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A modern Midrash on the Life of King Saul

Book One:

From the Death of the Concubine to the Victory at Jabesh-Gilead

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Jonathan S. Hanish 2/25/08

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I AM SAUL
אני שאול

A Modern Midrash on the Life of King Saul

Book One:
From the Death of the Concubine to the Victory at Jabesh-Gilead

by
Jonathan Scott Hanish

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Lewis M. Barth

February 29, 2008

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Lisa, and my two daughters, Lila and Sydney.
Thank you for being my partners on this journey.

As Issac Abravanel wrote,
No person can enjoy full happiness except with his spouse and his children.
אין לאדם שמחה כי אם עם אשתו ובניו.

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INTRODUCTION

ARE NOVELS MIDRASH?

The three million owners of Anita Diamant's novel The Red Tent believe they are reading a novel.¹ Could it be that they are actually reading a midrashic interpretation of the biblical story of Jacob's wives and daughter? Could it be claimed that modern midrash is generated in the hands of today's writers, poets, and storytellers and that one of the forms of modern midrash is the novel? Or, is there a line which divides novels, short stories, poems, ballads and plays which focus on biblical stories and characters from midrash? If so, where does that line reside?

Diamant's literary trail is not a solitary one. Many novels have been written over the last fifty years which have created new perspectives on biblical characters and stories. The King David Report shed new light on Judaism's second king. The Gilded Chamber shed new light on Esther. The recently published Honey from Lions shed new light on Samson. These pieces are definitely novels by any definition of the term but are they also midrash? Renée Block stated in her essay "Midrash," "so long as there is a people of God who regard the Bible as the living word of God, there will be midrash; only the name might change."² Has the name of midrash changed to "novel," "short story," "ballad," "poem," and "play?" Has midrash as a vehicle for storytelling entered a renaissance period?

It is difficult to answer these questions without first examining contemporary definitions and boundaries of midrash as generated by the arrival of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish intellectual movement of the late 18th century. Therefore, this essay will examine how the *Haskalah*

1. Ritvo, Molly. "A Look Inside the Tent with Diamant." The Jewish Advocate Online. Nov. 19, 2007.
2. Green, William Scott, editor. Approaches to Ancient Judaism, page 33.

affected the definition of midrash, what I perceive to be the parameters of modern midrash, the breadth of ancient and modern interpretations of the story of Saul as found in I Samuel, and the reasons why I selected to write the first hundred plus pages of a Saul narrative as the main focus of my rabbinic thesis. While it might seem simple to claim that today's author's are writing midrash, defining the boundaries of modern midrash is anything but simple.

HASKALAH'S TRANSFORMATION OF MIDRASH

If one were to ask a teacher of an introductory midrash class to define midrash they would respond in classical terms. The teacher would explain that midrash does not refer to a specific text. It refers to a number of texts and, more than fulfilling a role as a locator of texts, it defines a genre of interpretation within rabbinic writings. And while we can't use the words Bible, Mishnah or Talmud as verbs, we can use the root form of the word midrash, דרש. דרש means to seek, to search, to examine and to investigate. Similarly, midrash means a result of an inquiry and an account. Midrash is what one ends up with after the action of דרש is completed. Midrash is a process; there is no one midrash, only collections of midrashim.³

In Recreating the Canon, Nehama Aschkenasy writes:

“The midrashic hermeneutic elasticity illuminated for future generations possible modes of creative readings of text, implying, as well, that our dialogue with the sacred text should be ongoing and dynamic; and that biblical commentary may be used as a trigger for a new story, allowing for innovative craftsmanship.... Moving away from the pedagogic task of sheer illumination of the Holy Writ, the ancient rabbis told new stories with contemporary or universal applications.”⁴

According to Aschkenasy, the rabbis told stories to help Jews understand the world around them.

3. For a full discussion of classical Midrash see either Encyclopedia Judaica, CD Rom version, Key word: Midrash, or Stemberger, G. and H. L. Strack, Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash.

4. Aschkenasy, Nehama. Introduction: Recreating the Canon. Page 3.

The elasticity of the biblical text allowed it to be reinterpreted anew by each generation of rabbis and Jewish thinkers. Biblical interpretations changed from generation to generation depending on the emotional, spiritual and political needs of the Jewish people.

Prior to the *Hasklah*,⁵ aggadic midrash was written by the leading rabbis of the period and was therefore accepted as authoritative. Authority in regards to authorship changes with the advent of Enlightenment.⁶ After the French revolution, the leadership of the Jewish people was no longer solely in the hands of the rabbis. Intellectuals who wished to retain their Judaism while also enjoying the advantages of secular society gained a voice within the Jewish community and while some of these intellectuals were rabbis, most were not. Philosophers, Zionist activists, business entrepreneurs and writers became additional authoritative voices once Jews were allowed to move out of the ghettos and *shtetls* which had limited their exposure to other cultures and which had kept them under rabbinic authority.

For Jews, the advent of the *Haskalah* period became the dividing line between the middle ages and the modern world. It can be argued that midrash changed in form since it was no longer limited to the world of the rabbis. In the article "Modern Midrash: The Biblical Canon and Modern Literature," Gershon Shaked states that "...beginning with the Haskalah period, Hebrew literature effected a change in the explication of Biblical culture and constituted a significant midrashic force, giving it new life for its own generation. These midrashim defined the master text and illuminated its contextual ties. What the original midrashim did for the Biblical tradition in the past is paralleled by what the new literature did for the Enlightenment period."⁷ According to Shaked, the *Maskilim* viewed the work and writings of the intellectual Jews as the

5. For further information on the Haskalah, see Robert M. Seltzer, *Jewish People, Jewish Thought*, pages 567-570.

6. Shaked, Gershon. *Modern Midrash: the Biblical Canon and Modern Literature*. Page 43.

7. *Ibid*. Page 45.

true voice of Judaism beginning with the start of Enlightenment in Europe.

Shaked believes that "The mid-nineteenth century brought a return of Bible study to its former glory. It became the Book of Books for the *Haskalah* movement, and later served as the cultural foundation of the Zionist movement, providing the ultimate proof of the historic independence of the Jewish people and the compelling rationale for its return to the land of Israel."⁸ During the 19th Century, Jews were looking to recreate themselves. They did not want to be viewed as weak or cliquish. They were searching for stories which showed themselves in a different light. This different light was surprisingly found in an ancient text. No longer were Jews focused solely on post-biblical texts such as the Talmud. As a matter of fact, as Jews stopped living in closed communities, the study of Talmud decreased dramatically.

Non-rabbis were interested in biblical narratives and character because, as Aschkenasy writes, "The Bible provided Hebrew writers with larger-than-life, mythic models of glory and might, which they juxtaposed with the image of victim associated with the diaspora Jew."⁹ This led to a new perspective on biblical characters and on the land of Israel. "From the beginnings of the *Haskalah* period of literature, the use of biblical material gave a quasi-legitimization to the idea of introducing romantic and pro-nationalistic views into literary texts."¹⁰ The stories of might and power and a people who controlled their own fate and their own land became the dominant factor in the creation of stories based on biblical stories and characters.

For example, the early Zionists wanted to recreate the image of the Jews. M. Y.

Berditchevsky (1865-1921) wrote:

"We must oppose the generation of Ezra and Nehemiah and their followers, who returned to the land with tears and fasting, to the great generation of so-called 'outlaws' who fell upon their

8. Shaked, Gershon. Modern Midrash: the Biblical Canon and Modern Literature. Page 43.

9. Aschkenasy. Page 6.

10. Shaked. Page 44.

swords... and let us see who were the giants, and who the dwarfs. Surely the 'outlaws' are worthier than the reciters of the Eighteen Blessings... the sword is mightier than the book; those who fell on their swords are more praiseworthy than those who escaped the city walls, hidden in coffins... Samson who said 'let my soul die with the Philistines' is preferable to a blinded Samson who escapes."¹¹

His characterization of the 'outlaws' is the model for the New Jew as described within Zionist texts. Jew who were warriors and builders for a future homeland in Palestine were superior to Jews who prayed and studied and waited for the messiah. By using the Canon to tell stories which were metaphors for their hopes and dreams, Zionists gave themselves "a canonical legitimacy."¹²

In David C. Jacobson's book Modern Midrash: the Retelling of Jewish Narratives By Twentieth-Century Hebrew Writers, he writes "Since the turn of the twentieth century, hebrew writers have persisted in publishing retold versions of traditional Jewish narratives."¹³ Why are Hebrew writers so interested in traditional Jewish narratives? One answer is that the *Maskilim* focused their studies on the Bible, not on the Talmud or on later rabbinic writings such as codes or responsas. Another is that modern secular Israeli schools use the Bible as a history text. Like the *Maskilim*, they do not bother teaching their students Talmud. While they might not realize it, they are creating archetypes for their students. Images of Abraham warring with hostile nations and David doing battle with Goliath are interpreted through a specific lens. The lens changes depending on the political and social situation within the Jewish community. Even the "Israeli" lens has changed over the course of time. During the establishment of the state, the lens focused upon military might. Today, the lens is more varied -- one lens might focus upon military power

11. Berditchevsky, M.Y. Perurim. Tel Aviv: 1952. Page 47.

12. Shaked. Page 46.

13. Jacobson, David. Modern Midrash: The Retelling of Traditional jewish narratives by Twentieth-Century Hebrew Writers. Page 1.

while another might critique the outcome of military might as David Grossman does in his novel Lion's Honey, based on the biblical story of Samson. Jacobson states "One assumption is that myths of the past are useful as a means to analyze present crises and to explore alternative approaches that might help to resolve these crises...."¹⁴ Biblical stories allow us to explore points of view and current events which we cannot explore via stories set in our times.

