HAGAR, SARAH, AND THEIR CHILDREN

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Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives

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Chapter 4

Conflict and Coexistence in Jewish Interpretation

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In the biblical version of their story, Hagar and Sarah vie for position in the household of Abraham and in the eyes of God. As a freeborn, Israelite matriarch, Sarah is clearly superior to Hagar, her maidservant and Abraham's Egyptian concubine. But in conceiving Abraham's son Ishmael, Hagar, though still inferior in ethnicity and in social and marital status, surpasses Sarah on the most important factor of all: fertility. Sarah's superiority is restored when God intervenes on Sarah's behalf so that Sarah conceives and then bears Abraham's son Isaac.

The ups and downs of this relationship are propelled by the actions of the two women themselves. When she conceives, Hagar taunts Sarah, pointedly reminding her mistress of her own infertility. Sarah in turn deals harshly with Hagar, who runs away, only to return when God commands her to do so. This return is merely temporary; after Isaac is born, Sarah banishes both Hagar and her son Ishmael. Yet Sarah's expulsion of her rival, intended to ensure Isaac's succession, and perhaps also to seal her position within her own household, ultimately backfires. If Hagar is now banished from Abraham's estate, she has also escaped from Sarah's heavy hand. And whereas Sarah does not live to see Isaac grow to adulthood, marry, and have children, Hagar not only survives but also finds her son Ishmael a wife. The narrator thus deftly assures the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham, which

has promised numerous offspring, while at the same time restoring Hagar to freedom, honoring her personhood and looking ahead to the broader context of Israelite history.

For Jewish commentators through the ages, the biblical story of Hagar and Sarah forces a choice between two central principles: reverence for their Jewish ancestors, through whom God creates the nation of Israel,[1] and concern for the powerless, which is enshrined in biblical and subsequent Jewish law.[2] Whose side to be on, that of the revered matriarch whose son signified God's fulfillment of the covenantal promises to Abraham and resulted in the eventual appearance of the Jewish people on the stage of history? Or that of the beleaguered maidservant who suffered at that matriarch's hands, though her pregnancy had been engineered by the matriarch herself?

As they struggled with this issue, Jewish interpreters from the postbiblical period to our own time rewrote the story of Hagar and Sarah to reflect their own sensibilities as well as the norms and values of their own time and place. In this chapter, we will trace the ways in which the story was told and retold through the postbiblical, rabbinic, medieval, and modern/postmodern periods. In doing so, we shall see a complex, shifting, often uneasy relationship between Hagar and Sarah that over time and with liberal doses of patience and imagination evolves into a story of mutual respect, coexistence, and hope.

POSTBIBLICAL SOURCES

The postbiblical period, from the second century BCE through the second century CE, has left us with a significant number of Jewish texts that retell biblical stories, including that of Hagar and Sarah.[3] For example, the book of Jubilees, stemming from Palestine[4] in the mid-second century BCE, provides an account of what God ostensibly revealed to Moses during his forty days on Mount Sinai. It follows the basic outline of Genesis and the first several chapters of Exodus, but both adds and compresses, as well as interprets, the biblical narrative. Jubilees lingers only briefly on the stories of Hagar and Sarah. Jubilees 14:21–24 summarizes Genesis 16 but, significantly, omits Hagar's arrogance towards Sarai, as well as Sarai's behavior towards Hagar and Hagar's attempted escape. These omissions eliminate the problems inherent in the biblical account, and avoid the difficult moral dilemmas it invokes.[5] Jubilees 17 summarizes Genesis 21 but does not add any details to or comment upon the story of Hagar and Sarah.[6] Even sketchier is the account in the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo, a work that likely dates from first-century CE Palestine, which mentions only that, due to Sarai's infertility, Abram took Hagar, "his maid," who then bore him Ishmael.[7] No other details are forthcoming, not even Sarah's ownership of Hagar or the banishment of mother and child.[8]

A more extensive account is provided by Josephus Flavius, the first-century Jewish historian who is the source of much of our knowledge of Jewish life, soci-

ety, and history in Judea under Roman domination in the first century of the common era. His series of treatises, entitled *Jewish Antiquities*, begins with a retelling of biblical history. Here is his account of Genesis 16:

> God bade him [Abram] be assured that, as in all else, he had been led out of Mesopotamia for his welfare, so children would come to him; and by God's command Sarra brought to his bed one of her handmaidens, an Egyptian named Agar, that he might have children by her. Becoming pregnant, this servant had the insolence to abuse Sarra, assuming queenly airs as though the dominion were to pass to her unborn son. Abraham having thereupon consigned her to Sarra for chastisement, she, unable to endure her humiliations, resolved to fly and entreated God to take pity on her. But as she went on her way through the wilderness an angel of God met her and bade her return to her master and mistress, assuring her that she would attain a happier lot through self-control, for her present plight was but due to her arrogance and presumption towards her mistress; and that if she disobeyed God and pursued her way she would perish, but if she returned home she would become the mother of a son hereafter to reign over that country. Obedient to this behest she returned to her master and mistress, was forgiven, and not long after gave birth to Is(h)mael, a name which may be rendered "Heard of God," because God had hearkened to her petition. (*Ant.* 1.187–90)[9]

This section clearly takes the "side" of Sarai, but it does not portray Hagar as evil, merely as immature, ignorant, and misguided. Josephus returns to Hagar in his paraphrase of Genesis 21:

> Sarra at the first, when Ishmael was born of her servant Hagar, cherished him with an affection no less than if he had been her own son, seeing that he was being trained as heir to the chieftaincy; but when she herself gave birth to Isaac, she held it wrong that her boy should be brought up with Ishmael, who was the elder child and might do him an injury after their father was dead. She therefore urged Abraham to send him and his mother away to settle elsewhere. He, however, at first refused to consent to Sarra's scheme, thinking nothing could be more brutal than to send off an infant child with a woman destitute of the necessaries of life. But afterwards, seeing that Sarra's behests were sanctioned also by God, he yielded and, committing Ishmael to his mother, the child being not yet of age to go alone, bade her take a skin full of water and a loaf and be gone, with necessity to serve as her guide . . . An angel of god . . . told her of a spring hard by and bade her look to the nurture of the young child, for great blessings awaited her through the preservation of Ishmael. These promises gave her new courage, and, meeting some shepherds, she through their care escaped her miseries. (*Ant* 1.215–19)[10]

This account adds three important details to the biblical story. First, Sarah genuinely loved Ishmael, at least until Isaac was born. Second, Sarah's concern was primarily for the safety of her son Isaac, not the security of his inheritance. Third, Hagar and Ishmael survived their banishment to the desert at least in part due to the help of shepherds. Josephus here maintains and even enhances the positive evaluation of Abraham and Sarah, even as it does not denigrate Hagar, but he glosses over the moral issues that are inherent in the biblical account.

