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Non-Israelite Women Challenging Gender Roles

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How Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael
assume male roles within the
TaNaCh

Contents

1.	Contents
2.	Introduction
11.	Hagar in the TaNaCh
17.	A Commentary on the Hagar Texts
32.	Hagar: The Patriarch of her People
39.	Tzipporah in the TaNaCh
45.	A Commentary on the Tzipporah Texts
61.	Tzipporah: The First Female Mohel and Betrother
69.	Yael in the TaNaCh
74.	A Commentary on the Yael Texts
86.	Yael: The Female Warrior and Emasculator
94.	The Portrayal of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael in Midrash Rabbah
115.	Conclusion
123.	What next?
124.	Bibliography

Introduction

Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael may at first seem like a strange selection of Biblical characters to study. The only obvious factor which unites these women is their status as non-Israelites in stories centered around the Israelite people. Yet upon closer examination, we discover that these women share far more than their non-Israelite status; they are also, and more significantly, united by their actions that challenge the gender roles to which women are typically consigned in the Bible, behaving in ways which are best compared with other men rather than women. Hagar is chosen as the Patriarch for her people, Tzipporah becomes the first female mohel and betrother, and Yael emerges as a fierce warrior and emasculator of men.

The aim of this study will be to demonstrate the way in which these three women challenge the typical female gender role of the TaNaCh. It will paint a picture of each of these women, based exclusively on the text, revealing the way in which they stepped outside of the female sphere to behave in a manner which would elsewhere be restricted to men. In addition, it will shed a scrutinizing light on a book that has been credited as the source and foundation of the woman's traditional role in Judaism; illuminating how it can be seen as a source for a reimagining of both gender roles and perceptions, and a call for gender equality.

The Non-Israelite Identity of these women:

Before examining the way in which these three women behave in the pages of the TaNaCh it is important to clarify the non-Israelite identity which unites them.

The introduction of Hagar is completely unambiguous about her non-Israelite identity: וְלָהּ שִׁפְחָה מִצְרַיִת וְשֵׁמָּה הָגָר, "and she [Sarai] had an Egyptian maidservant, and her name was Hagar" (Gen. 16:1). Her Egyptian identity is one of the three elements with which she is introduced, alongside her status as a maidservant, and her name. While some may argue that she marries Abraham,¹ the text does not appear to suggest at any point that she joined the Israelites through this marriage. In fact, throughout the text, her non-Israelite identity is maintained. When Abraham is given a blessing by God in Genesis 17, it is made clear that although Isaac, the descendant of Sarah, will be the covenanted son, Hagar's son, Ishmael, will also become a great nation (Gen. 17:16-21). Both are bestowed with a destiny

¹As a result of the ambiguity of the Hebrew it is not clear whether she is simply a concubine or actually a wife.

from God, but it is a separate destiny, which may be related to sharing a father, but possessing different mothers. Most significantly, at the end of Hagar's story, she does not find a wife for Ishmael from among Abraham's people. Instead, Hagar "took for him a wife from the land of Egypt" (Gen. 21:21); she returned to her land and her people to find a wife for her son, demonstrating the fact that from beginning to end she remained an Egyptian, and therefore a non-Israelite.

Before encountering Tzipporah directly, there are two details which are known about her: *וּלְכֹהֵן מִדְיָן שִׁבְעַת בָּנוֹת* "Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters" (Ex. 2:16). She has six sisters, and she is the daughter of the priest of Midian, revealing her non-Israelite, Midianite identity. The challenge with regard to Tzipporah is the fact that she clearly marries Moses (Ex. 2:21) and therefore could be considered to assume the identity of her husband. However, when one looks at the text, while Tzipporah is married to Moses, she also appears in connection with her father Yitro, and as such remains under his Midianite influence. The text in Exodus 16:1 and 17:1 both make reference to *כָּל־עַדַּת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל* "the entire Israelite community" in the context of their journey towards Sinai. In Exodus 18, it is discovered that Tzipporah was not with the Israelites, and one may conclude that after the double reference and double emphasis of *כָּל־עַדַּת* "the entire community" her absence is not significant for she is not considered part of the community, she remains a Midianite. As a final indication of her non-Israelite status, when Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses' wife, they refer to his "Cushite wife" (Num. 12:1). While there is some debate about whether this is Tzipporah,² it is my opinion that not only is this Tzipporah, but this designation demonstrates that despite many years of marriage, she remains an outsider, considered a non-Israelite by both her brother-in-law and sister-in-law.

The final woman of the trio is in some ways the hardest one to define specifically as non-Israelite, for her individual national identity is never revealed.³ Yael is introduced as

² The Word Biblical Commentary and Anchor Bible both assert that the Cushite wife is not Tzipporah: "There is no attempt to identify this woman with Zipporah" (Budd 1984:136) and "The woman in question was most certainly not Zipporah" (Levine 1993:328). However, nowhere does the text specify that Moses took a wife other than Tzipporah, and as the International Critical Commentary concedes, after considering the various options, "a decisive choice between these alternatives is scarcely justified" (Gray 1986:121).

³ There are suggestions that Yael's name is a Yahwistic declaration that Yah(weh) is God, but this relies on the idea that the aleph and ayin elide; for the meaning would only work if her name *יָאֵל*. However, the text presents her name as *יַעֲל*, which is not specifically Yahwistic, and therefore not a cause for claiming Israelite identity.

being אִשְׁתֹּ חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי “the wife of Chever the Kenite” (Jud. 4:17). There is no debating the fact that her husband is a non-Israelite; the text even gives additional details about his Kenite identity, מִבְּנֵי חֶבֶב חִתָּן מֹשֶׁה “from the children of Chovav, the father-in-law of Moses” (Jud. 4:10). The text does not specify that Yael was a Kenite, but with no other indication, one may assume that she was a member of the same people as her husband, and therefore a Kenite. The text appears to support this assertion in the explanation of why Sisera fled to Yael’s tent: כִּי שָׁלוֹם בֵּין יָבִין מֶלֶךְ־חָצוֹר וּבֵין בֵּית חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי “for there was peace between Yavin, the king of Chazor, and the House of Chever the Kenite” (Jud. 4:17). She is part of this grouping, as Chever’s wife and a Kenite. As a secondary note it is unlikely that Sisera would have fled to the tent of an Israelite, when fleeing from Barak and his Israelite army. And in the midst of all of the praise which is heaped upon Yael by Deborah there is no suggestion that she was an Israelite, a fact which would in all likelihood have been emphasized were it true.

The Classification of Women in the Bible:

When examining the subject of women in the Bible there are many approaches that scholars have taken to group the various Biblical women together. Some scholars have sought to group women together by their location in specific Biblical books (see Ogden Bellis 1994), so that there is a chapter about ‘The Women of Genesis’ and another on ‘The Women of Exodus and Numbers’. Another approach is to consider the roles which the different women fulfill in the stories about them (see Brenner 1989), with chapters about ‘Women Poets and Authors’ and ‘Magicians, Sorcerers and Witches’. A final approach is to divide the women of the Bible into a number of categories (see Frymer-Kensky 2002), and then in the categories to subdivide them under broader headings. Among all of these various approaches, Hagar, Tziporah and Yael do not belong to a shared group, and thus have never been analyzed or studied in relation to one another.

In Athalya Brenner’s book *The Israelite Woman*, all three feature in the introduction to her chapter entitled ‘Foreign Women’. “Hagar was an Egyptian slave ... Moses’ wife

Zipporah was a Midianite ... Jael was a Kenite” (115).⁴ However, it is only Yael who is analyzed in detail in this chapter. For Brenner, the non-Israelite identity of Yael appears to only be significant when deciding where to situate her. Tzipporah is considered in a chapter entitled ‘Magicians, Sorcerers and Witches’, while Hagar is part of the chapter about ‘Mothers of Great Men’. The non-Israelite identity of Tzipporah and Hagar is secondary for Brenner when considering the role which they play in the TaNaCh; Tzipporah is first a sorcerer and Hagar is primarily Ishmael’s mother; both depictions obediently adhering to the traditional roles assigned to women in the Bible.

In Tikva Frymer-Kensky’s *Reading the Women of the Bible*, she divides the women into: ‘Victors’, ‘Victims’, ‘Virgins’, and ‘Voice’.⁵ Both Tzipporah and Yael belong to the group of ‘Victors’. Tzipporah is one of the ‘Saviors of the Exodus’, while Yael is paired with Deborah in a section entitled: ‘Warriors by Weapon and Word’. Hagar is separated from Yael and Zipporah, and is situated as one of the ‘Virgins’ in her own sub-section entitled: ‘Hagar, My Other, My Self’. The national identity of the women in the Bible is not Frymer-Kensky’s primary concern and as such, the unity between Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael as non-Israelite women is ignored.

When attempting a piece of work which requires a consideration of all the women in the Bible, it is clear that many of the women could be classified under a variety of categories. Hagar is a foreign woman, a slave, a young-bride, a mother and a woman who speaks with angels. Tzipporah is a foreign woman, a shepherdess, a bride, a mother, a circumciser and a betrother. Yael is a foreign woman, a wife, a homemaker, a hostess, and a killer. The author of such a work has to make a decision regarding what is the most significant characteristic of each woman and where they are most appropriately situated in the context of the other women in the study. In a book which examines all of the Biblical women, it is easy to separate these three women into different sections, as is seen in the examples of Brenner and Frymer-Kensky. But to do this is to overlook significant commonalities that unite these women.

⁴ There are many ways in which Biblical names may be spelled. I will be using Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael as the spelling of the three central characters, but when quotations have a different spelling these will be maintained in the references.

⁵ The names serve an alliterative role; by virgin she means bride to be, and by voice she means the voice of God (see xvii).

The classification of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael as a single group:

At first glance, Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael may appear as an incomplete group of Biblical women. While the three of them are united by their non-Israelite origins, they are clearly not united by a single non-Israelite identity. Hagar is an Egyptian, Tzipporah is a Midianite, and Yael is a Kenite.⁶ If this were just a study of non-Israelite women in the TaNaCh, there are a number of other women who would need to be considered, including, but not limited to: Rahab, Delilah, Jezebel and Ruth.

The stories of these women are all very different. Ruth's story is that of a non-Israelite, specifically a Moabite, who follows her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, and whose children are born Israelites. Jezebel was the Phoenician wife of King Ahab, who promoted the worship of Baal as opposed to Adonai. Delilah was Samson's Philistine wife and the one who ultimately delivered him into the hands of his enemies. Finally, Rahab was a harlot in the city of Jericho, who protected the Israelite spies and as a result she and her family were saved when the land was conquered. All four of these women have very different stories and experiences. When joined with the stories of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael, it becomes clear that there is no single and unified non-Israelite female experience within the TaNaCh.

The selection of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael as a unique subgroup within the category of non-Israelite women comes from a shared characteristic within their TaNaCh experience, one that distinguishes them from the other non-Israelite women.⁷ The non-Israelite origin of these three women serves as an initial point of unity, but the similarities between them go far deeper. The significance of the similarities that unite the stories of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael lies in the behavior each woman exhibits; countering the traditional female role within the TaNaCh. More specifically they behave, or are treated by the text, in ways which find comparisons in the stories of other prominent men in the Bible, not other women.

⁶ There is clearly a relationship with Tzipporah and Yael as the Kenites are specified as being "from the children of Chovav, the father-in-law of Moses" (Jud. 4.10), but at no point in the text is Tzipporah referred to as a Kenite, or Yael as a Midianite, and so the text never unites them as coming from one non-Israelite group.

⁷ The non-Israelite women as an entire group would be a fascinating subject for another study as they all appear to function in interesting ways. In the context of this study, having reviewed the material it is possible that Rahab could be added to this group of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael, for in her actions it is possible to discern a challenge to gender roles, and perhaps if this study develops into further projects she will provide a fourth example.

Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael challenging gender roles:

In general, the TaNaCh appears to confine the female domain. As Frymer-Kensky states: "Women, while not physically confined to the home, expended most of their energies there. Economically dependent on the head of their households, they had a limited ability to determine events beyond their own families" (xiii). Alongside this picture, Ogden Bellis notes: "Before marriage, a woman was dependent on her father for support. After marriage, she relied on her husband." (22). In this way, the women were first daughters, and then wives, and as such their roles were centered primarily around the home (or the tent). "The woman's primary responsibility was to bear children for her husband" (Ogden Bellis 1994:21), and after their children were born she was responsible for raising them. The primary women in the Book of Genesis (Eve, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah) establish this pattern of providing support for their husbands (or their families), giving birth to children and then raising them.

Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael all conform to one or more elements of this traditional female role. Hagar is a maidservant who is first introduced because of the possibility that Abraham may impregnate her. After she gives birth, she is primarily viewed as the mother of Ishmael. Tzipporah is first the daughter of the Midianite priest, tending to the family flock with her sisters. She is then given as a wife to Moses and immediately bears him a son, and throughout the book of Exodus she always appears alongside her sons, the primary caregiver. Yael is introduced in the text primarily as Chever's wife; she is not initially an individual, she is somebody's wife. She is also a woman who emerges from her tent, the female sphere.

While these three women do function in a female way, they function in a male way as well. They assume roles which are generally restricted to the masculine arena, and as such, they challenge the regular gender norms which the text promotes. There are other women, such as Miriam and Deborah, who moved beyond the confines of their homes to have an impact on the wider Israelite society, challenging our gender expectations. However, it is only Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael whose stories so prominently feature the assumption of roles generally reserved for the male members of the Israelite society. While Miriam and Deborah function in ways that challenge expectations, they belong to a group of female Israelite leaders, which involve different motivations, expectations and perceptions, thus making them a subject for another, possibly parallel, study, but excluding them from this one.

As Frymer-Kensky writes about Hagar, she is “the only woman to receive a divine promise of seed, not through a man but as her own destiny” (230). The promise of seed which she receives from the angel may most clearly be compared with the promises made to Abraham (Gen. 13:6), Isaac (Gen. 26:4) and Jacob (Gen. 28:14), rather than any promise or encounter of another woman within the Bible.⁸ In regarding Tzipporah, when she acts as a circumciser, she acts in “contradistinction to later Jewish tradition and to other biblical passages which deal with circumcision (Genesis 17, Joshua 5); here a woman performs the ceremony” (Brenner 1989:71). As a circumciser, she acts as Abraham did when he circumcised himself and his household (Gen. 17:23-24) and as Joshua did (Josh. 5:2-8). No other woman is recorded as circumcising a male.⁹ Finally, while the text suggests that Yael used her femininity to bring Sisera into her tent,¹⁰ as Frymer-Kensky suggests ultimately: “Yael confounds all expectations ... We brace ourselves for a violent rape in which the warrior brutally penetrates the woman. Instead, it is Yael who penetrates with her weapon” (56). In this way, Yael completely turns the story and our expectations on their heads, and rather than assuming a submissive feminine role, she assumes the role of the warrior, a violent and merciless role designated exclusively for males every where else in the TaNaCh.¹¹

Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael are therefore united not only as non-Israelite women, but as women who act in a way that conforms to ‘male’ rather than ‘female’ Biblical expectations. It is this shared challenging, and even reimagining, of gender roles, alongside their non-Israelite identity, which comprise the thread that weaves the lives and destinies of these three women together. There is something remarkably poignant in the reality that the major female challenge to accepted gender roles in the Bible comes not from any Israelite woman, but from an Egyptian, a Midianite and a Kenite woman.

⁸ There are other elements of Hagar’s interaction with the angels and her choice of a bride for Ishmael, which place her even more firmly in a category of women challenging gender stereotypes. These will be considered later in the study.

⁹ Her declaration about the bridegroom of blood is also significant for the way in which it challenges the regular marriage procedure.

¹⁰ The sexual innuendo throughout the stories of Yael in Judges 4 and 5 will be considered fully in the chapter devoted to her.

¹¹ Although Frymer-Kensky and Brenner do not classify these three women together, and do not focus on this challenge which they make to accepted gender norms, it is clear that both of these scholars recognize the fact that Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael did challenge the regularly accepted female role in society.

The Contents of this Study:

The aim of this study is to demonstrate how Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael all challenge and reinvent gender roles in the Bible. As a starting point it will therefore be necessary to produce a thorough translation of the passages within the TaNaCh involving, or relevant to, these women:

Hagar: Genesis 16:1-16, 21:8-21 and 25:12.

Tzipporah: Exodus 2:15-23, 4:18-26, 18:1-6 and Numbers 12:1-2.

Yael: Judges 4:9-11, 17-24 and 5:6-7, 24-31.

Following these translations will be a commentary on the Biblical text concerning each of these women. As non-Israelite women, the textual analysis has rarely been primarily concerned with them or their actions (often focusing on the accompanying Israelites and male characters). These commentaries will present the ways in which these women challenge the regular gender roles, and elaborate on the stories.

This will be followed by a thorough examination of the way in which each woman challenges gender roles and behaves according to one, or more, male categories. Through these studies it will be possible to offer classifications of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael in relation to the male roles which they perform:

Hagar: The Patriarch of her People

Tzipporah: The First Female Mohel and Betrother

Yael: The Female Warrior and Emasculator

After an analysis of these women in their Biblical context, there will then be a study of the way that these women are portrayed in Midrash Rabbah.¹² Through these rabbinic portrayals of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael, it will be possible to see the way in which their female qualities were emphasized and the extent to which their gender challenge was whitewashed, so that it was lost completely from the text. This will provide a sample of the way in which these women are portrayed in post-Biblical writings.¹³

These various perspectives will demonstrate the way in which Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael form a unique group of women within the TaNaCh, women united by their gender, their non-Israelite identity and their challenge of gender stereotypes, behaving in ways associated

¹² Due to the limits of this study it is not possible to move beyond this midrashic collection.

¹³ The other areas which could be considered in relation to these women, and may be considered in a further study, will be discussed in the conclusion.

with, and elevating those of, Biblical men. As a Patriarch, a mohel and a warrior, these women form a fascinating, and even revolutionary, group within the wider narrative of the TaNaCh.

Hagar in the TaNaCh

בראשית טז:א-טז - Genesis 16:1-16

א וְשָׂרַי אִשְׁתִּי אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לוֹ וְלֹה שִׁפְחָה מִצְרִית וְשָׁמָּה הָגָר :

1. But¹⁴ Sarai, the wife of Abram, had borne him no children; and she had an Egyptian maidservant,¹⁵ and her name was Hagar.

ב וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל־אַבְרָם הִנֵּה־נָא עֲצָרְנִי יְהוָה מִלָּדֶת בְּאֵנָה אֶל־שִׁפְחָתִי אוֹלִי אֲבִנָּה מִמֶּנָּה וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרַי :

2. And Sarai said to Abram: "Please¹⁶ behold Adonai has restrained me from bearing. Please come in¹⁷ to my maidservant, perhaps I will be built up by her?"¹⁸ And Abram heard¹⁹ the voice of Sarai.

ג וַתִּקַּח שָׂרַי אִשְׁתִּי אַבְרָם אֶת־הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית שִׁפְחָתָהּ מִקֶּץ עֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים לְשִׁבְתָּ אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַתִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ לְאַבְרָם אִשָּׁה לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה :

3. And Sarai, the wife of Abram, took Hagar her Egyptian, her maidservant, after²⁰ Abram had dwelled in the land of Canaan for ten years, and she gave her [Hagar] to Abram, her husband, to be his wife.²¹

ד וַיָּבֵא אֶל־הָגָר וַתְּהַר וַתֵּרָא כִּי הָרְתָהּ וַתִּקַּל גְּבוֹרָתָהּ בְּעֵינֶיהָ :

4. And he came upon Hagar, and she conceived, and she saw she had conceived, and her mistress was diminished in her eyes.²²

¹⁴ I have chosen to begin the translation with "But" as chapter 16 follows the promise made to Abram in chapter 15 that Abram shall have an heir from his own seed (15:4).

¹⁵ BDB specifies that this word is used for a maid servant "as belonging to a mistress" (BDB 1046).

¹⁶ There is a challenge of affording some translation to the נָא at the opening of Sarai's words, which is why I have translated it here as "Please".

¹⁷ The phrase וָאֵנָה with its use of the verb בָּאָה, possesses a sexual dimension which is absent in the English translation. This verb has a meaning of "entering a woman's tent or apartment (with implication *coire cum femina*" (BDB 98); two other examples of this are found in Genesis 6:4 and 30:3.

¹⁸ "Built up by her" has a clear sense of bearing children; this can be seen by its use in Genesis 30:3 in connection to Rachel and Bilhah; in this context the idea of giving birth is stated more explicitly. It can also be seen in Deuteronomy 25:9 in connection to levirate marriage.

¹⁹ The significance of the root שמע in this chapter means it is important in the translation to draw attention to the repetition of the word; I have therefore translated this word as "heard" although other translations use "heeded" (JPS 1985) and "hearkened" (KJV) to denote acquiescence to Sarai's request.

²⁰ This does not really do מִקֶּץ justice, and ideally it would be translated in a way which marked the conclusion of Abram's first ten years dwelling in the land of Canaan.

²¹ In the Hebrew, the concluding phrase לְאִשָּׁהּ לּוֹ לְאִשָּׁה referring to "her husband" and "wife" sound almost the same, and therefore gives a sense of the confusion of roles which is about to occur.

ה וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל־אַבְרָם חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ אֲנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שְׁפָחָתִי בְּחִיקְךָ וַתֵּרָא כִּי הָרְתָהּ
וַאֲקַל בְּעֵינֶיהָ יִשְׁפֹּט יְהוָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ.²³

5. And Sarai said to Abram: “My wrong²⁴ is upon you. I gave my maidservant to your bosom,²⁵ and she sees that she has conceived, and I am diminished in her eyes. Adonai will judge between me and you.”

ו וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל־שָׂרַי הִנֵּה שְׁפָחָתְךָ בְּיָדְךָ עֲשִׂי־לָהּ הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ וַתַּעֲנֶה שָׂרַי
וַתִּבְרַח מִפָּנֶיהָ :

6. And Abram said to Sarai: “Behold, your maidservant is in your hands, do to her what is good in your eyes.” And Sarai humbled her,²⁶ and she fled from before her.

ז וַיִּמְצָאָהּ מֶלֶאֲךָן יְהוָה עַל־עֵין הַמַּיִם בַּמִּדְבָּר עַל־הָעֵין בְּדֶרֶךְ שׁוּר :

7. Later²⁷ an Angel²⁸ of Adonai found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the route to Shur.

ח וַיֹּאמֶר הָגָר שְׁפָחַת שָׂרַי אֵי־מָזָה בָּאת וְאָנָּה תֵּלְכִי וַתֹּאמֶר מִפָּנֶי שָׂרַי גְּבֵרָתִי אֲנֹכִי
בִּרְחַח :

8. And he said: “Hagar, maidservant of Sarai, where have you come from? And where are you going?” And she said: “From the face of Sarai, my mistress, I am fleeing.”

ט וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֶלֶאֲךָן יְהוָה שׁוּבִי אֶל־גְּבֵרָתְךָ וְהִתְעַנִּי תַּחַת יָדֶיהָ :

9. And the Angel of Adonai said to her: “Return to your mistress!²⁹ And humble³⁰ yourself under her hand.”

²² In the Anchor Bible it suggests that this phrase signifies “she lost caste in her estimation” (Speiser 1964:117).

²³ There is a difference in one manuscript which has בֵּינֶיךָ, which could be ‘your son’. Even without this change the sound of וּבֵינֶיךָ sounds similar to the word for ‘your son’.

²⁴ Although the word חֲמָסִי is translated here as “my wrong”, the word itself also possesses a meaning relating to violence, which gives a sense of the severity of the wrong in Sarai’s eyes.

²⁵ This phrase appears to be recognized legal language in Sumerian-Akkadian (see Speiser 1964:118).

²⁶ This word is difficult to translate, as the root has very different meanings in different forms; in this piel form it is generally translated as ‘humbled’ or ‘afflicted’. However, in the basic kal meaning it would be ‘answered’. I have chosen “humbled” as it would seem to be an appropriate response for Sarai having been diminished in Hagar’s eyes (see BDB 776).

²⁷ In this context I have chosen to translate the לַ as “Later” to give a sense of the way in which v.7 continues the story of v.6.

²⁸ This word has a meaning of ‘angel’, but it can also be translated as ‘messenger’ (see BDB 521).

²⁹ I have put the exclamation mark to denote the imperative form of the verb, and the commanding instruction which this entails.

³⁰ Once again this could be translated as ‘afflict yourself’ (in the sense of ‘subject yourself to affliction’), and there is a judgment which the translator makes in choosing how to translate this word.

י וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֵלֶאֱךָ יְהוָה הַרְבֵּה אַרְבֵּה אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ וְלֹא יִסְפָּר מִרְבּוֹ :

10. And the Angel of Adonai said to her: "I will greatly multiply your offspring, and they will be too numerous to count."³¹

יֹא וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֵלֶאֱךָ יְהוָה הִנֵּן הָרָה וְיִלְדֶּתָ³² בֶּן וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמַעְאֵל כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל־עֲנִיָּךְ :

11. And the Angel of Adonai said to her: "Behold you are pregnant and you will give birth to a son, and you shall call his name Ishmael; for Adonai has heard your affliction.

יב וְהוּא יְהִי פָרָא אָדָם יָדוּ בְּכָל יוֹד כָּל בּוֹ וְעַל־פָּנָיו כָּל־אֲחָיו יִשְׁכֵּן :

12. And he will be a wild ass of a man,³³ his hand with everyone, and everyone's hand with him. And in the face³⁴ of all his brothers³⁵ he will dwell."

יג וַתִּקְרָא שֵׁם־יְהוָה הַדֹּבֵר אֵלֶיהָ אֶת־הָאֵל כָּאֵי³⁶ כִּי אָמְרָה הִנֵּם הֵלֵם רָאִיתִי אַחֲרָי רָאִי :

13. And she called the Name of Adonai who spoke to her: "You are El-Roi (a God that sees)," for she also said:³⁷ "Here³⁸ I saw, after God³⁹ saw me."⁴⁰

יד עַל־כֵּן קָרָא לְבָאֵר בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי⁴¹ הִנֵּה בֵּין קַדֶּשׁ וּבֵין בָּרֶד :

14. Therefore the well was called Be'er Lechai Roi (the well of the Living One that sees me), situated⁴² between Kadesh and Bared.

טו וַתֵּלֶד הָגָר לְאַבְרָם בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָם שֵׁם־בְּנוֹ אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָהּ הָגָר יִשְׁמַעְאֵל :

³¹ I have not directly translated the Hebrew here, so that the English translates the sense of the Hebrew, rather than the direct words.

³² Some versions have this word as וְיִלְדֶּתָ and as וְיִלְדֶּתָּ.

³³ This can be related to the Akkadian description of Enkidu and the first primitive man created by the gods (see Speiser 1964:118).

³⁴ This phrase has a sense of living alongside his brothers, so that it could be translated as 'alongside all of his brothers'. However, due to the use of hand earlier, it seems more poetic to use the word 'face', to maintain the physical nature of the blessing.

³⁵ This same phrase is used in Genesis 25:18 when Ishmael's death is described, appearing to fulfill the angel's prophecy present in this verse.

³⁶ In the Septuagint it has this as רֹאִי, a different form of the verb.

³⁷ This is a confusing verse to translate neatly, in the context of where Hagar's words begin and end.

³⁸ As BDB concedes, the meaning of הֵלֵם is 'dubious' in this text (see 241). I think that Hagar is situating where the event has taken place, which is significant as she will name the place in v. 14.

³⁹ I have inserted God into the translation rather than give God a gender by using 'He' or 'She'.

⁴⁰ This phrase could also possibly be translated as 'I have been seen'.

⁴¹ In another manuscript of the Masoretic text the form of this verb is altered to רָאִיתִי. In the Septuagint it has רָאִיתִי, which has a meaning of 'I saw'.

⁴² This is a way of translating the word הִנֵּה in the verse.

15. And Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave his son, which Hagar bore, the name Ishmael.⁴³

טו ואַבְרָם בֶּן־שְׁמֹנִים שָׁנָה וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים בְּלֶדֶת־הָגָר אֶת־יִשְׁמָעֵאל לְאַבְרָם :

16. And Abram was 86 years when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

בראשית כא:ח-כא - Genesis 21:8-21

ח וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּגְמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֶּה גְדוֹל בְּיוֹם הַגְּמֹל אֶת־יִצְחָק :

8. And the boy grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day when Isaac was weaned.

ט וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת־בֶּן־הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק :

9. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian,⁴⁴ whom she bore to Abraham, laughing.⁴⁵

י וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרֶשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בֶּן־הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת עִם־בְּנֵי עַם־יִצְחָק :

10. And she said to Abraham: "Drive out⁴⁶ this handmaid and her son, for the son of this handmaid should not inherit with my son, with Isaac."

יא וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל־אוֹדֹת בְּנוֹ :

11. And this matter was very displeasing⁴⁷ in the eyes of Abraham, because of his son.

יב וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אַל־יִרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל־הַנָּעַר וְעַל־אִמָּתְךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בְיִצְחָק יִקְרָא לָךְ זֶרַע :

12. But⁴⁸ God said to Abraham: "It should not be displeasing to your eyes on account of the lad and your handmaid. All that Sarah says to you, hear⁴⁹ her voice, because through Isaac, your offspring will be called.⁵⁰

⁴³ Although I have changed the order of the words in the verse, I have attempted to translate all of the Hebrew words, to maintain elements such as "his son" and "name".

⁴⁴ In the Septuagint it adds "with her son Isaac".

⁴⁵ This verb could also be translated as "playing", which may be more fitting in the context of the verse, but less in the context of the chapter; I have therefore chosen to translate it as "laughing" to fit with the chapter. Frequently this word is translated as "mocking", but "mocking" would require the preposition *h-* to designate the object" (Speiser 1964:155).

⁴⁶ I would like to translate *גָּרַשׁ* as "divorce", to give credence to the idea that Hagar was in some ways married to Abraham. However, due to the addition of *וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ* "and her son" "drive out" appears a more appropriate translation.

⁴⁷ This could be translated as "evil" or "bad" to emphasize how negative the idea was to Abraham.

יג וגם את־בן־הַאֲמָה לְגוֹי⁵¹ אֲשִׁימֶנּוּ כִּי זֶרַעַךְ הוּא :

13. And also the son of the handmaid, I will make into a nation, because he is of your seed.”⁵²

יָד וַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֶּקֶר וַיִּקַּח לֶחֶם וְחִמְת מִיָּם וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־הָגָר שָׁם עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ
וְאֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּשְׁלַחַהּ וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּתֶע בְּמִדְבָּר בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע :

14. And Abraham arose early in the morning,⁵³ and he took bread and a skin of water, and he gave them to Hagar, placing them on her shoulder with the boy.⁵⁴ And he sent her away, and she went, and she wandered in the wilderness of Be'er Sheva.

טו וַיְכָלוּ הַמַּיִם מִן־הַחֲמֵת וַתִּשְׁלַךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים :

15. And they finished the water from the skin, and she cast the boy under one of the bushes.

טז וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לָהּ מִנְּגַד הָרֶחֶק כְּמַטְחָוִי קֶשֶׁת כִּי אָמְרָה אֶל־אֶרְאָה בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד
וַתֵּשֶׁב מִנְּגַד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת־קִלְהָ וַתִּבְךְ :⁵⁵

16. And she went and sat herself⁵⁶ opposite,⁵⁷ at the distance of a bow shot, because she said: “I will not see the death of the boy.” So she sat opposite, and raised her voice and she cried.

יז וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר וַיִּקְרָא מֵלֶאֱלֹהִים אֶל־הָגָר מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר
לָהּ מַה־לָּךְ הָגָר אֶל־תִּירָאִי כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא שָׁם :

17. And God heard the voice of the lad.⁵⁸ And an angel of God called to Hagar from the heavens, and it⁵⁹ said to her: “How are you Hagar?”⁶⁰ Do not be afraid, because God has heard the voice of the lad where he is.

⁵¹ I have followed JPS (1985) translating this as “but”, to denote the contrary opinion God introduces.

⁵² I am translating this root as “hear” to maintain consistency with the use of this root in Genesis 16, although it has a sense of meaning “obey her”.

⁵³ This could also be translated as “a seed will be called for you” maintaining the sense of זֶרַעַךְ as meaning seed.

⁵⁴ In the Septuagint, Syriac and Vulgate versions of the text גְּדוֹל is added as is found in 21:18, this would alter the translation to “a great nation”.

⁵⁵ While I have translated the root זָרַע as “offspring” up to this point, in the context of this verse, I feel that it is drawing attention to the fact that Ishmael is from the seed of Abraham.

⁵⁶ וַיִּשְׁכֶּם has a sense of not just rising, but specifically rising early, as Abraham does in Genesis 22:3.

⁵⁷ As Ishmael would have been a teenager by the time of this narrative, it is hard to understand how exactly she could have carried him on her shoulder.

⁵⁸ In the Septuagint it states: וַיִּשָּׂא אֶת־קִלְהָ וַיִּבְךְ, this would suggest that Ishmael is the one who cries out, but the problem is that קִלְהָ has a meaning of “her voice”. It is possible that they both called out. In the context of the next verse Ishmael must have called out in some way, as “God heard the voice of the lad”.

⁵⁹ I have used this word to translate לָהּ in the verse.

⁶⁰ Opposite does not feel like a neat translation in this context, it seems to have a sense that she sat a certain distance away from Ishmael.

יח קומי שאי את הנער והחזיקי את ידך בו כִּי־לְגוֹי גָדוֹל אֲשִׁימֶנּוּ :

18. Rise up, lift up^{o1} the lad, and take hold of him in your hand, for I will make of him a great nation.”

יט ויפקח אלהים את עיניה ותרא באר מים ותלך ותמלא את החמת מים ותשק את הנער :

19. Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin of water, and gave the lad to drink.

כ ויהי אלהים את הנער ויגדל וישב במדבר ויהי רבה קשת :

20. And God was with the lad. And he grew and he dwelt in the wilderness, and he became an archer.

כא וישב במדבר פארן ותקח לו אמו אשה מארץ מצרים :

21. And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran. And his mother took for him a wife from the land of Egypt.

בראשית כה:יב - Genesis 25:12

יב ואלה תולדת ישמעאל בן־אברהם אשר ילדה הגר המצרית שפחת שרה לאברהם :

12. And these are the generations of Ishmael the son of Abraham, whom Hagar the Egyptian, the maidservant of Sarah, bore to Abraham.

^{o1} The text does not specify that Ishmael cried out, but this verse assumes that he must have done.

^{o2} I have chosen to use the word “it” in this context to avoid giving the angel a specific gender by use of the masculine associated with **וַיֹּאמֶר**.

^{o3} The phrase of **מַה־לָּךְ** is difficult to translate. In JPS (1985) there is an attempt to add the sense that it is a question about Hagar’s suffering by asking: “What troubles you?” From the text it could be translated as ‘what is it with you’; I have chosen to translate it as “How are you?” to give a sense of what is being asked without adding meaning as JPS does

^{o4} The root of the verb **שָׂא** is the same as the root **נָתַשׂא** in 21:16, in that verse Hagar “raised her voice”; I have translated this word as “lift up” to maintain the sense of raising.

A Commentary on the Hagar Texts

A commentary on Genesis 16:1-16

16:1 וְשָׂרַי -- From the outset, the story revolves around Sarai. She is the one in

relationship with both Abram and Hagar. And it is her childlessness which serves as the catalyst for the story.

לֹא יָלְדָה לוֹ – Sarai's barrenness is not a new revelation, we have known about it from the beginning (11:30). However in that context it stated: אֵין לָהּ יֶלֶד "she had no child", it was about her as an independent entity. In this restatement she has "borne **him** no children". Following the promise given to Abram in 15:1-5 that he will have an heir from his own seed, Sarai appears as the obstacle preventing the fulfillment of God's promise.