In summary, biblical stories and characters became the narrative fodder of the Jewish intellectual starting in the late 18th century. The bible was no longer solely interpreted by the leading rabbis of their eras. To Jews who were attempting to enter into mainstream society, these stories became part of their cultural make-up and allowed them the ability to view themselves in a new light. As Jacobson writes, "The retelling of traditional Jewish narratives by modern hebrew writers involves the creation of counter-histories that reinterpret the myths of the past in an effort to interpret the crises of Jewish modernity and often to justify the kind of radical changes in Jewish culture which they believe to be necessary in the modern period."¹⁵ The radical changes to which Jacobson refers only affect those who wish to enter into the modern period and become part of the general society which surrounds them. For Jews who live outside the walls of a closed community, some but not all novels, short stories, poems, plays and ballads based on biblical stories and characters, can be considered midrash.

THE PARAMETERS OF MODERN MIDRASH

The question arises, what parameters define modern day midrash? I recently wrote a short story entitled, Noah Hated Everything but He Hated Religious School Most of All. The story related to Jewish education and had additional Jewish themes running throughout, and the main

14. Ibid. page 5.

15. Ibid. page 6.

character was named after a biblical character. The story reflected my own experience as a individual who now teaches religious school but who hated attending religious school as a child. Even with these themes and the relationship of the name to the Bible, I never considered this piece to be midrash. While it could be argued that I was telling a modern day tale that was based upon the Biblical Noah and his educational experience building the ark, it still would not be midrash. I know that the relationship between my story and the bible was not strong enough to be considered midrash. From this anecdotal evidence, my academic study into modern day midrash, and the writing of I Am Saul, I came to the conclusion that there are criteria that must be fulfilled before a narrative can be considered midrash and that some modern narratives fit this form and some do not.

What constitutes modern day Midrash? Jacobson writes:

“Modern midrash, which consists of retold versions of traditional Jewish narratives... maintains much of the plot and characterization in the traditional narratives on which it is based, but it takes great liberty in adding and subtracting aspects of the narratives’ content and imaginatively retells the narratives in a more contemporary style. It also takes the form of short stories, novels, plays, ballads, or lyric poems, which, from an aesthetic point of view, have more in common with works of related genres by modern western writers than with the tradition narratives on which they are based.”¹⁶

He described the approach of modern writers when working with traditional Jewish narratives as the basis for their works. He allowed their content to become his definition. While it is an interesting approach, I prefer to reverse the criteria for defining modern midrash. I feel that the work should not define the genre but that the genre should define the work. I prefer to define modern midrash and then to see which narrative writers fulfill the definition. I believe that narrative formats can be considered midrash but not all narratives which contain biblical themes,

16. Ibid. Page 7.

stories or characters, are necessarily midrash.

Novels which merely rephrase a biblical story, add no new character nuances, or teach no lesson are neither good novels nor modern midrash. Modern midrash must further the development of a biblical story, a character or even a word or a letter found in the Bible, and this must be done with intent. I have derived my own criteria for narratives -- novels, short stories, poems, ballads or plays -- which can be considered modern midrash.

To create these criteria I returned to the core definition of midrash -- midrash is an enquiry into the biblical text from a Jewish perspective. The rabbis created midrash to fill in "holes" -- holes in terms of Jewish practice and holes in terms of understanding themselves and the world around them. The world which surrounded them was both the world of their period and the world of the TaNaKH.¹⁷ They created midrash to give structure and meaning to their lives and the lives of their followers. They created midrash so that the world around them was reflected in the biblical stories which they shared with their students, congregants and followers. They created midrash so that Judaism would survive. They created midrash so that each generation could look at the texts anew.

My criteria for modern midrash consists of the following:

- I. The writer must have a technical understanding of the story and/or the character upon which the writer's work is based.

The writer's technical understanding of plot, character and story structure must be reflected within the piece. In other words, the writer must have a technical understanding of the story structure and character upon which he is basing his work. Just as an abstract painter studies classical painting before he moves to his preferred art form, a modern day writer of midrash

17. TaNaKH - תנ"ך - is a Hebrew acronym for Torah - תורה, Neviim - נביאים, and Ketuvim - כתובים.

must be familiar with the original source material before preceding on his journey.

II. The writer must have knowledge of what has been written about the story in the past.

The past is the basis for the work of the present. The writer can build off of past works -- midrashim, poems, etc. -- but the past work cannot be the entirety of the narrative.

III. The writer must have a secret which he or she wishes to reveal about the character, the story or Judaism.

The term "secret" refers to story, character or theme revelations as shared by the writer with his audience. Midrash is based on secrets. It can be argued that these secrets are the words of God passed down from generation to generation. It can be argued that these secrets are divinely inspired and placed into the hearts of men to be revealed to others. It can also be argued that these secrets are discovered by men who are searching for their place, the place of their people and the place of God within the world. Secrets are the core ingredient to creating new interpretations.

IV. The writer must intertwine the past with the present.

The writer has the right to add characters and story lines. The writer has the right to change whatever fits the needs of the secret and the lesson which he is trying to share with the reader as long as the new story is still based on a character or a selection taken from the Bible. The goal is to intertwine the past with the present. As Gerson Shaked writes, "Modern Hebrew Literature, by giving a secular (and sometimes subversive) interpretation of the Bible, becomes a modern midrash that tries to infuse the blood of the past into the veins of the present and the blood of the present into the bloodstream of the past."¹⁸

V. The writer must love the character or the story as much as God does and when God does not

18. Shaked. Page 61.

love the character to do so anyway.

It only by learning to love the characters within a story is it possible to see them as human beings struggling through the plights of their lives. God can reject Saul. The writer cannot. The modern day author must learn to love him even if he must destroy him by the end of his story or paint him as King David's antagonist.

VI. The writer must be Jewish.

Midrash is a Jewish form of interpretation. If there is no Jewish perspective, then it is not midrash. Exegesis is for all religions. Midrash is for the Jewish people. I believe that today's writers are the descendants of yesterday's rabbis.

"Harold Bloom writes, 'to live, the poet must misinterpret the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the rewriting of the father,' we know that they are analyzing a process of literary creation which is analogous to that of the modern writer retelling the narratives of his cultural tradition."¹⁹ While I find Bloom's statement powerful, I do not think that the act of misprision is the act of midrashic creation. Modern midrash is created when one interprets one's own life through the stories and characters of the Bible. It is interpretation, not misinterpretation which creates midrash. It does not matter whether the words agree with those of one's fathers and mothers or not. The writer of modern midrash is not retelling the narratives of his cultural tradition, he is searching for a way to tell the stories of his life and times and to merge them with the history of his ancestors, thereby intertwining the past and the present so that his story is the story of his ancestors and the story of his ancestors is his story. They are one in the same because the text only gives us an outline whose details cry out to be explained. We are left to fill in the holes and the holes can only be filled in by our own experiences and knowledge. The only

¹⁹Jacobson. Page 6.

experience which the writer truly owns are his own.

A SHORT EXAMINATION OF SAUL IN MIDRASH AND LITERATURE

Rabbis wrote midrash to fill in the character and story holes of Saul's story and to develop spiritual and religious themes. According to the biblical text, Saul is a flawed character whom God punishes due to those flaws. David, on the hand, is just as flawed as Saul but God forgives him time and time again. The rabbis who authored collections of midrashim, the Talmud and the Zohar, created midrash for each of these kings. They generated story elements which defined why one was destined for a brutal death and the other for greatness. In Saul in Story and Tradition, Carl S. Ehrlich writes:

"Saul is an ambiguous and contradictory figure. A head taller than any other Israelite (I Sam 9:2), he is seemingly cut from the cloth of kingship. And yet he fails, ultimately to be abandoned and betrayed by the God who had chosen him as king, by the people who had acclaimed him as king, by his children Michal and Jonathan who rejected their family's claim on kingship, by his servant David who supplanted him as king, and by his own cowardice and descent into madness and paranoia. The multi-faceted nature of Saul and his variegated depiction in the biblical texts have led to a wide variety of interpretations of Saul in post-biblical tradition up to and including the present day."²⁰

Saul is rejected by God and David is accepted. The rabbis needed to explain why and they used midrash to fulfill this mission.