Among postbiblical authors it is Philo of Alexandria who pays the most attention to Hagar. Philo (approximately 50 BCE to 30 CE) was a Jewish philosopher whose goal was the reconciliation of Jewish Scripture with Greek philosophy, especially Stoicism and Neoplatonism.[11] He achieved this reconciliation primarily by interpreting the Bible as an elaborate allegory for the soul's journey to wisdom. Philo does not attach great importance to Hagar as an individual or as a character in a biblical story, nor does he show much concern for the moral issues raised by Genesis 16 and 21. Rather, he treats Hagar solely as an element in his thorough allegorical interpretation of Genesis. For Philo, "Hagar" means "sojourning," and refers specifically to the academic subjects with which the soul must "sojourn" temporarily on its way to wisdom and truth (*Allegorical Interpretation* 3.244; *On the Cherubim* 3–8).[12] When the seeker attains those truths, an achievement that is symbolized in Philo's allegorical system by the birth of Isaac, "then will be cast forth those preliminary studies which bear the name of Hagar, and cast forth too will be their son the sophist named Ishmael."[13]

But this is not to say that Hagar, that is, these preliminary studies, are unimportant. Indeed, Philo devotes an entire treatise to the subject of *Mating with the Preliminary Studies*. The preliminary studies that "virtue" employs are "no minor kind of introduction, but grammar, geometry, astronomy, rhetoric, music, and all the other branches of intellectual study. These are symbolized by Hagar, the handmaid of Sarah" (*Cong.* 11).[14] He explains further that Sarah, whose allegorical meaning is "virtue,"

> bears . . . the same relation to Hagar, education, as the mistress to the servant maid, or the lawful wife to the concubine, and so naturally the mind which aspires to study and to gain knowledge, the mind we call Abraham, will have Sarah, virtue, for his wife, and Hagar, the whole range of school culture for his concubine . . . he, then, who gains wisdom by instruction, will not reject Hagar, for the acquisition of these preliminary subjects is quite necessary. (*Cong.* 23–24)[15]

He concludes his treatise with a line addressed directly to his reader:

> When, then, you hear of Hagar as afflicted or evil-entreated by Sarah, do not suppose that you have here one of the usual accompaniments of women's jealousy. It is not women that are spoken of here; it is minds—on the one hand, the mind which exercises itself in the preliminary learning, on the other, the mind which strives to win the palm of virtue and ceases not till it is won. (*Cong.* 180)[16]

If his postbiblical peers simply ignore the difficult elements of the story, Philo allegorizes the story to the point where the surface meaning of the text is almost completely undone. In failing to address the moral dimensions of the text, all of these authors fail to call Sarah's behavior into question and hence implicitly validate her position of superiority. Our information is too sparse to permit speculation as to whether or how the situation of Roman domination may have led

these authors to emphasize Sarah's superiority over against the injustices done to Hagar.

RABBINIC SOURCES

Rabbinic literature, by contrast, is much less evasive. Rabbinic interpreters generally comment on specific verses or even parts of verses; they do not engage in a continuous narrative retelling of the Bible but their comments are often compiled in the order of the biblical verses to which they pertain. This genre of literature exists in the gray area between pure commentary and original creative composition. Comments are often prompted by linguistic, theological, narrative or homiletical pecularities, problems, or issues that emerge from the biblical text.[17] This type of commentary is referred to as "midrash," a Hebrew term deriving from the root "d-r-sh." This root literally means "to seek out" or "to inquire after," but in the context of biblical interpretation the term refers more specifically to the act of studying and interpreting the biblical text. As a genre of literature, midrash was prevalent in the rabbinic period, dating from the third through the tenth centuries CE. Individual comments, as well as collections of such comments, are called "midrashim." The rabbis to whom midrashic comments are attributed are often called "the Sages"; scholars disagree on the extent to which these attributions are historically correct.[18]

Rabbinic midrashic texts are often grouped into two categories. Midrash halakhah deals with the legal portions of the Bible, whereas midrash haggadah deals with the nonlegal sections of the biblical text. Discussions of Hagar and Sarah occur primarily in texts that belong to the category of midrash haggadah.[19] Many midrashic interpretations play on Hebrew homonyms, an aspect that often gets lost in translation. This playfulness suggests that midrashim were originally meant to be heard rather than read. Another important feature of midrash haggadah is polysemy—the belief that the text is subject to multiple interpretations and therefore cannot be reduced to one single "correct" meaning.[20]

Not surprisingly, rabbinic midrash tends to resolve the moral issues at stake in the biblical story of Hagar and Sarah in favor of the Israelite matriarch, but as we shall see, they are by no means blind to the moral dilemmas nor uniform in their assessment of the situation. We shall look briefly at rabbinic midrashim under four headings: status, fertility, revelation, and finally, Sarah's treatment of Hagar.

Status

The rabbis were well aware of the factors that from the Israelite point of view marked Sarah as superior to Hagar. One midrashic thread links Hagar's Egyptian identity to her status as Sarah's slave. The most developed example of this thread is found in *Genesis Rabbah*, a midrashic collection stemming from the area now known as Israel/Palestine, in the second half of the fifth century CE.[21]

> R. Simeon b. Yohai said: Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter. When Pharaoh saw what was done on Sarah's behalf in his own house, he took his daughter and gave her to Sarah, saying, Better let my daughter be a handmaid in this house than a mistress in another house. (*Gen. Rab.* 45:1)[22]

According to R. Simeon b. Yohai, Hagar is no ordinary slave woman, sold into slavery because of her lowly status. Rather, Hagar is the daughter of Pharaoh who could have had any prince as her husband. Yet her father gives her as a slave to the house of Abraham, in recognition of God's powerful, and dire, intervention on Sarah's behalf during the time that Sarah was in the Pharaoh's household (cf. Gen. 12:14–19).

Other midrashim suggest that Hagar's Egyptian origins mark her as an unreformed idolater. She may have worshiped the God of Israel while she was a member of Abraham's household, but Hagar reverted to her idolatrous state as soon as she was outside Abraham's sphere of influence. *Pirqe d'Rabbi Eliezer*, an eighth- or ninth-century compilation,[23] states that when Abraham banished Hagar and Ishmael the water did not run out until they reached the desert, as until that point they were still under the positive influence of Abraham's monotheism. When they reached the desert, however, "[s]he started wandering after the idol worship of her father's home and immediately the water ran out" (*Pirqe R. El.*, "Horeb," 29).

Less restrained in its negative assessment of Hagar's Egyptian origins is a midrash found in *Aggadat Bereshit*, a tenth-century collection of homilies on Genesis. Here the Sages draw a rather unflattering comparison between Hagar and a blob of donkey fat that has accidentally fallen into rose oil:[24]

> Even though its smell became pleasant from the rose oil, it ended up stinking as it had before. . . . The fat of a donkey is Hagar the Egyptian, as it says of the Egyptians (Ezek. 23:20) "whose members were like those of asses. . . ." Hagar cleaved to Abraham and gave birth to Ishmael . . . but in the end she returned to her stench as it is written, "And his mother took for him a woman from the land of Egypt" (Gen. 21:21). And this is why [the Bible] says that Abraham gave birth to Isaac whereas it says that Hagar gave birth to Ishmael.[25]

The quotation from Ezekiel connects idolatry to sexual promiscuity. Ezekiel 23:20 describes the lusting of Israel after the Egyptians: "She lusted for concubinage with them, whose members were like those of asses and whose organs were like those of stallions" (Ezek. 23:20). In drawing on this biblical passage, *Aggadat Bereshit* claims that Hagar is fertile because she comes from a sexually promiscuous people, not because she has found divine favor.

Not all the midrashim, however, view Hagar's Egyptian origins as an impediment to monotheism. *Yalkut Shimoni*, a compilation of midrashim composed in the twelth to thirteenth century from fifty earlier works,[26] lists Hagar first among nine righteous converts[27] including such important figures as Zipporah, Moses' wife, and Shifra and Puah, the Egyptian midwives who saved the Jewish boys from being drowned in the Nile.[28]

The Sages were attuned not only to Hagar's Egyptian origins but also to her status as a slave. So, for example, *Genesis Rabbah* 45:7 asserts that Hagar receives revelation solely to inform her that she is a slave:

> *And the angel of the Lord found her . . . and he said: Hagar, Sarah's handmaid* (Gen 16:8):[29] So runs the proverb: 'If one man tells you that you have ass's ears, do not believe him; if two tell it to you, order a halter.' Thus, Abraham said: Behold, thy maid is in thy hand (Gen 16:6); the angel said: Hagar, Sarai's *handmaid* . . . hence. *And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai.*[30]

The analogy invokes the image of a donkey, this time as a reflection not upon Hagar's ethnicity or sexuality, but her servitude. Like the donkey, Hagar the slave is a work animal. If Hagar believed that sharing her mistress's husband also meant sharing Sarah's social status, she was deluding herself. The angel confirms the contrary, by echoing Abraham's designation of Hagar as Sarah's handmaid.

Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer categorically denies the possibility that any events can change the inherently superior status of Sarah. In this text, God says to Abraham:

> Did you not know that Sarah was arranged for you from the time her mother conceived her and she is both your partner and a woman of your covenant. Sarah is not called your servant, rather your wife, and Hagar is not called your wife, rather your servant. (*Pirqe R. El.*, "Horeb," 29)

But just as Hagar's Egyptian origins did not irredeemably exclude her from the ranks of the righteous, neither did her lowly status as a slave. This point is illustrated by the following comment from midrash *Tanhuma Yelammedenu*, a group of homiletic midrashim on the Pentateuch from fifth-century Palestine.[31]

> May our rabbi teach us why a slave is counted among the seven that read from the Torah. [Answer]: Just as Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, because he was righteous, was compared to his master (Gen. 24:30), and the sons of the slave women [Bilha and Zilpa, the concubines of Jacob] were counted among the tribes,[32] so too God caused suffering to Abraham and Sarah and did not give them sons for the sake of Hagar who was a righteous woman, so that she would go in to Abraham, and he would have a son from her. (*Otsar HaMidrashim* [*OM*] 222:9–10).

Fertility and Divine Favor

On the whole, rabbinic literature does not fundamentally challenge Sarah's ethnic, marital, and social superiority to Hagar. But for the Sages, as for the biblical narrator, fertility destabilizes the fixed hierarchy between Hagar and Sarah. The high value placed on fertility as a marker of status is evident throughout *Genesis Rabbah*, chapter 45.

This chapter, like the majority of the chapters in *Genesis Rabbah*, begins with a proem, that is, a homily that takes a verse from the "Writings" portion of the Scriptures as the starting point for its discussion of a verse from the Torah or Pentateuch.[33] The proem that introduces *Genesis Rabbah* 45 builds its homily around Proverbs 31:10: "Who can find a worthy woman whose price (*mikhrah*) is beyond rubies?" The midrash asks: "What does 'mikhrah' mean? R. Abba b. Kahana said: 'Her pregnancy, as you read, *Thine origins (mekhorot) and thy nativity*'" (Ezek. 16:3). The Jerusalem Talmud explains that "righteous women, as in the case of Sarah, find pregnancy more difficult of attainment than rubies."[34] But underlying the midrash is also the notion that fertility is the trait that raises a woman's value—or status—"beyond rubies."[35]

Fertility is also important theologically. The central component of God's covenantal promise to Abraham is that he will be the patriarch of a great nation: "'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then [God] said to [Abraham], 'So shall your descendants be'" (Gen. 15:5). In order for God's promises to be fulfilled, Abraham must have at least one child, yet Sarah, like two of the three matriarchs who came after her, experienced extended periods of infertility before God finally intervened. This procreative delay creates a narrative crisis that is particularly disturbing in the story of Sarah and Abraham, the founders of the Israelite nation, as it is here that the question of continuity is most urgent.

In biblical narrative, it is God who controls female fertility. The biblical Sarai notes that it is God who has prevented her from giving birth (Gen. 16:2); in Genesis 18:10, one of the angels who comes to visit Abraham promises, on God's behalf, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." The promise is fulfilled in Genesis 21:1: "God remembered Sarah as God said; God did for Sarah what God had spoken." Most striking, however, is the fact that Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian handmaid, both gives birth and receives divine revelation before Sarah does.

If fertility is so closely connected to the divine will, how is it that Hagar—an Egyptian slave woman—conceives before Sarah—an Israelite and designated matriarch of the Jewish people? Rabbinic literature records two contrary responses to this question. One is to accept the presumed connection between fertility and divine favor; the other is to reject this link. The former response views Sarah's eventual conception of Isaac as a sign that she did indeed find favor in the eyes of the divine. This response is evident in midrashim that comment on the miraculous nature of Isaac's conception and birth. One example can be found in *Pesikta d'Rav Kahana*, a fifth-century homiletic midrash structured around the special readings for the festivals.[36] It reads,

> R. Berakhyah in the name of R. Levi said: You find that when our mother Sarah gave birth to Isaac the nations of the world said, "Impossible! Sarah did not give birth to Isaac, rather Hagar the maidservant of Sarah gave birth to him." What did God do? God dried up the teats of the women in the other nations and the matrons among them came and kissed the dust at

> Sarah's feet and said, "Do a good deed and breast feed our children." And Abraham said to Sarah: Sarah, this is not the time for modesty, sanctify the name of God by sitting in the market and breastfeeding their children. Thus it is written, "Sarah breastfed *children* [*banim*]" (Gen 21:7). It was not written "*ben*" (sg.) rather "*banim*" (pl.), not one child [*ben*], but many children [*banim*].[37]

The non-Jewish nations' misconception that Hagar gave birth to Isaac is an ironic echo of Sarah's hope that she will have a son through her maidservant. In order to rectify the misunderstanding, God causes a drastic miracle. Here, God's relationship with Sarah is not manifest through prayer and response, but rather through a miraculous birth.

In other midrashim, Sarah herself expresses the fear that her infertility may be a sign of divine disfavor. For example, in their comments on the verse "May the wrong done to me be upon you" (Gen. 16:5), the rabbis of *Genesis Rabbah* 45:5 portray Sarah as blaming Abraham for the fact that God has overlooked her desire for a child. According to this midrash, the situation responsible for Sarah's infertility "may be compared to two people who went to borrow seed from the king."

> One of them asked, "Lend me seed," and he ordered, "Give it to him." Said his companion to him, "I have a grievance against you. Had you asked, 'Lend *us* seed,' he would have given me just as he gave you; now however that you said, 'Lend *me* seed,' he has given you but not me." Similarly, hadst thou said, "Behold, to us Thou hast given no seed," then as He gave thee so had he given me. Now however that thou didst say, "Behold, to *me* Thou hast given no seed (Gen. 15:3), he gave to thee but not to me."[38]

Here Sarah insists that had her husband asked God for a son using the plural pronoun "we" rather than the singular pronoun "I," it would have been she and not Hagar who would have conceived and given birth. This midrash implies that women, whether Israelite or not, could connect with God only through the mediation of their husbands, and not through their own prayers.

Elsewhere, however, Sarah's fertility is seen as the ultimate proof of divine favor. In addition, Sarah's ability to breastfeed a multitude of children, described above in *Pesikta d'Rav Kavana*, demonstrates a radical shift in her status. A parallel to this midrash, found in the Babylonian Talmud *Bava Metzia* 87a,[39] describes her breasts as two fountains that flowed with enough milk to feed whoever came. God has transformed Sarah from a dry, barren, old woman to a goddess-like fertile mother.

Other midrashim reverse the presumed connection between fertility and the divine. For them, it is Sarah's very infertility that signifies her positive relationship to God. Commenting on the verse "and he went into Hagar and she conceived," *Genesis Rabbah* 45:4 explains:

> R. Levi b. Hayta said: [Hagar] became pregnant through the first intimacy. R. Eleazar said: A woman never conceives by the first intimacy. An objection is raised: surely it is written *Thus were both the daughters of Lot with*

> *child by their father* (Gen. 19:36)? . . . . R. Hanina b. Pazzi observed: Thorns are neither weeded nor sown, yet of their accord they grow and spring up, whereas how much pain and toil is required before wheat can be made to grow![40]

From the biblical perspective, the daughters of Lot, who got their father drunk, slept with him, and conceived his children (Gen. 19), exemplify fertility gone awry. The Sages use the example of these sisters to denigrate Hagar's own fecundity. Just as the offspring of Lot's daughters were the result of corruption, so too there is something suspect about Hagar's quick and easy conception. Hagar, like Lot's daughters, is compared to unruly weeds that impede rather than promote legitimate propagation. This metaphor not only casts aspersions on Hagar's divine connection but also delegitimizes Ishmael as the offspring of Abraham.