וְלָהּ שִׁפְחָה מִצְרִית וְשָׁמָּה הָגָר – We know three facts about Hagar: she is Sarai's maidservant (her property); she is an Egyptian, and her name is Hagar.

וְשָׁמָּה הָגָר – While we don't know much about Hagar, in her name there is, at its core, the word גַּר 'stranger'. Differently pointed her name could read הָגָר – the stranger, as though she may be the ultimate outsider. And in direct contrast to this name is the name שָׂרַי, which can be translated as 'my ruler', a clear indication of the power dynamic between Sarai and Hagar.

16:2 הִנֵּהנָּא – This phrase was used by Abram when he asked Sarai to pretend to be his sister (12:11); perhaps this was a demand she should have rejected, and here too, maybe he should have rejected Sarai's request. Perhaps she was hoping that her husband would reply in the way that Elkanah did to Hannah (1 Sam. 1:8).

עֲצָרְנִי יְהוָה – Sarai attributes her childlessness to Adonai, something which must have been especially difficult to bear in light of the renewed promise to Abram in 15:1-5.

אֶל־שִׁפְחָתִי – Throughout this verse Hagar is anonymous, her name is not mentioned, and she appears as a pawn of little significance, with no need to afford her the dignity of a name.

בראשית טז:

א וְשָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לוֹ וְלָהּ שִׁפְחָה מִצְרִית וְשָׁמָּה הָגָר:

1. But Sarai, the wife of Abram, had borne him no children; and she had an Egyptian maidservant, and her name was Hagar.

ב וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל־אַבְרָם הִנֵּהנָּא עֲצָרְנִי יְהוָה מִלָּדַת בָּאֲנָא אֶל־שִׁפְחָתִי אוּלַי אֲבֵנָה מִמֶּנָּה וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרַי:

2. And Sarai said to Abram: "Please behold Adonai has restrained me from bearing. Please come in to my maidservant, perhaps I will be built up by her?" And Abram heard the voice of Sarai.

ג ותקח שרִי | אִשְׁתִּי אַבְרָם אֶת־הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית שִׁפְחָתָהּ
מִקֶּץ עֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים לְשִׁבְתִּי אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַתֵּתֵן אֹתָהּ
לְאַבְרָם אִישָׁהּ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה:

3. And Sarai, the wife of Abram, took Hagar her Egyptian maidservant, after Abram had dwelled in the land of Canaan for ten years, and she gave her [Hagar] to Abram, her husband, to be his wife.

ד וַיְבֹא אֶל־הָגָר וַתַּהַר וַתֵּרָא כִּי הָרְתָהּ וַתִּקַּל גְּבִרְתָּהּ
בְּעֵינֶיהָ:

4. And he came upon Hagar, and she conceived, and she saw she had conceived, and her mistress was diminished in her eyes.

אולי אִבְנָה מִמֶּנָּה – While the word אִבְנָה means ‘built up’ the sound of the word is very similar to בֵּן, meaning son, and implicit in it is the idea that ‘perhaps I will have a son by her’. It also suggests

that the child of a union between Hagar and Abram would actually belong to Sarai.

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרִי – Abram is completely passive in his acquiescence to Sarai’s request, something which will come back to haunt him in 21:12. The root שָׁמַע is a crucial element of the story as it emerges in the naming of the son who will result from this union.

16:3 וַתִּקַּח שָׂרִי – When was Hagar consulted? When did she agree to become Abram’s wife? Hagar is silent, Sarai is the main character, she is the subject and Hagar is the object. But how could Hagar have argued?

הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית שִׁפְחָתָהּ – Initially she is referred to by her name, when she is taken by Sarai. When she is given she is once again anonymous וַתֵּתֵן אֹתָהּ.

אִישָׁהּ לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה – The Hebrew at this point all sounds very similar. It is “her husband” and “his wife” but the similarity of the words is symbolic of the confusion in roles which is taking place in the household as Hagar becomes Abram’s second wife.

16:4 וַיְבֹא אֶל־הָגָר – At this point, when she is alone with Abram, as his wife, she is no longer the Egyptian, or the maidservant. She is her own person; alone with Abram she is simply Hagar.

וַתַּהַר – While Sarai struggled to provide Abram with an heir, Hagar, the text suggests, has been able to conceive immediately. This must have provided Sarai with definitive proof that it was she, and not Abram who was infertile.

וַתֵּרָא כִּי הָרְתָהּ וַתִּקַּל – Suddenly it is Hagar who is active; with her conception, she becomes an active character in the progress of the story

וַתִּקַּל גְּבִרְתָּהּ – It is this phrase which suggests, for the first time, that the relationship between Sarai and Hagar may not be completely harmonious. Why she was diminished is crucial in understanding the relationship between the two women. Is it possible that beyond

simply conceiving, something happened while Hagar was alone with Abram which caused Sarai to be diminished.

16:5 **וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי**

אֶל־אַבְרָם – After Hagar's brief period of activity, with the same beginning as 16:2, Sarai once again moves to center stage.

וַיִּחַסֵּי עָלֶיךָ – Sarai did not blame Hagar for what had happened; in her mind the guilty party is plainly Abram. One may ask what happened when Hagar was given to Abram's "bosom", and what he said or did which led to Sarai being diminished in Hagar's eyes.

וַיִּפְחַחְתִּי – Once again, with Sarai at the center, Hagar is anonymous.

וַיִּשְׁפֹּט יְהוָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ – Suddenly Adonai, who has prevented Sarai from conceiving, is called upon to help resolve the issue, not between Hagar and Sarai, but between Sarai and Abram. In this comment there is also a precursor, based on the sound of the Hebrew, for what is to come: 'judge between my son and your son'. In 21:10 this is effectively the choice which Sarai gives to Abram, to choose between Ishmael and Isaac as to who will be his heir.

16:6 **וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם** – Abram once again appears to be almost completely passive as he clarifies that his new wife, Hagar, is still the possession of Sarai, to deal with her exactly as she chooses. In response to Sarai having been diminished in Hagar's eyes, Sarai can now do to Hagar what is good in her eyes.

וַיִּהְיֶה שְׁפָחָתְךָ – Even though Hagar has become his wife, when talking to his primary wife, he once again leaves her anonymous, and relegates her to her original status as maidservant.

וַתַּעֲנֶה שָׂרַי – Something that Sarai did to Hagar was sufficient for her to flee from her mistress. However, in this root **ענה**, it could simply be that Sarai answered Hagar, telling her why she was upset by the way events had turned out (the regular *kal* meaning of this root).

16:7 **וַיִּמְצָאָהּ** – The significance of this should not be underestimated. Hagar has been largely anonymous in the story; she has blended into the background. At this point the angel

ה וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל־אַבְרָם חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ אֲנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שְׁפָחָתִי בְּחִיקְךָ וַתֵּרָא כִּי הָרְתָהּ וְאֶקַּל בְּעֵינֶיהָ יִשְׁפֹּט יְהוָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶיךָ:

5. And Sarai said to Abram: "My wrong is upon you. I gave my maidservant to your bosom, and she sees that she has conceived, and I am diminished in her eyes. Adonai will judge between me and you."

ו וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל־שָׂרַי הִנֵּה שְׁפָחָתְךָ בְּיָדְךָ עֲשִׂי לָהּ הַטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ וַתַּעֲנֶה שָׂרַי וַתִּבְרַח מִפָּנֶיהָ:

6. And Abram said to Sarai: "Behold, your maidservant is in your hands, do to her what is good in your eyes." And Sarai humbled her, and she fled from before her.

ז וַיִּמְצָאָהּ מַלְאַךְ יְהוָה עַל־עֵין הַמַּיִם בַּמִּדְבָּר עַל־הָעֵין בְּדֶרֶךְ שׁוּר:

7. Later an Angel of Adonai found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the route to Shur.

חַיְאֹמֶר הָגָר שִׁפְחַת שָׂרַי אֵימָּהָ בָּאת וְאָנָּה תֵּלְכִי
וְתֹאמַר מִפְּנֵי שָׂרַי גְּבֵרְתִּי אֲנִכִּי בִּרְחַת :

8. And he said: "Hagar, maidservant of Sarai, where have you come from? And where are you going?" And she said: "From the face of Sarai, my mistress, I am fleeing."

ט וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה שׁוּבִי אֶל־גְּבִרְתְּךָ וְהִתְעַנִּי תַּחַת יְדֶיהָ :

9. And the Angel of Adonai said to her: "Return to your mistress! And humble yourself under her hand."

has found her, which means that the angel must be able to see her; the invisibility within Abram's house is gone.

מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה – The sudden

appearance of an angel is interesting, and may be read as a response to Sarai's call for Adonai's intervention in 16:5.

מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה – this is the first reference to a מַלְאָךְ by that designation in the Torah.

שׁוּר – this place will ultimately be significant for Hagar, as her son Ishmael will dwell there (25:18).

מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה – Hagar is the first woman who has the experience of speaking with angels.

16:8 וַיֹּאמֶר – This is the first time that someone has actually spoken to Hagar in the story. We can assume that Sarai spoke to her, but the text does not specify. In this context, the angel's engagement with Hagar in conversation demonstrates that she is viewed as a person worthy of conversation.

הָגָר שִׁפְחַת שָׂרַי - Even here in the wilderness, although she is referred to by her name, she is also reminded of her status as Sarai's maidservant.

מִפְּנֵי שָׂרַי גְּבֵרְתִּי – The relationship between Hagar and Sarai has not been broken or altered by the preceding experiences. For Hagar, Sarai is still her mistress, and it is from her that she has fled. Abram is absent in her account.

מִפְּנֵי שָׂרַי גְּבֵרְתִּי – The angel addressed two questions to Hagar, but here she only answers one. We still have no inclination of where she is going. For Hagar her flight has not been about a destination, rather it has been about leaving a place of persecution (in a similar way when God called Abram to לֵךְ לֵךְ, he knew where he was leaving, but not where he was going Gen. 12).

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַלְאָךְ 16:9 – Just in case there was any doubt that Hagar was in conversing with an angel, the point is made explicitly clear

שׁוּבִי – The angel is unequivocal in his comments to Hagar, commanding her to return.

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֶלֶאךָ יְהוָה הֲרֵבָה אֲרֶבָה אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ וְלֹא יִסְפָּר מִרְבּוֹ:

10. And the Angel of Adonai said to her: "I will greatly multiply your offspring, and they will be too numerous to count.

יֹאמֶר לָהּ מֶלֶאךָ יְהוָה הִנֵּן הָרָה וְיִלְדֶּת בֶּן וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל־עֲנִיָּךְ:

11. And the Angel of Adonai said to her: "Behold you are pregnant and you will give birth to a son, and you shall call his name Ishmael; for Adonai has heard your affliction.

וְהִתְעַנִּי תַּחַת יְדֵיהָ – This is the same root, ענה, as was used in 16:6. Sarai "humiliated her" and now Hagar is told to humble herself under Sarai's

hand. If Sarai had abused Hagar, it is troubling for the modern reader to understand why the angel would send Hagar back to a situation of domestic abuse. Perhaps this suffering will be offset by the promise which is to follow.

16:10 הֲרֵבָה אֲרֶבָה אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ – This is the beginning of the angelic promise to Hagar. And it begins in a similar form to the patriarchal promises of numerous offspring. Similar promises were made to Abram (13:16), Isaac (26:4) and Jacob (28:14) that their seed will be too numerous to count.

הֲרֵבָה אֲרֶבָה – The same phrase is used in Gen. 3:16 as to what the experience of childbirth will be for women. In childbirth, despite the pain of the labor, a baby is the ultimate blessing. Perhaps here the echoes of 3:16 are an indication that there will be pain in returning to Sarai's dominion, but that it will ultimately be for a blessing.

וְלֹא יִסְפָּר מִרְבּוֹ – This initial promise is clearly a positive one for Hagar, and the passage needs to be read in this context.

16:11 וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֶלֶאךָ יְהוָה – If there was an additional angel each time the text mentions מֶלֶאךָ יְהוָה (as Rashi suggests), then it would mean that Hagar was visited by more angels in one visitation than anyone else in the Torah.

הִנֵּן הָרָה – According to the text, Hagar conceived in 16:4, which raises the question of why the angel needed to reassert this. In the text there is no sense of a loving connection between Abram and Hagar, the act of sex in this context appears to have been very functional (to create an heir). It is possible that Hagar may have been resistant to further romantic involvement with Abram. This passage may therefore have served as a reassurance that she is already pregnant and will therefore not have to lie with Abram again, the source of her initial problems with Sarai.

יבֹהֵוָא יִהְיֶה פָּרָא אָדָם יָדוּ בְּכָל יָד כָּל בּוֹ וְעַל־פָּנָיו
כָּל־אָחָיו יִשְׁכֹּן :

12. And he will be a wild ass of a man, his hand with everyone, and everyone's hand with him. And in the face of all his brothers he will dwell."

וְקִרְאָת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמַעֲאֵל
– כִּי־שָׁמַע יִהְיֶה אֶל־עַנְיָד

the reader were in any doubt as to what has happened in the preceding verses the name of Ishmael makes it clear that God heard, and has responded to Hagar's affliction. It is also prophetic as God will hear Ishmael in 21:17.

יִשְׁמַעֲאֵל – With the explanation of the name, Ishmael serves as an eternal reminder of the fact that Sarai afflicted Hagar, and of the fact that God responded.

יִשְׁמַעֲאֵל – Although this child may not be the heir of Abram's covenant, it is clear that this child has a relationship with Abram's God through his name.

16:12 וְהָיָא יִהְיֶה – Many of the traditional commentaries suggest that this verse involves negative traits which Ishmael will have. However, following from the promise of many offspring (16:10) and a name which incorporates God (16:11), this should be read as a positive, rather than a negative description.

פָּרָא אָדָם – The translation "wild ass of a man" may sound like a negative characterization of Ishmael. However, when looking at this designation elsewhere in the Bible it becomes clear that this would have been a significant blessing for a person destined to live in the wilderness. Ishmael will be like the wild ass of Jeremiah 2:24 פָּרָה לְמַד מִדְּבַר, "suited to living in the wilderness". Job 24:5 makes clear exactly how these animals, and by association Ishmael, were suited to life in the wilderness הֵן פָּרָאִים | בַּמִּדְבָּר יֵצְאוּ בַּפִּעֵלָם מִשְׁחָרֵי לֶטֶרף, "they are wild asses in the wilderness; they go out for their work, seeking food in the wasteland which provides food for their children."

יָדוּ בְּכָל יָד כָּל בּוֹ – Once again this is frequently interpreted negatively, but it could also have positive connotations. This phrase could be a designation that Ishmael will have business dealings with everyone, buying and selling. As we read in Genesis 37:25 וַהֲנִיחַ אַרְחַת יִשְׁמַעֲאֵלִים בָּאָה מִגִּלְעָד וּגְמֻלֵיהֶם נִשְׂאִים נִכְאֹת וּצְרֵי נִלְט וְהָנִיחַ, "and behold a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilad with their camels carrying spice, balsam and myrrh."

כָּל־אָחָיו יִשְׁכֹּן – For Hagar who has fled from Abram's household, having already left her homeland, the idea that her son will live with his brothers, with family, would have been comforting to her

– ותקרא שם־יהוה 16:13

Hagar literally names Adonai; no other woman has the same kind of interaction, giving God a name.

– Hagar has אתה אל ראי been ignored by the rest of her household, has been almost invisible; and yet it is Adonai that sees, who is able to see her.

– אתה אל ראי After her conversation with the angels Hagar recognizes the role of Adonai in the prophecy for her future.

– אתה אל ראי The name of her son is associated with the fact that God heard her cry, and yet she names Adonai in connection with sight. As this episode ends, Hagar has been both seen and heard by God.

– הלם ראיתי אחרי ראי What did Hagar see before Adonai saw her? The text does not specify what she has seen, and leaves the reader wondering what she saw that led God to see her.

– עלכן קרא לבאר 16:14 Hagar does not name the well, but the text clarifies that the place has a name which is connected with her experiences there.

– באר לחי ראי Having been seen by God, Hagar can return to Abram and Sarai's home.

– ותלד הגר לאברם 16:15 The text does not detail the reunion between Hagar and the rest of the household. Instead it jumps immediately to the birth of Ishmael.

– ותלד הגר לאברם בן Originally Sarai proposed that Abram and Hagar should procreate so that she could be מבנה ממנה. However, now when the child is born, Sarai is absent, and the mother and father appear to be alone with their son.

– ויקרא אברם שם־בנו אשר־ילדה הגר Having been anonymous for so much of her time in Abram's household, in this verse Hagar is named twice, with this second occurrence seemingly superfluous to the text, stressing her identity as a named person.

יג ותקרא שם־יהוה הדבר אליה אתה אל ראי כי אמרה
הגם הלם ראיתי אחרי ראי :

13. And she called the Name of Adonai who spoke to her:
"You are El-Roi (a God that sees)." for she also said: "Here I
saw, after God saw me."

יד עלכן קרא לבאר באר לחי ראי הנה בין קדש ובין
ברד :

14. Therefore the well was called Be'er Lechai Roi (the well
of the Living One that sees me), situated between Kadesh and
Bared.

טו ותלד הגר לאברם בן ויקרא אברם שם־בנו
אשר־ילדה הגר ישמעאל :

15. And Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave his son,
which Hagar bore, the name Ishmael.

טו וְאַבְרָם בֶּן־שְׁמֹנִים שָׁנָה וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים בְּלִדְת־הָגָר
אֶת־יִשְׁמָעֵאל לְאַבְרָם :

16. And Abram was 86 years when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָם שֵׁם־בְּנוֹ
– אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה הָגָר יִשְׁמָעֵאל

One can assume that Hagar must have told Abram of her experiences at the well, so that he knew to name the boy Ishmael.

16:16 – וְאַבְרָם בֶּן־שְׁמֹנִים שָׁנָה וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים – Abram's age reveals just how old he was when his son was born.

בְּלִדְת־הָגָר אֶת־יִשְׁמָעֵאל לְאַבְרָם – This verse simply adds the age of Abram to the narrative, but significantly it ensures that once again Hagar is named alongside Abram. It is Sarai who is absent at the conclusion of this episode.

A commentary on Genesis
21:8-21

21:8 וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֶּה

גָּדוֹל – One is left wondering about whether a similar feast was thrown for Ishmael on the day when he was weaned.

בְּיוֹם הַגְּמֹל אֶת יִצְחָק –

Now that Isaac has been

ח וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּגְמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֶּה גָּדוֹל בְּיוֹם הַגְּמֹל אֶת יִצְחָק:

8. And the boy grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day when Isaac was weaned.

ט וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת־בֶּן־הָעִרְמְצִית אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק:

9. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she bore to Abraham, laughing.

י וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרֶשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בֶּן־הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת עִם־בְּנֵי עַם־יִצְחָק:

10. And she said to Abraham: "Drive out this handmaid and her son, for the son of this handmaid should not inherit with my son, with Isaac."

weaned, he has survived the initial time when many babies would have died. At this point Ishmael is no longer necessary as Abraham's heir, it is in this context that the story takes place.

21:9 וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה – Once again in a story involving Hagar it is Sarah who is the active party in the story, driving things forward; she is the subject.

אֶת־בֶּן־הָעִרְמְצִית – While Hagar is named at this point, with no mention of her being a handmaid or maidservant, her son is now the anonymous one. There is significance in who is named and who is anonymous.

אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם – The link between Hagar and Abraham has been maintained by the son which she bore to him.

מִצְחָק – The ambiguity of this word allows the reader to see in the actions of Ishmael exactly what he or she chooses. The interpretations allow for Ishmael's actions to be viewed negatively, or for it simply to be an example of an older brother amusing his younger sibling.

21:10 גֵּרֶשׁ – Does not simply mean "drive out"; it also has a meaning which relates to divorce. The same root is used for the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden (3:24) and Cain's banishment (4:14), demonstrating how strong a sense of separation is encapsulated in the word.

גֵּרֶשׁ הָאִמָּה – Once again when Sarah speaks to Abraham about Hagar she is anonymous. Sarah appears unwilling to give Hagar the honor of a name, and so instead she refers to her as **הָאִמָּה**. In the previous episode Hagar was described as **שִׁפְחָה**. As a **שִׁפְחָה** Hagar was the

יא וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אוֹדֹת בְּנוֹ :
 11. And this matter was very displeasing in the eyes of Abraham, because of his son.
 יב וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל אַבְרָהָם אֵל יֵרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל הַנֶּעֱר וְעַל אֲמָתְךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בְיָצֵחַק יִקְרָא לָךְ זָרַע :
 12. But God said to Abraham: "It should not be displeasing to your eyes on account of the lad and your handmaid. All that Sarah says to you, hear her voice, because through Isaac, your offspring will be called.

property of Sarah;⁶² once she gave birth to Ishmael, as Abraham's second wife, she became הָאִמָּה, no longer Sarah's property.

הָאִמָּה – It is interesting to

recognize that this word probably shares a root with אִמָּה, mother, which could be read in light of Hagar's relationship to Ishmael.

לא יִירָשׁ בֶּן הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת עִם בְּנֵי עַם יִצְחָק – It is not clear why Ishmael's behavior in the previous verse would have led Sarah to suddenly fear for her son's inheritance. Surely this was a subject of concern for her from the moment Isaac was born; one almost suspects that she was looking for a pretext to drive Hagar and Ishmael out of the house.

גֵּרֶשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת בְּנָהּ – One can read the order of Sarah's words as a designation of the fact that she is primarily concerned with expelling Hagar, and then also Ishmael. She may also feel that she can convince Abraham to expel Hagar first and then possibly Ishmael.

וְאֶת בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בֶּן הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת – Abraham's paternity of Ishmael appears to have been all but forgotten by Sarah as she calls for his expulsion.

וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי 21:11 – Perception has been the cause of problems for Hagar in the past; when וַיִּשְׁלַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַמַּלְאָכִים וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶיהָ (16:5), Sarai acted against Hagar. Here it is Abraham who is displeased about the situation.

עַל אוֹדֹת בְּנוֹ – Abraham does not appear to care for Hagar at all. Had Sarah asked him to just send her out of the household, one assumes he would have acquiesced, but on account of his son, Sarah's request is displeasing.

אֵל יֵרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל הַנֶּעֱר וְעַל אֲמָתְךָ 21:12 – Although God appears to be responding directly to Abraham's concern, God, who saw Hagar at Be'er Lechai Roi, ensures that Abraham recognizes that this request does not just involve Ishmael, but requires that Hagar also be expelled from the household. While Hagar may be neglected in the house of Abraham and Sarah, she is never forgotten or ignored by God.

⁶² BDB notes that שִׁפְחָה is "maid-servant, as belonging to a mistress" (1046)

יג וגם את־בן־האִמָּה לגוי אֲשִׁימֶנּוּ כִּי זֶרַעַךְ הוּא :

13. And also the son of the handmaid, I will make into a nation, because he is of your seed."

יד וַיִּשְׁכֶם אַבְרָהָם בְּבֶקֶר וַיִּקַּח־לֶחֶם וְחֲמַת מַיִם וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־הָגָר שֶׁם עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ וְאֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּשְׁלַחַּהּ וּתְלַךְ וּתִתֵּן בְּמִדְבַּר בְּאֶר שָׁבַע :

14. And Abraham arose early in the morning, and he took bread and a skin of water, and he gave them to Hagar, placing them on her shoulder with the boy. And he sent her away, and she went, and she wandered in the wilderness of Be'er Sheva.

שָׁמַע בְּקֻלָּהּ – All of these problems began when נִשְׁמַע. God's response almost appears to let Abraham know that he caused these problems by listening

passively to Sarah's request, and that he therefore has no legitimacy to reject a request from her now.

שָׁמַע בְּקֻלָּהּ – When God heard Hagar, she was blessed and received a son, who was a constant reminder that God listens: נִשְׁמָעֵאל. While Abraham listens to God, more directly he listens to, and consents to, Sarah's request.

כִּי בִיצְחָק יִקְרָא לֶךְ זֶרַע – There is an implication that Abraham's connection to Ishmael is going to be broken. Although it may appear that God is insensitive to the plight of Hagar and Ishmael, having read the text it appears that Abraham has not been interested in either his eldest son, or his second wife; therefore does he deserve to maintain a connection with them?

אֶת־בֶּן־הָאִמָּה 21:13 – Once again Ishmael is not named, and instead it is in connection to Hagar that Abraham's son is mentioned. It is as though the line of Ishmael really does not begin with him, but begins with his mother. When Ishmael's lineage is written he is clearly recognized as the son of both Abraham and Hagar in 25:12.

כִּי זֶרַעַךְ הוּא – This story is all about the significance of seed, and how Abraham's line will continue. And while Ishmael is the carrier of Abraham's seed, he is also the heir to Hagar.

וַיִּשְׁכֶם אַבְרָהָם בְּבֶקֶר 21:14 – These same words are used at the beginning of the Akedah (22:3); Abraham approached both events with as much enthusiasm, or as much trepidation.

וַיִּקַּח־לֶחֶם וְחֲמַת מַיִם – Although this matter was displeasing in the eyes of Abraham, he does not seem so concerned for Hagar and Ishmael's fate to give them more than a bare amount of provisions to start them on their journey.

שֶׁם עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ וְאֶת־הַיֶּלֶד – It appears strange that Ishmael is young enough that Hagar could carry him on her shoulders. Perhaps instead this an allusion to the fact that she will be

טו וַיִּכְלוּ הַמַּיִם מִן־הַחֲמָת וַתִּשְׁלַךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד
הַשִּׁיחִים :

15. And they finished the water from the skin, and she cast the boy under one of the bushes.

טז וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לָהּ מִנֶּגֶד הָרֶחֶק כַּמֶּטְחָי קֶשֶׁת כִּי אָמְרָה
אֶל־אַרְאֶה בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד וַתֵּשֶׁב מִנֶּגֶד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת־קוֹלָהּ
וַתִּבֶּן :

16. And she went and sat herself opposite, at the distance of a bow shot, because she said: "I will not see the death of the boy." So she sat opposite, and raised her voice and she cried.

carrying Ishmael into the future, and will be responsible for his well-being; metaphorically she is carrying him on her shoulders.

וְאֶת־הַיֶּלֶד – Ishmael is not

referred to as someone's son or as a lad, as he is sent away from his home; he is a boy, young and exposed to the world.

וַיִּשְׁלַחָהּ – Now that Sarah is not present, Hagar is simply sent away, and not driven out as Sarah originally requested.

וַתֵּתַע בְּמִדְבָּר בְּאֶר שָׁבַע – Hagar evidently had no idea where to go having been sent out of Abraham's house.

וַיִּכְלוּ הַמַּיִם מִן־הַחֲמָת 21:15 – While we do not know how long the water lasted, it appears that it did not last for a significant amount of time.

וַתִּשְׁלַךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים – Perhaps Hagar placed Ishmael in the shade so that even though there was no water, he would at least be protected from the sun's heat.

וַתִּשְׁלַךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת אֶחָד הַשִּׁיחִים – Hagar, remembering the promise which the angel had made to her, knew that Ishmael must survive, and so her task was to keep him alive before salvation arrived.

וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לָהּ מִנֶּגֶד 21:16 – Under this one solitary bush in the wilderness, perhaps there was only space for one of them to be sheltered.

וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לָהּ מִנֶּגֶד – Hagar did not want to sit in the shade, hidden. Her encounter with God had been an encounter with אֵל רֹאֶי, a God that sees (16:13), and so she wanted her distress to be completely visible to God.

אֶל־אַרְאֶה בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד – Not only did she not want to see the boy's death, perhaps she also did not want Ishmael to have to see how distressed she was by their situation.

וַתֵּשֶׁב מִנֶּגֶד וַתִּשָּׂא אֶת־קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבֶּן – Outside of Abraham's house, Hagar is the active character, she is the one who is advancing the narrative, and it is she who now cries out for help.

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים 21:17

אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר – We have not even read that Ishmael cried out, but why did God not listen to Hagar's call? Up until this point God has noticed Hagar

וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר וַיִּקְרָא מִלֶּאךָ אֱלֹהִים
אֶל־הָגָר מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה־לָּךְ הָגָר אֶל־תִּירָאִי
כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא־שָׁם :

17. And God heard the voice of the lad. And an angel of God called to Hagar from the Heavens, and it said to her: "How are you Hagar? Do not be afraid, because God has heard the voice of the lad from where he is.

יֵחַ קוֹמִי שְׂאִי אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר וְהַחֲזִיקִי אֶת־יָדְךָ בּוֹ כִּי־לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל
אֲשִׁימֵנו :

18. Rise up, carry the lad, and take hold of him in your hand, for I will make of him a great nation."

when she has been neglected by others, but now it appears that God has ignored her as well.

וַיִּקְרָא מִלֶּאךָ אֱלֹהִים אֶל־הָגָר – Even though God heard the cries of Ishmael, the angel responds to Hagar. This time it is not a *יְהוָה*, but instead a *מִלֶּאךָ אֱלֹהִים*

וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה־לָּךְ הָגָר – Although Hagar is so often nameless when alongside Abraham and Sarah, when she is in contact with God and the angels she is always called by her name.

מַה־לָּךְ הָגָר – This question shows the angel's real concern for Hagar. It is a question which demonstrates a desire to know how she really is. But stranded in the wilderness, isn't the answer obvious?

כִּי־שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל־קוֹל הַנֶּעֱר – Does this reassure Hagar, or does it leave her wondering why once again she has been ignored? Perhaps the significance of this is that she will know that her son has been heard by God, and will therefore hopefully be heard by God again in the future.

בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא־שָׁם – What is the significance of the place where Hagar left Ishmael that God specifically heard him "from where he is"?

קוֹמִי שְׂאִי אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר 21:18 – One can read this as a physical instruction from the angel to Hagar. Alternatively it can be a symbolic statement that Hagar will be the one to support Ishmael forward into the future.

וְהַחֲזִיקִי אֶת־יָדְךָ – This additional instruction seems to clarify that Hagar has a crucial role in leading Ishmael to his future and to become a great nation.

לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל – The fact that Ishmael will be a great nation means that he has received the same promise as Abraham (12:2 and 18:8), Jacob (46:3) and the offer which is made to Moses (Ex. 32:10).

יִפְתָּח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא בְּאֵר מַיִם וַתֵּלֶךְ
וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת־הַחֲמַת מַיִם וַתִּשְׁקֵן אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר:

19. Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin of water, and gave the lad to drink.

כ וַיְהִי אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר וַיַּגְדֵּל וַיֵּשֶׁב בַּמִּדְבָּר וַיְהִי רֹבֵה קִשְׁתִּי:

20. And God was with the lad. And he grew and he dwelt in the wilderness, and he became an archer.

כא וַיֵּשֶׁב בַּמִּדְבָּר פָּאֵרָן וַתִּקַּח־לוֹ אִמּוֹ אִשָּׁה מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

21. And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran. And his mother took for him a wife from the land of Egypt.

וַיִּפְתָּח אֱלֹהִים 21:19

אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ – After Hagar has been seen by God, אֵל רֹאֵי, a God that sees (16:13), now opens the eyes of Hagar so that she is able to see a well which she was unable to see before.

וַיִּפְתָּח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־עֵינֶיהָ – In many ways the strife between Sarah and Hagar escalated when her mistress was diminished in her eyes (16:4). Now as the story comes to an end Hagar's eyes are opened, and she is able to see things she did not notice before.

בְּאֵר מַיִם – Once again the story involving Hagar takes place around a well, a significant place within the wilderness, which could ensure survival in the harsh environment.

וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת־הַחֲמַת מַיִם – It was Abraham who originally gave Hagar and Ishmael the full skin of water. Now, having left Abraham's house, Hagar replaces him as the provider for Ishmael, filling up the skin which he had previously filled.

וַיְהִי אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַנֶּעֱר 20:20 – While Hagar and Ishmael may have left the home of Abraham, God did not desert them, and he remained with the boy.

וַיְהִי רֹבֵה קִשְׁתִּי – The prophecy given to Hagar in Gen. 16, that Ishmael would be well suited to living in the wilderness, is beginning to come true.

וַתִּקַּח־לוֹ אִמּוֹ אִשָּׁה מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם 20:21 – Hagar fulfills the role of the father, and returns to her homeland to find a wife for her son, just as Abraham will send his manservant back to his homeland to find a wife for Isaac. It is a further indication of the fact that Hagar is not just the mother to Ishmael, but in place of Abraham, she is also his father.

מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם – There is a symmetry to Hagar's story, it began with שִׁפְחָה מִצְרִית, an Egyptian handmaid (16:1), and now at the end of her narrative she returns to Egypt to find a bride for her son.

25:12 – Despite Abraham having sent his son Ishmael away from the home, the connection between father and son was never broken and it is still “Ishmael the son of Abraham”.

אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה הָגָר – Mothers are not generally included in the generational trees of Genesis. For Isaac it is: **וְאֵלֶּה תְּלֹדֹת יִצְחָק בֶּן־אַבְרָהָם אֲבִירָהם הוֹלִיד אֶת־יִצְחָק** “And these are the generations of Isaac the son of Abraham, Abraham gave birth to Isaac” (Gen. 25:19). For Esau it is: **וְאֵלֶּה תְּלֹדֹת עֵשָׂו הוּא אֱדוֹם** “And these are the generations of Esau, he is Edom” (Gen. 36:1). And for Jacob it is: **אֵלֶּה תְּלֹדֹת יַעֲקֹב בֶּן־שִׁבְעָעֶשְׂרֵה** “These are the generations of Jacob, Joseph was 17 years old” (Gen. 37:2),⁶³ when the children had a variety of different mothers.

אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה הָגָר – With this statement, in contrast to the other generational trees, there is an acknowledgement that Hagar is not simply a Matriarch in relation to Ishmael. She is a Patriarch and as such must be included in the generational tree. It is evident from this passage that both Abraham and Hagar together are the Patriarchs of Ishmael’s line.

הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית שִׁפְחַת שָׂרָה – Even now, after the death of Sarah and Abraham, Hagar cannot be considered independently from the social connection which she has as “the maidservant of Sarah”. Even though that link was apparently broken when Hagar and Ishmael were expelled from Abraham’s house.

⁶³ In connection to Jacob lines of names are also given with the other sons beginning: **וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל** “And these are the names of the Children of Israel” in Gen. 46:8 and in Ex. 1:1. In both of these cases the mothers are not mentioned

Hagar: The Patriarch of her People

וְלָהּ שִׁפְחָה מִצְרִית וְשִׁמָּהּ הָגָר

and she [Sarai] had an Egyptian maidservant, and her name was Hagar
(Genesis 16:1)

The introduction which Hagar receives in Genesis 16:1 ensures that she is immediately viewed as a second class character, if not lower. The first detail which the Hebrew text gives is the fact that she is a maidservant, the property of Sarai. This is closely followed by her national identity, Egyptian, which distinguishes her as a foreigner, separate from Abram's family and their descendants. This foreignness is further emphasized by her name הָגָר, which defines her as 'the foreigner' or 'the stranger'. Finally, in the context of the Biblical narrative, which generally focuses on the male characters and the men's story, her female identity and female mistress place her firmly in a second class category. However, in the course of her story, which only spans 31 verses in the Torah,⁶⁴ an amazing transformation occurs, which sees Hagar develop from a maidservant into the first, and only, female Patriarch.

As *Encyclopedia Judaica* states, the Patriarchs are: "the founding fathers of the people of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Sarna 2007:689). It is clear that this is a term used specifically to describe men, with a female equivalent of Matriarchs for the parallel women: Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel. However, when one looks at the life of Hagar according to the Biblical narrative it becomes evident that she has far more in common with the Patriarchs, than with the Matriarchs. Therefore, although her gender suggests she cannot be considered a Patriarch, her story demonstrates the way in which she overcomes the restrictions imposed by her gender, and behaves in a way which must be considered patriarchal. It should be stressed that Hagar is not a Patriarch for the Israelites (like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). Instead, she can most neatly be classified as the Patriarch of her people.