Until the modern period, Saul's story remained the same. He was seen as imperfect and unfit for kingship.²¹ Rabbinic texts reflect this position. Saul was viewed as a buffoon when compared to David. Saul is the misguided ruler who turns from God while David is the sinning king who turns to God. Saul is condemned and becomes the example of power driving a man

20. Ehrlich, Carl S., ed. Saul in Story and Tradition. Page 3.

21. A number of passages will be examined in this section to demonstrate this point.

insane while David becomes an icon of repentance for future generations.

Saul is given little honor by the rabbis. His character is repeatedly denigrated. For example, Leviticus Rabah 26:7 comments on the biblical verse from I Samuel "Seek me a woman that divineth by a ghost that I may go to her, and inquire of her" by stating:

Resh Lakish said: He was like a king who entered a province and decreed that all cocks were there should be slaughtered. He wished to depart at night and asked: 'Is there a cock in the place that will crow?' They answered him: 'Was it not you who issued the decree and ordered that every cock that there is in this place should be slaughtered?' It was the same with Saul. He removed the ghosts and familiar spirits from the land and then he says, 'Seek me a woman that divineth by a ghost.'²²

This selection ridicules the decision making process which Saul uses to rule his kingdom. He is likened to a fool. Who but a fool would outlaw something only to recognize its value at a later date and then demand its presence? Solomon, the son of David, will be known for his wisdom. Stories of this type will not be told about him. They are typical when it comes to Saul.

Later in the same text, the rabbis ask:

To what could Saul be compared at that moment [when he enquired of the necromancer]? R. Levi said: He was like a woman who is in the company of her paramour and swears by the life of her husband! So it was with Saul; he enquires of the ghost [i.e. the necromancer] and the familiar spirit and says, As the Lord liveth, there shall no punishment happen to thee for this thing.²³

At this point in the Saul saga, God has deserted him. Saul has lost any power of prophecy which he had been given and Samuel, a conduit to God, was dead. Saul finds himself alone, without a relationship with God. Yet, he promises upon God's name that the necromancer has no reason to fear punishment. How can he make a promise in God's name when his relationship to God is now broken? R. Levi's comment paints Saul as a philanderer, not the highest of character traits

22. Leviticus Rabah 26:7 as translated by Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon in the Soncino edition of Midrash. Page 331.

23. Ibid. Page 332.

especially when one's 'husband' is God. A portrait is painted which lessens Saul's character and status.

In the Babylonian Talmud Masechet Yoma 22b, the rabbis discuss the kingship of Saul and of David.

R. Huna said: How little does he whom the Lord supports need to grieve or trouble himself! Saul sinned once and it brought [calamity] upon him, David sinned twice and it did not bring evil upon him — What was the one sin of Saul? The affair with Agag. But there was also the matter with Nob, the city of the priests? — [Still] it was because of what happened with Agag that Scripture says: It repenteth Me that I have set up Saul to be king. What were the two sins of David? — The sin against Uriah and that [of counting the people to which] he was enticed. But there was also the matter of Bathsheba?²⁴

Saul sins once, possibly twice depending on your point of view, and is doomed. David sins twice, possibly thrice, yet he prospers. The text goes on to discuss the temporary punishments given to David during his lifetime. Saul's punishment is not temporary. After his suicide, he is beheaded and his royal line ends. It seems that the rabbis view the sins of Saul as being greater than the sins of David or, at least, feel the responsibility to explain Saul's downfall and David's ascent. Yet, a skillful writer could interject commentary which would make David's sins greater than Saul's. While it might make it difficult to explain Saul's death, it would not be an impossible feat.

The Zohar is a series of mystical midrashim on the five books of Moses. The Zonhar, Shemoth, Section 2, Page 49b states:

Now it is written: "And Aaron took Elisheba the daughter of Aminadab to wife" (Ex. VI, 23). This, allegorically interpreted, refers to the Community of Israel, in which Aaron is the "friend of the Bride", to prepare the house, to serve her, to lead her to the King, in order that she may unite herself with him. From that time every priest who ministered in the Sanctuary had the same office

24. Translation taken from Judaic Classics CD ROM based on Soncino.

as Aaron (to unite Israel with God). Achimelech was a great high priest, and all the priests who ministered under him were “friends of the Matrona”, and when they were killed by king Saul the Matrona remained alone without her friend, and there was none to minister to her, to prepare her “house”, and to lead her to the union with the King. Hence, from that day she passed to the “Left Side”, and it has ever been lying in wait to fall upon the world. It killed Saul and his sons, and the kingship passed from his line, and thousands and myriads of Israelites perished. And the guilt of that act hung over Israel until Sennacherib came and stirred it up again at Nob, the city of priests, the city of Achimelech. This is “the day-in Nob”, the fateful day, when the Community of Israel lost her bridal “friend”, when she remained without the “Right Hand” to join with the “Left”, for the priest belongs to the Right Hand. “Gibeon of Saul is fled” (*Ibid.*): Saul is mentioned because he killed the priests and was the cause of the Right Hand being uprooted from the world.

In this passage, Saul is blamed for the lack of unification between the bride, Israel, and the bridegroom, God. Because Saul caused the slaughter of the priests of Nob, there was no priest left to escort the bride to the bridegroom. Hence, the unification which the Kabbalists seek cannot occur. Thus, according to this Zoharic midrash, the “kingship passed from his line and thousands and myriads of Israelites perished.” Saul is blamed for the lack of unity between God and Israel. That is a heavy burden to lay upon the first king of Israel.

Starting with the *Haskalah*, the perspective on Saul changed. His suffering and sacrifice become representative of every man. Saul was from the the smallest clan of the smallest tribe within Israel yet he was selected to be king. The *Maskilim* and the Zionists saw that his selection could be a metaphor for their selection. His victories could be their victories. His mistakes could be their mistakes. His death could be their deaths. His sacrifices could be their sacrifices. His heroism could be their heroism. M. Y. Berditchevsky wrote, “Saul was head and shoulders above the whole nation, a man of distinction, a great man of heroic spirit. When he goes on that night to consult the Seer of En-dor, a pang of sorrow creeps into every heart, and when he falls

on his sword lest the Philistines desecrate his body, our every inner voice is stilled and astonished by his heroic soul.”²⁵ Writers began to view him as a beautiful character. They embellished both his flaws and his strengths. They viewed him as a hero who would battle until the end.

This is not to say that perspectives and opinions on Saul remained consistent from writer to writer.

“One can judge the developing changes in attitudes of hebrew poetry [and other narrative formats] toward the Bible by considering the alternate interpretations in the approach to one of the most significant Biblical characters, one who different poets [and narrative writers] dealt with from a variety of points of view, and was used by them to express differing world views. An example of this is the character of King Saul, the subject of literary and midrashic interpretations from the end of the eighteenth century (in Joseph Haephrahi of Tropolowitz’s 1794 play, *Meluchat Sha ’ul*) to the end of the twentieth century.”²⁶

Poet Karl Wolfskehl (1869 - 1948) published a lyrical drama entitled “Saul” in 1905. In this version “Wolfskehl underscores that the king did not confine his role to that of a conqueror and warlord. Although Saul displays pronounced religious concerns, he experiences nothing but god’s remoteness.”²⁷ In the same year, Lion Feuchtwanger wrote the one-act play “Konig Saul” of which there are no extant versions. During the mid-19th century, Robert Browning wrote a poem entitled “Saul” which focused on I.Samuel 16:14 - 23 and examined the use of music in driving out the spirits.²⁸ In 1739 George Frideric Handel performed an oratorio entitle “Saul.” In this piece:

“Saul is ruined in the Old Testament, because Jehovah removes his protective hand. But this does not suffice for Handel. For him it is

25. Shaked. Page 55. Quote is taken from: M.Y. Berditchevsky, “Hitpashutut v’hishtapchut” in Kol Mamarei, ed. M.Y. Berditchevsky, Tel Aviv, 1952, p. 167.

26. Ibid.

27. Urban, Martin. “Retelling Biblical Mythos through the Hasidic Tale: Buber’s ‘Saul and David’ and the Question of Leadership.” Page 60.