The continuation of this midrash provides two positive reasons for the infertility of Sarah and the other Israelite matriarchs. The first is "Because the Holy One . . . yearns for their prayers and supplications. . . ." The second, more pragmatic reason is explicated by R. Huna, R. Idi, and R. Abin in R. Meir's name:

> So that their husbands might derive pleasure from them, for when a woman is with child she is disfigured and lacks grace. Thus the whole ninety years that Sarah did not bear she was like a bride in her canopy. Ladies used to come to inquire how she was, and she would say to them, "Go and ask about the welfare of this poor woman [Hagar]." Hagar would tell them: "My mistress Sarai is not inwardly what she is outwardly: she appears to be a righteous woman, but she is not. For had she been a righteous woman, see how many have passed without her conceiving, whereas I conceived in one night!" Said Sarah, "Shall I pay heed to this woman and argue with her! No; I will argue the matter with her master!"[41]

Sarah's infertility is a divinely initiated communication; by referring to the biblical stories regarding the mothers' prayers for children, the midrash maintains that infertility, and not fertility, is in fact a sign of divine connection. And when Hagar attempts to convince the visiting matrons that fertility reflects one's righteousness and connection to God, the rabbis claim that Hagar's accusation is so far off the mark that Sarah refuses even to discuss it with her. By undermining the assumption that fertility signifies divine favor, the Sages are able to maintain Sarah's superiority despite her infertility.

Revelation and Divine Favor

But it is not only, or even primarily, her fertility that implies the biblical Hagar's link with the God of Israel. Rather, it is Hagar's encounters with angels in the desert that stress God's sympathy for Hagar and her plight (Gen. 16:7–13; 21:17–20). Indeed, the rabbis must contend seriously with the contrast between Hagar and Sarah in this regard: whereas Hagar met God's angels—and commu-

nicated with God directly, Sarah does so only once (Gen. 18:10), and even then it is Abraham who is the main audience for this revelation.[42]

The rabbinic responses to Hagar's angelic encounters vary widely. *Genesis Rabbah* 45:7 intensifies the biblical account by suggesting that Hagar sees not one angel but many:

> How many angels visited her? R. Hama b. R. Hanina said: Five, each time "speech" is mentioned it refers to an angel. The rabbis said: Four, this being the number of times "angel" occurs. R. Hiyya observed: Come and see how great is the difference between the earlier generations and the later ones! What did Manoah say to his wife? *We shall surely die, because we have seen God* (Judges 13:22); yet Hagar, a bondmaid, sees five angels and is not afraid of them! . . . R. Yitzhak said: "*She seeth the ways of her household*" (Proverbs 31:27). Abraham's household were seers, so she [Hagar] was accustomed to them.[43]

This midrash struggles with the question of why Hagar merited such abundant revelation. It diminishes the uniqueness of her experience by attributing her ability to see angels to her place in Abraham's household. Although Hagar is a mere servant in Abraham's household, she is accustomed to seeing angels and therefore she is not particularly bothered when she meets one (or five), while Manoah, despite his more illustrious lineage, believes that he will die because he has seen one.

In *Genesis Rabbah* 45:10, however, the Sages are less disparaging; they allow for the possibility that Hagar may have been able to see angels that were invisible to Sarah.

> I was favoured [to see an angel] not only when with my mistress, but even now that I am alone. R. Samuel said: This may be compared to a noble lady whom the king ordered to walk before him. She did so leaning on her maid and pressing her face against her. Thus her maid saw [the king], while she did not see him.[44]

This midrash emphasizes Hagar's ability to see angels by suggesting that even when the two women were together, there were times when Hagar was able to see divine beings and Sarah was not.

Sarah's Treatment of Hagar

The question of Sarah's divine favor is important not only for its own sake but also as a basis for the moral evaluation of her behavior towards Hagar. Some Sages tried to account for the fact that it was Sarah and not Abraham, the head of the household, who acted against Hagar. In *Genesis Rabbah* 45:6, Abraham draws on biblical verses to impress upon Sarah that he cannot act on her behalf in this matter:

> I am constrained to do her neither good nor harm. It is written, *Thou shalt not deal with her as a slave, because thou hast humbled her* (Deut 21:14): After we have vexed her, can we now enslave her again? I am constrained to do her neither good nor harm. It is written, *And Sarah dealt harshly with her,*

> *and she fled from her face* (Gen 16:6), while it is written, *To sell her unto a foreign people he shall have no power, seeing he hath dealt deceitfully with her* (Ex 21:8): after we have made her a mistress, shall we make her a bondmaid again? I am constrained to do her neither good nor harm; hence it is written, *and Sarah dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her face.*[45]

This passage betrays a hint of ambivalence with regard to Sarah's treatment of Hagar. In the midrash, Abraham bases his refusal to intervene upon verses from Deuteronomy and Exodus that describe the treatment of female war captives and Hebrew slaves. Deuteronomy forbids the enslavement of the captive taken for marriage (21:10–17); Exodus prohibits the selling of the Hebrew maidservant to foreign men (Exod. 21:7–11). These biblical instructions provide a striking counterpoint to our story. It would seem that Abraham has acquired Hagar in a manner prohibited by biblical law.[46] A wrong has already been done to Hagar; Abraham is unwilling to add to that wrong by punishing her on Sarah's behalf. For this reason, it is Sarah, not Abraham, who deals harshly with Sarah.

The Sages explicate the text in order to understand it better in all its dimensions, to articulate their own values, and to impress these values upon their audiences. Given their self-understanding as descendants of the covenantal people springing from the union of Abraham and Sarah, it is not surprising that many uphold Sarah's superior status and try to explain both her infertility and her behavior towards Hagar in a positive light. In this context, it is perhaps the dissenting voices—those that are willing to criticize Sarah and that view Hagar as an autonomous and worthy person in her own right—that are most significant. While their voices are not in the majority, neither have they been erased or suppressed.

MEDIEVAL JEWISH COMMENTARIES

Rabbinic midrash was succeeded in the Middle Ages by a new mode of biblical exegesis called *peshat*.[47] In contrast to rabbinic midrash, *peshat* did not posit a multitude of possible readings for each biblical verse but rather limited the possibilities to a small and finite number. Not for the medieval commentators was the midrashic tendency to lift words, phrases, or verses out of their immediate contexts in the biblical text. Nevertheless, midrashic interpretations had a measure of authority and were often quoted, if selectively. This was the practice of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (more commonly known as Rashi; 1040–1105 CE in Northern France), one of the earliest, and unquestionably the most famous, of the *pashtanim* (practitioners of the *peshat* method of exegesis).

In contrast to the Sages, most medieval Jewish commentators do not dwell on the relationship between Hagar and Sarah. Rashi quotes *Genesis Rabbah* at length in his comments to Genesis 16 and 21, and adds virtually no original ideas. Ibn Ezra, the Spanish grammarian (1089–1164), discusses various grammatical points but offers no insights into the characters or their actions. There are four commentators, however, who discuss the story in greater depth. These are Rabbi

David Kimchi (also known as Radak), Rabbi Levi ben Gershom (known as Ralbag), Nahmanides (known as Ramban), and Don Isaac Abarbanel. These commentators address the issue of morality in the context of Sarah and Abraham's marital relationship, and come to rather different conclusions as to the extent of Sarah's moral accountability for her behavior towards Hagar.

Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak), who lived in medieval Provencal (ca. 1160–1235), strongly condemns Sarah's treatment of Hagar:

> She did too much to her and she worked her ruthlessly, and it is possible that she hit her and cursed her until she could not endure it and she fled from before her. Sarah displayed in this neither the quality of morality and nor the quality of piety. Not morality because even though Abraham gave up his honor for her and said to her, *"Do what is right in your eyes,"* she [Sarah] should have restrained herself for his honor and should not have tortured her [Hagar]. And not piety and compassion, for a person should not do whatever is in their power to those who are subject to their authority. . . . And what Sarah did was not pleasing to God, as the angel said to Hagar: God heard your suffering, and he repaid her suffering with a blessing. And Abraham did not stop Sarah from torturing her—even though it was wrong in his eyes—for the sake of domestic harmony. This whole story was written in the Torah to teach people good qualities and to distance them from bad qualities.[48]

Radak's commentary holds Sarah to a high moral standard and blames her for failing to live up to these standards. In torturing Hagar, Sarah violates Abraham's honor; it reflects poorly on Abraham if his concubine is beaten by his own wife. More important, Sarah's actions violate the requirements of piety. Hagar, after all, is a human being even if she is a slave and therefore inferior in status. In Radak's view, Sarah's superiority should have been demonstrated not by cruelty and violence but by benevolence. Radak concludes his comments by affirming that the intention of the Torah is not to present idealized characters but to urge its readers towards self-improvement.

Rabbi Levi ben Gershom (Ralbag; France, 1288–1344) also views the text as a manual of moral behavior for its readers. In contrast to Radak, however, he is not willing to view the matriarchs and patriarchs as fallible. Ralbag recounts the story as follows:

> Behold Abram cohabited *with Hagar, and she conceived,* and her mistress was lessened in her eyes because of this, until she could not endure [the slavery]. (5) And Sarah did not want to torture her in order to remove Hagar's bad trait without the permission of Abram, and to this end she told him the way Hagar behaved towards her. And she got angry at Abram because he did not reprove Hagar, [and did not tell her] that she should not behave towards her mistress in this way. (6) And *Abram said to Sarai* that she should do to her maidservant as she sees fit, so that she would remove the lesser quality. Sarai tortured her to reprove her and Hagar fled. (7–8) And one of the prophets of that generation found her *at the well,* for she was fleeing, and he already knew that she was fleeing from Sarai her mistress. That prophet told her to

> return to her mistress and submit under her hand, and receive reproof from her, because Sarah's intent was for Hagar's own good, not to extract revenge from her.[49]

Ralbag, like Radak before him, comments on Hagar's inability to endure, but for a different reason. According to Radak, Hagar could not endure the harsh treatment of her mistress; her flight is therefore understandable and should be viewed with sympathy. For Ralbag, however, Hagar's inability to endure is evidence of her lower status as slave. In his view, the biblical statement that Sarah was lessened in the eyes of Hagar (Gen. 16:4) indicates that Hagar began to question the heretofore stable hierarchy of mistress and slave. Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar was intended to remove this weakness from Hagar's character, for Hagar's own good, of course.[50]

Nahmanides (Ramban; Spain, 1194–1271) was trained in the philological approach to the biblical text, but did not hesitate to use midrash and other rabbinic literature and analyze it critically. One aspect that makes Ramban's commentary unique is his use of typology. He views the actions of the matriarchs and patriarchs as prefiguring events that will happen to future generations.[51] Ramban arrives at a similar conclusion to Radak about the moral valence of Sarah's treatment of Hagar, but because his view of the biblical text is different, his response to her actions varies accordingly. He writes:

> Our mother sinned with this act of torture, as did Abraham by letting her do so. "And God heard her suffering" and gave her a son who would be a wild man to torture the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all sorts of mistreatment.[52]

In Ramban's view, the deeds of the ancestors foreshadow the fate of their progeny. Although he criticizes Sarah, and even blames her for the future enslavement of her children in Egypt, the homeland of Hagar, he affirms the ultimate superiority of Sarah and thus of her offspring to Hagar and her descendants:

> He [the angel] commanded her to return and accept Sarah's authority. This alludes to the fact that she would not be freed of Sarah, and that the children of Sarah would rule over her children forever.[53]

Don Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508; Spain, Italy) disagrees vociferously with Ramban's moral assessment of Sarah's behavior. He quotes Ramban's interpretation and then responds to it:[54]

> But this [Ramban's interpretation] is wrong, because the author of the Ethics [Aristotle] already wrote that correcting someone who has been imprinted with a lesser quality requires bending that person and forcing her to the opposite extreme. This is similar to the practice of those who try to straighten a bent stick by bending them in the opposite direction, so that when it springs up again it will stand straight. So too Sarah, when

> she saw Hagar behaving with arrogance and overweening pride, she tortured her and enslaved her more rigorously than normal. And all this [she did] towards a positive end, in order to return her to the mean. And she [Hagar], like one who rejects lessons, ran away from her by way of the desert.[55]

Like Ralbag before him, then, Abarbanel argues that Sarah did not act out of jealousy but out of a desire to improve Hagar's character by removing the negative traits of arrogance and pride.

Medieval commentators express their individual opinions regarding Sarah's behavior in the context of their overall perspective on the appropriate role of the Bible with regard to its audience. In all cases they view the Bible as instructive, though whether it fulfills this goal by elevating or by critiquing its protagonists is a matter of debate.

MODERN ANALYSES AND CREATIVE REINTERPRETATIONS

If the majority of medieval commentators are content to ignore Hagar and Sarah, their modern counterparts—including feminist writers and commentators—breathe new life into these matriarchs. In doing so, they allow us to view their relationship from different perspectives, often by revising the biblical story itself. Like their predecessors in the postbiblical, medieval, and rabbinic periods, contemporary writers address the issues of status and morality, but they also add a pressing political dimension. As Naomi Graetz notes, "Sarai and Hagar's discord have [sic] reverberated until the present day"[56] through the conflict between the peoples—Palestinians and Israelis—who trace their spiritual and even biological lineage back to the sons of Hagar and Sarah.

Many of these modern treatments adopt the norms and methods of modern biblical criticism and scholarship. That is, they place the events of Genesis 16 and 21 in their literary, social, and historical contexts, within the Bible as a literary composition, within Israelite history and law, and within the broader sphere of the ancient Near East, in particular its codes of law. Other contemporary reflections on the story can be classified as creative midrash. While they take the biblical story as their starting point, and often draw on traditional rabbinic and medieval commentaries, modern midrashists will rewrite the story to reflect or address contemporary concerns, or else imagine in some details the emotions and thoughts of the story's actors in ways that go well beyond either Bible or midrash. In doing so, they are also able to bring their readers into a dynamic engagement with the story and to encourage them (us) to consider the story's potential meanings for our own lives and times. We shall briefly survey the field by looking at comments pertaining to status and morality on the one hand and the pertinence of our story to history and politics on the other.

Status

As in earlier eras, modern writers on the biblical Hagar and Sarah comment extensively on issues pertaining to status. Tikva Frymer-Kensky's study of Hagar, for example, draws on the law codes of the surrounding peoples to explicate the legal background to the story: "The Hammurabi laws acknowledge the possibility that the pregnant slave woman might claim equality with her mistress, and they allow the mistress to treat her as an ordinary slave (Law 146)."[57] While Frymer-Kensky is not condoning the behavior of Sarah and Abraham in the biblical story, she finds that it is in accord with other ancient Near Eastern law codes. Elsewhere, however, the narrative deviates, not from Near Eastern law but from biblical law itself. She points out that in light of biblical law, it is odd that God requires Hagar to return. "Why should an angel [or God] respect property rights over the freedom of persons," particularly in the light of biblical law, which requires that runaway slaves should not be returned to their masters (Deut. 23:16)?[58] Frymer-Kensky's comments remind us that the status issues in Genesis 16 and 21 need to be understood in the broader context of the ancient Near East, not solely in terms of the biblical narrative and legal contexts.