While Hagar's actions and experiences predominantly challenge the typical gender roles of the Bible, the first six verses in which she appears present her in a manner consistent with accepted female expectations. After her introduction as a maidservant (a female role), she is primarily noted for her ability to give birth, and to be a mother. Hagar is the surrogate mother who is able to provide offspring for Sarai and Abram, who have been unable to bear

⁶⁴ The story of Hagar is confined to the following verses: Genesis 16:1-16, 21:8-21 and 25:12

children. In this role, Hagar is depicted in a completely passive way, an object taken by Sarai and given to Abram. The first time Hagar becomes the subject is in 16:4, when “she conceived”, still perpetuating the normative female role.

The tension between Sarai and Hagar is not easily defined as male or female, but the issue appears to be connected to the idea of status within the household. Hagar as a pregnant woman views herself to be in an elevated position, and simultaneously views the barren Sarai’s status to have been somewhat diminished. The man in the story, Abram, appears to wash his hands of the situation, reminding Sarai that “your maidservant is in your hands” (16:5). This ensures that the dispute is a female-only matter.

It is only once Hagar has fled from the house of Abram, and the presence of Sarai, that she begins to move beyond the boundaries of expected female behavior. It is in the wilderness that Hagar becomes the Patriarch of her people, a people who will dwell in the wilderness. There are a number of elements within Hagar’s story in Genesis 16, 21 and 25, which demonstrate the reason why she should be considered a Patriarch rather than a Matriarch, or a mere maidservant.

In the interaction between Hagar and the angels⁶⁵ in Genesis 16, the crucial element of the conversation is the promise of seed which Hagar receives. She is not simply told that she will give birth to a child. Instead she is promised: “I will greatly multiply your offspring, and they will be too numerous to count” (16:10). This promise does not take the form which is normally given to women in the Bible. Rebecca, Rachel and Leah are not even told that they will have children, let alone that they will have multiple descendants.⁶⁶ The only Matriarch who is informed, albeit indirectly, that she will have a child is Sarah. The angels-men⁶⁷ in Genesis 18 inform Abraham that his wife Sarah will have a son (18:10). She is not told directly, instead, she overhears this news from the entrance of the tent where she was standing. There is also no mention that this son will result in multiple descendants too numerous to count.

⁶⁵ I am following the Midrash, Genesis Rabbah 45:7, which considers Hagar to have been visited by 4 or 5 angels due to the repetition of the phrase “Angel of Adonai” or because of the different references to speech. It seems unnecessary to have these various introductions if it was just one solitary angel.

⁶⁶ After Rebecca has conceived, she is told that there are two children in her womb (25:23), but there is no promise of seed like the one Hagar received.

⁶⁷ They are referred to in the text as men, but their knowledge of God’s plan suggests they are angels.

In contrast to the Matriarchs, Hagar's experience can most readily be compared to the encounters involving Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In 13:16, Abram is told that his offspring will be like the dust of the earth, which cannot be counted. For Isaac, the promise is in 26:4 where his seed is likened to the stars in the sky. Jacob receives a blessing similar to his grandfather, in 28:14, that his seed will be like the dust of the earth. The essence of all of these promises is the description of their offspring as too numerous to count, the same pledge which Hagar receives.

It should also be noted that while Sarah overheard the discussion that she would have a child, Hagar was personally visited by several angels who gave her this promise, not just of a son, but of multiple descendants. Hagar's encounter with several angels in the wilderness may be compared to Abraham's experience in Genesis 18. Adonai's appearance to Abraham, declaring that Sarah will give birth to Isaac, involves three angels-men appearing at his tent to deliver the annunciation that he will have a son with Sarah. This can be compared to the four (or five) angels who appear before Hagar to announce the birth of Ishmael. It should also be acknowledged that Hagar receives the news of her son with calmness and a praise for God who will grant her this gift. In contrast, when Sarah overhears Abraham being told that she will have a son, she laughs and appears unable to believe what the angels-men are telling her husband. The contrast in responses between Hagar and Sarah serves as further evidence that Hagar does not belong in the matriarchal category. Her response in offering God a name, *אל קרני*, may also be seen as distinguishing her from the Patriarchs. She does not simply fulfill the patriarchal role, instead she elevates both male and female expectations, changing the dynamic of the relationship with God.

Hagar's promise of seed places her in the patriarchal sphere. Following this promise, the seven-fold blessing which she receives can be likened to the seven-fold blessings offered to Abram (12:2-3), Isaac (26:3-4) and Jacob (27:28-29). These blessings can be broken up as is demonstrated in Table 1 (overleaf). All four Biblical figures receive similarly structured blessings which may be paralleled with each other to demonstrate a category of patriarchal blessing. It should not be surprising that there is a distinction between the content of Hagar's blessing and the other three. The blessings to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are for the Israelites, while Hagar's blessing is for her people.

Table 1:

Hagar (16:11-12)	Abram (12:2-3)	Isaac (26:3-4)	Jacob (27:28-29)
הִנֵּנִי הָרָה behold you are pregnant	וַאֲעֲשֶׂנָּה לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל And I will make you a great nation	וְאִהְיֶה עִמָּךְ And I will be with you	וַיִּתֵּן לָךְ הָאֱלֹהִים מִטַּל הַשָּׁמַיִם וּמִשְׁמַנֵּי הָאָרֶץ וְרֹב דָּגוֹ וְתִירָשׁ: And God will give to you from the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth and much grain and wine
וַיֵּלֶדְתָּ בֵן you will give birth to a son	וְאִבְרָכְךָ and I will bless you	וְאִבְרָכְךָ and I will bless you	וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ עַמִּים Peoples will serve you
וְקָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל כִּי שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל־עֲנִיךָ and you shall call his name Ishmael, for Adonai has heard your affliction	וְאִגְדַּלְתָּ שְׁמִי and I will make your name great	כִּי לָךְ וּלְזֶרְעֶךָ אֶת־כָּל־הָאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת for to you and your seed I will give all of this land	וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לָךְ לְאֻמִּים and peoples will bow down to you
וְהוּא יְהִי פָרָא אָדָם and he will be a wild ass of a man	וְהָיָה בְרָכָה: and you will be a blessing	וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת־הַשְּׁבָעָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם אָבִיךָ: And I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father	וְהָיָה גִבּוֹר לְאֹחֶיךָ you will be lord over your brothers
וְיָדוּ בְּכָל his hand with everyone	וְאִבְרַכְתָּ מְבָרְכֶיךָ And I will bless those that bless you	וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֶת־זֶרְעֶךָ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם and I will multiply your seed like the stars of the skies	וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּ לָךְ בְּנֵי אִמֶּךָ and your mother's son will bow down to you
וְיָדוּ כָל־בּוֹ and everyone's hand with him	וּמִקְלָלֶיךָ אָאֵר and curse those that curse you	וְנָתַתִּי לְזֶרְעֶךָ אֶת־כָּל־הָאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת And I will give to your seed all this land	אָרְרִין אֹרְרֶיךָ cursed be the people who curse you
וְעַל־פְּנֵי כָל־אֲחָיו יֵשְׁבֶנָּה and in the face of all his brothers he will dwell	וּבִרְכוּ בְּךָ כָּל־מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה: and in you will all the families of the earth be blessed	וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזֶרְעֶךָ כָּל־גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ: And in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed	וּמְבָרְכֶיךָ בָּרוּךְ: blessed be the people who bless you

Further evidence that Hagar should be considered in the category of Patriarchs is the fact that her experiences result in the naming of a place. At the conclusion of her experience with the angels, Hagar offers God a name, which is immediately followed by the naming of

the well in connection to her experience. She names God אֵל רֹאִי “a God that sees” (16:13), which is followed by the naming of the previously anonymous well as בְּאֵר לְחַי רֹאִי “the well of the Living One that sees me” (16:14). The name of the well is connected with her experiences there. All three of the Patriarchs also name places in the context of their experiences there. Abraham names בְּאֵר שָׁבַע *Be'er Sheva* (21:31) as a result of his interaction there with Avimelech. Isaac is responsible for the naming of the well עֵשֶׂק *Esek* (26:20) after quarrels between his herdsmen and those of Gerar. And finally, after Jacob’s dream of God’s ladder, he names the place of his Divine encounter בֵּית אֵל *Beit El* (28:19). It is interesting to note that Hagar’s place-naming combines the elements of all three patriarchal namings, including both a well and a Divine encounter. No place is named in connection to the stories of the Matriarchs, once again demonstrating that Hagar is best classified, contrary to her gender, as a Patriarch.

While Hagar returns to the home of Abram and Sarai to give birth to Ishmael, her patriarchal experiences do not end with Genesis 16. Although she is once again relegated to the status of handmaid and subject to Sarah’s control, once she is outside of their home, she again has experiences which are most closely associated with the Patriarchs.

After their expulsion, Hagar and Ishmael ran out of water, and death threatened her son. This second encounter with angels is therefore primarily concerned with saving the dehydrated Ishmael, and providing him and his mother with water. However, God’s earlier promise for Ishmael is reaffirmed, as Hagar is told “I will make of him a great nation” (21:18) אֵל גִּדּוֹל. Abraham is told that he will be a גִּדּוֹל on two occasions (12:2 and 18:18). He is also told that Ishmael will be a גִּדּוֹל in 17:20, after being told that Sarah will give birth to Isaac. Jacob receives a similar promise in 46:3 when he is told that he will become a great nation in Egypt.

In this episode, after God opens her eyes, Hagar is able to discover a well in the wilderness. While wells are often associated with Miriam⁶⁸ and as a place for men to meet women,⁶⁹ there is also a strong connection between the Patriarchs and wells. Both Abraham and Isaac are characterized as discoverers of wells. Abraham discovered a well which was

⁶⁸ This is from the midrashic idea that a well of water followed the Israelites around the wilderness due to Miriam, hence after her death the community are immediately without water (Numbers 20:1-2).

⁶⁹ Abraham’s servant met Rebecca at a well (24:15-20), Jacob met Rachel at a well (29:1-11) and Moses met Zipporah at a well (Exodus 2:16-21).

seized by the servants of Avimelech (21:25), and then offers seven ewes as proof that he dug the well (21:30). Isaac followed directly in his father's footsteps and dug wells in the land of Gerar (26:18). While Hagar does not dig wells, the well at *Be'er Lechai Roi* was named for her experience, and when Ishmael is close to death her eyes are opened to discover a well. She therefore follows this patriarchal profession as a discoverer of wells.

Given these parallel experiences which occur throughout her life, it is clear that Hagar should be regarded on a similar, if not the same level, as the other Patriarchs. Her final action in the TaNaCh is returning home and taking a wife for her son from the land of Egypt (21:21). In this way, she decided that her son should not marry any of the local women and instead should marry someone from her own family unit, in Egypt. Here another parallel can be drawn to Abraham, who made his servant swear not to allow Isaac to take a wife from among the Canaanites, and instead ordered him to return to Abraham's homeland to take a wife for Isaac from the land of Abraham's birth (24:1-4). Abraham as a Patriarch required that his son, Isaac, marry a wife from his homeland, and Hagar as a Patriarch required that her son, Ishmael, marry a wife from her homeland.

Through the genealogy of Ishmael, the TaNaCh offers a final indication that Hagar is not a Matriarch, and should be considered as a Patriarch. Ishmael's family tree, which is included in 25:12-18, begins by stating: "And these are the generations of Ishmael the son of Abraham, whom Hagar the Egyptian, the maidservant of Sarah, bore to Abraham." While the family tree begins with Ishmael, Hagar is included alongside Abraham as one of his parents. In contrast, Isaac's family tree begins "And these are the generations of Isaac, the son of Abraham. Abraham begot Isaac" (25:19). Sarah's absence is particularly jarring as it follows immediately after Hagar's inclusion in Ishmael's family line.

Abraham, Sarah and Hagar are often analyzed together in academic studies as a result of the way in which their lives intersected. Scholars constantly compare and draw parallels between Sarah and Hagar, while overlooking completely any possible commonalities between Hagar and Abraham. Upon closely examining the life of Hagar, it becomes apparent that when she is compared to Sarah, a lot of the important incidents in her life are missed. Yet, when Hagar is compared to Abraham, the parallels between the two characters reveal the unquestionable similarities between them as well as her rightly deserved place beside him.

in the text. It becomes evident through this analysis that the two should be classified in the same way: Both Hagar and Abraham are the first Patriarchs.

When attempting to classify a Patriarch, one can discern the following characteristics which occur frequently. The Patriarch receives a promise of multiple descendants. Alongside this promise, the Patriarch also receives a seven-fold blessing. The Patriarch also bestows names upon places as a result of their experiences. There are other elements which occur in some, but not all cases; these include the discovery of wells, the visitation by angels, and the promise that they will become a great nation.

Given these characteristics, Hagar may be considered one of the Patriarchs. Furthermore, the Patriarch with whom she shares the most in common is Abraham. As a Patriarch, she leaps over the gender boundaries, behaving in a way unexpected of a woman, and arguably exceeding the expectations of a man.

Hagar is a Patriarch, but she also does something unmatched by any of the Patriarchs, or any other person in the Bible for that matter. After her experience with the angels of Adonai, she does not ask God for a name. Instead, Hagar bestows a name upon God, and calls God אֱלֹהֵי אֵל (a God that sees) (16:13). In this moment she steps outside of the male and female sphere to do something truly unique, which no one else in the TaNaCh does. Upon naming God, Hagar demonstrates that she not only defies expected and accepted gender roles. Through her righteous response and actions, Hagar redefines gender roles, and perhaps more significantly, Hagar re-imagines the role and the potential of the human being.

Tzipporah in the TaNaCh

שמות ב: טו-כג - Exodus 2:15-23

טו וַיִּשְׁמַע פַּרְעֹה אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לַהֲרֹג אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ־מִדְיָן וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל־הַבְּאֵר :

15. And Pharaoh heard about this matter, and he sought to kill Moses. So Moses fled from before Pharaoh, and he dwelt in the land of Midian, and he dwelt⁷⁰ by the well.

טז וּלְכַהֵן מִדְיָן שִׁבְעַת בָּנוֹת וַתִּבְאֵנָה וַתְּדַלְנָה וַתִּמְלֹאנָה אֶת־הָרֶהָטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבִיהֶן :

16. Now the priest of Midian⁷¹ had seven daughters,⁷² and they came, and drew water, and filled the troughs for their father's flock to drink.⁷³

יז וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרָעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם⁷⁴ וַיָּקָם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשַׁעַן וַיִּשְׁקֶן אֶת־צֹאנָם⁷⁵ :

17. But shepherds came and drove them out. And Moses rose up,⁷⁶ and saved them, and he gave their flock to drink.

יח וַתִּבְאֵנָה אֶל־רְעוּאֵל⁷⁷ אֲבִיהֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מְדוּעַ מֵהֲרַתָּן בֹּא הַיּוֹם :

18. And they came to Reuel,⁷⁸ their father, and he said: "Why have you hurried to come back today?"

יט וַתֹּאמְרֶנּוּ אִישׁ מִצְרִי הִצִּילָנוּ מִיַּד הָרָעִים וְגַם־דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁקֶן אֶת־הַצֹּאן :

⁷⁰ This is frequently translated as "sat" (see JPS 1985 and KJV 1982), however, due to the repetition of וַיֵּשֶׁב, I have decided to give the same translation for both occurrences. As an itinerant wanderer it would make sense for Moses to set up his base by the well, providing a supply of water.

The double use of וַיֵּשֶׁב also serves to clearly offer two specific definitions for the place where Moses has found himself: in Midian and by a well.

⁷¹ The Hebrew is structured so that we, as the reader, encounter the Priest of Midian before encountering his daughters.

⁷² In the Septuagint it adds "feeding the flock of their father Yitro".

⁷³ I have changed the order of the translation, to ensure that the idea of 'drinking' is specified.

⁷⁴ The Hebrew here is in the masculine and means 'drove them [men] out', to be in the feminine it should be וַיִּגְרְשׁוּן, this appears to be an error in the text. However, by offering the masculine form the word is echoed later in the name of Moses and Tzipporah's son 'Gershom'.

⁷⁵ The suffix of this verb is masculine, suggesting a male ownership (possibly Reuel), although it must be a reference to the daughters' flock.

⁷⁶ Often the word וַיָּקָם has a sense that action is about to follow (see Cain in Gen 4:8, or Jacob in Gen 31:17), in this context the action may simply have been Moses rising up on behalf of the seven daughters, and demonstrating his presence physically.

⁷⁷ The name Reuel can itself be translated as 'friend of God'.

⁷⁸ In some Septuagint manuscripts it changes the name here to Yitro.

19. And they said: “An Egyptian man delivered us from the hands of the shepherds, and also drew water for us, and gave the flock to drink.”

כ וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל בָּנָתָיו וַאֲיוֹ לָמָּה זֶה עָזַבְתֶּן אֶת־הָאִישׁ קִרְאוּ לוֹ וַיֵּאכֹל לֶחֶם :

20. And he said to his daughters: “Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Call him, so that he may eat bread.”

כא וַיֹּאֶל מֹשֶׁה לְשִׁבָּת אֶת־הָאִישׁ וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־צִפּוֹרָה בְּתוּ לְמִשָּׁה :⁷⁹

21. And Moses was pleased to dwell⁸⁰ with the man, and he gave Tzipporah, his daughter, to Moses.

כב⁸¹ וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן וַיִּקְרָא⁸² אֶת־שְׁמוֹ גֶרְשֹׁם כִּי אָמַר גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נֹכְרִיָּה :

22. And she bore a son. And he called his name ‘Gershom’ because he said: “I have been⁸³ a stranger in a foreign land.”⁸⁴

כג וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָרַבִּים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַיֹּאנְחוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבָדָה וַיִּזְעְקוּ וַתַּעַל שׁוֹעַתָם אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־הָעֲבָדָה :⁸⁵

23. And it came to pass after many days that the King of Egypt⁸⁶ died. And the children of Israel sighed from the labor, and they cried out. And their cry from the labor ascended to God.

⁷⁹ In the Septuagint it adds the word לְאִשָּׁה, specifying he took Tzipporah “to wife”.

⁸⁰ This section could be translated as ‘And Moses was pleased to sit with the man’. In the context of the verse, which follows with Moses’ marriage to Tzipporah, it appears that the word לְשִׁבָּת has a more permanent meaning in this context, hence “to dwell”.

⁸¹ In the Septuagint it adds וַתֵּלֶד, meaning “and she conceived”.

⁸² In Targum Onkelos and some Masoretic manuscripts it has וַתִּקְרָא, “and she called” suggesting that Tzipporah rather than Moses named Gershom. This would provide a nice parallel with 2:10 where Moses is named by the daughter of Pharaoh. However, the name Gershom, and the meaning attributed to it, seems more likely to come from Moses rather than Tzipporah.

⁸³ In the Septuagint, rather than translating הָיִיתִי in the past tense, “I have been”, it gives the word a present tense meaning: “I am a sojourner”, in this way the foreign land which is being referred to according to the Septuagint must be Midian. However, the simple meaning of הָיִיתִי is ‘I have been’ and so it suggests that the land in which he was a stranger is the one in which he previously lived – Egypt.

⁸⁴ The interpretation of the name Gershom which Moses gives it relates to: גֵּר ‘stranger’ שָׁם ‘there’. However, as Durham notes it could also be related to the Hebrew root: גָּרַשׁ ‘cast out’ or ‘drive out’ (see 23).

According to Propp in the Septuagint and Syriac Bible, they “append, in various ways, Moses’ other son, Eliezer, who first appears in 18:4” (170).

⁸⁵ The repetition of this word in the verse makes it clear that the suffering which the Israelites were enduring came “from the labor”.

⁸⁶ The move from “foreign land” in which Moses used to dwell to a verse about the King of Egypt seems to be a second piece of evidence that Moses considered Egypt to be the “foreign land”.

יח וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיָּשָׁב אֶל־יֶתֶר⁸⁷ חֹתֵנוּ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֵלְכָה־נָּא וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֶל־אֲחֵי
אֲשֶׁר־בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶרְאֶה הַעֲוֹדָם חַיִּים וַיֹּאמֶר יִתְרוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה לֵךְ לְשָׁלוֹם :

18. And Moses went, and he returned to Yeter, his father-in-law, and he said to him: "Please let me go, and I will return to my brothers, who are in Egypt, and I will see how life continues."⁸⁸ And Yitro said to Moses: "Go in peace."⁸⁹

יט וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְיָן לֵךְ שָׁב מִצְרַיִם⁹⁰ כִּי־מָתוּ כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים הַמְּבַקְשִׁים
אֶת־נַפְשְׁךָ :

19. And Adonai said to Moses in Midian: "Go, return to Egypt, for all the men who sought your soul,⁹¹ are dead."

כ וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת־בָּנָיו וַיִּרְכָּבֶם עַל־הַחֲמֹר וַיָּשָׁב אֶרְצָה מִצְרַיִם וַיִּקַּח
מֹשֶׁה אֶת־מִטָּה הָאֱלֹהִים בְּיָדוֹ :

20. And Moses took his wife, and his sons⁹² and set them riding upon a donkey, and he returned towards⁹³ the land of Egypt.⁹⁴ And Moses took the staff of God in his hand.

כא וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּלִכְתְּךָ לָשׁוּב מִצְרַיִמָּה רְאֵה כָּל־הַמִּפְתִּים אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַתִּי
בְּיָדְךָ וַעֲשִׂיתָם לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וְאֲנִי אַחֲזִק אֶת־לְבוֹ וְלֹא יִשְׁלַח אֶת־הָעָם :

21. And Adonai said to Moses: "On your journey, returning to Egypt, see all the wonders which I have put in your hand.⁹⁵ And you will do them before Pharaoh, and I will harden his heart, and he will not send out the people.

⁸⁷ In this verse Moses' father-in-law is given two names as יֶתֶר and יִתְרוֹ. In the Syriac and Targum manuscripts the first name is given as יִתְרוֹ so that Moses' father-in-law only has one name in this verse.

The name יֶתֶר does not appear anywhere else in the TaNaCh (see Durham 1987:52).

⁸⁸ This could also be translated as 'if they are still alive'; however, as Adonai has instructed Moses about his mission to take the Israelites out of Egypt, I assume that Moses knew they were still alive. This phrase has a meaning of checking on someone's welfare.

⁸⁹ In the Septuagint, it adds here: "Now after those many days, the king of Egypt had died." This is implied by the next verse, but this addition makes the death of the Pharaoh explicit.

⁹⁰ In another manuscript it states מִצְרַיִמָּה, to denote travel in the direction of Egypt.

⁹¹ I have translated נַפְשְׁךָ as "your soul", although it could equally be translated as "your life", which is the meaning implicit in

⁹² The Hebrew is clearly referring to sons in the plural. Although we have read about the birth of Gershom, we have not read about the birth of Eliezer, which is implied in this verse, but only explicitly revealed in Exodus 18:4.

⁹³ I have used the word "towards" to translate the directional הָ in אֶרְצָה.

⁹⁴ While here it says "the land of Egypt" in the Septuagint it just refers to "Egypt"

כב ואמר אלפרעה כה אמר יהוה בני בכרי ישראל :

22. Then you will say to Pharaoh, thus says Adonai: 'Israel is my firstborn son.'

כג ואמר אליך שלח את בני ויעבדני ותמאן לשלחו הנה אנכי הרג את־בְּנֶךָ
בְּכֶרֶךָ :

23. I have said to you: 'Send out my son,'⁹⁶ that he may serve me, but you refuse to send him out. Behold I will kill your firstborn son."⁹⁷

כד ויהי בדרך במלון ויפגשו יהוה ויבקש המיתו :

24. And it happened on the way,⁹⁸ in the lodging, Adonai⁹⁹ encountered him, and sought to kill him.

כה ותקח צפרה צר ותכרת את־ערלת בנה ותגע לרגליו ותאמר כי חתן־דמים
אתה לי:¹⁰⁰

25. So Tzipporah took a flint, and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs¹⁰¹ with it. And she said: "For you are a bridegroom of blood to me."¹⁰²

כו וירף ממנו¹⁰³ אז אמרה חתן דמים למולת :

26. And he¹⁰⁴ refrained¹⁰⁵ from him, so she said: "a bridegroom of blood due to the circumcision."

⁹⁵ In the Septuagint it reads "hands" in the plural.

⁹⁶ In the Septuagint the request is for Pharaoh to "Send out my people".

⁹⁷ The punctuation of where Adonai's speech begins and ends is not entirely clear; however, it seems most likely that the verse through to the end is the word of God.

⁹⁸ In the Syriac Bible we read "Moses was on the way" (see Propp 1998:189), specifying that the following episode involved him.

⁹⁹ Rather than attribute this incident directly to Adonai, in the Septuagint it identifies "an angel of the Lord".

¹⁰⁰ The Hebrew אַתָּה לִי, appears to be suggesting that Tzipporah is marrying Moses through this action

¹⁰¹ The word לְרַגְלָיו could be a euphemism for genitalia, as is found in Deuteronomy 28:57 and Ezekiel 16:25 (see Durham 1987:53). In the BDB, the words שְׁעַר הָרַגְלִים in Isaiah 7:20 are translated as "hair of the private parts" (920).

This word could also be translated as "feet", which would suggest that she fell down at his feet to touch them with the foreskin.

In the Septuagint the text reads: "she fell at his feet"

¹⁰² Targum Onkelos has "by the blood of this circumcision a bridegroom has been given to us" (see Propp 1998:189). In the Septuagint, Tzipporah is recorded as saying: "The blood of the circumcision of my child is staunched", with the same statement at the end of 4:26.

¹⁰³ In one manuscript it includes כִּמְנָה, which would suggest the refrain was from her, and would appear to make sense in the context of Tzipporah being the active one circumcising her son.

¹⁰⁴ While this is almost certainly a reference to Adonai, who began the attack, the mystery of the characters involved in the text has led me to use "he", to leave a sense of ambiguity as to who was actually involved.

¹⁰⁵ There is a sense in which the attempt to kill has finished.

א וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים¹⁰⁶ לְמֹשֶׁה¹⁰⁷ וְלִישְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ כִּי־הוֹצִיא יְהוָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם :

1. And Yitro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moses, heard all that God had done for Moses and Israel his people, for Adonai had brought Israel out of Egypt.

ב וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֶת־צִיִּפּוֹרָה¹⁰⁸ אִשְׁתּוֹ מֹשֶׁה אַחֲרֵי שְׁלוּחֶיהָ :

2. And Yitro, the father-in-law of Moses, took Tzipporah, the wife of Moses, after she had been sent away.¹⁰⁹

ג וְאֵת שְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר שָׁם הָאֶחָד גֶּרְשֹׁם כִּי אָמַר גֵּר הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נֹכְרִיָּה :

3. With¹¹⁰ her two sons, the name of one was Gershom, for he said: "I have been a stranger in a foreign land."

ד וְשֵׁם הָאֶחָד אֱלִיעֶזֶר כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי בַּעֲזָרִי וַיַּצֵּלֵנִי מִחֶרֶב פְּרָעֹה :

4. And the name of the one was Eliezer, "for¹¹¹ the God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh."

ה וַיָּבֹא יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר־הוּא חֹנֶה שָׁם הָרֶֹה אֱלֹהִים :

5. And Yitro, the father-in-law of Moses, came with his¹¹² sons and his wife to Moses, in the wilderness, where he encamped, there at the mountain of God.

ו וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אָנֹכִי¹¹³ חֹתֶנְךָ יִתְרוֹ בָּא אֵלֶיךָ וְאִשְׁתְּךָ וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ עִמָּה :

6. And¹¹⁴ he said to Moses: "I am your father-in-law, Yitro, I am coming to you with your wife and her two sons¹¹⁵ with her."

¹⁰⁶ In the Septuagint and Targum it includes יְהוָה rather than אֱלֹהִים, which would suggest that Yitro was more intimately aware of what had been happening with the Israelites.

¹⁰⁷ In the Septuagint the words לְמֹשֶׁה are missing, so that Yitro "heard all that God had done for Israel..."

¹⁰⁸ In the Syriac Bible it adds, "his daughter", specifying Tzipporah's connection to both Yitro and Moses.

¹⁰⁹ Although the word שְׁלוּחֶיהָ has a basic meaning related to being sent away, in this context it could also be related to the idea of a divorce. Suggesting that Moses had divorced his wife.

¹¹⁰ The וְאֵת in this context is translated as "With", for it denotes that the sons accompanied Yitro and Tzipporah on the journey.

¹¹¹ In Targum Jonathan it adds the phrase כִּי אָמַר to parallel the naming of Eliezer in v.4 with the naming of Gershom in v.3.

¹¹² The implication from the earlier passage is that this is a reference to Moses' sons and wife, although the text is not entirely clear.

¹¹³ In one manuscript it adds הִנֵּה, which would give it a context of "Behold I am your father-in-law..."

א וַתִּדְבֹר¹¹⁶ מִרְיָם וְאַהֲרֹן בְּמֹשֶׁה עַל־אֲדֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכֹּשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לָקַח כִּי־אִשָּׁה
כֹּשִׁית לָקַח:

1. Then Miriam spoke with Aaron about¹¹⁷ Moses because of his Cushite¹¹⁸ wife,¹¹⁹ that he took¹²⁰ a Cushite for a wife.¹²¹

ב וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲרַק אֶדְבַר בְּמֹשֶׁה דְּבַר יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם־בָּנוּ דִּבֵּר וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה:

2. They said: “Has Adonai only spoken to Moses,¹²² has God¹²³ not spoken with us?” And Adonai heard.

¹¹⁴ In the Septuagint this verse is not delivered by Yitro to Moses, instead “it was reported to Moses”, suggesting an anonymous third party.

¹¹⁵ While the two sons are connected to Tzipporah as “her” sons in this text, in the Septuagint the sons are referred to as “your two sons”.

¹¹⁶ The Hebrew is in the feminine singular form, and so it appears that the speech comes specifically from Miriam, and not from Aaron.

¹¹⁷ The Hebrew form of וַתִּדְבֹר... בְּ... although in its basic translation relates to an idea of speaking about, the form is found elsewhere as denoting rebellion as is seen in Num 21:5 וַיִּדְבֹּר הָעָם בְּאֱלֹהִים וּבְמֹשֶׁה. Although this can be translated as “And the people spoke about God and about Moses”, in the context of what follows it seems that “And the people spoke against God and against Moses” is a more accurate translation. In this context a case could be made that Miriam and Aaron are rebelling against Moses.

¹¹⁸ In the Targum Onkelos instead of calling her a “Cushite wife” it refers to a “beautiful wife”.

¹¹⁹ While it is not clear that this passage is actually about Tzipporah, there is no evidence of Moses having taken another wife. The problem is reconciling Tzipporah’s Midianite origins with her designation as a Cushite in this verse.

¹²⁰ It is difficult to translate the dual occurrence of לָקַח.

¹²¹ The combination of אִשָּׁה and לָקַח do not simply mean to take a woman, but have a clear sense of taking a wife in marriage, as can be seen in Abraham’s charge to his servant in Gen 14:3 לֹא־תִקַּח אִשָּׁה לְבָנִי, “you will not take a wife for my son”.

¹²² Although there is a similar formula combining דִּבֵּר and בְּ in this verse it is not of the same form as the וַתִּדְבֹּר... בְּ... used by Miriam, and denoting rebellion.

¹²³ I have inserted God into the translation rather than give God a gender by using “He” or “She”.

A Commentary on the Tzipporah Texts

A commentary on Exodus 2:15-23

2:15 – **וַיִּשְׁמַע פַּרְעֹה** – The Hebrews already knew that Moses had killed an Egyptian,

but now it is clear that the word of Moses' actions has spread to the highest level of Egyptian society.

וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה – Moses was brought up in the house of Pharaoh by the ruler's daughter, and yet now he is no longer safe. The Hebrews had rejected Moses and now Egyptian society rejects him as well.

וַיִּבְרַח – Clearly means that he fled, but the sound of the word is similar to **וַיִּבְרַךְ**; in Moses' fleeing is there a clue that blessings will be following from God.

וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה – Moses had the experience of fleeing from before Pharaoh so that he could help the Israelites to flee (for Pharaoh was told **כִּי בָרַח הָעָם** that the people had fled [Ex. 14:5]).

וַיָּשָׁב בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְיָן – It is not clear exactly where the land of Midian would have been, geographically speaking. However, as the descendants of Abraham and Keturah (see Gen. 25:2) perhaps Moses hoped to find people who would be sympathetic to him.

וַיָּשָׁב עַל הַבְּאֵר – Moses did not simply dwell in Midian, he dwelt by a specific well. Although we do not know what well it is, we do know that when Abraham's servant waited by a well he found a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24), and when Jacob arrived at a well he met Rachel there (Gen. 29).

2:16 **וַלְכֹּהֵן מִדְיָן** – Who is this mysterious priest of Midian with seven daughters?

שִׁבְעַת בָּנוֹת – The daughters of the priest of Midian are initially completely anonymous, they are unnamed. They simply go about their regular tasks looking after their father's flock, for whom they are known.

שמות ב:

טו וַיִּשְׁמַע פַּרְעֹה אֶת־הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לְהַרְגֹּת אֶת־מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי פַרְעֹה וַיָּשָׁב בְּאֶרֶץ־מִדְיָן וַיָּשָׁב עַל־הַבְּאֵר:

15. And Pharaoh heard about this matter, and he sought to kill Moses. So Moses fled from before Pharaoh, and he dwelt in the land of Midian, and he dwelt by the well.

טז וַלְכֹּהֵן מִדְיָן שִׁבְעַת בָּנוֹת וַתְּבִאֶנָּה וַתְּדַלְּנָה וַתַּמְלִאנָה אֶת־הָרְהָטִים לְהַשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אָבִיהֶן:

16. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters, and they came, and drew water, and filled the troughs for their father's flock to drink.

יִזְבְּאוּ הָרָעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיָּקָם מֹשֶׁה וַיּוֹשַׁעַן וַיִּשְׁק
אֶת צֹאנָם:

17. But shepherds came and drove them out. And Moses rose up, and saved them, and he gave their flock to drink.

יָח וַתְּבֹאנָה אֶל רְעוּאֵל אֲבִיהֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מִדּוּעַ מִהֲרָתָן בָּא הַיּוֹם:

18. And they came to Reuel, their father, and he said: "Why have you hurried to come back today?"

יֵט וַתֹּאמְרָן אִישׁ מִצְרִי הִצִּילָנוּ מִיַּד הָרָעִים וְגַם דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁק אֶת הַצֹּאן:

19. And they said: "An Egyptian man delivered us from the hands of the shepherds, and also drew water for us, and gave the flock to drink."

2:17 וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם – Although Moses will later name his son claiming it is because "I have been a stranger in a foreign land", the name can also be related to this root, as the shepherds drove the daughters

of the priest of Midian away.

וַיָּקָם מֹשֶׁה – Moses could not stand by as an Egyptian beat a Hebrew, and here too he is unable to watch passively as these women are persecuted by the other shepherds.

וַיּוֹשַׁעַן – This time Moses saves them without the need to kill anyone. It seems that he has learned an important lesson, that he can stop oppression without resorting to murder.

וַיִּשְׁק אֶת צֹאנָם – In giving water to the flock Moses takes on a role which is generally associated with women.

וַתְּבֹאנָה אֶל רְעוּאֵל 2:18 – These women did not stay to thank their savior, instead, in their excitement at what had transpired, they rushed straight home to tell their father about the man they had met.

וַתְּבֹאנָה אֶל רְעוּאֵל – Moses who has just saved these women, and then completed their job for them, is left stranded. What must he have thought about Midianite hospitality that he was left alone, unthanked, standing by the well?