28. Browning, Robert. *Poems*. Page 13.

a purely human fate that dooms this larger-than-life figure. It is the age-old royal tragedy that plays itself out; envy and jealousy against the leading minister of state, against David, derange the spirit of the ruler and destroy him. Saul is ruined, not because Jehovah has abandoned him, but because he has succumbed to the violent passions of his own heart."²⁹

Sarah Nicholson writes in her article, "Catching the Poetic Eye: Saul Reconceived in Modern Literature":

"The complexity of the Saul narrative lends itself to poetic reconceiving, with its themes of conflict and the tragic, and the ambivalent relationships between Saul and David and between Saul and God. The story has dramatic qualities that prompted Jean de la Taille to recast it as drama more than five centuries ago; he was followed later by Pierre du Ryer, Vittorio Alfieri, Voltaire, Alphonse de Lamartine and Andre' Gide. Other poets, such as Lord Byron, Robert Browning and Rainer Maria Rilke, have set aspects of the story to verse and, although even the longest of these poems is too short to handle the whole story, still the poets paint pictures of Saul that reflect some tragic aspects of the story. Thomas Hardy's novel The Mayor of Casterbridge surpasses most of the dramas in its setting of the Saul story, probably for reasons of genre."³⁰

Examples of writers re-interpreting Saul's biblical narrative go on and on. "In a sense, Saul has been spilling out of the bible into extra-biblical texts since the biblical story was first told. And if there is a sense that every reading is also a rewriting, new Sauls are constantly appearing."³¹

Saul Tchernikhovsky (1875-1943) was a poet, a doctor, a translator and a Zionist who exemplified the way modern writers reinterpret Saul. He composed five poems about Saul's life: At Endor (1893), the Ruins of Bethshan (1898), the King (1925), On the Mountains of Gilboa (1929) and A Band of Stalwart Men (1936).

"Tchernikhovsky's turning to a historic, tragic, anti-prophetic and

29. Bartelmus, Rudiger. "Handel and Jennens' Oratorio "Saul: A Late Musical and Dramatic Rehabilitation of the Figure of Saul." Saul in Story and Tradition. Page 284.

30. Nicholson, Sarah. "Catching the Poetic Eye: Saul Reconceived in Modern Literature." Saul in Story and Tradition. Page 309.

31. Ibid.

fighting figure such as Saul, and to a pre-monotheistic Canaanite world, is a clear expression of his search for an appropriate selection that would support his outlook, within the Canon itself. He emphasized a specific value from the Canon, and pushed into the background other values found in different sections. In these texts there is a qualitative change in the rules of what is allowed and what is forbidden in the given society.... conquest and slaughter are viewed as positive values, while 'nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more' is moved, as it were, to the margins of the canon. This poetry is an outstanding example of a reinterpretation of canon that seeks to produce a 'shift in values' in the world-view of the intended readers of the modern midrash."³²

Why was an anti-hero like Saul so interesting to Zionists like Tchernichowsky? "By identifying with these heroic biblical defiers of God who were successful in only a limited way, these writers conveyed their realization that their attempts to play a role in the radical cultural renewal of the Jewish people would most likely be opposed by forces that would deny them the complete fulfillment of their dreams."³³ Tchernichowsky saw himself in Saul. He used the story of Saul to reflect his emotional life as a Jew and as a Zionist. His form is poetry but his content is midrash.

Classical midrash attempted to explain the contradictory ideas of Saul being worthy of his selection as king and Saul having his kingship pass to David due to his sins and David's righteousness. Saul was portrayed as humble and worthy on one hand and as a buffoon and a sinner on the other. Modern midrash focuses on Saul's flaws and his strengths. His flaws make him human. His strengths define his kingship. Ultimately, in the hands of the writer of modern midrash, his flaws become his strengths.

32. Shaked. Page 48.

33. Jacobson. Page 10.

WHY SAUL?

When I reread Saul's story as found in I Samuel, I felt that Saul was not given a voice. I saw him as a rope in a game of tug of war where the competitors were Samuel and David. On one side of the rope was the Judge/Prophet/Priest Samuel who lambasted the people for their demand for an earthly king and denigrated Saul for every action he undertook on his own. On the other side was David the King/Musician/Warrior who could do no wrong in God's eyes no matter how terrible his sin. I viewed Saul as the transition between the rule of Judges as personified by Samuel and the rule of Kings as personified by David. Samuel, as the last judge, fought to retain power by belittling the people and Saul. As Samuel drifted out of the story, David drifted in. The influence of the Davidic line forced the narrative to pay homage to David and to denigrate king Saul. In Saul and the Monarchy: A New Look, Simcha Shalom Brooks wrote, "Saul did not commit any sin that would justify such condemnation. Saul is also unlikely to have perpetrated either of the atrocities against the priests of Nob or against the Gibeonites. Rather, it appears more likely that, first, the Deuteronomist successfully discredited Saul by portraying his strength and virtue as madness, and failure."³⁴ Madness and failure is all the ancient writer needed to transition between the rule of Judges and the rule of Kings. I needed more.

I needed to understand Saul. Saul was selected to be king of Israel. Beyond his madness, the Bible does not explain what Saul was thinking and feeling. I needed to understand his emotions, his relationship to God, his relationship to his tribe, and his relationship to the men of Israel. The text cried out to me and asked me to tell Saul's story. I felt that there were secrets which needed to be revealed.

34. Brooks, Simcha Shalom. Saul and the Monarchy: A New Look. Page 67.

My biggest obstacle in undertaking this project was to find a voice for the novel. From whose point of view should this story be told? I played with many variations. Ultimately, I decided to let Saul speak for himself. The novel is done in first person singular. The author's voice is the voice of Saul. The only perspective the reader is privy to is that of Saul's. I felt that Saul needed to have a voice which wasn't muddled by prophets, judges, kings or the deuteronomistic redactors. Midrash is about filling in the holes. I wanted Saul to fill in the holes to his story. I wanted Saul to explain his actions, and I wanted to help him do it.

I start this novel with the story of the killing of the concubine found in Judges 19 and the ensuing civil war against Benjamin found in Judges 20. These are the acts which defined Saul's relationship to the men of Israel. He was the descendant of a holocaust survivor. His goal was to protect his family. He desired to retain a low profile. Instead he is placed in charge of the Israelite nation. Enemies surrounded him, both external and internal. He needed to find a way to protect all that was important to him. In the end, he did not succeed. What do we learn from his failure? It is a question that is raised from the first page of I Am Saul.

I was also interested in Saul's relationship to God. Saul is a prophet. On more than one occasion he prophecises. Unlike David, he does not have a man killed so that he can marry his wife. Unlike David, he does not take refuge with the Philistines. Unlike David, he does not build a kingdom, rather he protects and defends a people. Yet, he is cut off from God. I sensed a deeper relationship between Saul and his Maker. Within this novel, I explore his relationship to God. I use a kabbalistic lens to define what he wants from God. Saul's goal is to have his soul reborn time and time again until his story is told. Only after his story is told can he become one with God. In many ways, Saul's search for God is a metaphor for my own search. During my life I have experienced events where I felt that God had deserted me. It is only in retrospect

Rhea, Sare, Shkh (Samaritan Midrash), Thamar³⁶

And for Japhet's Wife the following names are suggested by Utley:

Ada, Adalenses, Adataneses, Adataneses, Adatenases, Adnatnesce, Aradshisha, Areisia, Arisiah, Arisivah, Aurca, Aurca, Catafluuia, Fliua, Fliva, Fluia, Fluya, Fura, Kerenhapuch, Miriam, Misthe, Nehrance, Noegla, Noela, Noella, Noella, Olibana, Oliuana, Oliubana, Ollibana, Olliuni, Olybana, Philothea, Serac, Seruch³⁷

While none of the names for Noah's wife and her daughters-in-law are recording in the Biblical text, all of these ideas can help the Biblical reader to have a better idea of who these women, particularly Noah's wife was. As is seen in the midrash, Noah's wife was detailed as a caring, righteous woman who was not only pious but also a mother to her sons, the animals and in fact, the whole earth.

³⁶ See Utley pages 440-442

³⁷ See Utley pages 442-443

Chapter Three: Lot's Wife

Of all the nameless characters in the Bible, perhaps Lot's wife is the best known. Almost anyone who knows even the slightest amount of information about the Bible can recall that Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt. Many people would even be able to recall the reason she turned into a pillar of salt- being that she disobeyed God and turned back to look at the city of Sodom as it was being destroyed. Ironically, that is almost all that the Bible does in fact say about Lot's wife.

In Genesis Chapter 11, the Biblical reader is informed of Abram marrying Sarai and Abram's relation to Lot, which is that Haran was Abram's brother and Haran fathered Lot, thus making Lot Abram's nephew. However, it is not mentioned that Lot marries. It is mentioned only that that Terah, (who was Abram's father), Sarai and Lot all travelled together to the land of Canaan. In chapter 13, it is explained that while Lot and Abram journeyed together, the land could not produce enough for all their animals and subsequently there was strife between Lot and Abram. As a result of this, Lot goes off to the cities of the Plain and sets up his tent in Sodom, while Abram dwelt in Canaan. At that point, the Bible still doesn't mention Lot's wife and only mentions Lot and the men who tend his flocks.