Another writer who addresses status in terms of historical issues is Savina Teubal. In *Hagar the Egyptian*, Teubal argues that, contrary to the impression created by the biblical narrative, there was parity, not disparity, in the relative social status of Hagar and Sarah. According to Teubal's analysis, Hagar is neither slave nor concubine but the matriarch of a nation whom Teubal calls "Hagarites." In her view, both Hagar and Sarah were women struggling for religious and social rights in the context of an environment in which they enjoyed some measure of divinely sanctioned authority. As for the discrepancy between her reconstruction of the social context and the biblical account, Teubal blames the androcentrism of the latter. She argues that the men who constituted the military elite of ancient Israel suppressed Hagar's real story in favor of "the image of the archetypal hero": "If, during the early monarchy's recompilation of the biblical material, the powerful tribe of the Hagarites was known to acknowledge the matriarch Hagar as their common ancestoress [sic], a problem would have been posed for the androcentric writers who were attempting to highlight the patriarch: Descent was to be changed to the male line."[59] While creative, this analysis is so speculative as to be unconvincing from a historical point of view. Nevertheless it takes seriously a basic tenet of feminist interpretation, namely, the androcentrism of the biblical narrative.

Whereas Frymer-Kensky and, to some extent, Teubal, adopt the norms and approaches of the modern study of the Bible, Ellen Frankel's commentary takes the form, and allows itself the freedom, of traditional midrash. She sets up her commentary, *The Five Books of Miriam*, as a traditional Jewish commentary in which the biblical text is surrounded by the comments of the Sages, in this case including Sarah the Ancient One and Hagar. In Frankel's commentary, it is Hagar herself who ponders the instability of status in her relationship with Sarah: "When I conceived Abraham's child, my status was irrevocably changed. I became

the mother of my master's firstborn son. I fulfilled God's promise to grant seed to Abraham. And in so doing, I became Sarah's rival."[60]

Other writers approach the question of status through a creative and imaginative retelling of the story. Rosellen Brown, for example, simply reverses the plot as she rewrites the story. In her able hands, the biblical prophecy that Ishmael will be a "wild ass of a man" (Gen. 16:12) is transformed into a kinder, gentler prediction: "He shall be a gentle deer of a man." Her version of the story ends with the two brothers living peacefully and in harmony with each other.[61]

Vanessa Ochs tells the story of banishment from Hagar's point of view. She explores Hagar's feelings as mother who watches helplessly as her child is in dire distress, then receives divine revelation in a dream, understands its meaning, and musters the strength to carry on, day by day. Ochs brings these insights into reflections on her own parallel experience during the illness of a daughter and offers suggestions for how Hagar's story, via Ochs's reading, may be of help as we face similar situations.[62] In a similar vein, Naomi Rosenblatt offers a detailed set of reflections on the story and its implications for families and gender relations, especially in blended families in which there will be an inherent conflict of interest between stepmother and stepchildren.[63]

Norma Rosen has Sarah dream of Hagar as she seeks advice for how to deal with Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22). In facing the possibility that her own child will die—at the hands of his father—Sarah appeals to Hagar's maternal experience with regard to the near-death of her own child. "When death stalked your son in the desert, didn't you utter some prayer, some special supplication, that brought God's mercy down? You, whose son survived, can't you teach me words that give such blessing?" Hagar, who is now enthroned as an Egyptian queen, advises Sarah to submit, as she had once done, to the divine will: "If you are worthy, reap reward and rescue. Otherwise, your son's as good as dead." Hagar's advice is delivered with understandable coolness; she offers neither comfort nor blessings, and when Sarah embraces her knees, Hagar pushes her away.[64] Frankel has Hagar acknowledge that "both of us suffered in making this bargain—I because I remained a slave even after I bore Abraham a son; Sarah because her adopted son, Ishmael, always remained my son, the child of an Egyptian, a stranger to her."[65] For Rosen and Frankel, Hagar does not ever truly forgive Sarah for her behavior. Alicia Ostriker's Hagar is also not wholehearted in her willingness to match Sarah's contrition with her own forgiveness. Ostriker's Sarah tells Hagar, "We should be allies/we are both exiles, all women are exiles/I tell her/She smiles slyly. . . ."[66]

Karen Prager provides a warmer ending to a similar rewritten story. In Prager's creative midrash, Sarah prays to God out of remorse for how she had behaved towards Hagar: "God, I have wronged another women with what I demanded. How can I deserve Your benevolence?" God tells her to speak to Hagar. Sarah cries to Hagar and explains her bad behavior as residual anger from the time that she was Pharaoh's plaything (Gen. 12; cf. *Gen. Rab.* 45:1). Hagar offers Sarah a way to make amends: "Let Ishmael and Isaac grow up as brothers. Each shall have

two mothers and one father. You alone shall be my family. Together we will teach our children about the God we have found. Your child shall have his inheritance. Ishmael will know his homeland through our stories, and will return to Egypt to build a nation."[67] Prager's Hagar, in contrast to Rosen's, is ready to forgive Sarah for the well-being of their children.

A similar solution is offered in Brown's retelling, in which Hagar tells Sarah, "Let him do no thing that is grievous in thy sight. Thou also shall be as a mother to this child." Sarah, in turn, lays down the law to Abraham, who favored Isaac over Ishmael: "There shall be no peace in our house if thou dividest thy love as a loaf of bread in unequal portions. Forasmuch as God hath opened our wombs together to thee, neither son shalt thou put above the other."[68] As Frankel's Sarah notes, Sarah and Hagar have more in common than they themselves realized. "Shekhinah [God's female manifestation] understood that I was the pragmatist and Abraham the dreamer. Hagar too was a realist."[69]

Morality

The biblical narrator does not pass explicit moral judgment against either of the characters although, as we have seen, the story itself implicitly treats Sarah more harshly than it does Hagar. Like some of the Sages of the midrash, some of the contemporary commentators engage in apologetics. For example, Tamar Frankiel excuses Sarah's behavior, and in fact elevates it, on the grounds that women often have greater insight than men. According to Frankiel, Sarah "foresaw that the presence of Hagar's son would be dangerous to the future of the family, so he and his mother had to be separated from Isaac."[70]

Many others try to understand Sarah's behavior in a sympathetic way and to justify it without necessarily trying to excuse it. According to Tikva Frymer-Kensky, neither Sarai, who proposes Hagar, nor Abram, who agrees, mentions obtaining the consent of the slave girl. To contemporary readers, such consent seems necessary for the arrangement to be moral. But, as Frymer-Kensky notes, none of the ancient texts sees any ethical problem with this arrangement. Ancient societies accepted slavery as a regular part of social life. Using another person's body as a surrogate for one's own is part of the fabric of slavery.[71]

In Frankel's Torah commentary, Hagar asks for pity as "a powerless Egyptian slave, a shadow to Wife Number One, a surrogate womb." Sarah, in turn, explains that her actions were motivated by a larger divine plan, as a foreshadowing of the experience of slavery. But she acknowledges, "It cost me everything—from that moment on, I disappear from my own story. I am not heard from again in the Bible."[72] Mother Rachel explains: "Clearly, it's not easy for Sarah to share her marriage bed, especially with her own slave."[73] Here, Sarah's problematic behavior is explained on two grounds: jealousy and the exigencies of history, and the cost is acknowledged.