רְעוּאֵל – The priest of Midian is now given a name, and it is one with a clear connection to the Hebrew God. Samuel was given his name by Hannah because she asked Adonai for him (I Sam. 1:20).¹²⁴ The first part of his name may be linked to רַע 'friend', suggesting that Reuel was a 'friend of God'; and not just any God, but possibly the Hebrew God.

מִדּוּעַ מִהֲרָתָן – The women's oppression may have been a regular occurrence, which would explain Reuel's surprise to see them back home so quickly.

וַתֹּאמְרָן 2:19 – The seven daughters remain anonymous; without individual voices, they speak as one.

¹²⁴ El at the end of the name is also found with Ezekiel and Daniel

אִישׁ מִצְרִי – Moses appears to them as an Egyptian, his Hebrew identity hidden.

הַצִּילָנוּ – Moses delivered the

daughters of Reuel from the hands of the shepherds, and in the future he will deliver the children of Israel from the hands of Pharaoh.

וַאֲיוֹל מִשָּׁה לְשִׁבְתָּ אֶת־הָאִישׁ וַיֵּתֶן אֶת־צִפּוֹרָה בְּתוּלָמִשָּׁה: – While the daughters had rushed home to tell their father, Moses has been lost in the commotion. Now Reuel asks the pertinent question: “Where is he?” In their excitement the women abandoned him, and Reuel wants to know why.

וַיִּקְרָא לוֹ – However, he does not wait for an answer about their behavior, and instead instructs them to call for Moses. It is Reuel, and not his daughters, who will thank Moses for his chivalrous deeds.

וַיֹּאכַל לֶחֶם – Moses who fed his flock, will now be fed by Reuel.

וַיֹּאכַל מִשָּׁה לְשִׁבְתָּ – Having fled from Egypt, and stopped in Midian by a well, Moses is now invited to dwell with the man. And there is no doubt about what Moses thinks: **וַיֹּאכַל**, he was pleased. The man rejected by both of his communities (Hebrew and Egyptian) has now found a home in Midian.

וַיֵּתֶן אֶת־צִפּוֹרָה – Finally one of the daughters is named. Yet despite the activity of the women in the preceding verses, societal norms appear to be restored as the woman is given by her father as a wife to Moses.

וַיֵּתֶן אֶת־צִפּוֹרָה – What was their relationship? Previously we have met the future wives (Rebecca and Rachel) while still at the well, but here Tzipporah is introduced to us further along in the story, with no information about why she was chosen to be Moses’ wife rather than one of Reuel’s other daughters. We know not of her kindness (like Rebecca) or her beauty (like Rachel). All we know is her name **צִפּוֹרָה**, a name which comes from the same root as the word for ‘bird’. Perhaps Tzipporah was given to Moses as a wife because like a migrating bird she would be able to join him on his journeys from Midian to Egypt and then into the wilderness, flying freely by his side.

כַּוְיֹאמֶר אֶל־בָּנָתָיו וַאֲיוֹל לָמָּה זֶה עָזַבְתֶּן אֶת־הָאִישׁ קְרָאָן לוֹ וַיֹּאכַל לֶחֶם:

20. And he said to his daughters: “Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Call him, so that he may eat bread.”

כַּוְיֹאכַל מִשָּׁה לְשִׁבְתָּ אֶת־הָאִישׁ וַיֵּתֶן אֶת־צִפּוֹרָה בְּתוּלָמִשָּׁה:

21. And Moses was pleased to dwell with the man, and he gave Tzipporah, his daughter, to Moses.

כב ותלד בן ויקרא את שמו גרשם כי אמר גר הייתי
בארץ נכריה :

22. And she bore a son. And he called his name 'Gershom' because he said: "I have been a stranger in a foreign land."

כג ויהי בימים הרבים ההם וימת מלך מצרים ויאנחו בני ישראל מן העבדה ויזעקו ותעל שועתם אל האלהים מן העבדה :

23. And it came to pass after many days that the King of Egypt died. And the children of Israel sighed from the labor, and they cried out. And their cry from the labor ascended to God.

2:22 – **ותלד בן** – While Moses was already pleased to dwell in the house of Reuel, he now begins to form his own family unit with the birth of his son. Moses, who could have died

with the other Hebrew babies at birth, or could have been killed by Pharaoh for murdering an Egyptian, not only lives, but now has a descendant.

גרשם – The name which Moses gives his son, echoes with the actions of the shepherds towards the daughters of Reuel, when **ויגרשו** they drove them out (2:17). Moses himself was driven out of the land of Egypt, fleeing from the death sentence which had been handed down to him.

גר הייתי בארץ נכריה – Moses appears unconcerned by the connotations of the root **גרש** in his son's name, even though he himself was driven out of Egypt. Instead his son is named because he was a stranger in a foreign land. For Moses Midian is home, and Egypt, where he previously resided, is the "foreign land", where he was a stranger; he is neither Hebrew nor Egyptian, never fully belonging.

גר הייתי – The name of Gershom is ominous. Moses is in some ways destined to always be a **גר**. In Egypt he was an Israelite living amongst the house of Pharaoh. In Midian, although he has found his home, he is still a stranger, still a Hebrew, not a Midianite. And finally when he reunited with the Israelites, he is never completely one of them, not having experienced slavery and the Egyptian oppression.

2:23 – **ויהי בימים הרבים** – It is not clear exactly how long Moses dwelt with Reuel in Midian, but it is clear that it was a long time.

ויאנחו בני ישראל – While Moses is "pleased" living with Reuel, married with a son, his people are still suffering. And while Egypt may be a "foreign land" for Moses, his links to that land have not been fully broken.

אל האלהים – The God who heard the cry of the Israelites may be the God for whom Reuel was named. Did Reuel, as the priest of Midian, possibly have something to do with alerting God to the Israelites' suffering?

4:18 וַיָּשָׁב אֶל־יֵתֵר חֹתֵנוּ -

Moses is not able to follow God's instruction and return to Egypt without first speaking to his father-in-law Yeter.

יֵתֵר - His name is given first as Yeter and then as Yitro. This is the only place he is called by the name **יֵתֵר**. The name

signifies the fact that despite Moses' imminent departure, there is a cord (**יֵתֵר**) which will forever link him to his father-in-law.

אֶלְכָּהָנָא - Despite God's instructions to Moses he still needs to ask his father-in-law's permission; while he doesn't ask his wife what she thinks.

וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֶל־אֹחֵי - Why did Moses not mention God's call to him to return to Egypt? He is not completely honest with Yitro.

אֶל־אֹחֵי - While Midian and the family of Yitro has become Moses' home, he is still linked by familial ties to the Israelites in Egypt.

לֵךְ לְשָׁלוֹם - Yitro tells Moses to "Go in peace", offering him a blessing for his journey.

4:19 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה - While Yitro's approval was important, Moses is leaving Midian because Adonai has instructed him to leave.

כִּי־מָתוּ כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים - In all of his arguments with God to avoid returning to Egypt, at no point did Moses mention the sentence for murdering the Egyptian. Adonai reassures Moses about something which did not seem to be concerning him, and also demonstrates that while the men who sought to punish him may be dead, Adonai still remembers what happened.

4:20 וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ - What did Tzipporah really think about the journey she was about to join her husband on? She is passively taken by Moses, along with her sons, and placed upon the donkey. Surely she must have had concerns about Moses' return to Egypt to challenge the Pharaoh. Perhaps her passivity is an insight into the fact that she has faith in

שמות ד:

יח וַיֵּלֶךְ מֹשֶׁה וַיָּשָׁב אֶל־יֵתֵר חֹתֵנוּ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֶלְכָּהָנָא
וְאֶשׁוּבָה אֶל־אֹחֵי אֲשֶׁר־בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאָרְאָה הַעוֹדָם חַיִּים
וַיֹּאמֶר יֵתֵרוֹ לְמֹשֶׁה לֵךְ לְשָׁלוֹם:

18. And Moses went, and he returned to Yeter, his father-in-law, and he said to him: "Please let me go, and I will return to my brothers, who are in Egypt, and I will see how life continues." And Yitro said to Moses: "Go in peace."

יט וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְיָן לֵךְ שָׁב מִצְרַיִם כִּי־מָתוּ
כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים הַמְּבַקְשִׁים אֶת־נַפְשְׁךָ:

19. And Adonai said to Moses in Midian: "Go, return to Egypt, for all the men who sought your soul, are dead."

כ וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־אִשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶת־בָּנָיו וַיִּרְכָּבֵם עַל־הַחֲמֹר
וַיָּשָׁב אֶרְצָה מִצְרַיִם וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־מִטָּה הָאֱלֹהִים
בְּיָדוֹ:

20. And Moses took his wife, and his sons and set them riding upon a donkey, and he returned towards the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand.

כַּאֲנִי אֶמָּר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרָיִם לָשׁוּב מִצְרָיִם רְאֵה
 כָּל־הַמִּפְתִּי אֲשֶׁר־שָׂמֵתִי בְיָדְךָ וְעָשִׂיתָם לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וְאֲנִי
 אֲחַזֵּק אֶת־לְבֹו וְלֹא יִשְׁלַח אֶת־הָעָם :

21. And Adonai said to Moses: "On your journey, returning to Egypt, see all the wonders which I have put in your hand. And you will do them before Pharaoh, and I will harden his heart, and he will not send out the people.

כַּב וְאֶמְרָת אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה בְּנִי בְּכֹרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל :

22. Then you will say to Pharaoh, thus says Adonai: "Israel is my firstborn son"

כַּג וְאֶמָּר אֵלֶיךָ שְׁלַח אֶת־בְּנִי וְיַעֲבֹדֵנִי וְתִמְאֹן לְשַׁלְחוֹ הִנֵּה
 אֲנִכִּי הִרְגָּ אֶת־בֶּן־בְּכֹרְךָ :

23. I have said to you: "Send out my son, that he may serve me, but you refuse to send him out. Behold I will kill your firstborn son."

Adonai. While Moses resisted and offered every possible argument to avoid the mission Tzipporah is completely willing.

וְאֶת־בְּנִי – Who is this other son born to Moses and Tzipporah? We have only read about Gershom, but it appears

that while in Midian they had more than one son.

וַיָּשָׁב אֶרְצָה מִצְרָיִם – Although this is in the masculine singular, it is clear that Tzipporah and their sons are accompanying Moses on his return to Egypt, but for them it is not a return.

4:21 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה – Only now that Moses has begun his journey does Adonai reveal to him exactly what lies ahead of him when he comes to Egypt. It will not be a simple process of making the request and Pharaoh acquiescing. Instead Pharaoh will resist and there will be a need for many wonders to convince him to release the slaves.

כָּל־הַמִּפְתִּים – The wonders are not just going to be seen in Egypt, they will be seen on Moses' journey. But the only wonder on this journey will be when Adonai appears and attempts to kill Moses.

אֲשֶׁר־שָׂמֵתִי בְיָדְךָ – Adonai will be working through Moses to show Pharaoh the wonders to convince him to free the Israelites.

4:22 בְּנִי בְּכֹרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל – The relationship between Adonai and Israel is made explicit. However, this statement is rather ominous when placed alongside the following verse. Perhaps there is also within this verse an implicit warning that there are dangers connected to being the firstborn: Israel as God's firstborn has suffered in Egypt, the Egyptian firstborns will die – what will happen to Gershom, Moses firstborn?

4:23 אֲנִכִּי הִרְגָּ אֶת־בֶּן־בְּכֹרְךָ – This God which Moses has entered into a relationship with is not averse to killing when it is necessary.

אֲנִכִּי הִרְגָּ – When Moses left Egypt it was because Pharaoh sought לְהַרְגוֹ "to kill him" (2.15). Now, on his return, he will announce that Adonai will kill many Egyptians

כד וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בַּמֶּלֶן וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמָּיתוֹ :
 24. And it happened on the way, in the lodging, Adonai
 encountered him, and sought to kill him.

4:24 וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ -- There is no

formal ending to Adonai's words to Moses, and these words mark a break in the narrative, and a move to a new incident.

בַּמֶּלֶן -- It is not simply 'a lodging', it is "the lodging". Why was it at this specific place that Adonai chose to threaten Moses' life? All that is clear to us is that our travelers were pausing during their journey.

וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ -- Who is the man that Adonai is encountering? In the context of the preceding narrative we may assume that it is Moses, but the text does not specify. Moses' name is not mentioned in this or the two following verses. While we may assume it is Moses, the absence of particular names adds a sense of mystery to this episode, we are in a mysterious arena.

וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה -- Adonai's initial actions, encountering Moses,¹²⁵ give us no sense of what Adonai has in store. In fact one might even think that it is a reunion of sorts between Adonai and Moses along the journey. Adonai is still with Moses even on the journey. When Aaron goes to meet Moses, on his journey back to Egypt we read וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ "he encountered him" (4:27).

וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמָּיתוֹ -- Then suddenly our expectations are completely perverted as it is revealed that Adonai has not met Moses to renew acquaintances; Adonai has met Moses with the intention of killing him.

וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמָּיתוֹ -- The use of the two words together is jarring to the reader. When Moses pitched the Tent of Meeting, people could come to it, כָּל־מִבְקֵשׁ יְהוָה all who sought Adonai (Ex. 33:7). And yet here it is not in the context of the positive relationship between God and Israel; it is the verb which expresses Adonai's desire to kill.

וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמָּיתוֹ -- Just as Pharaoh had וַיִּבְקֶשׁ לְהָרֹג אֶת־מֹשֶׁה sought to kill Moses (2:15) now it is Adonai who is seeking Moses' death. Moses left Egypt because Pharaoh sought to kill him, and now on his return Adonai seeks his death. Perhaps the double use of וַיִּבְקֶשׁ is symbolic of the fact that Adonai sought Moses' death as retribution for the life of the Egyptian whom Moses killed. Although Adonai has told Moses כִּי־מָתוּ כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים כִּי־מָתוּ כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים "for all the men who sought your soul, are dead" (4:19), the mention of

¹²⁵ Although there is ambiguity about whether it is Moses, as will be discussed, we will assume it is Moses as he is the named character in the preceding verses

כה נתקח צפורה צר ותכרת את ערלת בנה ותגע לרגליו
 ותאמר כי חתן דמים אתה לי:

25. So Tzipporah took a flint, and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it. And she said: "For you are a bridegroom of blood to me"

it by Adonai demonstrates that God has not forgotten. Moses cannot return to Egypt without

paying the price for his bloodguilt.

וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ – Although up to this point the story has not mentioned circumcision, perhaps Moses' sin is that he was not circumcised, and could not return to lead the Israelites without a circumcision. The person who is uncircumcised **וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהוּא מֵעַמּוּיָהּ** "his soul will be cut off from the people" (Gen. 17:14). How can an uncircumcised Moses return to lead the people out of slavery? There must be a circumcision for him to be allowed to return and take his place amongst his people.

וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ – But perhaps it is not Moses that Adonai sought to kill. Moses is the one who has been chosen to lead God's people to freedom. How can God seek his death now? With all of the mention of firstborn sons and the fact that Moses is to tell Pharaoh that Adonai will **הֲרֹג אֶת־בְּנֶךָ בְּכֹרְךָ** "kill your firstborn son" (4:23), perhaps Moses' firstborn son, Gershom, now finds himself in danger. Maybe it is Gershom that God seeks to kill so that Moses will know the severity of what he is threatening to do to Pharaoh and Egypt.

וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַמִּיתוֹ – Up until this point there has been no mention of Gershom's circumcision; perhaps Moses failed to circumcise him, neglecting to fulfill the duty which would allow him to enter into the covenant. The price for this failure is Adonai's attempt to kill Gershom.

4:25 וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֹר – Despite the uncertainty in the preceding verse as to what has motivated this attack, and in terms of who exactly is being attacked, Tzipporah is very definite in her actions. She does not hesitate, but she knows immediately to take a flint. While for us everything is unclear, Tzipporah emerges, in contrast to us, resolute and certain.

צִפּוֹרָה צֹר – One cannot help but hear the similar letters in the name of Tzipporah and the word for flint. Perhaps Yitro gave Tzipporah to Moses because she would be able to deal with this precise situation. For in her very name one can find **צֹר פֹּה** 'flint is here'.

צֹר – Flint was the material used by Joshua to circumcise the Israelites when Adonai instructed him **עֲשֵׂה לָךְ חֲרָבוֹת צֹרִים** "make for yourself flint knives" (Josh. 5:2). So Tzipporah not only knew what to do, but she also knew what the appropriate materials were to use

וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת־עֶרְלַת בְּנֵהּ – Tzipporah is the circumciser. Although the commandment for circumcision was given for **כָּל־זָכָר** all males (Gen. 17:10); it is Tzipporah, a woman, and a non-Israelite, who performs the circumcision upon her son Gershom.

וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת־עֶרְלַת בְּנֵהּ – If Moses were being attacked it would make sense that he could not perform the circumcision upon his son, and thereby stop Adonai's attack. However, maybe Tzipporah knew what to do, while Moses, who had been raised amongst the Egyptians, did not know how a circumcision should be performed.

וַתִּכְרֹת אֶת־עֶרְלַת בְּנֵהּ – How did Tzipporah know that the situation required the circumcision of her son? Maybe she knew that the Israelites practiced the rite of circumcision, and for her son to be able to join his father and his father's people it would be necessary to have him circumcised. Perhaps he was the one being attacked by Adonai as a result of his lack of circumcision.

וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו – Having had a few moments of certainty, through Tzipporah's actions and her circumcision of her son, we are once again plunged into mystery as it is unclear whose legs are being touched. And it is not completely clear with what the legs are being touched, although one may assume that it is the circumcised foreskin.

וַתִּגַּע – Once again it is Tzipporah who is active. She is the one who knows that after the circumcision she must take the foreskin and touch it to "his legs".

וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו – Although the plain meaning of the text is "touched his legs with it", it seems strange that she would use the foreskin to touch his legs. Rather instead of legs we should read **לְרַגְלָיו** as symbolic of his genitalia, to which the foreskin was touched. Isaiah instructs us of a day when the hair of the head **וְשַׁעַר הָרַגְלִים** "and the hair of the genitals" (Isa. 7:20) will be cut away. With the foreskin being touched to the genitals it is unlikely that Gershom's genitals, from where the foreskin was cut, are being touched. It is far more likely that Tzipporah took Gershom's foreskin and touched it to her husband Moses' genitals.

וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו – Although it is Gershom who was circumcised, the foreskin was touched to Moses' genitals so that symbolically he would also be circumcised, and so that he could be saved from Adonai's attack.

וַתֹּאמֶר – This is the first time that Tzipporah has spoken as an individual, although together with her sisters she told her father about Moses' actions at the well (2:19). But here she

speaks for the first time as an

individual, her voice is finally heard. And with her words she takes Moses to be her bridegroom.

כּי חֲתָן דָּמִים אֶתָּה לִי – All certainty has once again disappeared, and there is ambiguity as to what Tzipporah intends by the words she is speaking, for it is only in these two verses that the phrase **חֲתָן דָּמִים** appears.

חֲתָן דָּמִים אֶתָּה לִי – It is Tzipporah who in this moment appears to remarry Moses, this time through a 'blood' connection. It is not a case of the husband taking a wife for himself, but it is Tzipporah, who challenges the regular gender roles of society to claim her husband, and not be given as a wife. This is the same Tzipporah who was **נִתְּנָה** "given" (2:21) by her father, passively, to Moses as his wife. Here the roles are reversed and it is Tzipporah who takes a husband for herself. Through the circumcision of her son, and the touching of Moses' genitals she has enacted a marriage.

חֲתָן דָּמִים – The foreskin may have had a role in the betrothal of a man to his wife. David was challenged by King Saul to bring 100 Philistine foreskins so that he might be allowed to marry Michal. **וַיָּבֵא דָוִד אֶת עֶרְלֵיתֵיהֶם וַיִּמְלְאוּם לְמַלְךְ לְהִתְחַתֵּן** "and David brought their foreskins and they were counted out for the king so that he may marry" (1 Sam. 2:27). However, while in this case the man (David) brought the foreskins so that he may marry his wife, here Tzipporah brings her son's foreskin so that she may marry her husband.

חֲתָן דָּמִים – While **חֲתָן** means bridegroom, it may also refer to a son-in-law (see BDB 368). It is to Yitro that Moses went to ask permission to leave, and it was in Yitro's house that Moses felt so at home. Tzipporah sought to have a relationship which would be as close to Moses as that of her father, his father-in-law, Yitro

וַיִּרְף מִמֶּנּוּ 4:26 – Despite the lack of an overt connection between Tzipporah's actions and Adonai's desire to kill Moses, her actions are successful, for "he refrained from him".

וַיִּרְף מִמֶּנּוּ – Tzipporah is no longer just the wife of Moses or the one who took him as a husband, she is also now his savior responsible for saving his life from Adonai.

וַיִּרְף מִמֶּנּוּ – Tzipporah is another in a line of women dating back to Moses' sister Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter who together saved him as a baby. Now as an adult, on the verge of returning to Egypt it is Tzipporah who saves his life.

וַיִּרְף מִמֶּנּוּ – With no overt name there is still mystery surrounding what has happened. And although the attack has stopped, all that seems clear is that Tzipporah's actions prevented the attacks continuation. It is still unclear as to who was being attacked, and why exactly the circumcision prevented the attack's continuation.

אָז אָמְרָה – Tzipporah who has been silent for so long speaks again.

חֲתָן דָּמִים לְמוֹלֶת – The reason for the betrothal is this time made clear, they have been wedded as a result of the circumcision. Through the act of Gershom's circumcision by Tzipporah, she has taken him as a חֲתָן bridegroom.

A commentary on Exodus
18:1-6

18:1 וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ – Moses' success has been so great that word of his achievements have made it back to Midian, and to Yitro.

שמות יח:
א וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֶת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה
אֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ כִּי־הוֹצִיא יְהוָה אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִמִּצְרַיִם:

1. And Yitro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moses, heard all that God had done for Moses and Israel his people, for Adonai had brought Israel out of Egypt.

ב וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֶת־צִיפּוֹרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ אַחֵר שְׁלוּחִיהָ:

2. And Yitro, the father-in-law of Moses, took Tzipporah, the wife of Moses, after she had been sent away.

חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה – The connection of Yitro to Moses is as a result of his daughter Tzipporah's marriage to Moses. It is unclear as to whether she remained with Moses or returned to Midian – she has not been mentioned since the bridegroom of blood incident.

כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה – Moses had gone to Yitro to ask him simply **וְאָשׁוּבָה אֵל־אֲחֵי** "Please let me go, and I will return to my brothers, who are in Egypt, and I will see how life continues" (4:18). Since that request Moses has done significantly more than his request suggested.

וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֶת־צִיפּוֹרָה – Tzipporah who had been so active in circumcising her son and saving Moses' life is now once again treated as an object, taken by her father-in-law, responding to the will of men.

וַיִּקַּח יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֶת־צִיפּוֹרָה – It is only when Tzipporah was apart from her father that she acted as an individual, defining her own destiny. When she is with her father she has been given (2:21), and now taken. The circumcising savior of Moses is once again silent.

אִשְׁתּוֹ אַחֵר שְׁלוּחִיהָ – Despite the fact that Moses sent Tzipporah away she remained his wife, demonstrating that there was no formal divorce.

אַחֵר שְׁלוּחִיהָ – Why did Moses send Tzipporah away? Did he want to protect her from the experiences of Egypt? Was he maybe embarrassed that he had not taken a wife from among his people? Tzipporah has missed the miraculous experience of the plagues in Egypt and the redemptive experience of crossing the Sea of Reeds.

אַחֵר שְׁלוּחִיהָ – Now that Moses has safely led his people out of Egypt, and seen the Egyptian army drowned behind them, why has he not called for his wife to rejoin him? Why were messengers not sent to Tzipporah to tell her about all that her husband has achieved? Had she not been there on the journey to save Moses, none of this would have been possible.

גִּזְאת שְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר שֵׁם הָאֶחָד גֶּרְשֹׁם כִּי אָמַר גֵּר
הָיִיתִי בְּאֶרֶץ נֹכְרִיָּה:

3. With her two sons, the name of one was Gershom, for he said: "I have been a stranger in a foreign land."

וְשֵׁם הָאֶחָד אֱלִיעֶזֶר כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי בְּעֶזְרִי וַיַּצֵּלֵנִי מִחֶרֶב
פָּרָעָה:

4. And the name of the one was Eliezer, "for the God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh."

and yet she appears to have been forgotten by her husband; and it is her father, Yitro, who seeks to reunite the married couple.

אָחֵר שְׁלוּחָהּ – It is possible that this word offers a clue as to why Tzipporah was absent. Perhaps Moses had divorced his wife, and that was why she was "sent away". Maybe his masculinity had been threatened by the way in which she saved his life, and took him as her husband through blood.

וְאֵת שְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ 18:3 – Moses who has separated himself from the family unit is not connected to their sons. Instead they are simply related to Tzipporah as "her two sons".

כִּי אָמַר – Despite Moses' absence from the family, the name of Gershom is the one which he gave to his son, speaking simply about his experiences as a "stranger in a foreign land", with no sense of how Tzipporah related to this name.

וְשֵׁם הָאֶחָד אֱלִיעֶזֶר 18:4 – This is the first time that Eliezer has been mentioned, when did Moses and Tzipporah give birth to this son. Here now there is finally an explanation for the words: וְאֵת בָּנָיו "and his sons" (4:20), who began the journey back to Egypt with him.

כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי – At first look this appears to be a simple reference from Moses to the God of his fathers, as in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as God was introduced in Exodus 3:6.

כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי – Perhaps with the preceding references to Yitro, Moses' father-in-law, and with the close relationship which is demonstrated when the two men are reunited; maybe this is not just the God of Moses' father on his side, but also the God of Moses' father-in-law, who was, after all, first introduced as Reuel (2:18).

כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי – Once again the name of this son of Moses and Tzipporah comes entirely from Moses' experience with no overt reference to Tzipporah.

וַיַּצֵּלֵנִי מִחֶרֶב פָּרָעָה Assuming that Eliezer was born before Moses returned to Egypt, this name could be a reference to God's reassurance **כִּי־מָתוּ כָּל־הָאֲנָשִׁים הַמְּבַקְשִׁים** "for all the men who sought your soul, are dead" (4:19). Moses could then see that he had been saved. The problem is that God was not overtly active in saving Moses from "the sword of Pharaoh" prior to Moses' return to Egypt. At this point in the narrative, with Moses

having just led the Israelites out of Egypt and witnessed the drowning of Pharaoh's armies, the name seems appropriate as a celebration of what God has

הַיִּבְא יִתְרוֹ חֲתָן מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה
אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר־הוּא חָנָה שָׁם הָר הָאֱלֹהִים :

5. And Yitro, the father-in-law of Moses, came with his sons and his wife to Moses, in the wilderness, where he encamped, there at the mountain of God.

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲנִי חֲתָנְךָ יִתְרוֹ בָּא אֵלֶיךָ וְאִשְׁתְּךָ וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ עִמָּה :

6. And he said to Moses: "I am your father-in-law, Yitro. I am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her."

just done for Moses, who really has now been saved from "the sword of Pharaoh".

18:5 יִתְרוֹ – Yitro is definitively the head of the household leading the others with him to be reunited with Moses.

וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ – Now on the journey back to meet with Moses they are "his sons and his wife". The journey reignites the family connection which has been dormant while Moses has been separated from his wife and sons.

וְאִשְׁתּוֹ – Tzipporah is Moses' wife, she effectively belongs to him, and Yitro appears to be returning Moses' 'property', which he has held for safe keeping to him.

הָר הָאֱלֹהִים – It is clear that Moses and the Israelites are not at a neutral place; they are camped at "the mountain of God". Did Yitro, as a priest, know this special place?

18:6 אֲנִי חֲתָנְךָ יִתְרוֹ – Did Moses not recognize his father-in-law that it was necessary for Yitro to establish his family connection? One imagines Moses running to greet his wife and sons as he saw them approaching in the distance. Instead the only physical connection is between the two men when Moses went out to meet Yitro **וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ וַיִּשָּׁק־לוֹ** "And he bowed down and kissed him" (18:7).

וְאִשְׁתְּךָ – Tzipporah is not introduced by her name, she is anonymous, introduced simply as "your wife". The connection between Moses and Tzipporah is rekindled, and Tzipporah is silent as she is reunited with her husband.

וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ עִמָּה – While Tzipporah is introduced by Yitro to Moses as "your wife", the sons are connected solely to her "her two sons with her". Having been apart from their father for so long it appears that their connection with him has, to a certain extent, been broken.

וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ עִמָּה – Perhaps in circumcising one of her sons on their journey back to Egypt, Tzipporah assumed the role which was usually assumed by the father, and so her sons became connected to her as their mother, and as the person assuming the role of their father. They are therefore "her two sons" with no reference to Moses.

12:1 – At the beginning of this incident it is clear that there is a division between Miriam and Aaron on one side, with Moses on the other.

עַל־אִדּוֹת הָאִשָּׁה הַכֹּשִׁית – It appears that the cause of the division between the siblings is something in relation to the Cushite wife to whom Moses is married.

הָאִשָּׁה הַכֹּשִׁית – Who is Moses' Cushite wife? There has been no mention of Moses marrying another woman since Tzipporah, but Tzipporah was a Midianite (she was the daughter of the Priest of Midian), and not a Cushite. But there is no evidence that Moses has had any interaction with the Cushites to find himself a wife.

הָאִשָּׁה הַכֹּשִׁית – At first glance it seems that this wife is not Tzipporah, however, when one looks more closely, one finds only a few verses that **וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחָבֵב בֶּן־רְעוּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי** “And Moses spoke to Chovav son or Reuel the Midianite, the father-in-law of Moses” (10:29). Rather than introduce us to a new wife, there is evidence that Moses maintained a relationship with his Midianite in-laws. It seems strange to introduce a new wife almost immediately after Moses had asked Tzipporah's father¹²⁶ to remain with the Israelites on their journey.

הָאִשָּׁה הַכֹּשִׁית – Perhaps the term ‘Cushite’ is a derogatory generic term used to refer to all foreigners. The wife is not necessarily a Cushite, she is simply a foreigner, as would be the case with the Midianite Tzipporah.

כִּי־אִשָּׁה כֹּשִׁית לָקַח – If it is Tzipporah, why is it only now, many years after their marriage that Miriam and Aaron are complaining about Moses taking her as a wife? It is unclear what their complaint is, as nothing specific is mentioned. However, in a few chapters: **וַיַּחַל הָעָם לְזִנוּת אֶל־בָּנוֹת מוֹאָב** “And the people profaned into harlotry with the daughters of Moab” (25:1). And then **וַהֲנִה אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּא וַיִּקְרַב אֶל־אֲחֵיו** “And behold a man from the Children of Israel came and brought the Midianite woman before his brothers” (25:6). While there was no tension with Midian when Moses and

¹²⁶ The text specifies that it is Moses' father-in-law, and therefore Tzipporah's father, although the name **חָבֵב** is a new name for this man, who has already been called Reuel, Yeter and Yitro

בַּיּוֹמָם הָרֶבֶק אֶת־בְּמִשָּׁה דִּבֶּר יְהוָה הֲלֹא גַם־בָּנוּ דִּבֶּר
וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה :

2. They said: "Has Adonai only spoken to Moses, has God not spoken with us?" And Adonai heard.

Tzipporah were married, in the future there will be problems

for the two peoples living together.

כִּי־אִשָּׁה כָּשִׁית לָקַח – If it is not Tzipporah, maybe the complaint of Miriam and Aaron is the fact that Moses has taken another wife, despite the fact that he was already married to Tzipporah.

וַיֹּאמְרוּ הָרֶבֶק 12:2 – From the complaint which follows it seems that Miriam and Aaron actually had no problem with Moses' choice of wife, but were rather concerned by his method of leadership.

Tzipporah: The First Female Mohel and Betrother

וַיֵּתֵן אֶת צִפּוֹרָה בְּתוּלָהּ לְמֹשֶׁה

and he [Reuel] gave Tzipporah, his daughter, to Moses
(Exodus 2:21)

When one considers that Tzipporah is married to arguably the most important man in the TaNaCh,¹²⁷ it is surprising that she features so rarely in its pages. Moses' wife is only mentioned by name in three distinct episodes, and his anonymous, Cushite wife, is referred to on one other occasion. In contrast, Abraham's story begins in Genesis 11 and concludes in Genesis 25. Sarah dies at the beginning of Genesis 23, but she features in seven of the preceding twelve chapters, and in most she has a significant role in advancing the narrative.¹²⁸ As another example, Rebecca is first encountered in Genesis 24 and she features centrally in each chapter up until, and including, Genesis 28 which moves the focus from Isaac to Jacob.¹²⁹ Tzipporah, who is introduced towards the very beginning of Exodus 2, appears in that chapter, in Exodus 4, in Exodus 18, and then arguably in Numbers 12. The story of Tzipporah can be confined to just 21 verses.¹³⁰ And yet in the course of these few verses, she is responsible for one of the most fascinating and mysterious incidents in the entire TaNaCh.¹³¹

Before looking at the narratives involving Tzipporah in Exodus, it is worth exploring whether she is the subject of Miriam and Aaron's words in Numbers 12. In an almost passing comment, the Torah states: "Then Miriam spoke with Aaron about Moses because of his Cushite wife, that he took a Cushite for a wife." In identifying this Cushite wife as Tzipporah, the clearest problem is the fact that she is a Midianite, as the daughter of the Priest of Midian. Baruch Levine is convinced that as a result of this discrepancy in national identity this must be a reference to a second wife taken by Moses (see Levine 1993:328). In

¹²⁷ One can argue that Moses is the focus of the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. As such he is the major character for a longer period of time than any other Biblical figure, referred to as *Moshe Rabbeinu* – Moses our teacher.

¹²⁸ Sarah is mentioned in Genesis 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 20, and 21. Genesis 12 includes the story of Sarah and Pharaoh, 16 is the story of Hagar and Sarah, 17 has Sarah's name changed, 18 includes the promise of a son for Sarah, 20 involves the story of Sarah and Avimelech, and 21 is about Sarah and Isaac alongside Hagar and Ishmael. It is clear that she is a central character in these narratives.

¹²⁹ Rebecca is also central in most of these chapters. In Genesis 24 she waters Abraham's servants flock, 25 she gives birth, 26 involves the story of Rebecca and Avimelech, 27 she works with Jacob to deceive Isaac, 28 it is to Rebecca's family that Jacob is sent.

¹³⁰ Exodus 2:16-22, Exodus 4:20-26, Exodus 18:1-6 and Numbers 12:1.

¹³¹ William Propp claims that this is "among the most controverted passages of Scripture" (495).

this context it is possible that Miriam and Aaron may even have been complaining about the fact that Moses took another wife. However, it seems unusual that Moses' marriage to a second wife is not mentioned in the text. Even though Sarah is Abraham's primary wife, the text states explicitly that he took Keturah as a second wife after Sarah (Gen. 25:1). It is strange that the Torah would neglect to mention the marriage of one of its most central characters.

Upon examining Numbers 12, it is significant that almost immediately before this episode, Moses was asking Tzipporah's brother, Chovav, to join the Israelites as they continued their journey to the Promised Land (10:29-32). This demonstrates that Moses was not only still married to Tzipporah, but maintained a relationship with her family. It is possible that when Miriam referred to a Cushite wife, she was using Cushite as a generic and derogatory term for foreigner, which may have related to Tzipporah's status as a Midianite. It is also significant that in the course of the book of Numbers, there is a less positive relationship between the Israelites and Midianites.¹³² In this context, the Torah may have wished to subvert the fact that Moses married a Midianite. Assuming that this therefore is Tzipporah, other than the negativity from Miriam and Aaron, nothing specific is learned about her; she is in this passage, as in most others, the object, not the subject of the narrative.