Lot is again mentioned in chapter 14 of Genesis when Abram rescues him from being captured. It is very likely that Lot is still without a wife, for it is mentioned in verse 14:16 that Abram, "*brought back all the goods, and also brought back his brother Lot,*

and his goods, and the women also, and the people.¹” It is possible, though, that this use of the word, “women” could be referring to Lot’s wife and daughters.

The character of Lot’s wife is only truly introduced to the Biblical reader in Chapter 19 when the “visiting men” (the unnamed angels to be discussed in Chapter Five) urge Lot to take his daughters and wife out of Sodom. In verse 19:15, the men say to Lot, “Arise, take thy wife, and thy two daughters that are here; lest thou be swept away in the iniquity of the city.²” Lot, however, didn’t move and the unnamed men had to take hold of Lot’s hand, his wife’s hand and the hands of Lot’s daughters. In verse 19:16, the biblical text continues, and explains that the Lord was being merciful to Lot. “And they brought him forth, and set him without the city.³” In the following verse Lot’s family is commanded, “Escape for thy life, look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the Plain...lest thou be swept away.⁴” Lot then pleads with the unnamed man in order for him and his family to be able to flee to Zoar. Once they reached Zoar, the text says that God caused it to rain “brimstone and fire” upon Sodom and Gomorrah and with that, God overthrew those cities and all the Plain and all the inhabitants of those places.

Lot’s wife is then mentioned for a third and final time in Genesis 19:26. She is still voiceless, as she hasn’t yet spoken, but it is in this verse when the Biblical narrator says the famous statement that “but his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of Salt.⁵” While the text of course never calls this woman anything but

¹ JPS 1917 translation

² JPS 1917 translation

³ JPS 1917 translation

⁴ JPS 1917 translation

⁵ JPS 1917 translation

“Lot’s wife,” in *Perkei De Rabbi Eliezer*, among other sources, she is finally known by a name, that of “Idit.”⁶

It is interesting to note that unlike the story of Abraham’s hospitality where he asks his wife to partake in feeding the guests, the Biblical text about Lot says in chapter 19:3 that Lot himself made them a feast and baked unleavened bread for them. In fact some midrashim even state that Lot’s wife didn’t want to offer hospitality for the guests. For it is recorded that she said to Lot that if the inhabitants were to find out of their offering a place to stay for the wayfarers, the townspeople would kill them all. To protect his wife, tradition holds that Lot then split their home into two separate dwelling parts, one for him and his guests and another for his wife. Interestingly, this story doesn’t mention anything about where his daughters were to spend the night, and mentions only that this division was set up ideally to protect his wife should the townspeople have caught them being kind to those in need.⁷ However, there are midrashic sources that actually blame Lot’s wife for alerting the townspeople about the fact that Lot was harboring the unnamed men. One such story reports that in order to make the food for the visitors, Lot’s wife needed to go to a neighbor to borrow salt. When the neighbor asked why she didn’t acquire the salt during the daytime, Lot’s wife replied that during the day they had enough salt, but now that some guests came to them they needed more salt. It was through this disclosure to the neighbor that all of the townspeople of Sodom quickly found out that Lot and his wife had guests. Furthermore, the traditional midrashim explain that since the sin of Lot’s wife dealt with salt, she was destined to

⁶ *Perkei de Rabbi Eliezer* 25 and related sources, see Ginzberg page 215

⁷ *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* 50.6 and *Midrash Hagadol Bereshit* I, 289 and related sources in Ginzberg page 212

become a pillar of salt.⁸ According to Jewish legend, that pillar still stands today, and in fact, all day long cattle lick the salt pillar until it seems as if it has disappeared, but then it returns again in the morning, just as large as it had been the day before.⁹

One of the greatest questions surrounding this character is, why did Lot's wife look back? Maybe just as someone looks down from a great height when they are told not to, Lot's wife couldn't resist temptation and felt she needed to look at what was off limits to her. Like the midrash that paints a negative picture of her as being inhospitable and responsible for the townsfolk knowing they had visitors, maybe the character of Lot's wife wasn't a good person. Maybe she defied God simply because she couldn't resist the urge to look. This may be the theme that Christians call upon when in Luke 17:32, where the Christian Scriptures warns, "Don't be like Lot's wife."¹⁰ Many Christian explanations say this is a warning to follow God's word, not to look back to sinning or evil ways. All cultures, could heed this warning that once someone has the chance to escape evildoing, it is imperative that they keep moving forward, they don't look back in longing to return to sin and/or their disastrous lifestyle, for if they do, they may suffer the same fate as Lot's wife.

There are others, however, that paint the character of Lot's wife in a much more appealing light. According to traditional midrashim, the angels told Lot and his family to run for their lives and not look back or they would see the "Shekinah"- the presence of God who was destroying the cities. But Lot's wife could not resist and it was her love for her married daughters which made her look back in the hopes that they were

⁸ Bereshit Rabbah 51.5 and 50.4, see Ginzberg page 212

⁹ Perkei de Rabbi Eliezer 25 and related sources, see Ginzberg page 213

¹⁰ Greenhough Rev J.G. "Saints and Sinners of Hebrew Story." London: Stockwell. "Lot's Wife"

following her. However, since Lot's wife had disobeyed the command, no matter the reason, she was turned into a pillar of salt.¹¹

In a modern midrash on Lot's wife, Author Cecil Herman, takes a more detailed approach to both the biblical text and the traditional midrash. In his midrash¹², he writes that Lot's wife turns back, even in disobeying, because of her compassion for all those who were destroyed. Yes, as the traditional midrash in Bereshit Rabbah says, she turned back out of compassion for her daughters that didn't follow. However, Herman suggests that Lot's wife was entirely full of compassion for all those who went up in the fires of sin and even the flood in Noah's time. He continues in great detail, *"Possibly she wept for all the dying people of the flaming cities, down on the arid plain. Terrified, screaming, running here and there with their skins all afire- with not even one righteous man among them, to tell them why it was happening.* Herman attempts to explain that Lot's wife turned into salt because she wept too much- leaving only the salt of her tears.

"And say, too that she wept too much. For all the burnt people, and the drowned ones. That there was far too much compassion. Too many tears...An endless flood of a million billion salty tears. Flowing in torrents from her eyes, and then from every pore, filling every particle of her shaking body. Tears soaking into the desert floor beneath her feet. Until, at the end to it all, every bit of her was dissolved. And then, say, she began to evaporate. In the bright midday sun, in the incandescent heat of the burning cities. All the multitude of her droplets rising up into the heavens, from whence they had come. Until finally all of the waters were gone, and only the salt of her tears remained. A high pile of salt. As high as a person. Salt forming out of her a singular statue of sorrow. A monument...Carved in the shape of a woman."

This is a truly beautiful modern take on the biblical account which attempts to see Lot's wife not as someone who simply disobeyed God's command, but rather a woman with a deep sense of empathy. She had so much compassion that even though she had to be

¹¹ Perkei de Rabbi Eliezer 25 and related sources, see Ginzberg page 213

¹² Helman, Cecil "Pillar of Salt" *Tikkun*; Mar/Apr 2001; 16, 2; ProQuest Religion, page 80

punished for her defiance, she was still worthy of having a forever monument which speaks to the importance of caring about everyone- even sinners.

In further attempting to understand why Lot's wife turned back, Rebecca Goldstein explains that it was out of such a deep sense of grief. In her article, says, "*In such a moment of grief one knows only one desire: to follow after one's child, to experience what she's experienced, to be one with her in every aspect of suffering. Only to be one with her.*"¹³" Goldstein continues to explain that it is because of this desire that she turned into a pillar of salt, concluding, "*She was turned into salt either because God couldn't forgive her this desire ...or because he could.*"¹⁴

Whatever the real reason was that Idit, the wife of Lot turned back may have been may never truly be known. However it is an extremely important literary device for her not to survive. For it is through the death of Lot's wife that his daughters believe they are the only women left on the earth and fear they must take the responsibility to repopulate the earth. This leads the problems of Lot and his daughters which will be discussed in the next chapter. While some may chose to see Idit as a woman who disobeyed God and looked back towards a city full of sin, it is much easier to see this woman as someone with a heavy heart full of sadness for personal losses. The destruction of Sodom did not merely mean the annihilation of a place full of sin, but for Idit it meant an eternity without her married daughters. Sadly it was one last look, most likely for the purpose of

¹³ Goldstein, Rebecca, "Looking Back at Lot's Wife" *Commentary*; Sep 1992; 94, 3; ProQuest Religion pg. 37

¹⁴ Goldstein, Rebecca, "Looking Back at Lot's Wife" *Commentary*; Sep 1992; 94, 3; ProQuest Religion pg. 37

seeing if her married daughters could change their ways and follow her, which cost Idit her life.