Like Frankel's "Mother Rachel," Norma Rosen tries to re-create the feelings of the biblical characters. When she realizes that Abraham is preparing to take Isaac away from her (Gen. 22), Rosen's Sarah laments, "He had been more attentive when he sent Hagar from the house with Ishmael. He had been more reluctant to expel *them*. He had caressed *that* mother, kissed *that* child."[74] Naomi Rosenblatt also focuses on Sarah's jealousy and attributes Sarah's violent behavior to her emotional state: "She hadn't meant to chase Hagar away from their camp. She only wanted to teach her her place, remind her who was the wife and who the servant. . . . She went too far by beating her, and deeply regretted it. But Hagar had provoked her with her insolence, and Sarai had been careful only to strike her on the hands and feet, so as not to harm the child."[75] This explanation verges on apologetics. In fact there is no hint in the text that Sarah exercised any restraint. On the other hand, the absence of interiority on the part of the characters does allow for the possibility that Sarah did not go as far as she could have. Along the same lines, Marsha Pravda Mirkin states that "Sarah became the oppressor as well as the oppressed, too caught up in her own sorrow to reach out to her servant with that woman-to-woman empathy that could transcend their ethnic and class differences."[76]

History

Many commentators look at the story in terms of the broad sweep of Israelite history. For Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Hagar serves as a model for later Israelite history. As an Egyptian slave, she foreshadows the period of Israel's own slavery in Egypt, and God's intervention on behalf of Hagar and Ishmael similarly foreshadows his later intervention in rescuing Israel from Egypt. It is somewhat ironic that the Egyptian slave woman becomes the archetype of or model for Israelite history, but the parallels are clear. In Frymer-Kensky's words, "[t]he pattern of Hagar and Abram and of later Israel shows that the way to God's reward is through the margins of society and the depths of degradation. Only then, it seems, does God redeem."[77]

Like the medieval commentator Ramban, Ellen Frankel sees Hagar as the beginning of a recurring pattern in Israelite history. She has the "historian," Serah bat Asher, comment that

> Hagar's first exile is temporary. But after the birth of Isaac, Sarah orders Hagar and her son banished for good. And so begins the fateful swing of history's pendulum: Abraham banishes Ishmael; two generations later, the Ishmaelites sell Abraham's great-grandson Joseph into Egyptian slavery. Sarah banishes Hagar the Egyptian; later, Egypt enslaves Sarah's descendants for four hundred years.[78]

Frankel thereby brings Hagar into the main sweep of Israelite and Jewish history in which slavery and the exodus are the formative events of Jewish identity and the prime evidence of God's intervention in history on behalf of God's people.

Politics

Perhaps the major difference between the approach of contemporary writers to that taken by their predecessors throughout the history of Jewish literature is the political dimension. One such approach is visible in the Jewish response to the use of the Hagar and Sarah story in womanist biblical interpretation. Ruth Behar notes that "African American readers have lovingly claimed Hagar as their own, made her a foremother, taken pride in her struggle, formed spiritual churches in her name, and led the way in creative appropriations of her story," especially when slaves were forced to bear children by their masters because wives were barren.[79] She concludes: "We were slaves in Egypt, yes, but let us not forget that we also enslaved. Let us not forget that slavery was carried by human beings, by the very human beings whose names we invoke in our Jewish prayers, but it was inhuman. . . . Reading the story of Sarah and Hagar, we can begin to risk compassion for ourselves and for others."[80] A very different response is recorded by Pamela Tamarkin Reis, who describes her pain and discomfort at a scholarly meeting in which she listened to a womanist reading of the Hagar and Sarah story that identified the oppressors of black slaves as Jews. "This speaker's vilification of Sarah went beyond the fringes of biblical exegesis into the outskirts of anti-Semitism. She spoke of what she considered the racism of the ancient Hebrews, of their preoccupation with financial matters, of their insistence on their chosenness, and compared these traits with those of contemporary people."[81]

More often, however, the Hagar and Sarah story is seen both as a precursor of and an analogy to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ruth Behar urges us to "lay Sarah and Hagar to rest, side by side, in the same blood-ravaged land."[82] Lynn Gottlieb is perhaps the most eloquent voice on this theme:

> Sarah and Hagar are the first matriarchs of the Jewish and Muslim peoples. . . . It is a tragedy that religion and ideology have transformed this story into a conflict of faiths and peoples. The ultimate irony is the consequent suffering of the hundreds of thousands of women and children who have died as a result of religious and national wars fought in the name of this text. Let us give honor to the origins of our people by reframing the story. Let us stand together against the abuse of children and women in the name of religion. Women, let us extricate our peoples from the patriarchal borders that make it impossible to see one another as sisters sharing a common bond.[83]

Gottleib's poem *Achti* was intended to encourage "Jews and Palestinians to acknowledge our common humanity and end the violence between our peoples." Here Sarah begs Hagar, her sister, for forgiveness, in a cadence reminiscent of the solemn prayers of atonement that characterize the High Holy Day liturgy: "Forgive me, Achti/For the sin of neglect/For the sin of abuse/For the sin of arrogance/Forgive me, Achti,/For the sin of not knowing your name."[84]

The story has also been introduced in contemporary creative liturgy. Genesis 21 is already part of the annual New Year (Rosh Hashanah) liturgy, as the Torah reading chanted on the first day of this two-day festival. But in recent years, some

households have incorporated a blessing that there be peace between the sons of Sarah and Hagar into their recitation of the grace after meals.[85]

CONCLUSION

Hagar and Sarah have traveled long and far, together and apart. They begin their journey in Genesis 16 and 21 as rivals, jostling for position in the eyes of their husband, in the eyes of God, in the eyes of the narrator, and in the eyes of their readers. As their story is told and retold from the postbiblical period to our own day, their roles are sometimes entrenched, sometimes questioned, sometimes reversed, according to the personal views of their successive storytellers and the ways in which these storytellers themselves understood their situation as Jews. While each age shows a greater or lesser amount of diversity in the roles assigned to Hagar and Sarah and in the moral evaluation of their behavior, it is palpably in the last thirty years that commentators have felt freest to exercise their creativity, and to rewrite and rework these stories thoroughly enough to make them speak to and resonate with contemporary female experience, in the light of personal relationships and/or in the light of the political considerations raised by the Israel/Palestine conflict. The reconciliation of Hagar and Sarah in many of these stories eloquently articulates the hopes and prayers for peace. May it also be a foreshadowing of peace, grounded in profound respect for humankind and the commonality of human experience, shared by women and men across cultural, religious, and political boundaries that both define us and yet unite us.

Notes

1. See Gen. 12:2: "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."
2. See, for example, Deut. 15, which discusses the treatment of the poor and disadvantaged.
3. For an introduction to the literature of this period, see Bruce N. Fisk, *Do You Not Remember? Scripture, Story and Exegesis in the Rewritten Bible of Pseudo-Philo*, Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha Suppl. Series 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
4. The term "Palestine" is not intended as a reference to the modern-day territories in the Middle East that are now or may at some point come under the control of the Palestinian people in the context of a political settlement of the current conflict. Rather, this is the usual usage in the field for the Middle East areas where Jews were the ethnic majority in the postbiblical period.
5. James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1st ed., 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 2:85.
6. Ibid., 2:89–90.
7. This text was attributed incorrectly to Philo of Alexandria, as the Latin text circulated along with the Latin translations of Philo's works, hence the attribution of authorship to "Pseudo-Philo."
8. Charlesworth, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:313.