This focus on Tzipporah as object is evident in her first mention in the Torah; here she is introduced as one of the anonymous daughters of Reuel.¹³³ In this context, she is one of seven daughters, all of whom are performing the traditional female function of visiting the well on behalf of the family, in this case leading their father's flock to water them. It was a similar role that Rebecca was fulfilling when she met Abraham's servant at the well (Gen. 24:15-27) and it is the same role that Rachel assumed when she led her father's flock to the well and met Jacob (Gen. 29:6-11). The parallels between these three stories continue as in each case the women rushed back to their fathers' to recount their experiences at the well.¹³⁴ In this way, our first encounter with Tzipporah presents her behaving in exactly the way

¹³² This negative relationship may be seen in the story of Balak in Numbers 22-24, which is followed by the negative attitude towards relationships with Moabite and Midianite women in Numbers 25.

¹³³ Different names are given for Tzipporah's father at various points in the text; I have attempted to use the name which is referred to in the passage being discussed.

¹³⁴ Rebecca runs in 24:28, Rachel runs in 29:12 and while the text does not specify that the daughters of Reuel ran home, he asks them why they have "hurried to come back" (2:18).

expected of women. She fits appropriately within this particular paradigm of women: daughter home-maker who becomes wife home-maker, through a meeting at a well.¹³⁵

While she is initially active in fulfilling the normative female role, she is also anonymous, one of seven daughters, with no individual characteristics. When Tzipporah is finally named, and in most of the Biblical narratives in which she is mentioned, she is a passive object who moves, and is moved, according to the will of the men in her life.

In Exodus 2 after Moses has moved in with Reuel's family it states: "and he gave Tzipporah, his daughter, to Moses" (2:21). There is no reference to Tzipporah's feelings, emotions or thoughts about her marriage to Moses. She is simply a possession to be given by her father as he chooses; and his choice is to give her as a wife to Moses. Tzipporah may be compared to the sheep, oxen and servants which were taken by Avimelech and given to Abraham (Gen. 20:14). Or she may be compared to Zilpah, who was given to Leah by Laban as her maidservant on the occasion of her marriage to Jacob (Gen. 29:24).¹³⁶ Tzipporah is a passive object at the mercy of the whims and wishes of the men in her life.

Tzipporah is a daughter and then a wife. Immediately after becoming a wife, she fulfills the other major role associated with women in the TaNaCh by becoming a mother. The bearing of a son is the first action specifically taken by Tzipporah, as an individual in the text. But after this momentary action, which is concluded in two short words, the story returns to Moses who names their son, specifically for *his* experiences. In quick succession, Tzipporah became a wife and then a mother, the two primary female roles, and in fulfilling both of these, she was both defined and objectified by the men around her.

Having been 'given' (by Yitro), Tzipporah is next 'taken' (by Moses). Moses' interactions with God take place completely separate from his wife, and after he has been instructed to return to Egypt, he does not consult with her. He asks Yitro: "Please let me go, and I will return to my brothers, who are in Egypt, and I will see how life continues" (4:18). Moses' decision to return takes place with his father-in-law; it is a conversation between men, and his wife is absent. Tzipporah is taken by Moses along with "his sons" (4:20). She is taken in the same manner that Moses "took the staff of God" (4:20). Once again, her life is at the mercy of the men in it.

¹³⁵ Although Rebecca did not meet her future husband at the well, she met the man who would introduce her to her husband.

¹³⁶ In both of these cases it is the verb נָתַן, just as is the case with Reuel giving Tzipporah to Moses.

After the incident in the lodging (4:24), the next time Tzipporah is encountered, she is once again 'taken'. Yitro hears about what has happened to Moses and the Israelites and so he decides to take Tzipporah and his grandchildren to reunite them with their husband and father. She is taken by her father, in the same way as she was taken by her husband on his journey back to Egypt. It is striking that were it not for Yitro taking Tzipporah back to Moses and the Israelites, she would have missed the Sinai experience. She is not important enough to be invited back by her husband to stand at his side for arguably the most important moment in the life of his people, the Israelites.¹³⁷ The reunification which ultimately occurs is not really between Tzipporah and Moses, it is between Yitro and Moses. The two men even kiss each other after their prolonged absence. While Tzipporah is at Yitro's side, she is secondary.

Upon examining these verses, it is evident that Tzipporah is firmly located within the female sphere, acting primarily as a wife and mother. Furthermore, she is not only a female, but a passive female, one acted upon and defined by the men in her life, seemingly powerless to determine her own destiny. Yet, in just three short verses she boldly steps outside of the female domain. In these three verses, she behaves in a way that contradicts her female behavior everywhere else in the TaNaCh. Upon circumcising her son, she becomes the only woman in the TaNaCh to perform a circumcision.

There is a great degree of uncertainty about what is actually happening in the course of Exodus 4:24-26. The passage is particularly mysterious, and scholars have offered many interpretations that attempt to explain what exactly transpired on that fateful night, and the true purpose of the story.¹³⁸ Despite all of the ambiguity surrounding these verses, we encounter a moment of clarity in the middle of this brief story. "So Tzipporah took a flint, and cut off her son's foreskin" (4:25). On either side of these words, there are questions which need to be addressed about the text; but apart from the question of which son, these words appear relatively clear. This time, Tzipporah, the woman who was taken both by her husband (4:20) and her father (18:2), is the one who does the taking. She takes the flint, and with it she performs a circumcision.

¹³⁷ The significance of Yitro's actions in bringing Tzipporah back to Moses to stand at Sinai comes from unpublished lecture notes by Rabbi Sheldon Zimmerman.

¹³⁸ For an overview of several of the theories see Robinson 1986.

By circumcising her son, Tzipporah enters into a male-only world which excludes women everywhere else in the TaNaCh. The original instruction which God gave to Abraham was, “at eight days old you will circumcise all the males in all your generations” (Gen. 17:12). This commandment is extended to include male servants, effectively every male in Abraham’s household. “Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all the boys of his house, and all that were bought with money, all the males of Abraham’s household, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins” (17:23). Women are not only uninvolved in the process of circumcision, they appear to be completely absent. No women are present or involved when Isaac is circumcised (21:4) or when the men of Shechem are circumcised (34:13-24).¹³⁹

Not only does Tzipporah therefore perform an action which is reserved exclusively for men, but she also does it in a traditional way. Joshua 5 is the only place where the text specifies details about the actual performance of circumcision. Adonai instructs Joshua, “make for yourselves flint knives” (5:2), and with these, all of the men were circumcised. When Tzipporah was at the lodging she did not necessarily have a flint knife with which to circumcise her son, but she did have some flint which she used. Therefore Tzipporah not only performed a male ritual, but she also performed it in an appropriate way.

This small but significant section of the text demonstrates the way in which Tzipporah behaves in a unique way for a woman, performing a male only ritual. It should also be noted that when Abraham performed the circumcision on both of his sons and his household, it appeared that this was a ritual which the father of the house was obligated to fulfill. In circumcising her son, Tzipporah is a woman fulfilling a paternal function. And when viewed alongside the rest of this mysterious passage, Tzipporah moves farther away from the female realm and further into the male one. Tzipporah is the savior of this story.

It is difficult to determine definitively who Tzipporah actually saves. It is unlikely that this attack was against one of Moses’ sons as neither has been mentioned in the preceding verses.¹⁴⁰ Therefore, despite the lack of a clear reason, it seems that Adonai’s attack was directed against Moses. It may have been a response to Moses’ reluctance to

¹³⁹ It is possible that Dinah was in Shechem’s house at the time, but this is not explicitly mentioned.

¹⁴⁰ If one were to consider that it were one of Moses’ sons who was attacked, then Tzipporah not only saves her son’s life, but she circumcises him, when her husband Moses should have performed the obligation for his son, just as Abraham did for Ishmael and Isaac.

return to Egypt, it may have been a result of the bloodguilt for the Egyptian he killed, or it may be a necessary near death experience prior to his return to Egypt to save the Israelites.

The reason for Adonai's attack on Moses remains unclear, but it may be compared to another enigmatic incident in the Torah: When Jacob separated himself from his family the night before his reunion with his brother Esau. Jacob encountered a mysterious being with whom he wrestled throughout the night (Gen. 32:25-33), and there is a sense of danger facing the Patriarch as the fight continues. Jacob is able to defend himself against his assailant, although he suffers a physical wound on his hip. After the attack, his journey to meet his brother Esau continues. There is a sense of mystery surrounding the motivation of this attack, and there are significant parallels to Moses' experience. Both Moses and Jacob had embarked on a significant journey of return, Jacob with Esau and Moses with his brother Aaron (and also his people). There is a further parallel in the significance of the reunion as on both occasions, the brothers kiss (Ex. 4:27 and Gen. 33:4).¹⁴¹ Both men were threatened by a mysterious figure and a physical scar was left at the end of each incident, the hip in the case of Jacob, the site of circumcision in the case of Moses' son. There are certainly distinct differences; Jacob's experience occurs in isolation, it does not directly involve Adonai, and it leads to both a blessing and a change of name. However, the parallels between the two mysterious attacks outweigh the differences.

By viewing these two incidents as parallel to each other we are able to explore how Tzipporah's role more fully develops. Jacob was able to fight his assailant and save himself. In contrast, Moses required his wife to save his life. Moses assumes the passive role throughout these three verses, the object whom Adonai first "sought to kill" (4:24), and then "refrained from" (4:26). Tzipporah actually saves Moses' life; she is the only one who has been active. Rather than save himself like Jacob, Moses must rely on his wife to save him.

Comparing the two incidents may also help reveal whose legs Tzipporah touched during the incident (4:25). The legs are being touched with the foreskin, but it is not clear whose legs they are. In the Jacob incident, he is left scarred by the experience; after this incident, Tzipporah's son is marked by the circumcision, and by touching it to Moses' legs there is a sense in which he is vicariously marked by his son's experience. It also seems unlikely that it was his legs that were touched, but rather, as is the case in Isaiah 7:20, 'legs'

¹⁴¹ This comparison is based on a reading in Robinson 1986.

is a reference to 'genitals'. If Moses is vicariously circumcised, then Tzipporah is not only her son's circumciser, she is also by association her husband's circumciser. And with the recognition that circumcision is a paternal role, she therefore complicates her relationship with her husband, with whom she also now shares a paternal relationship.

Tzipporah performs a circumcision, saves her husband's life and assumes a paternal role. It is necessary to finally examine the meaning of Tzipporah's statement: "For you are a bridegroom of blood to me" (4:25) and "a bridegroom of blood due to the circumcision" (4:26). This is the first, and only time that Tzipporah speaks on her own in the text (previously her voice was heard along with her sisters [2:19]). When studying the text, it appears as though it is a formula for declaring a marriage and taking a husband. Although Tzipporah had previously been married to Moses, it seems that she is reaffirming her marriage with him. While in the previous marriage she was passively given by her father to Moses, this time she takes an active role. It is as though she betroths Moses to herself through the action of circumcision. In the first instance, she specifies "a bridegroom of blood to me" and then appears to explain how they have been betrothed by clarifying "a bridegroom of blood due to circumcision".

The marriages which occur in the TaNaCh generally involve fathers giving their daughters, and husbands taking these women to be their wives. The women do not express a preference, they are effectively objects given and received as part of a transaction. This incident is therefore striking for the role reversal within it. Moses does not take Tzipporah as his wife; rather she declares that Moses is her husband. This time she is not given by her father; instead, she takes Moses to be her husband. The circumcision of her son appears to alter her relationship with her husband, and through this action she is able to take Moses for a husband, in a way which no other women does in the TaNaCh.

In all but three verses of her story, Tzipporah conforms to the TaNaCh's gender stereotypes and expectations. She is a wife and mother. She is a passive character who moves according to the wishes of the men around her. However, for three short verses, she steps outside of the female realm, and roots herself boldly within a male sphere. Tzipporah becomes the first, and only, female mohel in the TaNaCh. She performs, and involves herself in, a ritual which is otherwise confined exclusively to men, who act as both circumcised and the circumcisers. This would be reason enough to view Tzipporah as a challenge to

normative gender roles. But through the action of circumcision, she also alters the relationship with the men around her. She directly assumes a paternal role towards her son, whom she circumcised, performing a commandment which should have been fulfilled by his father. When the foreskin is touched to Moses, she also vicariously becomes his circumciser, thus establishing a paternal relationship with him. These combined actions further serve to save Moses from Adonai's attack; she becomes his savior. Finally, this incident changes the relationship between Tzipporah and her husband, and through it they are remarried. Only this time, it is she who takes Moses to be her husband, declaring him to be a bridegroom for her. While all other women are taken or given in marriage, in this instance, Tzipporah takes a husband for herself.

While Tzipporah may behave in the ways which conform to normative and accepted gender roles both before and after this incident, for these three verses she completely inverts the tired gender stereotypes that inundate the TaNaCh. She becomes not only the first female mohel, but she also assumes the unlikely roles of paternal figure, savior, and betrother of her husband. Any one of these roles would have been sufficient for viewing Tzipporah as a challenge to gender roles. Yet she combines all of them, inhabiting several male roles simultaneously. While she may be neglected by Moses,¹⁴² her story cannot be ignored. If she had not acted in a such a striking way Moses would have been killed and the Israelites would have remained slaves in Egypt. Through her actions Tzipporah not only inhabits several male gender roles, she also lays the foundations for the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

¹⁴² He fails to call her back after the Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 18).

Yael in the TaNaCh

Judges 4:9-11, 17-24 - **יוזבב, יא, יז-כד**

ט ותֹאמֶר הֵלֶךְ אִלַּיךְ עִמָּךְ אִפְסִי¹⁴³ כִּי לֹא תִהְיֶה תַּפְאֲרֶתְךָ עַל־הַדָּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ כִּי בְיַד אִשָּׁה יִמָּכֶר יְהוָה אֶת־סִיסְרָא וְתִקַּם דְּבוּרָה וְתִלָּךְ עִם־בָּרַק קְדָשָׁה :

9. And she said: "I will surely go with you;¹⁴⁴ know that¹⁴⁵ it will not be for your glory on this way that you are going, for into the hand of a woman, Adonai will deliver¹⁴⁶ Sisera."

And Deborah arose, and she went with Barak to Kedesh.

י וַיִּזְעַק בָּרַק אֶת־זְבוּלָן וְאֶת־נַפְתָּלִי קְדָשָׁה וַיַּעַל בְּרַגְלָיו עִשְׂרֵת אֲלָפִי¹⁴⁷ אִישׁ וְתַעַל עִמּוֹ דְּבוּרָה :

10. And Barak called¹⁴⁸ together Zevulum and Naphtali at Kedesh, and he went up by foot¹⁴⁹ with ten thousand men,¹⁵⁰ and Deborah went up with him.

יא וַחֲבֵר הַקִּינִי נִפְרָד מִקֵּין מִבְּנֵי חֶבֶב חִתָּן מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּט אָהֱלוֹ¹⁵¹ עַד־אֵלּוֹן בְּצִעְעָנִים¹⁵² אֲשֶׁר־אֵת־קְדֵשׁ :

11. Now¹⁵³ Chever, the Kenite,¹⁵⁴ had separated from the Kenites, from the children of Chovav, the father-in-law of Moses. And he had stretched out his tent at Elon Betzananim,¹⁵⁵ which is by Kedesh.

¹⁴³ In the Septuagint, in place of אִפְסִי, it states: יָדַע, related to the root for 'know'.

¹⁴⁴ I have used "surely go" to emphasize the repetition of the verb with the Hebrew: הֵלֶךְ אִלַּיךְ.

¹⁴⁵ In BDB it specifies that the phrase כִּי אִפְסִי is used in "qualifying a preceding statement" (67), it offers the translation "save that, howbeit" (ibid). However, in line with the other manuscript tradition, I have translated it as "know", which still serves to qualify the preceding statement.

¹⁴⁶ Although the Hebrew יִמָּכֶר literally means 'sell', in the context of this verse "deliver" is more appropriate.

¹⁴⁷ In one manuscript it states: אֲלָפִים, which does not change the numbers involved.

¹⁴⁸ In Judges 12:2 this same root זָעַק is used by Jephthah in the sense of calling out for help.

¹⁴⁹ In the New King James translation it reads: "ten thousand men under his command", understanding בְּרַגְלָיו to denote being under his command. I have chosen to translate this with the literal reading "by foot" because of the fact that Yael's feet are relevant in the retelling of the story in chapter 5.

¹⁵⁰ As the Hebrew is in the singular: וַיַּעַל בְּרַגְלָיו, I have tried to maintain that in the translation.

¹⁵¹ In one manuscript it writes: אָהֱלָה, which has the same meaning.

¹⁵² While this is the Hebrew which is written, according to the Masoretic tradition it is read: בְּצִעְעָנִים.

¹⁵³ I have translated the ׀ as "Now" to denote the new character being introduced.

¹⁵⁴ It could also be translated as "Hever, the smith" (see BDB:83 for translation of קִין), however, in this context, following on from Judges 1:16, I believe it is a tribal designation, so that Chever's tribal origins and affiliations are known to the reader before encountering his wife.

יז וְסִיסְרָא נָס בְּרִגְלָיו אֶל־אֶהֱלָ יַעַל אִשֶּׁת חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי כִּי שָׁלוֹם בֵּין יָבִין מֶלֶךְ־חָצוֹר
וּבֵין בֵּית חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי :

17. But Sisera escaped on foot to the tent of Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite, for there was peace between Yavin, the king of Chazor, and the House of Chever the Kenite.

יח וַתֵּצֵא יַעַל לִקְרַאת סִיסְרָא וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סוּרָה אֲדֹנִי סוּרָה אֵלַי אֶל־תִּירָא¹⁵⁶
וַיָּסֵר אֵלֶיהָ הָאֶהֱלָה וַתִּכְסֶהוּ בְּשִׁמְיָהָ¹⁵⁷ :

18. And Yael went out to meet Sisera, and she said to him: "Turn in¹⁵⁸ my lord, turn in to me, do not be afraid." So¹⁵⁹ Sisera, turned into her tent, and she covered him with a rug.

יט וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ הֲשָׁקִינִי נָא מַעַט־מַיִם כִּי צָמָאתִי¹⁶⁰ וַתִּפְתַּח אֶת־נְאוֹד¹⁶¹ הַחֶלֶב
וַתִּשְׁקֶהוּ וַתִּכְסֶהוּ :

19. And he said to her: "Please give me a little bit of water to drink, for I am thirsty." And she opened a skin of milk, and gave him to drink, and covered him.

כ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ עֲמֵד¹⁶² פֶּתַח הָאֶהֱלָ וְהָיָה אִם־אִישׁ יָבוֹא וְשָׁאַלְךָ וְאָמַר הִישָׁפָה
אִישׁ וְאָמַרְתְּ אֵין :

20. And he said to her: "Stand¹⁶³ at the door of the tent, and if a man comes, and asks you if you have a man here, you should say, there isn't."

כא וַתִּקַּח יַעַל אִשֶּׁת־חֶבֶר אֶת־יָתֵד הָאֶהֱלָ וַתִּשֶׂם אֶת־הַמַּקְבֵּת בַּיָּדָהּ וַתָּבוֹא אֵלָיו
בְּלֹאט¹⁶⁴ וַתִּתְקַע אֶת־הַיָּתֵד בְּרִקְתּוֹ וַתַּצֵּנֵחַ בְּאָרְץ וְהוּא נֹרֵדִם וַיַּעַף וַיָּמָת :

¹⁵⁵ I have phonetically translated the Hebrew as it is read: בְּצַעֲנָנִים, rather than how it is included in the actual text.

¹⁵⁶ This phrase, used by Yael to allay Sisera's fears is the same phrase spoken to the warriors in Deuteronomy 1:29 and 7:18 prior to the conquest of the land of Israel.

¹⁵⁷ In Septuagint, codex Vaticanus rather than covering him with a rug it states: בַּמַּכְסֶה, which has a sense of hiding him.

This is the only place in the TaNaCh where the word שְׁמִיָּה appears, providing no other contexts with which to compare the word.

¹⁵⁸ The Hebrew has a sense of turning aside from one's course, in this way Yael's request was to stop running away, and to wait in her tent.

¹⁵⁹ Here I have translated the ו as "so" to give a sense of his actions coming as a response to her words.

¹⁶⁰ In another Masoretic manuscript it offers צָמָתִי, which has the same meaning.

¹⁶¹ There are some variations of this word in other manuscripts, but with the same meaning.

¹⁶² In various Syriac manuscripts it has עֲמֵדִי, which is an imperative commanding form of the same instruction in the feminine form.

¹⁶³ It should be noted that the Hebrew instruction which he gives her "Stand" is the form of the verb which would be addressed to a man, rather than to Yael.

21. And Yael, the wife of Chever, took the tent peg, and set the hammer in her hand, and she came upon him secretly, and she thrust the peg into his temple¹⁶⁵ and it went down into the ground,¹⁶⁶ as he slept heavily, and he became faint and he died.¹⁶⁷

כב וְהִנֵּה בָרַק רָדַף אֶת־סִיסְרָא וַתֵּצֵא יָעַל לִקְרָאתוֹ וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ לֵךְ וְאַרְאֶךָ אֶת־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה מִבְקֵשׁ וַיָּבֹא אֵלֶיהָ וְהִנֵּה סִיסְרָא נָפַל מֵת וְהִי־תִיד בְּרַקְתּוֹ :

22. And¹⁶⁸ Barak pursued Sisera. And Yael came out to meet him, and she said to him: "Come and I will show you the man that you are seeking." And he came with her, and behold Sisera lay dead, and the peg was in his temple.

כג וַיִּכְנַע אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת יָבִין מֶלֶךְ־כְּנָעַן לִפְנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל :

23. And God subdued Yavin, the king of Canaan, on that day before the Children of Israel.

כד וַתִּלָּךְ יָד בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל הַלּוֹךְ וְקָשָׁה עַל יָבִין מֶלֶךְ־כְּנָעַן עַד אֲשֶׁר הִכְרִיתוּ אֶת יָבִין מֶלֶךְ־כְּנָעַן :

24. And the hand of the Children of Israel went out and was hard on Yavin, the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Yavin, the king of Canaan.

שופטים ה:ו-ז, כד-לא - Judges 5:6-7, 24-31

ו בַּיָּמִי שִׁמְגַר בֶּן־עֲנַת בִּימִי יָעַל חֲדָלוּ אֲרָחוֹת¹⁶⁹ וְהִלְכִי נְתִיבוֹת יִלְכוּ אֲרָחוֹת עֲקֻלְקֻלוֹת :

6. In the days of Shamgar the son of Anat, in the days of Yael,¹⁷⁰ paths ceased, and travelers along the paths went on crooked paths.¹⁷¹

ז חֲדָלוּ כְּרִזּוֹן בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל חֲדָלוּ עַד שִׁקְמַתִּי דְּבוּרָה שִׁקְמַתִּי אִם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל :

¹⁶⁴ In other Masoretic manuscripts there are different spellings of: בָּלְאָט, נָרְדָם and נִיעַף, but all with the same basic meaning.

¹⁶⁵ It is the temple of his head.

¹⁶⁶ This is the translation offered by BDB (856).

¹⁶⁷ It is not clear how exactly the three final verbs of the verse would work, and what the progression would be, but it is important in the translation to make reference to all three of them.

¹⁶⁸ I have translated וְהִנֵּה as "And" giving it a basic meaning.

¹⁶⁹ The word אֲרָחוֹת also has a meaning which relates to trade or convoys.

¹⁷⁰ This comment suggests that Shamgar, mentioned in Judges 3:31 was a contemporary of Yael.

¹⁷¹ This has a sense that they could not take the direct route and instead had to travel by roundabout routes.

The word could also have a sense related to immorality, as can be seen in Psalms 125:5.

7. The rural population¹⁷² ceased in Israel. They ceased until I¹⁷³ arose, Deborah, I arose a mother in Israel.

...

כד תברך מנשים יעל אשת חבר הקיני באהל תברך :

24. Blessed above women Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite, above the women of the tents she is blessed.¹⁷⁴

כה מים שאל חלב נתנה בספל אדירים הקריבה חמאה :

25. He asked for water, milk she gave in a majestic bowl, she brought near curds.

כו ידה ליתד תשלחנה¹⁷⁵ נימינה להלמות עמלים והלמה סיסרא מחקה ראשו ומחצה וחלפה רקתו :

26. Her hand¹⁷⁶ went for¹⁷⁷ the peg, and her right hand to the workman's mallet,¹⁷⁸ and she smote Sisera she destroyed his head, shattering and piercing his temple.

כז בין רגליה כרע נפל שם נפל שדוד :

27. Between her legs he bent down, he fell, he lay down between her feet.¹⁷⁹ He bowed down, he fell, where he bowed down, there, he fell, destroyed.

כח בעד החלון נשקפה ותיבב¹⁸⁰ אם סיסרא בעד האשנב מדוע בשש רכבו לבוא מדוע אחרו פעמי מרכבותיו :

¹⁷² The meaning of פְּרָזוֹן is unclear. In one manuscript it includes פְּרָזוֹת instead, which could be related to Ezekiel 38:11 which makes reference to אֶרֶץ פְּרָזוֹת, which may be translated as a 'land of hamlets' or 'land of open spaces' (see BDB:826), which would relate to the idea of פְּרָזוֹן referring to the rural population.

¹⁷³ Instead of putting this passage in the first person, in the Septuagint, and in the Vulgate it is presented in a third person: "she arose. Deborah arose a mother in Israel".

¹⁷⁴ The order of the Hebrew at the end of the verse reverses the order of the Hebrew at the beginning of the verse, and I have sought to replicate this in my translation.

¹⁷⁵ In one manuscript it states: תְּשַׁלְּחֶנָּה, which does not change the translation.

¹⁷⁶ One may assume that it was her left hand as the right hand, נִימִינָה, is specified later in the verse, but the text is not specific.

¹⁷⁷ Rather than translate תְּשַׁלְּחֶנָּה as something related to 'send', I have chosen to translate it in the context of the verse.

¹⁷⁸ I have translated this as "mallet" rather than "hammer" as in 4:21 so that the translation includes the same contrast as the Hebrew which is הַלְמוֹת here and is הַמִּקְבֶּת in 4:21.

¹⁷⁹ There are sexual connotations to this passage which are very difficult to convey in the translation. The word רַגְלִיָּה is often used in the context of genitalia, as can be seen in Deuteronomy 28:57 and Isaiah 7:20; the root of כָּרַע also has a sexual implication from the way in which it is used in Job 31:10.

¹⁸⁰ In two Septuagint manuscripts it states: וַתִּבְט, which means "looked", and therefore maintains the general sense of the verse.

28. Behind the window the mother of Sisera looked and wailed, behind the lattice: "Why is his chariot delayed in coming, why does the beat of his chariot tarry?"

כט חכמות¹⁸¹ שְׁרוּתֶיהָ תַעֲנִינָהּ אֶף־הִיא תִשִּׁיב אֲמָרֶיהָ לָהּ :

29. The wisest of her noble ladies answered her, she even replies saying to herself.

ל הֲלֹא יִמָּצְאוּ יַחֲלָקוּ שָׁלַל רַחֵם רַחֲמָתַיִם לְרֹאשׁ גִּבּוֹר שָׁלַל צְבָעִים לְסִיסְרָא שָׁלַל
צְבָעִים רַקְמָה צִבֵּעַ רַקְמָתַיִם לְצִנּוֹאֲרֵי שָׁלַל¹⁸² :

30. "Are they not finding, they are dividing the spoils, a woman¹⁸³ or two to each man,¹⁸⁴ the spoil of dyed stuff to Sisera, the spoil of dyed woven stuff, dyed woven stuff around the necks of the spoils."¹⁸⁵

לא כֵּן יִאֲבָדוּ כָּל־אֹיְבָיִךְ יְהוָה וְאַהֲבָיו¹⁸⁶ כִּצְאֹת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ בַּגְּבֻרָתוֹ וַתִּשְׁקֹט הָאָרֶץ
אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה :

31. Thus will all your enemies Adonai perish, and those who love God¹⁸⁷ are like the sun rising in its strength. And there was quiet in the land for forty years."

¹⁸¹ In the Syriac and Vulgate it states: חכמות, which has the same meaning.

¹⁸² In one manuscript it states: שָׁלַל, which may relate to the queen's consorts, and may mean that there will be dyed garments around the consorts of Sisera's mother, as the spoils of war will be so bountiful.

¹⁸³ Although רַחֵם literally means 'womb' in the context of the verse it appears to be referring to a woman, this part of the body which makes the woman distinct from the man is emphasized to symbolize woman.

¹⁸⁴ לְרֹאשׁ is not directly translated, as it does not effect the meaning of the verse.

¹⁸⁵ It is not possible to translate this verse directly and it may give the sense that even the spoils, in relation to the women, will have dyed garments around their necks. In this case the alternative manuscript tradition which refers to the consorts of Sisera's mother appears more likely.

¹⁸⁶ In the Syriac and Vulgate it states: וְאַהֲבָיִךְ, which would instead mean "who love you", maintaining the general meaning of the verse.

¹⁸⁷ I have used God here rather than translate it as 'him' which gives God a gender.

A commentary on the Yael Texts

A Commentary on Judges 4:9-11 and 17-24

4:9 הֵלֶךְ אִלַּךְ עִמָּךְ – Women are going to be important in the forthcoming battle, as at least

Deborah will be joining Barak and his troops.

לֹא תִהְיֶה תִפְאָרְתְּךָ עַל הַדֶּרֶךְ – We read about Barak as a warrior leading the people, but Deborah ensures that we know he is not the subject of this story who should be glorified.

כִּי בְיַד אִשָּׁה יִמָּכֵר – Not only will Deborah be present at the battle, but Sisera will not fall to Barak, or to any other man, he will fall by “the hand of a woman”.

בְּיַד אִשָּׁה – Who is this woman that will defeat Sisera? No clue is given about this mystery female who will be the one to vanquish this warrior. Could it be Deborah who will be joining Barak in battle? It seems strange for her to speak in the anonymous third person if she will be the one to defeat him. We are therefore left waiting for this mystery woman, who will defeat Sisera, to appear. For it is she who will be glorified at the end of this experience.

יִמָּכֵר יְהוָה – Lest there is any doubt, while it will be a woman who will defeat Sisera, it will be Adonai who causes it to happen in exactly the way Deborah has foretold.

וַתֵּקֶם דְּבוֹרָה וַתֵּלֶךְ – While this is a story of Deborah and Barak, it is clearly she who is the active participant in this narrative, arising and going.

4:10 עֲשֶׂרֶת אֲלָפֵי אִישׁ וַתַּעַל עִמּוֹ דְּבוֹרָה – We now learn that Barak had 10,000 troops alongside him, and yet he refused to go to battle without Deborah by his side. In the way that this verse is structured one may assume that Deborah’s presence in the battle is equivalent to the presence of 10,000 troops.

עֲשֶׂרֶת אֲלָפֵי אִישׁ – Alongside the anonymous woman who will defeat Sisera, there are 10,000 anonymous troops who will join in this battle, with only a tribal affiliation specified.

שׁוּפְטִים ד:

ט וַתֹּאמֶר הֵלֶךְ אִלַּךְ עִמָּךְ אִפְסָ כִּי לֹא תִהְיֶה תִפְאָרְתְּךָ
עַל הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ כִּי בְיַד אִשָּׁה יִמָּכֵר יְהוָה
אֶת־סִיסְרָא וַתֵּקֶם דְּבוֹרָה וַתֵּלֶךְ עִם־בָּרַק קְדֵשָׁה:

9. And she said: “I will surely go with you: know that it will not be for your glory on this way that you are going, for into the hand of a woman, Adonai will deliver Sisera.” And Deborah arose, and she went with Barak to Kedesh.

י וַיִּזְעַק בָּרַק אֶת־זְבוּלֹן וְאֶת־נַפְתָּלִי קְדֵשָׁה וַיַּעַל בְּרַגְלָיו
עֲשֶׂרֶת אֲלָפֵי אִישׁ וַתַּעַל עִמּוֹ דְּבוֹרָה:

10. And Barak called together Zevulum and Naphtali at Kedesh, and he went up by foot with ten thousand men, and Deborah went up with him.

יֵא וְחֵבֶר הַקֵּינִי נִפְרָד מִקֵּין מִבְּנֵי חֲבֵב חֵתָן מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּט
אֶהְלוּ עַד אֵלוֹן בְּצַעְנַיִם אֲשֶׁר אֶת קִדְשׁ :

11. Now Chever, the Kenite, had separated from the Kenites, from the children of Chovav, the father-in-law of Moses. And he had stretched out his tent at Elon Betzananim, which is by Kedesh.

יֵז וְסִיסְרָא נָס בְּרַגְלָיו אֶל־אֶהֱל יַעֲל אֵשֶׁת חֵבֶר הַקֵּינִי כִי
שָׁלוֹם בֵּין יָבִין מֶלֶךְ חָצוֹר וּבֵין בֵּית חֵבֶר הַקֵּינִי :

17. But Sisera escaped on foot to the tent of Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite, for there was peace between Yavin, the king of Chazor, and the House of Chever the Kenite.

4:11 וְחֵבֶר הַקֵּינִי – After all of these anonymous figures who will be part of the battle Chever the Kenite is named.

וְחֵבֶר הַקֵּינִי – While Chever is a new character, his tribal

affiliation is known. He is a Kenite. These are the people who are mentioned in Genesis 15:19, as part of the land to be given to Abram's descendants, and they will be consumed and taken captive according to Balaam (Numbers 24:21-22). And in Judges 1:16 it is revealed that the Kenite was the father-in-law of Moses. As descendants of Yitro, one may expect there to be a good relationship with the Israelites.

וְחֵבֶר – His name, which is from the same root as the word for friend, leads us to believe he will be good for Israel.

נִפְרָד מִקֵּין מִבְּנֵי חֲבֵב חֵתָן מֹשֶׁה – Why did he separate from the rest of his people? The text gives no clue as to what happened. He is an outsider separated from his people.

מִבְּנֵי חֲבֵב חֵתָן מֹשֶׁה – There is no doubt that Chever shares a familial connection to Moses.

בְּצַעְנַיִם אֲשֶׁר אֶת קִדְשׁ – Had he come to Kedesh, because it was one of the cities of refuge which had been set aside by Joshua for the manslayer to flee to (Josh. 20:7). Did Chever require protection from something?

4:17 וְסִיסְרָא נָס בְּרַגְלָיו – Sisera, who was known for the 900 chariots which he used to persecute the Israelites, is forced to flee on foot, with no horse or chariot to take him to safety. His humiliation is already beginning.

אֶל־אֶהֱל יַעֲל אֵשֶׁת חֵבֶר הַקֵּינִי – Deborah told us Sisera would be delivered into the hands of a woman; finally, a woman has appeared. Is this Yael perhaps the one into whose hands Sisera will be delivered, the woman for whom the text has been waiting?

אֶל־אֶהֱל יַעֲל – Why did Sisera choose to come to the tent of Yael, and not to the tent of her husband? If he was seeking protection, one would assume that the head of the household would have been a better option.

יח וַתֵּצֵא יָעֵל לִקְרֹאת סִיסְרָא וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו סוּכָה אֲדֹנִי
סוּכָה אֵלַי אֶל־תִּירָא וַיָּסֵר אֵלֶיהָ הָאֹהֳלָה וַתִּכְסֶהוּ
בְּשִׁמְיָהּ:

18. And Yael went out to meet Sisera, and she said to him:
"Turn in my lord, turn in to me, do not be afraid." So Sisera,
turned into her tent, and she covered him with a rug.

יָעֵל – While we may not know much about this woman, her name is associated with a model wife presented in Proverbs 5:18-19.

כִּי שָׁלוֹם בֵּין יָבִין מֶלֶךְ־חֲצוֹר וּבֵין בֵּית חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי – There was not necessarily peace between the whole of the Kenite people and Yavin, rather there was peace specifically with the House of Chever. Was this peace treaty the reason that he had to leave his people?