Chapter Five: The Unnamed Visitors

Perhaps the best known unnamed male characters of the Bible are the men that go to visit Abraham after his circumcision. The text in the book of Genesis Chapter 18 says that God appeared to Abraham, and then there were three men who came to visit Abraham in his tent. Many people interpret these men not as not mere mortal men, but rather angels. Abraham Ibn Ezra argues that *“other commentators maintain that Abraham’s three guests were prophets, if one should argue, why would God send a message via a prophet to Abraham who himself is a prophet, since it is only when one prophet is greater than the other, as in the case of Moses who was sent with a prophesy to Aaron that god transmits his intentions to a prophet through another prophet.”*¹ Furthermore, the midrashim also speak to this idea of the guests as angels. It is also important to note that nowhere in the Biblical text are these men given names. In Genesis 18:3-6, Abraham pleads with the men to stay and let him show them how hospitable he is. He has water fetched, their feet washed and offers them bread as well. These unnamed “men” stay and one even says that he will return and that Sarah will have a son. In verse 18:16 of Genesis the men leave Abraham and look towards Sodom.

In one midrash, God suggests to the angels that they go and visit Abraham, who is in pain after his circumcision. The story continues that it was extremely hot that day since

¹ Strickman, H. Norman and Arthur M. Silver. (translators and annotators) “Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Pentateuch.” Volume Genesis (Bereshit), New York: Menorah Publishing Company, 1988, Page 190-192,

God had “bored a hole in hell, so that its heat might reach as far as the earth” and thus no one would disturb Abraham in his pain.² However, this lack of visitors actually bothered Abraham even more. From this, comes the Jewish imperative of “Bikkur Holim”, the mitzvah of visiting the sick and further. In fact this obligation to visit the sick is so important, that it said that by visiting someone who is ill, 1/60th of his/her pain is actually taken away. Abraham asked his servant Eliezer (who himself is nameless in the Biblical text throughout most of the book of Genesis) to find travelers, but Eliezer could not find anyone. Just as Abraham was about to go out for himself, the midrash continued that God and the angels appeared.³ This is an attempt to explain how in the text Abraham says he sees God, yet speaks to the angels. Abraham Ibn Ezra is quick to make the differentiation between the three men and God, saying “God first appeared to Abraham in a vision after which Abraham lifted his eyes and saw three angels.”⁴

Legend continues that Abraham turned to God and asked God to wait while he responded to the needs of his guests, since the duty of hospitality is deemed so very important.⁵ However, these were not just men, but rather the midrash explains that the three men Abraham saw were actually the angels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. These names, according to Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish came up with the Jewish people from Babylon.⁶ The angels appeared as humans so they could fulfill Abraham’s wish to have visitors, and thus offer hospitality. The angels, though, were said to be disguised.

According to one account, “*Rabbi Levi said: One appeared to him in the guise of a*

² Baba Mezi’a 86b and other sources cited in Ginsburg page 204 with footnote 132

³ Baba Mezi’a 86b and related sources as cited in Ginzberg, page 204

⁴ Strickman and Silver Page 190

⁵ Shabbat 127a and related sources, see Ginzberg page 204

⁶ Midrash Rabbah-Genesis Midrash Rabbah - XLVIII:9, Judaic Classics

*Saracen, the second in the guise of a Nabatean, and the third in the guise of an Arab.”*⁷

Each angel served a different role in their visit. Raphael (*meaning God's healing*) was to heal Abraham's wound and pain from the circumcision. Michael (*meaning Who is like God?*⁸) was sent to tell Sarah the good news that she would bear a child, and Gabriel (*meaning God's strength*) came to Earth in order to manage the destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah.⁹ The angels actually withdrew from Abraham's presence when they saw him nursing himself, but he went out to bring them in, despite his infirmity.¹⁰ The midrash explains that since the angels were disguised as Arabs, Abraham asked them to wash their feet, according to their custom. According to a tradition in the Zohar, Abraham could tell that the visitors were worthy because he had a special tree by his tent and whenever anyone who believed in God stood under it, the tree would offer shade.¹¹

Commentators often try to discern how the angels supposedly ate, when angels don't eat. Some people believe, like the authors of the traditional midrash, that the angels disguised as men did not eat, but only appeared to eat and the food was actually consumed by heavenly fire.¹² Ibn Ezra says, they consumed the food, just as the burning bush was consumed, but not destroyed. And “Eaten in our verse, has the same meaning as the identical word in whereto the fire hath eaten” (was consumed) in Leviticus 6:3.¹³

⁷ Midrash Rabbah-Genesis Midrash Rabbah - XLVIII:9, Judaic Classics

⁸ Source Citation: Ginsberg, Harold Louis, Aaron Rothkoff, and Joseph Dan. "Michael and Gabriel." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 14. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 167-169. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Gale. HEBREW UNION COLLEGE. 23 Jan. 2008 <<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=GVRL&u=hebrewucll>>.

⁹ Bereshit Rabbah 50.2 and related sources, see Ginzberg page 204

¹⁰ Baba Mezi'a 86b and related sources, see Ginzberg page 204

¹¹ Zohar I, 102b as cited in Ginzberg page 205

¹² Midrash HaGadol Sefer Bereshit I, 272 and related sources in Ginzberg page 205

¹³ Strickman and Silver Page 190

It was the archangel Michael, the greatest angel of all, who had the responsibility of telling Sarah of Isaac's birth.¹⁴ In order to announce this birth Michael drew a line on the wall and said the following, "When the sun crosses this point, Sarah will be with child, and when [it] crosses the next point, she will give birth to a child."¹⁵ After Abraham had entertained his guests, he escorted them on their way, because just as important is the mitzvah of hospitality, it is also required to help the parting guest to depart. Two of the angels, Gabriel and Michael, went on to Sodom, one to destroy it and the other to save Lot. The third angel, Raphael, had fulfilled his errand of helping Abraham, so he set out on his way to return to heaven.¹⁶

After the unnamed men depart from Abraham, the Biblical text recounts the story of how Abraham pleads with God not to destroy Sodom for the sake of the righteous people there. However, there are not enough righteous people in the entire city of Sodom- not even 10, and thus God continues with his plan to destroy Sodom. From there, the story returns to the angels as the Biblical text now turns to discuss the character of Lot in Sodom in chapter 19. It is very interesting to note that here the text does not call the visitors of Sodom men, but instead, unlike with Abraham, clearly states that they are angels. However, through much commentary and midrashim, the connection is made that these men and angels were the same visitors.

In the beginning of chapter 19, two angels come to Sodom and reach the city in the evening. When they see Lot at the gate of the city he rises to meet them and in verse

¹⁴ Bereshit Rabbah 50.2 and related sources, see Ginzberg page 204

¹⁵ Baba Mezi'a 86b and related sources, see Ginzberg page 205

¹⁶ Bereshit Rabbah 50.2 and related sources see Ginzberg page 206

19:2, he says to the angels, "*Behold now, my lords, turn aside, I pray you, into your servant's house, and tarry all night, and wash your feet, and ye shall rise up early, and go on your way* ¹⁷." The angels refuse and express a desire to stay out in the open that night, but after more pleading by Lot, they agree and go with Lot to his home. There in the home, Lot made the men a feast, complete with unleavened bread. In one of the most disturbing scenes in the Bible, the men of the town come to Lot's home and demand to behold the visitors. The townspeople's goal was for Lot to give up his guests that the people of Sodom might "know" these visitors. Lot refuses to offer up his visitors but instead offers his virgin daughters for the townspeople to do with whatever they please. The townspeople, in anger, then say to Lot that they will deal even more harshly with him, especially since he came as a traveler and is now telling the townspeople what to do. In verse 19:10 the angels (who are called men here in the Hebrew) saved themselves and Lot by drawing Lot into the home and then they "smote the men that were at the door of the house with blindness, both small and great; so that they wearied themselves to find the door."¹⁸ At this point in the story, the angels (again, called men by the Biblical text) ask Lot if he has any other family in Sodom. The angels then tell Lot that they are about to destroy the city. Lot spoke to his sons-in-law but they do not believe him, in fact, according to Bereshit Rabbah "they mocked at [Lot] him, and said: "O thou fool! Violins, cymbals, and flutes resound in the city, and thou sayest Sodom will be destroyed!"¹⁹ And thus they do not flee with Lot and his wife and Lot's two unmarried daughters. In the morning the angels (the text returns to using the term angels) escort Lot and his wife and

¹⁷ JPS 1917 Translation

¹⁸ JPS 1917 Translation

¹⁹ Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 50.9 and related sources, see Ginsberg page 213

daughters out of Sodom. Since the family was lingering, the men (angels) had to grab each of them by the hands. Lot was ordered to flee to the mountain to be saved, but he pleaded with the angel (the text does not say which one) to escape to a smaller town. The angel accepts his plea and tells Lot to escape there for he cannot destroy Sodom until Lot and his family get to this town. This is the last that the angels are heard of in this story, for following the previous exchange God causes fire and brimstone to rain down upon Sodom and Gemorrah.