9. Flavius Josephus et al., *Jewish Antiquities*, vol. 4, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 93–95.
10. Ibid., 107–9. For a detailed study of Josephus's works as rewritten Bible, see Louis H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible*, Journal for the Study of Judaism Suppl. 58 (Leiden: New York: Brill, 1998).
11. For a useful introduction to Philo, see Samuel Sandmel, *Philo of Alexandria: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). See also Maren R. Niehoff, "Mother and Maiden, Sister and Spouse: Sarah in Philonic Midrash," *Harvard Theological Review* 97, no. 4 (October 2004): 413–44.
12. Philo of Alexandria, vol. 1, *Philo: With an English Translation*, trans. F. H. Colson and George Herbert Whitaker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), 467.
13. Ibid., vol. 2, 11–13.
14. Ibid., vol. 4, 463.
15. Ibid., vol. 4, 467–71.
16. Ibid., vol. 4, 551. For a detailed study of this subject, see Alan Mendelson, *Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria*, Monographs of the Hebrew Union College, no. 7 (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1982).
17. David Stern, "Midrash and Midrashic Interpretation," *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1872.
18. For discussion about historicity and other central issues pertaining to the academic study of rabbinic literature, see Richard Lee Kalmin, *Sages, Stories, Authors, and Editors in Rabbinic Babylonia*, Brown Judaic Studies, no. 300 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994).
19. In this paper are included aggadic works both from the rabbinic and postrabbinic periods. These latter works (such as *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* and *Aggadat Bereshit*) do not fall strictly under the category of midrash, but are rather more fluid retellings of biblical narrative or homiletical discourses.
20. For an excellent introduction to midrash see Stern, "Midrash and Midrashic Interpretation," 1863–1875. See also Michael A. Fishbane, *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Irving Jacobs, *The Midrashic Process: Tradition and Interpretation in Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For dating and other technical information see H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, ed. and trans. Markus Bockmuel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).
21. For more information see Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 276–83.
22. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, *The Midrash Rabbah Genesis*, new compact ed., vol. 1 (London: Soncino, 1977), 380.
23. For an English translation see Gerald Friedlander, *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981).
24. For more information see Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 311. For an English translation see Lieve M. Teugels, *Aggadat Bereishit* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2001).
25. Menahem Cohen, ed., *Mikraot Gedolot HaKeter* (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar Ilan Press, 1997), 159.
26. Ibid., 351–52.
27. The word *ger* used here can mean either stranger or convert, but in rabbinic literature the latter meaning is predominant.
28. The full text of the midrash reads, "There are righteous *giyorot* (converts): Hagar, Osnat, Zipporah, Shifra, Puah, the daughter of Pharaoh, Rahab, Ruth and Yael the wife of Heber the Kenite" (*Yalkut Shimoni, Remez* 9).
29. In these quotations, biblical citations are italicized.

30. Freedman and Simon, *The Midrash Rabbah Genesis*, 385.
31. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 4–6. Since this literature is not one unified work, it is difficult to date each individual midrash. See Mark Bregman, *Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature: Studies in the Evolution of the Versions* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003).
32. Cf. Gen. 30:6 and 30:11 for the names of the sons of Bilha and Zilpa. Cf. Exod. 1:1–4 for a listing of the sons of Jacob that went to Egypt.
33. The Hebrew Scriptures are divided into three sections: Torah (Pentateuch), the Prophets, and the Writings. The last-named category includes the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles.
34. Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah,* 379; see also n. 22, loc cit.
35. This is an equivocal comment, for it implies the commodification of a woman's value insofar as it can be compared to that of rubies. Another, less objectionable interpretation would be that fertility is of greater value to a woman's status than the possession of rubies would be for her status.
36. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 291–96. For an English translation see William G. (Gershon Zev) Braude and Israel J. Kapstein. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana,* 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002).
37. Variations on this midrash occur in the Babylonian Talmud (BM 87a) and in *Genesis Rabbah* 53.9.
38. Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, 383.
39. Redacted in the sixth century, the Babylonian Talmud is a work structured not around the biblical text but rather around the text of the Mishna, an earlier legal code. It includes both discussions that are halakhic in nature as well as those aggadic in nature.
40. Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, 381.
41. Ibid., 381–82.
42. There Sarah speaks to Abraham and denies her laughter. The response "No but you laughed" could either be read as a response from God (as *Genesis Rabbah* 45:9 wants to read it) or as a response from Abraham to Sarah's denial.
43. Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah,* 385.
44. Ibid., 388.
45. Ibid., 384.
46. Variations on the argument between Abraham and Sarah can be found in *Tosefta Sotah* 5:12 and *Midrash Mishlei* 26:24.
47. For an overview of medieval exegesis see Barry Walfish, "Medieval Jewish Interpretation," *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1876–1900.
48. Except for the passages from *Genesis Rabbah*, which are taken from Freedman and Simon, *The Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 1, all other translations are those of Miriam-Simma Walfish.
49. Cohen, *Mikraot Gedolot HaKeter*, 159.
50. At the end of his commentary on the episode, Ralbag mentions that the being whom Hagar met in the desert was not an angel but a prophet. This revision to the biblical story may simply be his attempt to deny Hagar her divine encounter. It is possible, however, that this interpretation does not express a negative attitude towards Hagar so much as Ralbag's own rationalist discomfort with the very notion of angels.
51. Walfish, "Medieval Jewish Interpretation," 1892.
52. Cf. Barry D. Walfish, "An Introduction to Medieval Jewish Biblical Interpretation," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism,*

Christianity, and Islam, in ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry Walfish, and Joseph Ward Goering (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

53. Cohen, *Mikraot Gedolot HaKeter*, 159.
54. Abarbanel's commentary is not verse by verse. Rather, he takes a larger passage, asks a number of questions regarding it, and proceeds to answer them.
55. Cohen, *Mikraot Gedolot HaKeter*, 159.
56. Naomi Graetz, *Unlocking the Garden: A Feminist Jewish Look at the Bible, Midrash and God*, 1st Gorgias Press ed. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005), 91.
57. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Hagar," in *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*, ed. Carol L. Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross Shepard Kraemer (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 86.
58. Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 230.
59. Savina J. Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); and *Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch of Genesis* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1984).
60. Ellen Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1996), 18.
61. Rosellen Brown, "Hagar and Sarah, Sarah and Hagar," in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days*, ed. Gail Twersky Reimer and Judith A. Kates (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 33.
62. Vanessa L. Ochs, *Sarah Laughed: Modern Lessons from the Wisdom & Stories of Biblical Women*, 1st ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005).
63. Naomi H. Rosenblatt and Joshua Horwitz, *Wrestling with Angels: What the First Family of Genesis Teaches Us about Our Spiritual Identity, Sexuality, and Personal Relationships* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1995), 190.
64. Norma Rosen, *Biblical Women Unbound: Counter-Tales* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 48.
65. Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam*, 17.
66. Alicia Ostriker, *The Nakedness of the Fathers: Biblical Visions and Revisions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 68.
67. Karen Prager, "God's Covenant with Sarah," in *Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Sourcebook*, ed. Naomi M. Hyman (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), 25.
68. Brown, "Hagar and Sarah, Sarah and Hagar," 33–34.
69. Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam*, 19.
70. Tamar Frankiel, *The Voice of Sarah: Feminine Spirituality and Traditional Judaism*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 7.
71. Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 227.
72. Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam*, 18.
73. Ibid., 19.
74. Rosen, *Biblical Women Unbound*, 46.
75. Rosenblatt and Horwitz, *Wrestling with Angels*, 141.
76. Marsha Pravder Mirkin, "Hearken to Her Voice: Empathy as Teshuvah," in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days*, ed. Gail Twersky Reimer and Judith A. Kates (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 65.
77. Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 232–33.
78. Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam*, 19.
79. Ruth Behar, "Sarah and Hagar: The Heelprints Upon Their Faces," in Reimer and Kates, *Beginning Anew*, 40.
80. Mirkin, "Hearken to Her Voice: Empathy as Teshuvah," in Reimer and Kates, *Beginning Anew*, 42.

81. Pamela Tamarkin Reis, *Reading the Lines: A Fresh Look at the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 56.
82. Behar, "Sarah and Hagar," 43.
83. Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within: A Feminist Vision of a Renewed Judaism*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 88–90.
84. Ibid., 89–90.
85. Often these are in unpublished but nonetheless broadly circulating copies of the Grace After Meals. One such is called *Anim Zemirot*, copyright Leah J. Solomon, 1999. Another is the book created by Barry Walfish et al., for the occasion of the wedding of Miriam-Simma Walfish and Michael Rosenberg.