4:18 יָעֵל – It is not clear why Yael went out of the tent to meet Sisera: she could be like Leah וַתֵּצֵא לֵאָה לִקְרֹאתוֹ "And Leah went out to meet him" (Gen. 30:16), who came to tell Jacob he had to sleep with her. Or she could be like Dinah וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה "And Dinah went out" (Gen. 34:1) whose encounter with Shechem led to much bloodshed. In both cases there is a sense that sexual relations may follow וַתֵּצֵא.

סוּכָה אֲדֹנִי – Her initial words to Sisera demonstrate her acknowledgement of his status as a leader, to address him as אֲדֹנִי demonstrates her apparent deference towards him.

סוּכָה אֵלַי – Yael's second request to Sisera seems stranger, she is not just asking him to "turn in", she is specifically asking "turn in to me". Her words appear to be suggestive that a sexual encounter may be developing.

סוּכָה אֲדֹנִי סוּכָה אֵלַי – Yael's repetition appears to suggest a note of urgency in encouraging Sisera into her tent. Perhaps she wants to avoid being seen with the enemy of the Israelites, offering him protection.

אֶל־תִּירָא – Having invited him into her tent she seeks to reassure him "do not be afraid". These words offer the same reassurance which was given to the Israelite warriors in Deuteronomy 1:29 and 7:18 before their conquest of the land of Israel. It is a sign that despite her words, the battle is not yet over, and perhaps Sisera should be afraid.

אֶל־תִּירָא – There is something immediately peculiar in the relationship between Yael and Sisera, who is this woman to tell the mighty warrior not to be afraid? One would expect a reverse of the situation with Sisera telling Yael "do not be afraid", the challenging of roles begins almost immediately.

וַיָּסֵר אֵלֶיהָ – This mighty warrior, who had fled from before the Israelites, simply obeys this woman's instructions without question.

יט וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיָהּ הִשְׁקִינִי נָא מֵעֵט מַיִם כִּי צָמָאתִי וַתִּפְתַּח
אֶת־נְאוֹד הַחֶלֶב וַתִּשְׁקֶהוּ וַתִּכְסֶּהוּ :

19. And he said to her: "Please give me a little bit of water to drink, for I am thirsty." And she opened a skin of milk, and gave him to drink, and covered him.

כ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיָהּ עֲמֵד פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וְהָיָה אִם־אִישׁ יָבוֹא
וּשְׁאַלְךָ וְאָמַר הִישָׁפָה אִישׁ וְאָמַרְתְּ אֵין :

20. And he said to her: "Stand at the door of the tent, and if a man comes, and asks you if you have a man here, you should say, there isn't."

– וַתִּכְסֶּהוּ בִּשְׂמִיכָהּ

Alongside Yael this once mighty warrior is like a child, whom she must cover with a rug, to offer him not just

protection but comfort after his escape.

וַתִּכְסֶּהוּ בִּשְׂמִיכָהּ – Yael is behaving just as one would expect from an ally of King Yavin.

4:19 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיָהּ הִשְׁקִינִי נָא מֵעֵט מַיִם – When he finally speaks this mighty warrior does not demand that Yael serves him, instead he timidly asks, "Please", requesting only "a little bit of water". This does not sound like the same man who persecuted the Israelites.

כִּי צָמָאתִי – Is there really a need for Sisera to justify his request for water?

וַתִּפְתַּח אֶת־נְאוֹד הַחֶלֶב – He asked for water, but she gave him milk, it is now completely clear that Sisera is no longer in control, even his simple request has not been obeyed by Yael. This act demonstrates that Yael is in control, she is defining what will happen.

נְאוֹד הַחֶלֶב וַתִּשְׁקֶהוּ וַתִּכְסֶּהוּ – The infantilization of Sisera begins as Yael refuses to give him water, but instead gives him milk like a baby. Milk which he does not take for himself, but milk which "she gave him to drink" she feeds him like a child, and then she covers him as one would cover a child about to go to sleep. Not only is Yael in control of the situation, an unequal relationship is developing with Yael as the parent and Sisera as a child.

נְאוֹד הַחֶלֶב וַתִּשְׁקֶהוּ וַתִּכְסֶּהוּ – Yael's plan is slowly being revealed, she has created a situation where Sisera, exhausted from his flight from battle, sleepy from the milk, and covered up, will feel able to fall asleep. The question is why was Yael trying to induce sleep?

4:20 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיָהּ עֲמֵד – Suddenly the warrior is awakened and after all that Yael has done for him, he orders her, as he would one of his soldiers, to stand guard at the tent's door. He does not even address her as a woman, he tells her עֲמֵד, using the same instruction that he would give to any of his male soldiers.

עֲמֵד – Yael's gender transformation begins with this instruction. She is a woman, the wife of Chever, but in this moment we realize that she is not simply a woman, she is classified by Sisera as a man, and ordered to stand as one would instruct a man.

כַּאֲתִיקַח יַעֲלֵ אֶשֶׁת־חֶבֶר אֶת־יֵתֵד הָאֹהֶל וְתָשֵׂם
אֶת־הַמַּקְבֵּת בְּיָדָהּ וְתָבֹא אֵלָיו בְּלֹאט וְתִתְקַע אֶת־הַיֵּתֵד
בְּרִקְתּוֹ וְתִצָּנַח בְּאָרְצָהּ וְהוּא־נָרְדָם וַיָּעַף וַיָּמָת :

21. And Yael, the wife of Chever, took the tent peg, and set the hammer in her hand, and she came upon him secretly, and she thrust the peg into his temple and it went down into the ground, as he slept heavily, and he became faint and he died.

Sisera -- וְהָיָה אִם־אִישׁ יָבֹא

does not fear any woman, he is afraid of a male pursuer. Sisera believes that the only threat to

his life can come from men, and as Yael ultimately kills him, he reveals the gender switch she will ultimately perform.

וְאָמַר הֲיֵשׁ־כֹּה אִישׁ וְאָמַרְתְּ אֵין -- While Yael is becoming a man during the course of this verse, Sisera's masculinity is disappearing. If Yael, who is standing outside the tent, is asked "if you have a man here" she is told to say "there isn't". Sisera himself rejects his masculinity, a gender-role reversal is taking place between the warrior Sisera, and Yael, the woman of the tent.

4:21 וְתִקַּח יַעֲלֵ אֶשֶׁת־חֶבֶר -- Just as the inevitable climax of this narrative approaches the text seeks to remind us that Yael, despite what has happened and what will happen, is still a woman, she is the wife of Chever, he is the man of the household.

אֶת־יֵתֵד הָאֹהֶל וְתָשֵׂם אֶת־הַמַּקְבֵּת בְּיָדָהּ -- Yael is not a warrior with obvious weapons at her disposal, she is a woman of the tent. Her weapons are therefore "the tent peg" and "the hammer" which are used for erecting her home. As she takes these items we are once again reminded that she is not a warrior, she is not a veteran of previous battles, she is used to life in her tent, and all which that brings.

אֶת־יֵתֵד הָאֹהֶל וְתָשֵׂם אֶת־הַמַּקְבֵּת בְּיָדָהּ -- It is not yet entirely clear what Yael intends to do with "the tent peg" and "the hammer", perhaps she will stand outside the tent, and pretend to be erecting it, thus obeying Sisera's command. There is a sense of hesitation as to what will transpire.

אֶת־הַמַּקְבֵּת בְּיָדָהּ -- The hammer which she took has at its root the letters נקב, sharing its root with the word נִקְבָּה female. The hammer with which she would thrust the tent peg into Sisera's temple not only killed him, but also feminized him, through the piercing; reversing gender roles and leaving Yael as the male.

וְתָבֹא אֵלָיו בְּלֹאט -- Suddenly her direction becomes clear, Yael is not about to leave the tent, instead she is approaching Sisera. Her steps are quiet so as to avoid waking the sleeping warrior.

כב והנה ברק רדף את־סיסרא ותצא יעל לקראתו
ותאמר לו לך ואראנך את־האיש אשר־אתה מבקש ויבא
אליה והנה סיסרא נפל מת והיטת ברקתו :
22. And Barak pursued Sisera. And Yael came out to meet
him, and she said to him: "Come and I will show you the man
that you are seeking." And he came with her, and behold
Sisera lay dead, and the peg was in his temple.

– ותבוא אליו בלֵאט – The
silent approach is reminiscent
of Ruth, who ותבא בלֵאט "she
came secretly" (Ruth 3:7). In

that case Ruth intended for sexual relations with Boaz, but here, as Yael clutches the hammer and tent peg, it appears that she has other plans for Sisera. But the sexual potential is in the air.

– ותתקע את־היטת ברקתו – There is to be penetration, but it is not of a sexual variety, instead it is the tent peg which Yael uses to penetrate the temple of Sisera. But with this penetration the roles are reversed. Yael is the one who penetrates and Sisera is penetrated.

– ותתקע את־היטת – This verb would usually be used in connection to pitching a tent, setting up home (see Gen. 31:25 and Jer. 6:3). And yet here this same verb, with its generally positive sense is the harbinger of death.

ברקתו – His temple is pierced, unlike the masculine ראש, this is the feminine word רקה, emphasizing the feminization of Sisera, and Yael's masculinity.

– ותצנח באַרץ – The strength and power of Yael cannot be underestimated, the tent peg does not just lodge in his head, but rather it goes through into the ground below.

– והוא נרדם ויעף וימת – Sisera's death occurs in stages through his sleep, the faintness from the initial impact of the tent peg, and the death, which it causes.

וימת – The death of Sisera at the hands of a woman, which Deborah prophesied, is finally fulfilled by Yael, the warrior who killed King Yavin's general.

וימת – Yael's transformation from woman of the tent to warrior is complete. It is Sisera who lies dead on the floor of the tent, while she is the conqueror who has killed this once mighty warrior.

– והנה ברק רדף את־סיסרא 4:22 – The glory is not for Barak, he continues to pursue Sisera despite the fact that this enemy of the Israelites has already been vanquished by Yael. His pursuit of Sisera is now somewhat unnecessary, as his enemy is already dead.

כַּג וַיִּכְנַע אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת יָבִין מֶלֶךְ כְּנָעַן לִפְנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

23. And God subdued Yavin, the king of Canaan, on that day before the Children of Israel.

כַּד וַתֵּלֶךְ יַד בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַלּוֹךְ וְקָשָׁה עַל יָבִין מֶלֶךְ כְּנָעַן עַד אֲשֶׁר הִכְרִיתוּ אֶת יָבִין מֶלֶךְ כְּנָעַן:

24. And the hand of the Children of Israel went out and was hard on Yavin, the king of Canaan, until they had destroyed Yavin, the king of Canaan.

וַתֵּצֵא יָעֵל לִקְרַאתוֹ – Just as Yael “came out to meet Sisera” here she comes out to meet Barak. Sisera’s welcome into her tent ended with his death, it

seems unlikely that Barak will be destined for the same fate.

וַתֹּאמֶר לוֹ – Yael is once again setting the agenda, as she welcomes Barak into her tent. Just as she appeared to recognize Sisera, addressing him as “my lord”, here too she appears to recognize Barak, acknowledging that he is the man pursuing Sisera.

וַיִּבֹּא אֵלֶיהָ – Just as Sisera was completely trusting of Yael, so too is Barak. Neither warrior appears to suspect that a woman could present any threat to them.

וַהֲנִה סִיסְרָא נָפֵל מֵת – The death of Sisera is confirmed for the Israelites, as Barak sees his enemy lying dead on the floor of Yael’s tent.

וַהֲיִתַּד בְּרִקְתּוֹ – The cause of his humiliation, “the peg” remains embedded in his temple. The cause of death is clear for all to see. Yael the woman of her tent, used the tools at her disposal to penetrate and kill this mighty warrior.

וַהֲיִתַּד בְּרִקְתּוֹ – Barak appears silent before Yael, the warrior who killed Sisera, it is as though he is speechless to see that Deborah’s prophecy that a woman would actually kill Sisera has been fulfilled. Yael has surpassed the expectations attached with women, and become a warrior, leaving Barak speechless.

וַיִּכְנַע אֱלֹהִים 4:23 – Following Yael’s slaying of Sisera, God appears to subdue Yavin. There is an apparent partnership between Yael, the killer of Sisera, and God. Through Yael’s actions God has “subdued Yavin” so that the Israelites could flourish in the land of Canaan.

וַיִּכְנַע אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת יָבִין – Just as Yael subdued Sisera, so too God subdued Yavin, the two oppressors of the Israelites are finally removed.

וַתֵּלֶךְ יַד בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל 4:24 – Yael’s hand took the hammer, and Sisera was killed, now through the hand of the Children of Israel, Yavin is to be destroyed. This destruction at “the hand of the Children of Israel” is only possible because of what happened to Sisera at the hands of Yael.

A commentary on Judges 5:6-7 and 24-31

בִּימֵי שִׁמְגָר בֶּן־עֲנַת בִּימֵי 5:6

יָעֵל – Yael is elevated here to the level of Shamgar. Yael's killing of Sisera may be compared to Shamgar's killing of 600 Philistines with an ox-

goad. Both of these warriors used unconventional weapons to defeat their enemies, Yael utilized a tent peg and a hammer, while Shamgar took an ox-goad.

חֲדָלוּ אֲרָחוֹת – The dire nature of the situation which faced the Israelites at this time is explained by the difficulty of travel around the country; these were not easy times for the inhabitants of Canaan. There is a sense of disorder and chaos.

וְהָלְכִי נְתִיבוֹת יִלְכוּ אֲרָחוֹת עֲקָלְקָלוֹת – These crooked paths could refer, literally, to the routes which people were forced to take; or there could be a suggestion here of the crooked ways which the Israelites had fallen into.

חֲדָלוּ כְּרוֹזֹן בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל חֲדָלוּ 5:7 – The gravity of the situation is further emphasized in this verse, they did not just cease, but the word is repeated to stress just how bad the situation was.

עַד שִׁקְמָתִי דְּבוֹרָה – Yael is the woman for whom the time is known, “in the days of Yael”, but it appears that in this song Deborah is the crucial woman in the story, it was her appearance which altered the situation, she is the Judge to save Israel.

שִׁקְמָתִי אִם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל – There is no doubt that Deborah is a woman within the community of Israel, and not just any woman, but a mother of Israel. The juxtaposition of the “mother in Israel” with Yael, the warrior, further stresses the challenge to the traditional feminine role which Yael presents through her actions.

תְּבַרְךְ מְנַשִּׁים יָעֵל 5:24 – Yael is clearly to be exalted, she is “blessed above women”. At first glance it appears that this song is therefore placing Yael firmly back in the female sphere, she is compared to women, and blessed above them. However, it is possible that her

שׁוֹפְטִים ה:

ו בִּימֵי שִׁמְגָר בֶּן־עֲנַת בִּימֵי יָעֵל חֲדָלוּ אֲרָחוֹת וְהָלְכִי נְתִיבוֹת יִלְכוּ אֲרָחוֹת עֲקָלְקָלוֹת:

6. In the days of Shamgar the son of Anat, in the days of Yael, paths ceased, and travelers along the paths went on crooked paths

ז חֲדָלוּ כְּרוֹזֹן בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל חֲדָלוּ עַד שִׁקְמָתִי דְּבוֹרָה שִׁקְמָתִי אִם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל:

7. The rural population ceased in Israel. They ceased until I arose, Deborah. I arose a mother in Israel.

כד תְּבַרְךְ מְנַשִּׁים יָעֵל אִשְׁתְּ חֶכֶר הַקִּינִי מְנַשִּׁים בְּאֶהֱל תְּבַרְךְ:

24. Blessed above women Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite, above the women of the tents she is blessed.

כֹּה מִים שָׁאֵל חֶלֶב נִתְּנָה בְּסִפְלֵי אֲדִירִים הִקְרִיבָה חֲמָאָה :
 25. He asked for water, milk she gave in a majestic bowl, she
 brought near curds.

superior blessing comes, not

from her femininity, but from the fact that she challenged her regular gender-role and stepped out of the female sphere.

יַעַל – תְּבַרֵךְ מְנַשִּׁים – Although Deborah exalted herself at the beginning of the song, Yael is to be blessed above her.

יַעַל אִשְׁתְּ חֶבֶר הַקִּינִי – Despite her challenge to the female gender role, it should not be forgotten that she is still a woman, and the wife on a man.

מְנַשִּׁים בְּאֶהָל תְּבַרֵךְ – She is not just exalted above all women, she is specifically blessed “above the women of the tents”. It is not clear who these women are, in Genesis Rabbah 48:15 these are either the women of the wilderness or the Matriarchs. But it seems more likely that it is a statement about all women in general, with their regular role which saw them as the keepers of the tent. Through her actions Yael surpassed the generally accepted female role.

מִים שָׁאֵל חֶלֶב נִתְּנָה 5:25 – In retelling the story of Yael in song, Deborah ensures that we will not just read about this woman on one occasion, her story will be told twice; an indication of its importance.

מִים שָׁאֵל חֶלֶב נִתְּנָה – The retelling of Yael’s story does not begin with her invitation of Sisera into her tent. Instead it starts with her first act of rebellion against Yavin’s general, when she brought him milk instead of water.

מִים שָׁאֵל חֶלֶב נִתְּנָה – Giving Sisera milk, instead of water, may have been a way of glorifying the general, but the motives were evidently more sinister.

בְּסִפְלֵי אֲדִירִים הִקְרִיבָה חֲמָאָה – These details were absent in the initial telling of the story, and could be the result of ‘poetic license’. But these details reveal the gravity of Yael’s deception of Sisera. She did not simply disobey his request for water, she systematically lulled him into a false sense of security by appearing to glorify Yavin’s general with milk, “a majestic bowl”, and curds. These details demonstrate the thinking behind Yael’s plan, and reveal it was not simply an action in the heat of the moment.

כּו יָדָהּ לִיתֵד תְּשַׁלְּחָנָה וַיִּמְיֶנָה לְהַלְמוֹת עַמְלִים וְהִלְמָה
סִיסְרָא מִחֶקֶה רֹאשׁוֹ וּמַחְצָה וְחִלְפָה רַקְתּוֹ :

26. Her hand went for the peg, and her right hand to the workman's mallet, and she smote Sisera she destroyed his head, shattering and piercing his temple.

כּוּ בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ כָּרַע נָפַל שָׁכַב בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ כָּרַע נָפַל בְּאֶשֶׁר
כָּרַע שָׁם נָפַל שָׁדוּד :

27. Between her legs he bent down, he fell, he lay down between her feet. He bowed down, he fell, where he bowed down, there, he fell, destroyed.

יָדָהּ לִיתֵד תְּשַׁלְּחָנָה 5:26
– It is once again a peg which Yael takes, but this time the hammer has changed, it is a

“workman’s mallet”. This is not the penetrating, feminizing hammer of 4:21, it is a different type of hammer. This mallet is related to the root המל; it is a mallet which is used to smite and destroy. As Yael picks up this mallet the end result for Sisera can only be his destruction. – It is not just a mallet, it is a “workman’s mallet”; not a workwoman’s mallet, but specifically one used by men. As Yael takes hold of the workman’s mallet she herself assumes the gender necessary to utilize this tool, she becomes a male.

– This is not just the death of Sisera, this is his complete destruction at the hands of Yael.

– His head is destroyed; the clearest indication of who Sisera is (his face) is no more.

– The complete destruction of Sisera, at the hands of Yael, is emphasized by the description of the different ways that he is destroyed: ... מִחֶקֶה ... וּמַחְצָה וְחִלְפָה.

– Yael is not just any warrior, she is an extremely thorough warrior, leaving Sisera completely destroyed, not simply killed.

– The sexual dimension of Sisera and Yael’s interaction is made explicit; here he lies between her legs. But he does not find himself between her legs in a pleasurable, sexual situation; instead he lies between her legs, destroyed.

– Yael is the victorious warrior, standing above her conquest. This is not Sisera, the man, standing over his sexual conquest, or the warrior standing above his victim; Sisera is in the unexpected position of lying underneath Yael: she is the warrior, she is the conqueror.

– Sisera does not immediately lie before Yael, instead he first bows. He bows before her in act of deference or worship; standing above this once mighty warrior.

כח בעד החלון נשקפה ותיבב אם סיסרא בעד האשנב
 מדוע בשש רכבו לבוא מדוע אחרו פעמי מרכבותיו :
 28. Behind the window the mother of Sisera looked and
 wailed, behind the lattice: 'Why is his chariot delayed in
 coming, why does the beat of his chariot tarry?'
 כט חכמות שרותיה תענינה אף היא תשיב אמריה לה :
 29. The wisest of her noble ladies answered her, she even
 replies saying to herself.

Yael is superior, she is the one who should be worshipped. We can assume that this warrior has bowed before no-one save

his king Yavin, and his god(s); but now it is Yael to whom he must bow.

שָׁכַב בֵּין רַגְלֶיהָ – The humiliation of Sisera is complete, he finds himself defeated, between her legs, not once but twice. It is as though he has been vanquished for a second time, both in the words and in the song's retelling of his humiliation.

כָּרַע שֵׁם נָפַל שָׁדוּד – To ensure that there is no doubt, his humiliation at the hands of Yael is emphasized one more time.

בְּעַד הַחֲלוֹן נִשְׁקָפָה וְתִיבֵב אִם סִיסְרָא 5:28 – Yael, the woman who challenged her gender role and emerged from inside her tent is contrasted with the mother of Sisera who is trapped behind the window, confined to the regular role which women fulfill.

וְתִיבֵב אִם סִיסְרָא – These are not plain tears, these are the tears of a woman, wailing for her missing son. The femininity of Sisera's mother is once again emphasized.

אִם סִיסְרָא – Yael who fed Sisera milk, and therefore assumed a maternal role in relation to this warrior, is now contrasted with his real mother, a reminder of the traditional female role as mother and homemaker.

בְּעַד הָאֲשֵׁנִב – The regular confinement of women to the home is further emphasized; Sisera's mother is not just "behind the window", she is also trapped in the female sphere, "behind the lattice".

בְּעַד הַחֲלוֹן ... בְּעַד הָאֲשֵׁנִב – Yael emerged from the confinement in her tent to define her own destiny, to kill Sisera and to free the Israelites from Yavin's oppression. Sisera's mother remains trapped and confined to her home. In many ways Sisera's mother is the anti-Yael.

מְדוּעַ בִּשְׁשׁ רֶכְבּוֹ לְבוֹא מְדוּעַ אַחֲרוֹ פְּעָמֵי מִרְכָּבוֹתָיו – Sisera's mother can only ask where her son is and why his chariot has not yet arrived, she is powerless.

חֲכָמוֹת שְׂרוּתֶיהָ 5:29 – Sisera's mother is not just in the female sphere physically, she is also surrounded by women.

אִף־הִיא תִּשָּׁיב אֲמָרֶיהָ לָהּ – She is not able to do anything to alter her destiny or situation, all she can do is speak to herself, taking no direct action in relation to her missing son.

ל הלא ימצאו יחלקו שלל רחם רחמתיים לראש גבר
שלל צבעים לסיסרא שלל צבעים רקמה צבע רקמתיים
לצוארי שלל:

30. 'Are they not finding, they are dividing the spoils, a woman or two to each man, the spoil of dyed stuff to Sisera, the spoil of dyed woven stuff, dyed woven stuff around the necks of the spoils.'

לא כן יאבדו כל אויביו יהוה ואהביו כצאת השמש
בגברתו ותשקט הארץ ארבעים שנה:

31. Thus will all your enemies Adonai perish, and those who love God are like the sun rising in its strength. And there was quiet in the land for forty years."

הלא ימצאו יחלקו 5:30

– There is no suggestion that Sisera could have been killed by a woman, instead his mother expects that he will return victoriously, oblivious to the fact that he is already dead.

רחם רחמתיים לראש גבר – Not only will Sisera and his troops bring back the spoils of war, these spoils will include women. These women are not called women, instead they are referred to as wombs, for they are viewed as sexual objects to be taken back by the victorious warriors. This is the expected fate for women in a conflict with Sisera's army, and yet Yael has completely altered the situation. Sisera lies dead between her legs, she is the conqueror, he is defeated.

שלל צבעים רקמה צבע רקמתיים לצוארי שלל – Sisera's mother hopes for the spoils of war which would be appreciated by a woman. The traditional female sphere is once again emphasized. Yael stands in contrast to the women standing behind the window, the captured women of war, and the women who wait for "dyed woven stuff".

כּן יאבדו כל אויביו יהוה 5:31 – Yael has not just killed Sisera as an enemy of the Israelites, she has killed an enemy of Adonai. While Yael was worthy of praise simply for killing Sisera as an Israelite enemy, the magnitude of her achievement is emphasized as he is more than an Israelite enemy, he is Adonai's enemy.

ואהביו כצאת השמש – She is placed in the category of those "who love God".

ותשקט הארץ ארבעים שנה – Yael's actions did not just provide Israel with a short-term victory, but they resulted in quiet for a full 40 years. This is the second longest period of quiet which the Israelites achieved in the Book of Judges, only greater was the 80 years of quiet which Ehud achieved (3:30). Othniel (3:11) and Gideon (8:28) also achieved quiet for the Israelites for 40 years. Yael is therefore in illustrious company for what she was able to bring to the Israelites.

Yael: The Female Warrior and Emasculator

תְּבָרַךְ מִנְּשִׁים יַעֲלֵ אִשֶּׁת חֶבֶר הַכִּנִּי

Blessed above women Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite
(Judges 5:24)

Deborah's description of Yael leaves the reader with no doubt that this is a woman who should be praised and glorified. Her actions warrant a blessing above all other women. She is also the woman, alongside Shamgar, for whom the period is remembered. These are not the days of Deborah and Barak (as one might have expected). These are "the days of Shamgar, the son of Anat, in the days of Yael" (5:6). It is important to remember that these two praises are given to a non-Israelite woman. This would be significant praise for a female Israelite, but when one remembers she is a foreigner, it emphasizes the significance of her actions and the praise which Deborah accords her. There is something powerful in the image of one woman singing such lauded praises of another woman. At this point in the male-dominated TaNaCh, the story centers around two remarkable women.

The importance of Yael's story can be seen, not only in Deborah's description of her, but also in the fact that her story is not just told in the TaNaCh; it is also retold. When reading the Book of Judges, Yael's story is encountered in both chapters 4 and 5. By telling the story twice, Judges emphasizes its importance. There are some differences between the two tellings of the story, but in general, the two versions are complimentary rather than contradictory. In examining Yael's story and the way that she acts both as a warrior and an emasculator, both accounts (in Judges 4 and 5) will be analyzed individually to understand the way in which each functions as a unit.

Before the reader has even encountered the name of Yael, Judges 4:9-11 seems to serve as a precursor for what will happen, and foretells the important role which Yael will assume. Deborah's words to Barak, "into the hand of a woman, Adonai will deliver Sisera" (4:9), ensure that the reader is waiting for the appearance of a woman. From the outset there is an awareness that not only is a woman serving as the Judge over the Israelites, but that there will be another powerful and significant woman in this episode, who will vanquish Sisera. This is coupled with the seemingly superfluous introduction of Chever the Kenite in 4:11. He has a connection to the Israelites through his relationship to Chovav, Moses' father-in-law, and the placement of his tent at Kedesh brings him into geographical proximity with

Barak's army. However, the text does not elaborate, it simply mentions him and moves on to the next subject. The significance of Chever is therefore also left hanging in the air.

The first story of Yael begins with the escape of Sisera from the battlefield. It is clear that the Israelites have been victorious over his army, but with the General still standing, there is unfinished business. The initial meeting with Yael only serves to emphasize the fact that she is a woman by introducing her as "the wife of Chever the Kenite" (4:17). The existence of peace between Chever and Yavin seems to explain why Sisera has chosen this specific tent to shelter. Although, it is significant that he did not arrive at the tent of Chever, but rather his wife's tent.

Yael is first introduced as a wife, and her first actions appear to further emphasize her stereotypical female role. Her invitation to Sisera, "Turn in my lord, turn in to me" (4:18), has two contrasting elements. The first request appears to be innocent, offering Sisera a place to rest. The repetition of the invitation however, with the addition of אֵלַי "to me", gives it a sexual implication. When Judah requested sex from Tamar, thinking she was a harlot, he asked: הִבָּה נָא אָבוֹא אֵלַיךְ "Please may I come in to you" (Gen. 38:16), to ask her for sex.¹⁸⁸ The potential for a sexual encounter between Yael and Sisera is seemingly high, as implied by similar patterns found in other such texts. Even her emergence from the tent to meet Sisera, which reads, וַתֵּצֵא יָעֵל "And Yael went out" (4:18), can be paralleled to Dinah's emergence from the tent וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה "And Dinah went out" (Gen. 34:1). Dinah's appearance from within her tent led her to a sexual encounter with Shechem and his ultimate death. Before the sexual encounter occurs the text jumps, and Yael is transformed from a sexual figure into a maternal one, as "she covered him with a rug" (4:18), in much the way that a mother may look after a child.

Despite this beginning, which involves a male warrior being cared for by a prototypical female as wife, harlot and mother, the situation begins to rapidly change. Sisera's first words to Yael are not a command, or an order. Instead, it appears as a timid request for water. He begins by saying "Please", he asks for "a little bit of water" and he justifies his request by explaining, "for I am thirsty" (4:19). This is not the language one expects from a warrior who is used to issuing orders. And Yael, in a flagrant display of

¹⁸⁸ The text also clarifies that they had sex: וַיָּבֹא אֵלֶיהָ וַתַּהַר לוֹ "And he slept with her (came to her) and she conceived by him." (Gen 38:19).

insubordination does not heed his request, instead she brings him milk. While the provision of milk seemingly perpetuates the image of Yael as a mother, it instead cleverly becomes her weapon of destruction, ironically weakening instead of nourishing, and turning the female image of mother and caretaker on its head. The warrior uncharacteristically relinquishes control of the situation, and finds himself at the mercy of a woman, an unfamiliar and unlikely Biblical situation.

The story inverts roles and expectations; but it is in Judges 4:20 that the gender reversal becomes explicit. Sisera does not address Yael as a woman; instead he once again becomes the General issuing orders. However, Yael is no longer being addressed as a female. She is ordered in the masculine form of the verb to “Stand at the door of the tent”. Sisera’s masculine address to Yael reveals that her gender has undergone some type of transformation. Further complicating the gender roles, Sisera then instructs her to tell any man who passes that there is no man in the tent, thereby altering his own gender, and denying his masculinity.

It is in the act of killing Sisera that Yael affirms her challenge to female gender stereotypes, behaving in a way that no other woman in TaNaCh even begins to emulate. The act of killing another person is certainly sufficient to warrant Yael’s move beyond the female sphere, yet the manner in which she carries out the murder serves to intensify the gender transformation.

When Yael approaches Sisera; וַתֵּבֹא אֵלָיו בְּלֵיל “and she came upon him secretly” (4:21), the specific terminology is that of a sexual encounter, similar to the way that Ruth approached Boaz: וַתֵּבֹא בְלֵיל “and she came secretly” (Ruth 3:7). However, the hammer and tent peg to which she is grasping indicates that this story will not succumb to the stereotypical Biblical account of sexual interaction. The hammer which she holds is הַמַּקְבֵּץ, which has at its root נָקַב.¹⁸⁹ This is a hammer which feminizes in its use, when the hammer is used to kill Sisera he is feminized by the hammer. Yael is not penetrated sexually by the male Sisera. Instead, the female Yael penetrates Sisera with the tent peg, which breaks through, and penetrates, “his temple”, not his head, but rather the feminine רֶקֶתוֹ. The transformation of Sisera is complete, already emasculated by his own words (4:20). Yael completes this emasculation by penetrating, and thus killing him. In relation to Sisera, Yael is

¹⁸⁹ The root נָקַב is the root of the Hebrew word for female.

masculinized; she is not merely a killer, but she is also the one who penetrates. Yael, the wife, harlot and mother, has disappeared and is replaced by a new Yael, a masculine Yael who is a warrior and emasculator, the conqueror of Sisera.

Deborah's prophecy has been fulfilled in the person of Yael, for into her hands Sisera has been delivered.¹⁹⁰ As a final note, Yael appears in contrast to the figure of Barak. This other warrior persists in his pursuit of Sisera even though Yael has already killed him. And he does not issue orders to this woman, instead she is in control of this situation from the outset, she is a woman transformed. She invites Barak into her tent, but this time with no sexual innuendo, there is no need. She speaks to him as one warrior to another, inviting him to see the vanquished Sisera.

When looking at the parallels between Yael's actions and other warriors in the TaNaCh, there are echoes of other warriors within her story. The idea of piercing someone so that the weapon passes through them is reminiscent of Pinchas' stabbing of the Israelite man and Moabite woman (Num. 25:6-8). While Yael took a hammer and tent peg in her hands, Pinchas took a spear in his hand. Yael killed Sisera when she *וַתִּתְקַע אֶת־הַיָּתֵד בְּרִקְתּוֹ* "she thrust the peg into his temple" (4:21). This may be compared directly with Ehud's slaying of Eglon. He took the sword *וַיִּתְקַעָּהּ בְּבֶטְנוֹ* "and he thrust it into his stomach" (Jud. 3:21). Pinchas and Ehud provide the models of male warriors with whom Yael may be compared.

If the only account of Yael's actions was contained in Judges 4 it would be sufficient to warrant her success in challenging normative gender roles, and her rightful place as a warrior, and emasculator. But the song of Deborah ensures that Yael's story is retold, and in a way which emphasizes and develops Yael's transformation.

As was the case in the first account of the story, Yael appears initially as a woman. She is once again the wife of Chever (5:24) and she is also compared both to women in general and "the women of the tents" (5:24) specifically, above both of whom she is blessed. While she is clearly exalted, she is exalted in the company of other women, among whom she is placed. Additionally, the provision of milk to Sisera serves to add the maternal image to this female picture of Yael.

The song, as was the case in the account of the incident, emphasizes the disobedience which Yael exhibited in response to Sisera's initial request for water. With the knowledge of

¹⁹⁰ The need to introduce Chever earlier in the text has also been revealed.

what transpired in Judges 4, the fact that she brought him not just milk, but also curds, serving it “in a majestic bowl” (5:25), adds to the duplicity of Yael’s actions. In the song’s account of the story, there is a sense in which Yael is mocking Sisera in her behavior. The words of the song, and the elaborations, serve to enhance the derision of Sisera.

The mallet which Yael takes hold of in the song’s account is not the same feminizing hammer which she utilized in Judges 4. Instead, this time she takes “a workman’s mallet” (5:26). This is a tool specifically used by workmen, a prototypical male tool. Yael is a woman who is able to use objects which are reserved exclusively within the male sphere. The piercing of Sisera’s temple, which still denotes a penetration by Yael into Sisera, appears far less significant than the fact that through Yael’s actions, the once mighty warrior is completely destroyed. She smote him, destroyed his head and shattered and pierced his temple (5:26). Yael is thorough in her destruction of Sisera. She is not just a killer, whose victim lies dead. She is a warrior, a merciless killer, who utterly destroys the man she has dominated.

Deborah described the murder with different language: וְהִלְכָּה סִיסְרָא “she smote Sisera” (5:26). Yael is not initially compared to a warrior, instead she appears יִנְדַע כְּמַבִּיא “like men with axes in a thicket of trees” (Ps. 74:5) וְכִילְפֹת : לְמַעַלָּה בְּסִבְךָ עֵץ קִרְדָּמוֹת : “and with axes they destroy them” (Ps. 74:6). The destruction of a tree by a woodcutter is equivalent to Yael’s complete destruction of Sisera. But she may also be compared to a warrior. Not a specific warrior engaged in a terrestrial battle, but a warrior whose strength comes from God, as Psalm 18:39 imagines, אֶמְחָצֵם וְלֹא יִכְלוּ קוּם “I shattered them [my enemies] and they could not get up”. Just as Sisera lay vanquished on the floor, unable to rise. The emulation is not just of a warrior in relationship with God, it may also be compared to God as warrior: אֶת־אֱלֹהִים יִמְחֹץ רֹאשׁ אֹיְבָיו: “thus God shatters the head of his enemies” (Ps. 68:22). Yael shattered Sisera’s head just as God shatters the heads of God’s enemies. Yael is a warrior engaged in a divine battle on behalf of God, and emulating God.