It is interesting to note, as evidenced in the explanation above, that the Biblical text switches freely between calling Lot's visitors angels **הַמַּלְאָכִים** and men **הָאֲנָשִׁים** .

According to the midrash, the angels who visited Abraham left at noon, Raphael returning to Heaven and Michael and Gabriel continuing on to Sodom. Tradition says that angels normally hasten to do their assigned task, but according in this case, Raphael and Gabriel hesitated on their journey to proclaim the destruction of Sodom in the hopes that the inhabitants of the city would turn away from evil. However, since it was nightfall when the angels reached Sodom, they knew that their mission must be completed, as the wicked always receive their punishment at night.²⁰

Even though it was the custom of the people of Sodom to treat their visitors harshly, Lot offered hospitality to them, having learned the importance of this value from Abraham. Lot knew he was risking his life by being hospitable, since harboring and

²⁰ Bereshit Rabbah 50.1 and 50.3 and related sources, as cited in Ginzberg page 212

entertaining strangers was punishable by death in Sodom.²¹ Initially, the angels, thought not to accept Lot's request since he was an ordinary man, whereas the angels had immediately accepted the invitation to enter Abraham's tent since he was such a great man.²² While Lot's wife was fearful of their visit (see the Chapter on Lot's wife), Lot was even willing to use force to have the men enter his abode.²³

Also, according to Bereshit Rabbah the angels were initially inclined to take mercy on the sinners of Sodom, at Lot's request. However, when the townspeople came to attack the angels they realized just how evil the inhabitants of Sodom were, and the angels decided that they definitely could not intercede on the behalf of the townspeople.²⁴ It was the angel Michael who held the hand of Lot and his wife to escort them out of Sodom, while Gabriel used his little finger, to destroy the cities by touching the rock on which the cities were built. Gabriel overturned the cities and then the rain that came pouring down instantly changed into brimstone.²⁵ Michael suggested to Lot that he and his family seek a safe haven from the destruction of Sodom with Abraham, but Lot refused. He said to Michael, *"As long as I dwelt apart from Abraham, God compared my deeds with the deeds of my fellow-citizens, and among them I appeared as a righteous man. If I should return to Abraham, God will see that his good deeds outweigh mine by far."*²⁶ Thus, Michael allowed Lot to escape to Zoar, which had been founded a year later than the other four cities of the plain. Therefore, since it was a slightly newer city, the measure of the sins of Zoar were not as great as those of Sodom, Gemorrah and the other

²¹ Perkei De Rabbi Eliezar 25 and related sources, as cited in Ginzberg page 212

²² Midrash Hagadol Bereshit I, 289 and related sources as cited in Ginzberg page 212

²³ Baba Mezi'a 87a and related sources, see Ginzberg page 212

²⁴ Bereshit Rabbah 50. 3-7 and related sources, see Ginzbug page 213

²⁵ Midrash HaGadol Bereshit I, 290 and related sources and recorded in Ginzberg page 213

²⁶ Ginzberg page 213 from Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 50.11 and related sources

two cities that were destroyed. However, Zoar was later destroyed when the measure of evil in the city became even greater.²⁷

These three angels, Michael, Gabriel and Raphael are also mentioned in other places in the Bible as well as in other pieces of literature. For example, Michael while called a prince in the Book of Daniel (chapter 10-12) is believed by some to actually be a divine figure, and a not an earthly prince, but rather a prince of God.²⁸ It is also in various midrashim where some of these angels are mentioned dozens and dozens of times. For example in Midrash Rabbah Genesis VIII:13 it was said by Rabbi Judah ben Rabbi Simon that at the union between Adam and Eve, Michael and Gabriel served as Adam's best men.²⁹ The angel Gabriel is also very prevalent in the story of Moses' rescue by Pharaoh's daughter (see Chapter Seven on the Daughter of Pharaoh).

As can be seen, within Jewish tradition there are many mentions of angels, and they play a very crucial role in helping to do God's work on earth. This is of course seen clearly in chapters 18-19 of Genesis. For it is apparent that Raphael, Michael, and Gabriel, while unnamed in the Biblical text, were really the unnamed men who came to earth to heal Abraham, announce the impending arrival of Isaac, destroy Sodom and even save Lot.

²⁷ From Shabbat 10a, see Ginzberg page 213 and 215

²⁸ **Source Citation:** Ginsberg, Harold Louis, Aaron Rothkoff, and Joseph Dan. "Michael and Gabriel." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 14. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 167-169. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Gale. HEBREW UNION COLLEGE. 23 Jan. 2008 <<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=GVRL&u=hebrewuc11>>.

²⁹ Midrash Rabbah - Genesis VIII:13, Judaic Classics

Chapter Six: Potiphar's Wife

One of the most intriguing, yet barely known and discussed characters in the entire Bible, is that of Potiphar's wife. This character is often vilified for her seduction of Joseph and subsequent lies which cause Joseph to be enslaved. However, the wife of Potiphar, who remains nameless in the entire text, can actually be seen as the force that sets in to motion a series of events which cause Joseph to rise to power in Egypt. While she may be considered a minor character, her impact is truly great.

To fully grasp the character of Potiphar's wife, the context of Joseph's time in Egypt and his subsequent acquiring by Potiphar must be set. In chapter 37 of Genesis, Joseph relays his dreams, which symbolically portray his brothers bowing down to him. His brothers, who already despise Joseph because he is their father's favorite, decide to plot against Joseph when they are informed of his dreams. Joseph goes out to find his brothers working in the fields and they decide to kill him. Rueben speaks out to spare Joseph's life and suggests that they throw him in the pit and leave him, and then Judah finally speaks out to spare their own flesh and blood and instead suggests selling Joseph to the Midianites who are passing. Joseph's famous coat, a gift from his father, is then returned to Jacob covered in blood. Jacob mourns heavily for his son Joseph, believing that he has been devoured by a beast and not knowing his other sons sold him into slavery. Following this story, there is a departure from the accounts of Joseph and the story of Judah and Tamar is told.

Chapter 39 of Genesis then picks up where chapter 37 left off and begins by reiterating that Potiphar, who is an officer in Pharaoh's army, bought Joseph. The text states that because God was with Joseph, he prospered and Potiphar even selected Joseph to serve as head of the household. God continues to be with Joseph and as a result, God's blessing is also bestowed upon the house and even fields of Potiphar. At this point the text also states that Joseph's master, Potiphar, left complete control with Joseph, except for the bread that he ate. At this point in the story, the reader is then informed that Joseph was of beautiful form and very handsome to look at. After sometime Potiphar's wife begins to "set her eyes" upon Joseph and demands that he sleep with her. He refused, due to the trust of his master as well as not wanting to sin against God. Potiphar's wife persists and continues to ask him to be with her every day, but he does not listen to her request. Finally, one day when she attempts to seduce him they are in the house alone. This time, when he rejects her advances, she grabs onto his clothing and he then escapes, leaving his garment in her hand. When she realizes that he has left his garment, she screams to the men of the house and accuses Joseph of seducing her and says that he, a Hebrew man was brought to the house to mock the household. She offers a different explanation as to the course of events and states that when Joseph heard her scream he left his garment with her and fled. She retells the story to her husband and again states that the Hebrew slave, Joseph, came to her to mock her. Potiphar of course becomes quite enraged and took Joseph and put him in the prison of the king. The text again states that God was with Joseph and bestowed favor unto him and thus the guard of the prison puts Joseph in charge of the prisoners and all they do. This shows that God continues to cause Joseph to prosper, even now when he is imprisoned.

This story of imprisonment will thus lead the way for Joseph to once again interpret dreams and later be able to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh and keep Egypt protected from

starvation during a period of scarcity of food. The biblical reader could look at this story and quickly vilify Potiphar's wife for her immoral acts. However, had it not been for the character of Potiphar's wife and her seduction of Joseph and subsequent lies, Joseph would not have been able to rise to power as he did, keep Egypt from famine, reconnect with his brothers and father and even help his own family during the devastating period of famine. While there are some negative commentaries and midrashim about Potiphar's wife, there are surprisingly a number of stories that attempt to offer a sense of redemption to this often despised character.

