony, the man, in this case the Commander, declares, “‘And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband,’ says the Commander [...] ‘Now we will have a moment of silent prayer,’ says the Commander. ‘We will ask for a blessing, and for success in all our ventures.’”<sup>61</sup> The regime claims that the ceremony is based on Sarah’s instruction to her husband, Abraham, in Genesis: “And Sarai said to Abram, ‘Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her’” (Gen. 16:2), and it attributes the positioning of the women during the ceremony to another verse uttered by Rachel: “She said, ‘Here is my maid Bilhah. Consort with her, that she may bear on my knees and that through her I too may have children’” (Gen. 30:3). Serena is suspected of being barren, even though her own and her husband’s sexual histories indicate that he is the sterile one. As we have noted, the childbearing-sanctifying regime only permits the assumption of female infertility. Given the circumstances, Serena is forced to accept a marriage in which the Commander is assigned a handmaid and she must be present when he has intercourse with the handmaid. (Knowing that the Commander is sterile, Serena encourages Offred to sleep with Nick, the driver, so that Offred can conceive and bear a child.)

58 These words are from Genesis 30:1, said by Rachel to her husband, Jacob.

59 Atwood 1985, 61.

60 Atwood 1985, 89.

61 Atwood 1985, 91.

Every handmaid is degraded, silenced, subjugated, inferior, and obedient. The story of the Gileadite Republic's handmaids is based, although taken to an extreme, on the biblical handmaid narratives. The voice of the biblical Hagar goes unheard.<sup>62</sup> She is the repressed Other of society, her voice insignificant. Sarah refers to Hagar as a "handmaid", without mentioning her by name, and Hagar's sole responsibility is to resolve the discrepancy between Sarah's infertility and Abraham's fertility. Hagar is a surrogate mother, much like Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid, whom the barren Rachel gave to Jacob. After Bilhah has given birth to a child conceived with Jacob, Rachel declares, "And [He has] given me a son" (Gen. 30:6). Hagar suffers, flees, and while pregnant sets off alone on a lonely road. There, in the wilderness, an angel of the Lord finds her and asks, "'Hagar, handmaid of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?' And she said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.'" (Gen. 16:8). Even when questioning Hagar, the angel emphasizes her status as Sarai's handmaid. The expectant mother is supposed to relinquish her independence and suffer in order to guarantee her son's future.

## The Bible and Men as Masters Possessing Women

Offred lives in the first generation of the Gileadite Republic, so she still remembers life before the revolution. She uses a Dictaphone to record her memoirs, telling of her existence as a sex slave whose role in life is to bear a child for a commander in the new regime and his wife. The name "Offred" is a slave name, meaning "of Fred", denoting the handmaid's status as the possession of the particular man she is consigned to at any given time. "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden [...] I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day [...] Like an amulet, some charm that's survived from an unimaginably distant past."<sup>63</sup> Atwood bases her protagonist on the biblical rendering of quite a few women who lived in the shadows of men and sometimes went completely unmentioned.

As we have noted, the second creation story in Genesis relates that man was created first, from the earth, while woman was created second, as a

62 Shenhar 2011, 19.

63 Atwood 1985, 84.



partner who will serve man as his helper (Gen. 2:18). Gileadite ideology is founded on this creation story: “For Adam was first formed, then Eve.”<sup>64</sup> The biblical creation story is the only ancient creation story in which a male creator created the world all by himself, without a mate. This fact has a profound impact on women’s status in Scripture, and on the status of the female in the West as history unfolds.<sup>65</sup>

Sarah, staying true to the prevailing custom in the Ancient Near East, called her husband *adoni*, my master: “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment – with my master so old?” (Gen. 18:12). The Bible relates that King Abimelech of Gerar “took” Sarah for a wife: “So King Abimelech of Gerar sent and had Sarah taken to him. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, ‘You are to die because of the woman that you have taken, for she is a married woman.’ Now Abimelech had not approached her” (Gen. 20:2–3). And when Sarah gave birth to Isaac, she bore a son to Abraham – “Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken. Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had born him, the name of Isaac” (Gen. 21:2–3). The Bible refers to Jephthah, the Gileadite’s daughter, only as “daughter of Jephthah” (Judg. 11:30–40). Lot’s wife is referred to only in relation to her husband, as “Lot’s wife”, and that only once, during the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: “Lot’s wife looked back, and she thereupon turned into a pillar of salt” (Gen. 19:26). We do not know Noah’s wife’s name. The names of Jacob’s daughters-in-law go unmentioned, except for that of Judah’s wife, “Bat-Shua” (literally, the daughter of Shua). Not only is the name of Jephthah’s daughter absent, but so too is the name of her mother. While there are exceptional cases where women are named, in these instances there is always a reason related to the role they play in the story.<sup>66</sup>