The striking contrast between the two accounts, up to this point, can be found in the absence of sexual innuendo and implication in the song’s telling of the story. However, in 5:27, the sexual dimension returns and emphasizes both Yael’s masculinity, Sisera’s

humiliation at the hands of a woman, and the way in which this story inverts the typical expectations of an encounter between a warrior and a lone woman.

After his destruction, there is an almost slow motion explanation of how Sisera actually died at the hands of Yael. The first element, which is repeated a second time in the verse, is the fact that he was “Between her legs” (5:27). On one level, the mighty warrior Yael stands above the once mighty Sisera; however, this is secondary to the sexual imagery of a man being between the legs of a woman. One may have expected to see Sisera in this position, in relation to Yael, but one did not expect this to be the position of his death or of her domination. The sexual dimension which was anticipated has been turned on its head so that the positions and language are the same, but in the place of intimacy, there is death. “Between her legs” carries a secondary meaning related to sex as the word רַגְלָהּ has a relationship to the sexual organs. In Isaiah 7:20 the reference is made to וְשַׁעַר הַרְגָּלָיו, literally “and the hair of his legs”, but really a reference to the hair of his genitals. It is Sisera who is beneath Yael’s genitals. The male conqueror is not the male warrior; rather, the female tent-keeper has become the male conqueror, and in so doing, the male warrior has also become the female conquest.

The significance of this account and the sexual reversal it contains can only be fully understood in connection to the final part of Yael’s story in Deborah’s song: the introduction of Sisera’s mother, which also serves as a conclusion to both Yael narratives.

The challenge that Yael brings to the traditional Biblical female role can be read in the account of her murder and complete annihilation of Sisera. However, to ensure that the reader is left with no doubt regarding Yael’s challenge, a traditional female picture is painted with Sisera’s mother.¹⁹¹ In the first encounter with Yael she stepped out of her tent to meet Sisera, leaving the traditional female sphere to encounter the General. In contrast, Sisera’s mother is trapped “behind the window” and “behind the lattice” (5:28). She is doubly trapped, not just by the home in which she resides, but also by her adherence to female norms, and therefore her inability to emerge from behind the walls of her home. The man she is waiting for was encountered, and killed, by a woman who stepped out of the female

¹⁹¹ The traditional female account of Sisera’s mother may also be seen in contrast to Deborah who is a judge and a leader, but for the sake of this study the significance comes in relation to the way in which this account follows immediately upon the conclusion of Yael’s story.

sphere. Rather than reunite with her son, this mother, who remains confined to the female sphere, will instead be forced to mourn his death.

From the very beginning, even when appearing to conform to female roles, Yael is an active rather than a passive character; she is the one who sets the agenda, first meeting Sisera and then calling on him to “turn in” (4:18). Men do not define Yael or her destiny; she sets her own path and also a path for the man with whom she interacts. Once again, Sisera’s mother stands in contrast. She is unable to have an impact on her or her son’s fate. All that she is able to do is to look, helplessly watching to see if he will appear, and wail about his continued absence. Her wailing evokes the sound of a powerless woman, trapped in a prison of gender norms, unable to help her son. She is able to ask questions, but she can do nothing to alter the inevitable answer which will ultimately be given to her.

It is only in the response to these questions that the sheer significance of Yael’s actions can be fully appreciated. The response betrays the ‘natural’ order of what happens when a male warrior encounters females in the course of a battle. And in so doing it demonstrates how this situation has been completely turned on its head by Yael’s actions. The mighty warrior Sisera could only have been delayed because of the time taken to divide the spoils of war. In the answer, Sisera’s mother reassures herself that the only reason for the delay must be the division of the spoils. In this context; the spoils of war include “dyed stuff”, “dyed woven stuff” and “a woman or two to each man” (5:30). Women are relegated to objects which the mighty warrior brings back with him, alongside all of the other ‘stuff’ that he takes from those he has defeated. But these are not even women that the warrior takes. The text does not speak of women; instead, it literally means ‘a womb or two wombs to each man’. These women are not just objects. They are objects whose purpose is to provide their unique sexual organs for both sexual pleasure and procreation.

The gravity of the gender inversion perpetrated by Yael is only truly comprehended with the reference to the wombs that the warrior would be bringing back among the spoils of war. In the eyes of the warrior, women are sexual objects, and the spoils of war. However, there was no sexual encounter between Sisera and Yael. All of the sexual imagery in the story of Yael: the request to “turn in to me” (4:18), the penetration with the hammer (4:21), and the imagery of the man “between her legs” (5:27) are now seen clearly in the context of the regular warrior-female relationship. The sexual interaction is what the mother of Sisera

was anticipating, but the regular sexual order has been completely reversed. Yael has assumed the normal male warrior role, while Sisera has been emasculated.

Yael and Sisera's mother serve as the ultimate contrast. Yael demonstrated elements of the woman's maternal role. She gave Sisera milk to drink like a baby, and she covered him as one would cover a child. But Yael was not confined to the female sphere in the way that Sisera's actual mother was. Instead, Yael completely burst out of the regular female restrictions. Sisera's mother is trapped by the regular female role. Yael demolishes the female sphere to enter into the male domain as a warrior. But she is not just a warrior, for she also emasculates the man with whom she interacts. Sisera is not just killed, he is emasculated.

Yael's story is worthy of telling and retelling. And at the beginning of the song, which includes this retelling, there is a further indication of the way in which Yael emerges from the traditional female role. In 4:17, when Yael is first encountered, she is "Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite"; and when Deborah begins to tell her story in 5:24, she is again "Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite". She is introduced both times in the traditional way in which women of the Bible were considered, in relation to their husbands (or their fathers).¹⁹² However, in the midst of these two accounts, when Deborah explains the period of time to which she is referring, she sings: "In the days of Shamgar, the son of Anat, in the days of Yael". The man is introduced in connection to his father,¹⁹³ but Yael stands alone. She is not named in connection to a father or mother, and more significantly she is not named in connection to her husband. When Deborah sings her song, recalling this period, and what has transpired, it is clear that Yael has broken free from the female sphere. She has challenged the normative female gender role, ensuring that this is not a song about 'the days of Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite'. Rather, it is a song about "the days of Yael". Yael does not behave in the way which women typically behave, instead, she is the female warrior and emasculator. She is named in her own right, as a unique individual, and one who redefines what it means to be a powerful woman.

¹⁹² As two examples: Sarai is first introduced as "the wife of Abram" (Gen 11:29), and when Rachel's children are listed they are "The sons of Rachel, the wife of Jacob" (Gen 46:19).

¹⁹³ The only reason for saying that Anat is the father is because the regular convention is to name the person and then state 'son of' and name the father, for example: "Lot son of Haran" (Gen 11:31). Although it is interesting to note that Anat is a female name in Ugarit and in Israel today. It would be interesting if in this context Shamgar were named in connection to his mother, rather than his father.

The Portrayal of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael in Midrash Rabbah

Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael challenging gender roles in the TaNaCh:

Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael are united by three primary characteristics; all of them are women, they are all non-Israelites and they all challenge gender roles within the pages of the TaNaCh. Hagar is first encountered in Genesis 16, where she is introduced as Sarai's Egyptian maidservant. Tzipporah is one of the daughters of the priest of Midian in Exodus 2, where she becomes the wife of Moses. Finally, Yael appears in Judges 4, as the wife of Chever the Kenite. As has been demonstrated all three of them challenge the traditional gender roles which one expects from women in the TaNaCh. Hagar is a 'Patriarch for her People', Tzipporah is 'The First Female Mohel and Betrother', and Yael is 'The Female Warrior and Emasculator'. These women function together as a group due to their shared characteristics, and they demonstrate the way in which non-Israelite women challenge gender roles in the TaNaCh.

While the preceding study has demonstrated the way in which these three women challenged the traditional gender roles, when they are discussed in later Jewish texts (Midrash, Talmud and commentaries) their actions are whitewashed or ignored in such a way as to place them, once again, firmly within the traditional female sphere. The male rabbinic writers who worked with the text of the TaNaCh; explaining it and commentating on it, appear to have been uneasy with the gender challenge which these women presented.

In this chapter it will be possible to see the way that through the later Jewish texts the gender challenge was removed and these women were once again placed firmly within the female sphere. In these texts they are made to conform to female categories and characteristics, with their challenging characteristics removed. By looking at the collection of Midrash Rabbah as one single example it will be possible to see how the rabbinic authors pursued this 'policy'.

Midrash Rabbah:

Midrash Rabbah comprises ten books, each of which is focused on a single book of the TaNaCh. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy each has a Rabbah collection attached to it. Alongside the five books of Torah, Midrash Rabbah is also concerned with the five Megillot from Ketuvim: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations,

Ecclesiastes and Esther. While the ten books often appear today as a single collection, in reality they first appeared together as a single volume as late as 1545 in Venice. Having originally been two separate volumes, with one on the Torah books and another on the Megillot. The different collections which together form Midrash Rabbah were all written at different points in history. Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah, Lamentations Rabbah and Esther Rabbah are among the oldest midrashic collections which have been preserved, dating back to the fifth century. In contrast Numbers Rabbah was written as late as the twelfth century, about seven hundred years later (see Herr 2007a:184). In this way while Midrash Rabbah is today presented as a single collection it represents a spectrum of midrashim composed throughout the generations.

As Marc Bregman notes, the meaning of the name is probably “The Great Midrash” (64), but it seems that initially the designation ‘Rabbah’ was used in connection to Genesis and was then later applied to other Midrashic collections. When considering the development of this collection there are a number of manuscripts which contain elements of Midrash Rabbah. In the British Library there is a manuscript of Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah together, while in Paris there is a manuscript containing these two collections alongside the first five chapters of Numbers Rabbah and part of Esther Rabbah (see Bregman 1997:64). While today Midrash Rabbah is considered to be a single collection, it is clear that in reality it is a compilation of various Midrashic works, which were gradually given the title ‘Rabbah’ and which then gradually coalesced into, what has become, a single work.

The diversity of Midrash Rabbah can be seen when one looks at the form and content of the various books. There are two forms of midrashim which are represented in the Rabbah collection, these are exegetical and homiletical midrashim. *Encyclopedia Judaica* characterizes Genesis Rabbah as “an exegetical Midrash which gives a consecutive exposition of the Book of Genesis, chapter by chapter, verse by verse, and often even word for word. It is a compilation of varying expositions, assembled by the editor of the Midrash” (Herr 2007b:448). Similar descriptions are given to the Rabbah collections for Esther, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Ruth and Song of Songs, in relation to their specific Biblical book. Deuteronomy and Leviticus are defined as homiletical midrashim, offering homilies on different elements of the Biblical book progressing according to the triennial reading cycle.

Finally, Exodus Rabbah and Numbers Rabbah combine both exegetical midrashim at the beginning, and homiletical midrashim for the majority of the book.

Midrash Rabbah is therefore a useful collection in the context of this study as it provides a range of Midrashic collections, composed over a number of generations, and may therefore be considered representative of a number of midrashic genres and approaches. When seeking to consider the way in which Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael are portrayed in the Midrash this collection has one further characteristic to recommend it. In classifying Midrash Rabbah, Marc Bregman suggests that one may “apply to Midrash Rabbah the notion of an ‘accessible, canon,’ in the sense of a group of works that attain a kind of corporate identity by becoming readily accessible to a particular community” (Bregman 1997:69). With its popularity from the Middle Ages onwards, Midrash Rabbah is important as it was arguably the most accessible Midrashic collection for the Jewish public to read, and therefore its portrayal of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael would be the most significant midrashic portrayal for the community.

Hagar in Midrash Rabbah:

In the course of Midrash Rabbah Hagar is mentioned in 25 different midrashim, the overwhelming majority of which are in Genesis Rabbah, where she appears in 18 midrashim. This is hardly surprising as the two significant narratives about Hagar are in Genesis 16 and 21.

It is important to recognize that in a number of midrashim Hagar is simply mentioned in passing, as the mother of Ishmael, or Sarah’s maidservant with no significant information about her. One example is Genesis Rabbah 53:11 where Hagar is mentioned through the Biblical verse “And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian” (Gen. 21:9). The focus of the midrash is Ishmael and his behavior, but Hagar is mentioned.¹⁹⁴ The negativity towards Ishmael in this midrash, explaining exactly what he did to Isaac to arouse Sarah’s ire, could

¹⁹⁴ The other midrashim which are not about Hagar, but reference her are: Gen Rab. 45:2 Hagar is referenced as Sarai will be “built up by her” (Gen. 16:2); Gen Rab. 45:8 is about the naming of Ishmael before his birth “And the Angel of Adonai said to her: ‘Behold you are pregnant...’” (Gen. 16:11); Gen Rab. 45:9 is about the prophecy relating to Ishmael (Gen. 16:12) and how he will be a negative figure; Ex Rab. 1:1 is primarily about Ishmael in connection to his expulsion from Abraham’s house (Gen. 21:9-12). Hagar is not the focus; Num Rab 20:19 Hagar is simply included as Sarai’s handmaid “And Sarai, the wife of Abram, took Hagar the Egyptian” (Gen. 16:3); and Ecc Rab. 10:8 is about Joseph, and only references Hagar, as it was Ishmael’s descendants who sold Joseph into slavery.

be read as an implicit criticism of Hagar as his mother, but this is not specified in the text, and she is clearly peripheral, not the central focus.

In a number of midrashim Hagar is treated as an 'object', an almost irrelevant character whose only purpose is to glorify Sarah and Abraham. The clearest example of this in connection to Sarah is found in Genesis Rabbah 45:1 where the ancestry of Hagar is given:

אמר ר"ש בן יוחאי הגר בתו של פרעה היתה וכיון שראה פרעה מעשים
שנעשו לשרה בביתו נטל בתו ונתנה לו אמר מוטב שתהא בתי שפחה בבית זה
ולא גבירה בבית אחר

Said Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh, and
when Pharaoh saw the deeds which were done for Sarah in his house, he took
his daughter and have her to him. He said: "it is better that my daughter will
be a maidservant in this house than a mistress in another house."

While this midrash adds information about Hagar, suggesting that she was Pharaoh's daughter, the overwhelming aim is to glorify Sarah. How many households can boast a Pharaoh's daughter as a lowly maidservant?¹⁹⁵ Hagar is only elevated so that Sarah, by association, is exalted. Abraham is glorified in Genesis Rabbah 45:3: לקחתה בדברים אמרה: "[and Sarah] took her [Hagar] with words, she said to her: 'Happy are you that you get to cling to this holy body.'" There is no consideration of Hagar's thoughts, feelings or response to Sarah's words. The purpose of the midrash appears to be the glorification of Abraham who is considered to be a "holy body"; Hagar is an accessory to this purpose.

While Hagar is utilized to glorify Abraham and Sarah, a number of midrashim serve to develop and express the enmity between Sarah and Hagar. The cause of Sarah's anger in Gen. 16:5 is expressed in Genesis Rabbah 45:4:

והיתה הגר אומרת להם שרי גבירתי אין סיתרה כגלויה נראית צדקת ואינה
צדקת אילו היתה צדקת ראו כמה שנים שלא נתעברה ואני בלילה אחד
נתעברתי

And Hagar would say to them, Sarai my mistress is not as she outwardly
appears, she looks righteous, but she is not righteous, see how many years she
has been unable to become pregnant, and I became pregnant in one night.

¹⁹⁵ In the Midrash it is interesting that it then suggest that Avimelech also gave his daughter to serve in the house of Sarah after witnessing the deeds performed for her.

Hagar appears as the antagonistic party in this context. Enmity between the two women is demonstrated, and Hagar is negatively portrayed as the cause of the strife. In response to this affront Sarah places an evil eye upon Hagar and causes her to miscarry in the following midrash (45:5).¹⁹⁶ In Genesis Rabbah 45:6 the way in which Sarah “humbled her” (Gen. 16:6) is given, so as to heighten the tension and animosity between the two women.¹⁹⁷ Neither woman appears particularly favorably in these midrashim.

While there are midrashim which may be considered to portray both women negatively, there are other midrashim which do this specifically to Hagar. The picture of Hagar in Genesis 21, according to the midrashic authors, is of a woman who has lost faith in God, as her son nears death. One example of this is in Genesis Rabbah 53:14, where she is criticized: ותלך ותמלא את החמת, הדא אמרת מחוסרת אמנה היתה “And she went and filled the skin of water, this shows that she was lacking in faith.” The midrashic authors ignore the fact that she then gave Ishmael to drink from this skin, and instead portray her as faithless for not trusting that God would continue to protect her and her son. In another midrash, Exodus Rabbah 3:13, she is accused of challenging God:

א"ר ברכיה התחילה מטחת דברים כלפי מעלה אמרה רבון העולמים אתמול אמרת לי (שם טז) הרבה ארבה את זרעך והיום הוא מת
Said Rabbi Berachia: she began to reproach God with words. She said:
“Master of the Universe yesterday you said to me ‘I will greatly multiply your offspring’ (Gen. 16:10), and today he is dying.

The midrash ignores the fact that she is conversing with God (something which will be considered later) and focuses on her challenging God as a reproach.¹⁹⁸ There is no sympathy for her plight, and when viewed together with Genesis Rabbah 53:14 a picture of a faithless woman emerges.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁶ An evil eye is also placed on Ishmael in Genesis Rabbah 53:13.

¹⁹⁷ In another example, in Numbers Rabbah 3:13 it specifies that Sarah’s complaint in Gen 16:5 was only against Hagar and not against Abraham.

¹⁹⁸ The same criticism appears in Genesis Rabbah 53:13, with the addition there that הוא מת בצמא “he is dying of thirst”.

¹⁹⁹ There is another negative midrash: Genesis Rabbah 53:15. Here the text suggests a negativity towards Hagar’s decision to return to Egypt to find Ishmael a wife: אמר רבי יצחק זרוק חוטרא לאורא ועל עיקריה הוא קאים “Said Rabbi Isaac, when you throw a stick in the air it will land where it came from”. While the text is not itself negative, there is an implied negativity with the comparison of Hagar’s actions to that of throwing a stick in the air.

While the majority of midrashim up to this point have either treated Hagar as an object, or been negative about her (individually and in relation to Sarah). There are some midrashim which present a more positive picture. In Genesis Rabbah 60:14 it is written:

ויצחק בא מבוא (שם כד) אתא ממיתא ולהיכן הלך באר לחי רואי (שם) הלך להביא את הגר אותה שישבה על הבאר ואמרה לחי העולמים ראה בעלבוני
“And Isaac came back” (Gen. 24:62) He came from coming? Where did he go to? “Be’er Lechai Roi” (ibid.) he had gone to bring Hagar, the one who sat by the well and said “To the Living One of the worlds, see my misery”.

It is significant that after the death of his mother, the midrash has Isaac turning to Hagar, which has to be to her merit. Another positive example is found in Genesis Rabbah 61:4 in relation to Abraham taking Keturah as his wife (Gen. 25:1):

רב אמר זו הגר אמר ליה רבי נחמיה והכתיב ויוסף א"ל על פי הדבור נשאה היך מד"א (ישעיה ח) ויוסף ה' דבר אלי עוד א"ל והכתיב ושמה קטורה א"ל שמקוטרת מצות ומעשים טובים
Rav said this was Hagar, Rabbi Nechemia said to him, it is written (ויסף) again. He said to him it was by divine word as it says: “Again Adonai spoke to me” (Isa. 8:5). He said to him and it is written her name was Keturah to say she united commands and good deeds.

The association of Hagar with Keturah is clearly, in this context, conceived of as a positive one, for the characteristics which her name embodies.²⁰⁰

There are also midrashim which acknowledge the fact that Hagar was able to converse with angels, which could begin to move into the area of acknowledging the ways in which Hagar’s Biblical behavior challenges gender roles. However, this is not the case. One clear example is Genesis Rabbah 45:7:

כמה מלאכים נדווגו לה ר' יוסי בר חנינא אמר חמשה בכל מקום שנאמר אמירה מלאך רבן אמרי ארבעה בכל מקום שנאמר מלאך א"ר חייא בוא וראה כמה בין ראשונים לאחרונים מנוח אמר לאשתו (שופטים יג) מות נמות כי אלהים ראינו והגר שפחת שרי רואה ה' מלאכים בזה אחר זה ולא נתייראה מהם אמר רבי חייא ציפרן של אבות ולא כריסן של בנים א"ר יצחק (משלי לא) צופיה הליכות ביתה בני ביתו של אבינו אברהם צופים היו והיתה רגילה לראות בהם:

How many angels visited her? Rabbi Yossi bar Chanina said 5, every time that speech is mentioned it is an angel. Our Rabbis said 4, for every time that it say

²⁰⁰ There is some negativity in the following midrash Genesis Rabbah 61:5, but this is about the children of this union.

angel. Rabbi Chiya said come and see how much greater former [generations] are than later [generations]. Manoah said to his wife: “We will surely die for we have seen God” (Jud. 13:22). And Hagar, the maidservant of Sarai, saw 5 angels, one after the other, and she expressed no fear. Rabbi Acha said the fingernails of our Patriarchs, rather than the stomachs of the sons. Rabbi Isaac said: “She oversees the activities of her household” (Prov. 31:27). The children of our father Abraham’s household were seers, and she was used to seeing them.

The midrash is clearly positive about Hagar for the fact that she was able to see angels, and respond to them as though it was a regular occurrence. Once again Abraham is glorified through Hagar’s actions, but in this midrash she is also exalted. With the use of Proverbs 31:27, the passage known as אִשָּׁת חַיִּל “A woman of valor”, there is also implicitly within this midrash an implication that Hagar may be considered to be a woman of valor. Most significantly, no objection is raised to the fact that Hagar, as a woman, was able to see angels.

There are two other midrashim which also acknowledge the fact that Hagar was able to see multiple angels. However, in these cases the question from the authors of the midrash appear to revolve around why she was granted to see so many angels. The aim of Genesis Rabbah 75:4 is to elevate the status of Jacob, the number of angels which visited him is therefore compared to the number who were with Eliezer (Abraham’s servant), Hagar and Joseph. In relation to Hagar it states:

א"ר חמא בר חנינא הגר שפחת שרי היתה ונדמנו לה חמשה מלאכים זה שהוא אוהבו של בית על אחת כמה וכמה

Said Rabbi Chama bar Chanina: Hagar the maidservant of Sarai had 5 angels appear to her, so the one who was beloved of the house [Jacob] how much the more so.

Hagar’s merit in seeing 5 angels is acknowledged, but at the same time there is a clear distinction made between her and Jacob, who is far more worthy. In Exodus Rabbah 3:16 Moses is said to have raised a similar challenge when trying to avoid his role as the redeemer of Israel.

הגר המצרית ה' מלאכים שלחת אצלה לששים רבוא בניה של שרה בידי אתה משלח להצילן

Hagar the Egyptian had 5 angels sent to her, but to the 600,000 children of Sarah you send me alone to deliver them.

In both cases there is no statement made that Hagar did not deserve to receive a visit from 5 angels, instead the midrash appears concerned that if she were worthy enough to receive 5, surely Jacob received more and the Children of Israel deserved more. The midrashim acknowledge Hagar's special status, but fail to discuss it in any way. It is as though the authors of the midrash are uncomfortable with the fact that Hagar was visited by 5 angels, and appear unable to offer any explanation.

The most interesting midrash in the context of this study is Genesis Rabbah 45:10.

ותקרא שם ה' הדובר אליה אתה אל ראי, רבי יהודה בר סימון ורבי יוחנן בשם ר' אלעזר בר שמעון מעולם לא נזקק הקב"ה להשיח עם האשה אלא עם אותה הצדקת ואף היא ע"י עילה, רבי אבא בשם רבי בירי כמה כרכורים כרכר בשביל להשיח עמה, ויאמר לא כי צחקת, והכתיב ותקרא שם ה' הדובר אליה רבי יהושע בר נחמיה אמר על ידי מלאך, והכתיב ויאמר ה' לה, רבי לוי בשם רבי חנינא בר חמא אמר על ידי מלאך, רבי אלעזר בשם ר' יוסי בן זמרא אמר ע"י שם, אתה אל ראי אמר רבי אייבו אתה הוא רואה בעלבוך של עלובין, כי אמרה הגם הלום ראיתי אחרי רואי, אמרה לא דיי שנוקקתי לדיבור אלא למלכות, היך מה דאת אמר (שמואל ב ז) כי הביאותני עד הלום, ראיתי אחרי רואי, לא דיי שנוקקתי עם גברתי לראות המלאך אלא שאפילו גברתי שהיתה עמי לא ראתה, ד"א לא דיי שנוקקתי עם גברתי אלא ביני לבין עצמי, אר"ש בר נחמן משל למטרונה שא"ל המלך עברי לפני עברה לפניו והיתה מסתמכת על שפחתה וצמצמה פניה ולא ראתה המלך והשפחה ראתה.

"And she called the name of Adonai who spoke to her 'You are El Roi'" (Gen. 16:14). Rabbi Judah bar Simon and Rabbi Yochanan in the name of Rabbi Elazar bar Shimon: Never has the Holy One Blessed be God engaged in conversation with woman, only with that righteous one [Sarah], and only on account of a special cause. Rabbi Abba in the name of Rabbi Biri: What a circular way [God] went about in order to converse with her: "And God said no you did laugh" (Gen. 18:15). And it is written: "And she called the name of Adonai who spoke with her" Rabbi Joshua bar Nechamia said: It was through an angel. "And Adonai spoke to her" (Gen. 25:23) Rabbi Levi in the name of Rabbi Chanina bar Chama said: By an angel. Rabbi Elazar in the name of Rabbi Yossi ben Zimra said: Through Shem.²⁰¹ "You are El Roi" Said Rabbi

²⁰¹ The same text, beginning with Rabbi Judah bar Simon up until this point appears in Genesis Rabbah 20:6 as a discussion of Genesis 3:16 about the woman's pain in childbirth.

Aibu You who sees the offence of the neglected, for she said: "Here I saw, and after He saw me" (Gen. 16:14). She said it was not enough that I engaged only to speak with angels, as it says: "You have brought me this far" (2 Sam. 7:18) 'I saw and after He saw me' not only did I encounter angels when I was with my mistress, but also when my mistress was not with me I saw them. Another matter: Not only was I encountered with my mistress but also when I was by myself. Said Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman: It is like a parable. A noble lady was told by the king to pass before him. And she was leaning on her maidservant, pressing her face against her, so she didn't see the king, but the maidservant saw him.

There are several interesting elements to the midrash. The first which must be acknowledged is that despite the Torah verse relating to Hagar, and despite the majority of the midrash being about her, there is an effort at the beginning and with the parable at the end to ensure that Sarah is also glorified through this midrash. Sarah has an interaction with God, and in the parable at the end it is only Hagar's association with Sarah, the noblewoman, that allows her to be permitted to see God. As Judith Baskin writes about this parable: "For the rabbis, Hagar's visitation, while real, is indicative of her arrogance and lack of shame, as well as of her subordinate status." (153). The midrash fails to note that Sarah's interaction with God involves God speaking only three words to her in Genesis 18:15, in contrast to Hagar's full conversation.

However, in the midrash Genesis Rabbah 45:7 there was an attempt to consider Hagar's interaction with angels in the context of something which was regular for her in the house of Abraham. This midrash explicitly acknowledges the fact that Hagar was also able to see angels when she was on her own in the wilderness. Twice the midrash emphasizes the fact that there is a sense of wonder for Hagar that she was able to see angels outside of Abraham's house, when she was on her own.

Most importantly, however, is the midrashic attempt to claim: "Never has the Holy One Blessed be God engaged in conversation with woman". Sarah, Hagar and Rebecca challenge this initial statement. Hagar's case is explained by the fact that she conversed with angels, but it is significant that this discussion takes place in the context of Genesis 16:14, where Hagar names God as El Roi, with the text explicitly stating: "And she called the Name

of Adonai who spoke to her". The midrash which cites this text, claims that God spoke through angels, but fails to acknowledge the fact that the Biblical text is clear: **הַדֹּבֵר אֵלֶיהָ** "who spoke to her". Even the parable at the end of the midrash, which may be regarded as a tool to glorify Sarah, also serves to make explicit the fact that the maidservant (Hagar) had a direct interaction with the king (God). The midrashic attempt to relegate Hagar's conversation to one with angels, and not with God, is part of an attempt to avoid seeing in Hagar a challenge to the regular role of women. According to Judith Baskin: "Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this story for rabbinic commentators was the foreign Hagar's privilege in receiving two divine visions" (153). In this midrash women do not converse with God. Sarah is permitted in a roundabout way, and Rebecca's conversation is through an intermediary. The challenge of Hagar, who has the fullest conversation is most striking, and the midrashic authors response reveals their discomfort with Hagar's challenge to gender roles, and their attempt to avoid this challenge in their reading of the text.

Tzipporah in Midrash Rabbah:

Although the Tzipporah stories take place in the Book of Exodus, which has a Rabbah collection connected to it, there are only 5 midrashim which make reference to her. And in two of these midrashim Tzipporah is clearly not the subject. However, of the remaining three midrashim, one deals with the origin of her name, and the other two relate to the circumcision incident on the journey back to Egypt.

In the midrashim where Tzipporah is mentioned in passing the general focus appears to be on her father (Yitro/Reuel) and his relationship to Moses. In Exodus Rabbah 1:33 the midrash considers **וַיֹּאֵל מֹשֶׁה** "And Moses was pleased" (Ex. 2:21):

ר"י אומר שנשבע לו ואין ויאל אלא לשון שבועה שנאמר (שמואל א יד)
ויואל שאול את העם ולמה השביעו אמר לו יודע אני שיעקב אביכם כשנתן
לו לבן בנותיו נטלן והלך לו חוץ מדעתו שמא אם אתן לך את בתי אתה עושה
לי כך מיד נשבע לו ונתן לו את צפורה

Rabbi Judah said: He swore to him. There is no *vayael* (oath) only the language of swearing, as it is written: "Saul laid an oath upon the people" (1 Sam. 14:24). Why did he swear? He [Yitro] said to him: I know of Jacob your father that when Laban gave him his daughter, he took his daughter and went without his knowledge. Perhaps if I give you my daughter you will do the

same to me. Immediately he [Moses] swore to him. And he [Yitro] gave to him Tzipporah.

The interaction in the midrash is between Yitro and Moses. Tzipporah is present and is the subject of discussion between the two men, but she is not active. She is given to Moses by Yitro. There is a potential of reading in this a parallel between Moses and Jacob, and therefore between Tzipporah and Rachel (and Leah), which has to be considered to be for Tzipporah's merit. The text may also demonstrates the connection between father and daughter, such that Yitro does not want his daughter to leave with her husband.

In Exodus Rabbah 27:1 the focus is clearly on Yitro, and his relationship with Moses, contrasting him with Esau in the context of Proverbs 27:10: טוֹב שָׁכֵן קָרוֹב מֵאֶחָי רָחוֹק “a close neighbor is better than a distant brother”. Tzipporah is referenced only in passing in that: וביתרו כתיב ויתן את צפורה בתו (שמות ב) בעשו כתיב (תהלים יד) אוכלי עמי אכלו לחם “And of Yitro it is written: ‘And he gave Tzipporah his daughter’ (Ex. 2:21); of Esau it is written: ‘Who consume my people like they consume bread’ (Ps. 14:4)” The midrash focuses on Yitro, but Tzipporah, as his daughter, may be worthy of some praise as the daughter of such a righteous man.

Of the remaining three midrashim one is unconcerned by the circumcision incident, and instead considers the origins of Tzipporah's name and her first meeting with Moses. Exodus Rabbah 1:32 is concerned with Moses' experiences upon his arrival in the land of Midian, and his first interaction with the daughters of Reuel (Yitro). At the end of the midrash the focus moves specifically towards Tzipporah:

למה זה עזבתן את האיש וגו' (שמות ב) שמא ישא אחת מכם ואין אכילת לחם האמור כאן אלא אשה ודומה לו (בראשית לט) כי אם הלחם אשר הוא אוכל מיד רצתה צפורה אחריו כצפור והביאה אותו ולמה נקרא שמה צפורה שטיהרה הבית כצפור

“Why did you leave the man...” (Ex. 2:20) He may marry one of you. It is speaking of eating bread here which is like marriage: “for the bread which he ate”²⁰² (Gen. 39:6). Immediately Tzipporah ran after him like a bird and brought him. Why was she called by the name Tzipporah? For she purified the house like a bird.

²⁰² This verse is in the context of Potiphar and Joseph, when Potiphar left all of his house under Joseph's control except “for the bread which he ate”, which is taken here as a reference to his wife rather than just to food.

There is a clear link between Tzipporah's name and the word for a bird. The midrash specifically claims she was named because of the way she purified the house like a bird, but it also implies a connection between her name and the way she ran after Moses. It is significant that by considering Tzipporah as a bird looking after the house she is placed within the female sphere, in a traditional female gender role as the house keeper. However, this could be challenged through an association of purification with the Priestly function, suggesting a possible male gender role. In the TaNaCh there is no mention of Tzipporah as a woman in her tent or as a woman looking after Moses' tent; however, the midrashic authors want to place her in this context.

The final two midrashim concerned with Tzipporah are both related to the circumcision incident. In Exodus Rabbah 5:8 the focus is on the importance of circumcision and how Tzipporah knew that this was the necessary remedy to prevent Adonai's attack:

ויהי בדרך במלון חביבה מילה שלא נתלה משה עליה אפילו שעה אחת לפיכך כשהיה בדרך ונתעסק במלון ונתעצל למול לאליעזר בנו מיד ויפגשוהו ה' ויבקש המיתו את מוצא מלאך של רחמים היה ואעפ"כ ויבקש המיתו ותקח צפורה צור וכי מנין ידעה צפורה שעל עסקי מילה נסתכן משה אלא בא המלאך ובלע למשה מראשו ועד המילה כיון שראתה צפורה שלא בלע אותו אלא עד המילה הכירה שעל עסקי המילה הוא ניזוק וידעה כמה גדול כח המילה שלא היה יכול לבלעו יותר מכאן מיד ותכרת את ערלת בנה ותגע לרגליו ותאמר כי חתן דמים אתה לי אמרה חתני תהיה אתה נתון לי בזכות דמים הללו של מילה שהרי קיימתי המצוה מיד וירף המלאך ממנו אז אמרה חתן דמים למולות אמרה כמה גדול כח המילה שחתני היה חייב מיתה שנתעצל במצות המילה לעשותה ולולי היא לא ניצל:

"And it happened on the way, in the lodging" (Ex. 4:24) Circumcision is so beloved that Moses should not have postponed it from him for even one hour.

Therefore when he was busy on his way in the lodging and he delayed to circumcise Eliezer, his son, immediately "Adonai encountered him, and sought to kill him" (Ex. 4:24). He was found by an angel of mercy, but he still sought to kill him. "So Tzipporah took a flint" (Ex. 4:25), from where did Tzipporah know that it was on account of circumcision that Moses was endangered. For the angel came and swallowed Moses from his head to his circumcision. Hence Tzipporah saw he had not swallowed him, only up to his circumcision; she recognized that it was on account of circumcision that he was injured. And she knew how great the power of circumcision was for he could not swallow him past the circumcision. Immediately "she cut off her

son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it. And she said: 'For you are a bridegroom of blood to me.'" (Ex. 4:25) She said you will be my bridegroom, given to me by merit of the blood of circumcision, the commandment of which I have fulfilled. Immediately the angel refrained from him²⁰³ and she said: "a bridegroom of blood due to the circumcision" (Ex. 4:26). She said: How great is the power of circumcision. My husband who deserved death for not fulfilling the commandment of circumcision, and were it not for he, he would not have been saved.

There is no denying the role of Tzipporah within this midrash, and it is made explicit that she saved Moses through the performance of Eliezer's circumcision. The midrash serves to stress the power and importance of circumcision, but it does not discuss the fact that this ritual was performed by a woman, completely ignoring this fact. The focus is exclusively on the power of circumcision, and on explaining how exactly Tzipporah knew that circumcising her son would save Moses. It also makes explicit the fact that Tzipporah marries Moses through this action, declaring that "you will be my bridegroom", without questioning how this functions in the context of their earlier marriage, or how a woman is able to take a husband for herself, reversing the traditional roles. By passing over these elements of the story, while acknowledging Tzipporah's actions, the midrashic authors ignore any challenge to gender roles.