Atwood creates a radical regime that ranks women by their fertility. From time immemorial the patriarchy has defined women by their bodies, as receptacles that function as sexual objects and as childbearing vessels.<sup>67</sup> The biblical narrative places women at the center of the story when they are about to give birth to a son – only then are they worthy of our full attention. In Moses’ birth and early childhood story, his father’s role is mar-

64 Atwood 1985, 223.

65 Ankori/Ezrahi 2004, 196.

66 Zakowitz 1987, 14–32.

67 Nardi 2007; Grant 1988.

ginalized entirely to the initial act of marriage: “A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman” (Exod. 2:1). From that point on, the protagonists are all women: his mother hides him and is later hired to be his wet nurse, and his sister watches from afar when he is set adrift on the Nile, “And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him” (Exod. 2:4). His sister mediates between Moses’ mother and Pharaoh’s daughter – also referred to as the king’s daughter – who adopts Moses and names him: “She named him Moses, explaining, ‘I drew him out of the water’” (Exod. 2:10).

If a woman should happen to defeat a man on the field of battle, the dishonor is crushing. Thus the story of Abimelech: “a woman dropped an upper millstone on Abimelech’s head and cracked his skull. He immediately cried out to his attendant, his arms-bearer, ‘Draw your dagger and finish me off, that they may not say of me, “A woman killed him!”’” So his attendant stabbed him, and he died” (Judg. 9:53–54).

Unfortunately, having his armor-bearer deal the death blow did not remove the eternal stain on his honor, for we find Joab, King David’s military chief of staff referring to the incident derisively many years later: “Who struck down Abimelech son of Jerubbesheth? Was it not a woman who dropped an upper millstone on him from the wall at Thebez, from which he died?” (2 Sam. 11:21).

In the Hebrew Bible we find undeniable hints of a primordial status of the feminine, even though, as a rule, the masculine Hebrew Bible rejected the feminine completely. Indeed, the Hebrew Bible’s spiritual break from the matriarchy was its greatest achievement, although it had to pay a price: relinquishing the feminine and the understanding of it.<sup>68</sup> The ancient Babylonian and Assyrian creation stories describe a struggle between the masculine and the feminine and the patriarchy’s victory. The transition to a patriarchal order occurred gradually, and by the time the era was reached in which humanity began transcribing its laws and myths, the patriarchy was firmly established and the men were the ones writing the legal code,<sup>69</sup> in which the woman is defined and distinguished in terms of her relationship to the man. She is secondary and is not crucial – she is the Other.<sup>70</sup>

68 Ankori/Ezrahi 2004, 199–201.

69 De Beauvoir 2001, 114–115.

70 Brisson 2001, 419.

Among the Hebrews in the biblical period, the head of the family was polygamous, and he was permitted to divorce his wives at will. The young bride was given to her mate in her youth (while still a virgin) and was bound to a life of childbearing and domestic chores. Many of the Ancient Near Eastern nations possessed a levirate tradition. The Laws of Hammurabi in Babylon were less severe and granted women certain rights. Relatively speaking, the Egyptian woman's lot was the best. The fundamental social unit was the couple, and the woman was considered to be connected to and a completion of the man. She could inherit and own property. Greek custom was similar to the Near Eastern nations, but the latter did not permit polygamy.<sup>71</sup>

According to Yair Zakowitz, the hyperfocus of the biblical authors on men led to the loss of earlier traditions about female figures.<sup>72</sup> The epilogue of the Book of Job sees no reason to name the sons Job had after God restored his good fortune, merely treating us to the succinct “and he had seven sons”; however, when it adds that he also had “three daughters”, the narrator takes the unusual step of naming them: “The first he named Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. Nowhere in the land were women as beautiful as Job's daughters to be found” (Job 42:13–15). Doubtless, there is a rich tradition concealed behind this laconic verse. We may be able to glean some of this lost tradition from the apocryphal work *The Testament of Job*, which details the wondrous nature of Job's daughters in chapters 46 through 51.

## Epilogue

Offred, Atwood's protagonist, says in her memoir, “I wish this story were different, I wish it were more civilized. I wish it showed me in a better light, if not happier [...] or about sudden realizations important to one's life, or even about sunsets, birds, rainstorms, or snow.”<sup>73</sup> The reader's identification with the hero, who retells the story of her painful experiences in the first person, causes the reader to think about the status of women in the present and the past throughout the globe. As Offred shares, “I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story [...] But there is nothing I can do to change

71 De Beauvoir 2001, 121–126.

72 Zakowitz 1987.

73 Atwood 1985, 269.

it.”<sup>74</sup> Gilead’s architects were called “the sons of Jacob”, but the minimal knowledge about the period was mostly gleaned from a journal written in code: “Wilfred Limpkin, one of the sociobiologists present. (As we know, the sociobiological theory of natural polygamy was used as a scientific justification for some of the odder practices of the regime, just as Darwinism was used by earlier ideologies).”<sup>75</sup> Atwood warns us not to allow our societies to resurrect ideological trends from the past that seem to be based on scientific theories, a phenomenon we are all too familiar with from the not-too-distant past.<sup>76</sup>

The feminist movement was born out of a sense that women were in distress and it was high time that the lot of women across the globe be improved through a combination of social activism and academic theory and thought. Atwood was well aware of the gap between feminist achievements and the actual plight of women around the world.<sup>77</sup> Women’s rights are still often systematically and grotesquely violated. Many women still lack basic freedoms because, among other things, they lack the basic right to make their own decisions about their bodies and their sexuality. In many places in the world, the attainment of women’s human rights still seems like a distant dream. This notwithstanding, women have certainly begun taking their rightful places in politics and society, a positive trend that should not be belittled. Concepts like gender equality and gender integration have become part of normative political discourse.<sup>78</sup>

Notwithstanding all the progress made in improving women’s lives, the fundamental disparity between the sexes derives from the fact that we live in a society founded upon patriarchal values. Many of these patriarchal societal assumptions are so deeply rooted within society and are so deeply imprinted on both men and women that they go entirely unquestioned. Patriarchal culture forces women to define themselves via their bodies, in the best-case scenario as sexual objects and child-rearing vessels.<sup>79</sup> Tovi Browning argues that a sense of alienation from the feminine stems from a primal fear of the feminine that has been inculcated by diverse cultures

74 Atwood 1985, 269.

75 Atwood 1985, 308.

76 Atwood 2022, 250–253.

77 Keren 1999, 89.

78 Fogiel-Bijaou 2011.

79 Tamir 2007; Nardi 2007.

throughout the world for thousands of years.<sup>80</sup> Atwood wants to shine a spotlight on the biblical past which is foundational to Western culture. Her novel explicitly points out the dangerous possible interpretations of foundational principles from the biblical narrative that inspired the establishment of the Gileadite Republic, with emphasis placed on the handmaids' biblical stories. Atwood claims that the ancient biblical past resounds in our culture to this very day: "As all historians know, the past is a great darkness, and filled with echoes."<sup>81</sup>

When we tell a story about the cultural past and the sources of a certain cultural phenomenon – in our case, the patriarchal attitude toward women – we learn about the present and are spurred to proactively create a different future. This is the type of criticism that Nietzsche promotes in "On the Genealogy of Morals", when he suggests that the primary purpose of his approach is to question the assumptions that go unquestioned in a certain cultural context. Human beings, according to Nietzsche, live historically – with an awareness of their past and with the reality of their having been conditioned by it.<sup>82</sup> "And now we realize how necessary it is for a human being looking back at the past to frequently opt for the third path, the critical one [...] man needs to possess the strength, which he occasionally must use, to shatter and dissolve the past so that he may live, and this he accomplishes by putting it on trial, examining and questioning it harshly and ultimately convicting it."<sup>83</sup> Nietzsche suggests that we must put our cultural past on trial, just as Atwood chose to do in her novel when she indicted our historical attitude toward women – the very foundation of Western culture – by radically and terrifyingly fictionalizing it in a manner that urges us to *wake up!*

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80 Browning 2003.

81 Atwood 1985, 314.

82 Nehamas 1994, 270–272.

83 Nietzsche 2000, 36.

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