The final Rabbah midrash which involves Tzipporah is Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:1, which is once again concerned with the subject of circumcision. In this midrash the concern is with what is actually involved in circumcision and who may perform a circumcision.

הלכה תינוק שנולד כשהוא מהול מהו שיהא מותר למול אותו כך שנו חכמים
 תינוק שנולד מהול צריך להטיף ממנו דם ברית מפני בריתו של אברהם ומנין
 אתה למד מן התורה שנאמר (בראשית יז) המול ימול יליד ביתך ומקנת
 כסף ד"א המול ימול אל תהי קורא בו אלא שתי מילות מילה ופריעה רבי
 לוי אמר המול ימול מכאן למוהל צריך שיהא מהול דכתיב המול ימול אמר
 ר' יודן בן פזי מה כתיב בצפורה אשת משה (שמות ד') אז אמרה חתן דמים
 וגוי למילה אין כתיב כאן אלא למולות שתי מילות מכאן למילה ומכאן
 לפריעה

Halacha: A baby born who is born without a foreskin, is it required to
 circumcise him? Thus have our sages taught: a baby born without a foreskin it

²⁰³ This is not a direct citation from Ex 4:26 as it includes המלאך the angel, which is not mentioned in the Biblical text.

is necessary to take a few drops of blood for the Covenant of Abraham. From where do you learn this? From the Torah as it is written: “You will surely circumcise everyone born in your house and purchased with money” (Gen. 17:13) Another matter: ‘Surely circumcise’ [*hamol yimol*], you should read in it 2 elements of circumcision; circumcision and uncovering. Rabbi Levi said: ‘Surely circumcise’ [*hamol yimol*], from this we learn that the circumciser needs to be circumcised as it is written *hamol yimol*. Said Rabbi Judan ben Pazzi: For Tzipporah, Moses’ wife, it is written: “so she said: ‘a bridegroom of blood...’” (Ex. 4:26). It is not written to circumcise [*lemilah*], rather it is written circumcision [*lemulot* – in the plural], there are 2 elements of circumcision: circumcision and uncovering.

Tzipporah’s practice of circumcision is taken as a model for how circumcision should be performed, offering further evidence that there are two elements to circumcision. However, in relation to this study the most important element of the midrash are Rabbi Levi’s comments, directly before Tzipporah’s example. Rabbi Levi teaches “that the circumciser needs to be circumcised”, which would suggest that circumcision must be performed by a male, who himself has been circumcised (a Jew). Instead of focusing on this perspective, it is immediately followed by Tzipporah circumcising her son, which appears as a direct challenge to Rabbi Levi’s comments. By placing Tzipporah’s example immediately after Rabbi Levi’s teaching it appears that the midrashic author is revealing an unease with the fact that Tzipporah performed a circumcision. But instead of challenging Tzipporah for performing a circumcision, as a woman, this too is ignored. The failure to acknowledge this striking contradiction between Rabbi Levi and Tzipporah may be taken as evidence of the unease of the midrashic authors to fully explore Tzipporah, as a woman, performing the male act of circumcision.

Yael in Midrash Rabbah:

Before considering the place of Yael in Midrash Rabbah, it is important to acknowledge that there is no Rabbah collection connected to the Book of Judges. There is no book in this collection moving systematically through the chapters and verses of the Book of Judges, where the story of Yael appears. Despite this Yael is included in 6 midrashim

throughout the Rabbah midrashim. While there is a clear strand of negativity towards Hagar in the midrashim, and a lack of real judgment towards Tzipporah,²⁰⁴ with Yael all of the midrashim are clearly positive about her as a heroic character.

The first midrash to consider is Ruth Rabbah 1:1, which elevates Yael to be considered alongside the Judges:

ויהי בימי שפוט השופטים אוי לדור ששפטו את שופטיהם ואוי לדור ששופטיו צריכין להשפט שנא' (שופטים ב') וגם אל שופטיהם לא שמעו ומי היו רב אמר ברק ודבורה היו ריב"ל אמר שמגר ואהוד היו רב הונא אמר דבורה וברק ויעל היו שפט חד שפטים תרין השפטים תלתא:
 "And it was in the days of the judges judging" (Ruth 1:1) Woe to the generation who judges its judges and woe to the generation whose judges need judgment. As it is written: "And also to the judges they did not listen" (Jud. 2:17). And who were they? Rav said: They were Barak and Deborah. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: They were Shamgar and Ehud. Rav Huna said: They were Deborah, Barak, and Yael. Judge is 1, judges are 2, and the judges are 3.

In this midrash Yael is viewed alongside Deborah and Barak as one of the judges, and therefore one of the leaders of the Israelites; a position of clear honor.

As well as being considered a Judge in the midrash, Numbers Rabbah 10:2 portrays her as an agent of God. This midrash moves through Proverbs 23 beginning with verse 26 and offering a commentary on each verse through to the end of the chapter. In this midrash Yael appears in connection to Proverbs 23:34: **וְהָיִיתָ כְּשֹׁכֵב בְּלִבָּיִם וְכְשֹׁכֵב בְּרֹאשׁ חֲבֵל** "You will be like one lying in the heart of the sea, like one's head on a mast". The midrash considers Pharaoh to be associated with 'You will be like one lying in the heart of the sea'. Since Pharaoh sought to drown Israelite boys in Exodus 1:22, his punishment was to be "deep frozen in the heart of the sea" (Exodus 15:8) for as the midrash states: **כך יעשה הקב"ה** "Thus will God do to all the idolatrous nations who do evil to Israel, measure for measure." It then continues:

וכשוכב בראש חבל זה היה סיסרא מה כתיב (שופטים ד) והוא לחץ את בניי בחזקה כ' שנה מה היה סופו לפי שהיה מחרפם ומגדפם בנחיצה לכך מת מיתה גדופה שמסרו ביד אשה כמ"ד (שם) כי ביד אשה ימכור ה' את סיסרא לכך נאמר וכשוכב זה היה סיסרא שכתוב בו (שם ה) בין רגליה כרע נפל שכב

²⁰⁴ While the midrashim concerning Tzipporah are clearly not negative about her in the way that the midrashim treat Hagar, it is hard to discern explicit comments which view Tzipporah positively.

בראש חבל שחבלתו יעל בראשו עם היתד שבאהל הה"ד (שם) ידה ליתד
 תשלחנה וימינה וגו' מדה כנגד מדה
 "Like one's head lying on a mast" this is Sisera, what is written about him:
 "He oppressed the Children of Israel harshly for 20 years" (Jud. 4:3). What
 was his end? Since he abused, cursed and oppressed them he died a cursed
 death, so he was delivered into the hands of a woman. As it says: "for into the
 hand of a woman, Adonai will deliver Sisera" (Jud. 4:9). Thus it says: 'lying'
 this was Sisera of whom it is written: "Between her legs he bent down, he
 fell" (Jud. 5:27). 'Head on a mast' Yael wounded his head with a peg from her
 tent, as it is written: "Her hand went for the peg, and her right hand..." (Jud.
 5:26), measure for measure.

According to the midrash Yael killing Sisera is the retribution from God for the way that he persecuted the Israelites. The tent peg through his head provides the connection to the Biblical verse in Proverbs, which has the victim's head lying atop a mast. The punishment is clearly from God "measure for measure", and so Yael must be regarded as an agent of God for killing Sisera in this way.

Yael's murder of Sisera was clearly beneficial for the Israelites, and in two of the midrashim the close relationship of Yael and Israel is elaborated. In Exodus Rabbah 4:2 Yael is connected through another friend of Israel, through Yitro. The midrash is concerned with Exodus 4:18, but moves immediately to Proverbs 17:17: בְּכָל־עֵת אֶהֱבֶה הָרֵעַ וְאָח לְצָרָה יִנָּלֵד: "A beloved friend is there at all times, and a brother is born to share adversity". According to the midrash Yitro is the friend, and then it progresses to involve Yael:

מצותו של יתרו שקבל בתוך ביתו גואל שברח מפני השונא עמד מביתו שקבל
 לשונא שברח מפני הגואל והרגו איזה זה זה סיסרא שנאמר (שופטים ד)
 וסיסרא נס ברגליו אל אהל יעל אשת חבר הקיני וכתוב (שם א) ובני קיני
 חותן משה לכך נאמר ואח לצרה יולד לפי שאהב יתרו למשה והיה לו ריע
 לכך נעשו בניו אחים לישראל בעת צרתן והרגה יעל לסיסרא

Yitro's mitzvah was that he received a *Goei* [an avenger] into his house, who
 was running from before the enemy. So one stood from his house who
 received the enemy fleeing from before the avenger, and killed him. Who was
 this? This was Sisera as it is written: "But Sisera escaped on foot to the tent of
 Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite" (Jud. 4:17). And it is written: "And the
 sons of Keni, the father-in-law of Moses" (Jud. 1:16). Thus it says: "a brother

is born to share adversity”, since Yitro loved Moses he was a friend, so his children became brother of Israel in their time of trouble, and Yael killed Sisera.

Parallels are drawn between Moses fleeing from Egypt to arrive at Yitro’s tent and Sisera fleeing from Barak’s army to come to the tent of Yael. In this context the midrash stresses the familial relationship between Yitro and Yael through Judges 1:16 which specifies that Keni was Moses’ father-in-law, and therefore Yitro. Yael was there at Israel’s hour of distress to kill Sisera, and was therefore like the brother born to share Israel’s adversity. As was the case in Numbers Rabbah 10:2 the midrash does not shy away from acknowledging that Yael did kill Sisera, appearing again, in some ways to place it as part of God’s plan.

Although Genesis Rabbah 48:15 begins by considering Sarah’s place in the tent in Genesis 18:9, it quickly moves to explain the designation Deborah gave to Yael stating: “Blessed above women Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite, above the women of the tents she is blessed” (Jud. 5:24). The midrash states:

א"ר עזריה כשם שאמרו איה שרה כך אמרו לשרה איו אברהם ויאמר הנה באהל הה"ד (שופטים ה) תבורך מנשים יעל אשת חבר הקיני מנשים באהל תבורך רבי אלעזר אמר מנשי דור המדבר שהן יושבות באהלים שנאמר (במדבר יא) איש לפתח אהלו ולמה תבורך מהם הן ילדו וקיימו את העולם ומה היה מועיל להם שאלמלא היא כבר היו אבודין רבי שמואל בר נחמן אמר מן האמהות הן ילדו וכו' שאלולי היא כבר היו אבודין
Said Rabbi Azariah: As they said to him [Abraham] where is Sarah? So they said to Sarah: where is Abraham? “And he said behold in the tent” (Gen. 18:9). As it is written: “Blessed above women Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite, above the women of tents she is blessed” (Jud. 5:24). Rabbi Elazar said: More than the women of the generation of the wilderness who sat in tents, as it is said: “Each man to his tent” (Num. 11:10). And why is she more blessed than them? They gave birth to children, and if it had not been for her [Yael] they would have all been destroyed. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman said: Than the Matriarchs, they gave birth, and if it were not for her [Yael] they would have been destroyed.

The murder of Sisera by Yael is viewed by the midrash as an event of great significance: for without it the children of the Matriarchs and the children of the generation in the wilderness would have all been destroyed. However, the midrash does not explicitly make mention of

what Yael did to deserve such a designation. There is no consideration of the fact that Yael found herself elevated above all of these women because she behaved in a way which was not normal for females in the TaNaCh. Instead the midrash compares her to other women, and ensures that she is firmly in the female sphere.

The final two midrashim function together as a pair, and both reveal how highly Yael was regarded by the midrashic authors. And at the same time the midrashim reveal how they attempted to avoid her gender challenging behavior. The first midrash expresses how highly Yael was considered, and the second midrash explains why she was so highly regarded. In Leviticus Rabbah 23:9 it states:

אני ה' אני הוא שנפרעתי משמשון ומאמנון ומזמרי ועתיד אני ליפרע ממי
 שיעשה כמעשיהם אני הוא ששלמתי ליוסף ליעל ולפלטי בן ליש אני עתיד
 לשלם שכר למי שעושה כמעשיהם

I am Adonai, I am the one who punished Samson, Amnon and Zimri, and in the future I will punish those who behave in the way their deeds. I am the one who repaid Joseph, Yael and Palti son of Laish, I in the future will pay a reward to he who acts according to their deeds.

The midrash is clear in presenting three figures who should be emulated, and three whose actions should be avoided. By associating Yael with Joseph and Palti it is clear that she is worthy of praise, however, it does not specify exactly what she did that should be emulated. The midrash exclusively focuses on Joseph. According to Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel, since none of his body had been used for transgression he is worthy of praise and emulation. It is not immediately clear to the reader how Yael and Palti behaved in an equivalent way.

One needs to read the next midrash to understand what these three characters did which should be emulated:

שלשה הם שברחו מן העבירה ושתף הקב"ה שמו עמהם ואלו הן יוסף ויעל
 ופלטי יוסף מנין שנאמר (תהלים פא) עדות ביהוסף שמו מהו ביהוסף (זה) יה
 מעיד עליו שלא נגע באשת פוטיפר יעל מנין שנאמר (שופטים ד) ותצא יעל
 לקראת סיסרא ותכסהו בשמיכה מהו בשמיכה רבנן דהכא אמרי בסודרא
 ורבנן דתמן אמרי במשיכלא אמר ריש לקיש חזרנו על כל המקרא ולא מצינו
 כלי ששמו שמיכה ומהו שמיכה שמי כה שמי מעיד עליה שלא נגע בה אותו
 רשע

Three of them ran away from sin, and were partnered with the name of the Holy One Blessed be God, and these are they: Joseph, Yael and Palti. Joseph since it says: "He placed a decree upon Joseph" (Ps. 81:6). what is *Bayathosef*?

God [*yah*] gives witness for him that he did not touch the wife of Potiphar. From where is Yael? It says: "And Yael went out to meet Sisera ... and she covered him with a rug" (Jud. 4:18). What is this rug [*semicha*]? Our Rabbis from there say it is a scarf, our Rabbis from here say it is a cloak. Said Resh Lakish: We returned to all of Scripture and we have not found an item names a *semicha*. What is a *semicha*? It means my name is here [*shmi coh*]. My name tells that she did not touch this wicked one.²⁰⁵

This midrash makes explicit the fact that Yael is categorized with Joseph and Palti as someone who should be emulated because of the fact that she did not have sexual relations with Sisera. While the Biblical text has allusions to sexual relations through the story of Yael, there is no explicit suggestion that they actually had sex. Yael refraining from sexual relations with Sisera may be worthy of praise. However, it would seem that Yael is more worthy of praise for the fact that she killed Sisera and therefore saved the Israelites. In her song of praise in Judges 5, Deborah makes reference to the praise which is due to Yael because of the fact that she killed Sisera, not because she did not have sexual relations with this man. By focusing on this element of Yael's story, the midrashic authors reveal their discomfort with the idea of a woman killing a man, and being praised for it. Yael as Sisera's killer challenges the accepted female role. In response to this the midrashic authors therefore alter the focus of her story, so that she is praised for resisting a man's sexual advances, placing her firmly in the female sphere, and removing the gender challenge which her story brings.

Midrash Rabbah's removal of Gender Challenges:

In the TaNaCh it is clear to see the way in which Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael challenge traditionally accepted gender roles. Hagar speaks with angels and God, receiving a patriarchal promise. Tzipporah performs a circumcision and betroths Moses to herself as a husband. And Yael is the warrior who kills Sisera, the TaNaCh's only female killer. In Midrash Rabbah rather than focusing on the challenging gender implications of these stories, the midrashic authors deal with these women in such a way as to place them firmly in the female sphere, with no acknowledgment of any challenge to gender roles.

²⁰⁵ Palti is then praised in the midrash for not having any contact with David's wife Michal.

With so many midrashim about Hagar it is hard to define a singular approach towards her in the midrash. Instead Hagar is a complex character with whom the midrashic authors need to reconcile the tension between her and Sarah, her expulsion from Abraham's house, the birth of Abraham's firstborn son, and the fact that she interacted with God and angels. In some cases the midrashim are very negative towards her (and her son) (Genesis Rabbah 53:13), while in others they appear to portray in quite a favorable light (Genesis Rabbah 61:4). However, when it comes to the challenge which she presents in relation to the regular female role there is uniformity in attempting to downplay what actually happened to her (this can be seen in the comparison to Jacob in Genesis Rabbah 75:4, and the comparison with Moses in Exodus Rabbah 3:16). And then to focus on elements of the Torah text so that she no longer presents a challenge to gender roles. In this way in Genesis Rabbah 45:10 the authors exclusively accept: **וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה** "And the angel of Adonai said to her" (Gen. 16:9), with no acceptance of the Torah's comment **וַתִּקְרָא שֵׁם יְהוָה הַדֹּבֵר אֵלֶיהָ** "And she called the Name of Adonai who spoke to her" (Gen. 16:14), and the challenge which it brings for Hagar must have spoken with God. When looking at Hagar through the eyes of Midrash Rabbah she no longer presents a challenge to the regularly accepted female gender role.

While there are far fewer midrashim about Tzipporah to consider, a similar agenda can be read through them. The midrashim do not appear to offer a particularly positive or negative assessment about her, but they do present a picture which ignores the gender challenge of her performance of a circumcision. In Exodus Rabbah 1:32 she is arguably placed in the female sphere, with her name associated with the way that she purified the home (although it could be argued that this places her in a priestly role). Then in Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:1 the midrash suggests that only a person who is circumcised may perform a circumcision (i.e. a man) and then places Tzipporah's circumcision story alongside this statement. However, there is no mention of the fact that Tzipporah may therefore be read as a challenge to Rabbi Levi's statement, ignoring the fact that she challenges the male only nature of this ritual, thereby avoiding the problem. The midrash also skips over the implications of the fact that she betroths Moses to herself when she states: **כִּי חֲתָן דָּמִים אַתָּה לִי** "For you are a bridegroom of blood to me" (Ex. 4:25).

Finally, in the case of Yael all of the midrashim are universally positive about her: elevating her to the status of Judge (Ruth Rabbah 1:1) and placing her clearly as a friend of Israel (Exodus Rabbah 4:2). In part it is clear that she must be regarded positively, for of her Deborah said: תְּבָרַךְ מִנְּשִׁים יַעַל אִשֶּׁת חֶבֶר הַקֵּינִי מִנְּשִׁים בְּאֹהֶל תְּבָרַךְ : “Blessed above women Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite, above the women of the tents she is blessed” (Jud. 5:24). When this blessing is considered in Genesis Rabbah 48:15 it ensures that Yael is viewed alongside the Matriarchs and the women of the generation in the wilderness; placing her firmly in the female sphere. However, at the same time as she is viewed positively, the reason for this is not necessarily the one which appears evident in the text. As Leviticus Rabbah 23:9-10 suggests while Yael is a person whose example should be emulated, her positive example is not killing Sisera, it is rather not having had sexual relations with him. The midrash declines to praise Yael for killing Sisera, an action which may be considered ‘unfeminine’ and instead finds a way to praise her through the story, which leaves her firmly in the realm of accepted female behavior.

Despite these three women challenging gender roles through their actions in the TaNaCh, Midrash Rabbah reveals the way in which these actions were challenged (with Hagar), ignored (with Tziporah) and subverted (with Yael). So that the picture of these three women which emerges at the end of Midrash Rabbah is not of three non-Israelite women challenging gender roles. Instead Midrash Rabbah ensures that the Biblical stories of Hagar, Tziporah and Yael are read as stories about women conforming to generally accepted female practices.

Conclusion

The Uniqueness of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael:

At first glance, Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael belong to two clear categories within the TaNaCh. All three of them are women, and may therefore be classified along with the other female characters. They are also united by their shared non-Israelite identity: Hagar as an Egyptian, Tzipporah as a Midianite, and Yael as a Kenite. There is no other obvious characteristic shared by these three women. Tzipporah and Yael are wives, but Hagar is only a concubine, or a second-class wife.²⁰⁶ Both Tzipporah and Hagar are mothers, but there is no indication that Yael has any children. Outside of their shared gender and shared non-Israelite identity, there is seemingly little to unite these three women and suggest that they should be viewed as a specific group.

The combined stories of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael comprise a total of 78 verses across the entire TaNaCh.²⁰⁷ In the midst of so many other chapters and verses, it would be easy to lose these three women alongside all of the seemingly more significant characters. There are other women who appear to be more important (involved for many more than 78 verses) and other non-Israelites who feature more prominently. And yet in the course of 78 verses these three women behave in ways which makes them completely unique within the TaNaCh.

While it is possible to compare these women to other female characters, as they do fulfill the female roles of daughter, wife and mother, to do so is to completely miss their significance. In their stories, Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael are able to inhabit two worlds simultaneously. They are women, and they behave like women, but they also behave like men. Each one of these women behaves in a way which is incomparable with any other woman across the many pages of the TaNaCh. Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael all do things which remain squarely within the male domain. And through their actions, they challenge the gender roles which appear to be accepted elsewhere in the TaNaCh. Hagar the Patriarch, Tzipporah the mohel, and Yael the warrior are striking as a group for the way in which they

²⁰⁶ Even though Abraham took Hagar as his wife, there is a clear distinction between Sarah's role as wife in contrast with Hagar's lesser role.

²⁰⁷ This is taking a maximalist approach to the verses which actually concern them.

each assume a role which is otherwise exclusively male, and for the way in which they elevate those male roles to new and undiscovered heights.

A review of the challenge of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael to traditional gender roles:

As has been demonstrated through this study, each woman challenges gender roles to assume a different male function.

Hagar behaves in a way which demonstrates that she should be considered as a Patriarch for her people. This is not to say that she does not behave according to recognized female roles at any point during her story. In Genesis 16:1-4 Hagar is introduced as a maidservant, who is of interest because of the potential that she could bear a child. With this beginning, she is then given as a wife and conceives. However, she quickly steps outside of the female sphere and behaves in a way which is most appropriately compared with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, rather than any other woman. In both Genesis 16 and 21 when Hagar is away from Sarah and Abraham she has experiences which place her as a Patriarch for her people. The interaction with God and angels, her promise of seed and the seven-fold blessing, among other features of her story, demonstrate the way in which she should be considered 'The Patriarch of her People'.

In Hagar's story there are times when she appears to conform to female roles, and there are other texts when she is portrayed as a Patriarch, and thus resides in the male sphere. The gender challenge in the Hagar narrative occurs across 16 verses.²⁰⁸ In contrast the story of Tzipporah's challenge to gender roles is told in 3 short verses.²⁰⁹ Elsewhere in the text Tzipporah is portrayed exclusively as a woman conforming to regular female roles. She is a daughter in relation to Yitro, a wife for Moses and a mother to their two sons. Her life and destiny are determined by the two primary men in her life who give and take her as they both see fit. However, on their journey back to Egypt, when Adonai attacked Moses, Tzipporah emerges from the female sphere and does things which no other woman in TaNaCh does. With Moses' life in jeopardy she took a flint and performed a circumcision on her son, just as Abraham circumcised his two sons Ishmael and Isaac. She may also be compared to Joshua who took flint knives when the Israelites males were circumcised upon their entry

²⁰⁸ The actual gender challenge occurs in Genesis 16:7-14 and 21:14-21.

²⁰⁹ The story occurs in Exodus 4:24-26.

into the land of Israel. She is 'The First Female Mohel'. But Tzipporah does not just challenge gender roles by behaving like a mohel, she also appears to betroth Moses to herself, taking him as her husband. In this marriage the woman is not taken by the man, instead she declares Moses to be her bridegroom.

Yael's entire story is focused on the way in which she challenges her gender role by killing Sisera. However, despite this the text still emphasizes that she is a woman introducing her twice as Chever's wife. Before she behaves in a masculine way she is a wife. In the story Yael appears to behave in feminine ways which could see her classified as a harlot (inviting a man into her tent) and a mother (covering Sisera and feeding him milk). These implications are then turned on their head when Yael takes the tent peg and penetrates Sisera's temple with it. The penetration which was expected occurs, but it is not of a sexual nature, instead the woman penetrates the man, killing him. In a similar way rather than serving Sisera as a nurturing, protective mother Yael betrays his trust and kills him. In killing Sisera she can be compared to Pinchas, who killed Zimri and the Moabite woman, or Ehud when he killed Eglon. She also acts like the warrior of Psalms 18 and 68. In this exchange, which results in Sisera's death, he is not only killed, but he is also emasculated, for while Yael assumes a male role, he appears to lose all of his masculine characteristics. Yael truly is 'The Female Warrior and Emasculator'.

The category of non-Israelite women challenging gender roles:

As this study has demonstrated, Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael form a group as non-Israelite women who challenge gender roles. All three of them are portrayed as women, but this is then elaborated to demonstrate that they are women who behave in ways which should be compared with other men. In this way these three women establish a category within the characters of the TaNaCh as non-Israelite women challenging gender roles.

When examining these stories in relation to each other, it is possible to see that in addition to important characteristics shared by these women, the structure of their stories follow a similar pattern, as illustrated in Table 2 (overleaf).

Table 2:

Hagar	Tzipporah	Yael
The introduction of each woman, emphasizing their non-Israelite and female identity:		
Gen. 16:1-3 Hagar is first "an Egyptian maidservant", she is then offered to bear children, and ultimately she is taken "to be his wife"	Ex. 2:16 "Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters" Ex. 2:21-22 Tzipporah is given to Moses as a wife, "and she bore a son"	Jud. 4:17-18 Yael is first introduced as "Yael, the wife of Chever the Kenite", and then she welcomes him to "turn in" and covers him like a mother would a child
A male character, asserting normative gender roles, creates the context for the challenge to gender roles:		
Gen. 16:4 "And he came upon Hagar, and she conceived"	Ex. 4:20 "And Moses took his wife, and his sons"	Jud. 4:9 After Barak's request Sisera is to be delivered "into the hand of a woman" Jud. 4:17 "But Sisera escaped on foot to the tent of Yael"
The initial gender challenge:		
Gen. 16:7-14 Hagar encounters angels of Adonai, who promise "I will greatly multiply your offspring", she is blessed and "the well was called Be'er Lechai Roi"	Ex. 4:24-26 "So Tzipporah took a flint, and cut off her son's foreskin" and twice she declares Moses "a bridegroom of blood"	Jud. 4:18-21 Yael kills Sisera when she "thrust the tent peg into his temple", assuming the male role in the story while Sisera is emasculated Jud. 5:6 The period is called "the days of Yael" with no husband mentioned
A Reassertion of the non-Israelite and female identity:		
Gen. 16:15-16 "And Hagar bore a son to Abram" Gen 21:9 "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian"	Ex. 18:2-3 The next encounter is when Yitro "took Tzipporah, the wife of Moses" returning her to him. Num. 12:1-2 She is called Moses' "Cushite wife"	Jud. 5:24 When Deborah blesses Yael, she is again "the wife of Chever the Kenite" and she is compared to "the women of the tents"
The second gender challenge		
Gen. 21:15-21 "And an angel of God called to Hagar" promising that Ishmael will be "a great nation" She finally takes for him a wife	<i>There is no overt second gender challenge</i>	Jud. 5:25-27 In Deborah's retelling Yael "smote Sisera" and finds him in a position lying "between her legs", as her sexual conquest

When viewing these stories parallel to each other, an undeniably shared structure is revealed. Each woman is introduced in a way that emphasizes both her female role and her

non-Israelite identity. This is followed by a man's actions which asserts the normative gender roles, but then sets the context for the gender challenge to take place. This leads to the first gender challenge. However, the narrative of the woman cannot end at this point, and so there is a reassertion of each woman's female role and non-Israelite identity. At this point Tzipporah's story ends, but with Hagar and Yael there is then a second gender challenge, which can be paralleled to the first one.²¹⁰ The stories of Hagar and Yael therefore end with them challenging gender roles, while Tzipporah's story ends with a reassertion of her female and non-Israelite identity.

While Tzipporah overtly lacks the second gender challenge, it should be noted that this second challenge can be identified. Tzipporah performs two actions which step outside of her accepted gender role. She first circumcises her son, and then she betroths her husband to herself. In her story there are two clear gender challenges. It is also striking that she declares twice that Moses is "a bridegroom of blood" (4:25 and 26). Tzipporah therefore possess a second gender challenge, but rather than break up the two gender challenges with a reassertion of non-Israelite and female identity, her story ends with it.

This structure ensures that throughout the stories of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael the reader is constantly reminded of the fact that they are both women and non-Israelite. It is impossible to ignore these two important elements of their identity, as they are referenced and reasserted repeatedly throughout the text. It is as though the text demands no room for doubt regarding the identity of these three figures. They are women who challenge gender roles, but they are not just any women they are specifically non-Israelite women. They are Egyptian, Midianite and Kenite, a fact which is stated and restated lest it be lost or forgotten.

The midrashic challenge to these women:

While the TaNaCh text can be read clearly to demonstrate that Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael challenge the generally accepted gender roles, in Midrash Rabbah these women are altered so that they no longer present a challenge to biblical gender roles.²¹¹ In the course of Midrash Rabbah these women are portrayed in a variety of ways, but at no point are they

²¹⁰ In the case of Yael it is a retelling, in the case of Hagar there are a number of similarities between both incidents.

²¹¹ Midrash Rabbah was selected as an example of rabbinic literature, as will be noted later this study could be broadened to other materials.

presented in a way which challenges gender roles. Instead Hagar's challenge is denied (see Genesis Rabbah 45:10), Tzipporah challenge is ignored (see Deuteronomy Rabbah 6:1), and Yael's challenge is subverted (see Leviticus Rabbah 23:10). The midrashim lose the gender challenge which these women present in the TaNaCh.

Midrash Rabbah provides an example of the way in which rabbinic literature appears to diminish the gender challenge which these women present.²¹² One can imagine that the Rabbis were uneasy with Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael for two primary reasons. They were all non-Israelites and as such were from outside the Jewish family, and yet they behaved in significant ways; interacting with God, saving Moses and saving the Israelite community. However, it is likely that the challenge which they presented to gender roles was more problematic for the Rabbis. In the rabbinic world view of gender things are generally very black and white. There are male areas and there are female areas; men function in the male domain, performing male roles and the equivalent is true of women for the female domain and roles. Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael challenge this neat vision of society which sees men and women as distinct groups, with distinct roles. These women therefore present a very dangerous example, which if followed, could see the traditional gender structures challenged. It is for this reason that Midrash Rabbah gives no indication of any gender challenge and instead rejects and ignores it. With the challenge removed Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael are simply three non-Israelite women.

What is the significance of these three women?

The stories of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael can be read on several levels. Each one of these women is important for their actions within the TaNaCh. Hagar is one of the Biblical figures who is able to converse with God. Tzipporah saves Moses' life when it is threatened, without her who would have redeemed the Israelites from Egypt? And Yael's murder of Sisera brings peace to the Israelites for forty years. These actions, important in their own right, become even more so because they are carried out by women. Women, who are most often peripheral characters in the TaNaCh become central to our narrative and its perpetuation. On a secondary level, these actions are even more important because they

²¹² I use the term "appears" because as Midrash Rabbah is taken as a representative sample, and it would require the study of many more midrashim to make the claim more strongly.

demonstrate the positive roles which non-Israelites are able to assume within the TaNaCh. Finally, these actions are important because they demonstrate the ability of women to act in ways which elsewhere are reserved exclusively for men. When these various elements are taken together, and considered as a group there is a tremendous power in the stories of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael.

These three women demonstrate an egalitarianism which can often feel absent in the TaNaCh, and in the Jewish community which has developed from it. Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael can be viewed as trailblazers and revolutionaries who demonstrate that no role should be restricted to a person because of gender or nationality. Hagar is an Egyptian woman who speaks to God, Tzipporah is a Midianite woman who performs a male-only Jewish ritual and betroths her husband to herself, and Yael is a Kenite woman who kills and emasculates a mighty Philistine warrior. If these non-Israelite women were able to challenge the gender roles to which they were confined, surely there should be no role which is forbidden to Jewish women within Judaism.

In this context, it is significant to consider what the three roles assumed by Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael represent. These are not peripheral male roles; they are among the most central male roles and the ones which are often most difficult for women to enter. Yael, as the warrior who kills Sisera, breaks down the boundary of women participating in warfare and, in the modern context, serving in armies.²¹³ Hagar, as a woman who converses with God, and as a Patriarch for her people, demonstrates that women should be permitted to rise to the highest levels of leadership within religious society. She is an example that woman can communicate with God as authentically as men can. Tzipporah participates in a male only ritual when she circumcises her son, and therefore demonstrates that there are no rituals which women are unable to perform. Circumcision is arguably the most male dominated ritual within Judaism, involving only men, and yet Tzipporah is able to perform it, and serves as a role model.

In Talmudic argument there is a frequently used phrase: על אחת כמה וכמה, which basically means 'how much the more so'. It is used in arguments to claim that if X is possible, 'how much the more so' should Y be possible. This is particularly relevant in the

²¹³ While Deborah accompanies Barak to the battle there is no account of her participation in the fighting; Yael participates in the fighting by killing Sisera.

context of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael. It is possible to read these stories for a Jewish audience with this concept in mind: If Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael are able to challenge gender roles in these three areas, how much the more so should Israelite (Jewish) women be able to challenge gender roles.

It is possible that the stories of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael were preserved in the TaNaCh to offer an example for society to grasp hold of many generations after these books were written. These gender challenges could not be placed in the Israelite female world as this would have been too overt, and would have been too challenging for that society. Instead, the TaNaCh preserved the challenge to a male dominated society for more peripheral characters, so that in future generations, these women could be rediscovered for the shining examples which they provide. And for today's Jewish community inheriting the TaNaCh, if non-Israelite women were able to challenge gender roles *על אחת כמה וכמה* for us today.

The threat of this challenge to the established order of society may also serve as the motivation for why Midrash Rabbah, as an example of rabbinic literature, sought to remove the gender challenge from these women. These women were effectively castrated by the midrashic authors, losing their gender challenge and with it the part of them which acted in a male way.

Our challenge is to return to the text of the TaNaCh, rebelling against the characterization of these women in rabbinic literature, to recognize these women for who they were: Hagar as the Patriarch for her people, Tzipporah as the first female mohel and betrother, and Yael as the female warrior and emasculator. When we can clearly see the way in which these three non-Israelite women broke the glass ceilings of their day to assume male roles, we can follow their example. And in doing so, we can break the glass ceilings of our current society and challenge these restrictions, not only because they are antiquated and wrong, but because the TaNaCh grants us the authority, and even the mandate, to do it.

What next?

This study is a first step in the investigation of non-Israelite women challenging gender roles within the TaNaCh and there are a number of different areas in which this study could develop. I would like to suggest four areas which would provide a logical next step in the context of this study.

I. The place of Rahab:

While Rahab was not included in this study, she is another non-Israelite woman who can be considered to challenge gender roles through her actions. Could Rahab possibly be portrayed as ‘The Head of her Household’? In this role, she would be a woman in a role that is reserved for men elsewhere in the TaNaCh.

II. A Further investigation of Rabbinic texts:

Midrash Rabbah provided an initial foray into the portrayal of Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael in rabbinic literature. It would be interesting to look for other examples within other Midrashic collections, as well as considering the place of these women in the Talmud and parshanut. This would help to develop a fuller picture of how these women were viewed post-Biblically, and how the gender challenge was lost.

III. The Contemporary Material

It was not possible in the context of this study to move into the modern period and the portrayal of these women in contemporary material. However, it would be interesting to consider the way that Hagar, Tzipporah and Yael are treated in contemporary scholarship, as well as looking at their place within art such as poetry and paintings. This would serve as another form of commentary on these women.

IV. Why non-Israelite women?

Having considered these other portrayals it would be interesting to delve deeper into the reasons which may explain why this gender challenge does not come from Israelite women, but appears to be confined to non-Israelite women.

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