Rabbi Shlomo ben Isaac, better known simply by Rashi, spoke of Potiphar's wife in his commentary to Genesis 39:1. He explains that the original story of Joseph is interrupted by the story of Judah and Tamar to explain that this story of Judah's sexual indiscretions bring Judah down in greatness. Further, Rashi writes that the story was interrupted, *"in order to connect the story of the wife of Potiphar to the story of Tamar. Which is to tell you- that which one did for the sake of Heaven, also the other acted for the sake of Heaven. For she [Potiphar's wife] saw in her astrologers that in her future she would be caused to have children from him, and she didn't know if it would be from her or her daughter."*¹

With this commentary, Rashi makes the connection between Tamar, who posed as a harlot to seduce Judah, and Potiphar's wife who unrelentingly attempted to seduce Joseph and states that what both women did were not true sins, but rather done for a great purpose, namely for the sake of Heaven. By this, it appears that Rashi is implying that both of these immoral acts, which seem quite scandalous at first, will actually lead to God's plan being fulfilled. Thus, according to Rashi, these characters are not only important, despite their small roles, but in fact necessary in order to move the Biblical narratives along. Therefore, the Biblical reader can see that these women were part of God's plan and thus should not be seen as evil, deceitful or

¹ Author's translation of Rashi's commentary. Here Rashi bases his ideas on *Bereshit Rabbah pey-hey-bet*

anything else negative. For Rashi, these women were acting on Heaven's behalf (God's behalf) to help more positive outcomes occur in the future.

As described in his commentary, Rashi attempts to remove even more fault from Potiphar's wife by citing from the midrash—Bereshit Rabbah. The midrash which he is stating says the following, "*Potiphar's wife's feeling was heightened by the astrologic forecast that she was destined to have descendants through Joseph. This was true, but not in the sense in which she understood the prophecy. Joseph married her daughter Asenath later on, and she bore him children, thus fulfilling what had been read in the stars.*"² Therefore, not only was Potiphar's wife seducing Joseph for the sake of Heaven, but also because, according to the midrash, her astrologers informed her of her destiny which would be to have a child with (through) Joseph. Even though her attempt at seducing Joseph may not have been what her astrologers had in mind, one could argue she wasn't acting out of pure immoral desires, since according to the midrash and Rashi it was Potiphar's wife believed she would have a child with Joseph. It is clear then, that according to traditional Jewish sources, Potiphar's wife's seduction of Joseph was merely her attempt to fulfill what she believed was her predetermined fate.

Another way in which there is an attempt to redeem Potiphar's wife from seeming to act in a truly malicious way is by explaining that Joseph deserved her negative attention and the problems it caused because of his own doing. For example, Rashi believed Joseph was at fault since he became settled in Potiphar's house and did not attempt to return to his father who believed Joseph to be dead. Rashi explains this line of thinking in his commentary to Genesis 39, verse 6 where he elucidates the description of Joseph which says that he "was of beautiful form." Rashi attacks Joseph and says, "*because he (Joseph) saw himself as a leader, he began to*

² Bereshit Rabbah 85.1, see Ginzberg, page 352

*eat and drink and curl his hair, the Holy One Blessed be he said, "your father is mourning and you are curling your hair, I will incite in you the bear- immediately."*³

This description of Joseph, in which he is said to have a beautiful form, is also used to describe his mother. In fact, Joseph must have been so beautiful since he is the only man to be referred to with such a glowing description in the entire Bible. While this may appear to be a positive attribute about Joseph, Rashi, however, turns this into something negative about Joseph. He explains that once Joseph is in power in Potiphar's house he becomes too comfortable as a leader- eating, drinking and curling his hair. It appears as if Joseph doesn't care that his father is filled with sorrow as he mourns his favorite son (of course, one could argue that Joseph didn't know that his father believed him to be dead, for he may have thought his brothers told their father they sold him into slavery). Rashi, therefore, explains that the seduction by Potiphar's wife and trouble it causes for Joseph is God's punishment for him. Since Joseph was too busy enjoying and prettifying himself, Rashi says God punished him by "inciting the bear." This expression of "inciting the bear" is to be interpreted as inciting problems or aggressiveness, which is of course what happens with Potiphar's wife's seduction and false accusations.

Rabbi David Kimchi, another well-known commentator, also aspired to elucidate this Joseph story and the reasons for Potiphar's wife's actions. Rabbi David Kimchi, who was born in Narbonne, Provence in 1160 and he lived until 1235 is often known by the acronym, Radak. In his commentary to verse 39:7 Radak offers a way to explain why misfortune comes to Joseph and why he must suffer in the way that he did.⁴ Radak counts the experiences Joseph had by saying that after some time in Potiphar's house Joseph grew in strength, felt secure and was even given honor. Radak continues that when the urging of Potiphar's wife came to Joseph that was

³ Author's translation. Rashi bases this comment on a midrash from *Tanhuma*

⁴ Walfish, page 1885

actually some that was for the betterment of both Joseph and his family. In his commentary Radak continues, *“Therefore, that which was so difficult at the beginning was good at the end. Here, the sin of the cupbearer and the baker and the dream of Pharaoh, all were the reasons from God in which [Joseph was] to be blessed because through all their hands, Joseph was able to rise to greatness. And this book (story) is written to tell of the reasons of these things and if a man should be informed by what the Bible tells, it is to be secure in God and know that his end will be for good (prosperous).”*⁵ Radak concludes his comment by explaining that this story is a lesson for those who are oppressed, like Joseph was, to keep faith and not discredit what is happening for who can be sure of the purpose.

Unlike Rashi, who chastises Joseph for concerning himself with beauty, Radak is far more concerned with Joseph’s righteousness and positive characteristics. Mostly, though, Radak seems to be concerned with predetermination and he explains that even though Joseph was happy and content in Potiphar’s house, he had to experience the negativity of Potiphar’s wife’s advances. For this then allowed Joseph to be jailed and meet the cupbearer and baker and interpret their dreams in order to then be able to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams. All of these events would enable Joseph to rise up to even greater power and security and thus also be able to help his family be prosperous in the time of famine. Therefore, Radak is saying that every action or event Joseph suffered was necessary in order for him to be even more prosperous for himself and his family at the end. Like Rashi who says Potiphar’s wife acted for the sake of Heaven, Radak’s interpretation also helps to redeem Potiphar’s wife since her role and advances were necessary in order for Joseph to rise to power.

⁵ Author’s translation

In addition to these explanations by commentators, there are other midrashim that speak to Joseph's beauty as almost intoxicating to the point that Potiphar's wife lost control and had to act the way she did. In fact, the following midrash finally names Potiphar's wife as Zuleika. The midrash begins by explaining that Zuleika became incredibly ill because she was so intoxicated by his beauty and yet everyday he would deny her. The story continues that all the women of Egypt (it is assumed this means her friends of the same social status) paid a visit to their ill friend to understand why she was so sick. Her friends cannot understand how a woman who is the wife of someone so "esteemed in the sight of the king," could be so ill. To explain her illness, Zuleika ordered her servants to prepare food for all the women so that she could offer a banquet before them. Zuleika had the table set with oranges and knives with which to peel them. She then commanded Joseph to appear in expensive clothing and serve her guests. The women, like Zuleika were so impressed with Joseph's beauty that they could not stop looking at him, and because of that they all cut their hands with their knives and the oranges were covered with their own blood. However, they were still so mesmerized by his beauty that despite cutting their hands they didn't stop looking at him. Zuleika stopped them and said, "What have you done?" The women, surprised at what happened, looked at their hands and saw that not only did they have blood on their hands, but their own blood had even stained their clothing. They responded to Zuleika, *"This slave in thy house did enchant us, and we could not turn our eyes away from him on account of his beauty."* She then said: *"This happened to you that looked upon him but a moment, and you could not refrain yourselves! How, then, can I control myself in whose house he abideth continually, who see him go in and out day after day? How, then, should I not waste away, or keep from languishing on account of him!"*⁶ The women seemed to understand her dilemma and emotional anguish and agreed that it would be impossible to look upon his beauty

⁶ Page 355 of Ginzberg, volume 1- see Yashar 87a-87b and related sources

daily and refrain from their feelings. They implored her, saying that since he is her slave, she should just tell him of her feelings, rather than become so ill from not having her desires fulfilled. Zulcika admitted to them that she has in fact told him of her wishes, saying, "Daily do I endeavor to persuade him, but he will not consent to my wishes. I promised him everything that is fair, yet have I met with no return from him, and therefore I am sick, as you may see."⁷

While this midrash may not cause the Biblical reader to completely condone Potiphar's wife's advances, it does explain a great deal. This story lets the reader know that not only was Potiphar's wife acting for the sake of Heaven or because her astrologers told her to do so, but simply because she was overcome by Joseph. His beauty was so strong that it in fact caused all of the women in Egypt to temporarily lose control.

Yet another possible explanation for Potiphar's wife's advances towards Joseph is that she could not have marital relations with her husband since we has a eunuch. This notion is set forth in a commentary by Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra. This famous medieval Biblical commentator, often referred to simply as Ibn Ezra, spent most of his life in Spain, and finished his life by going to Rome, France and England. He lived from 1089 until 1164 and represented the Spanish school of exegesis⁸. He explained verse 39:6 as stating the following:

Rabbi Ibn Ezra: 39:6 *There are some that say bread is a term for lying with his wife. But that is far-fetched (far from the truth). Additionally (this could not be true) because the master of Joseph was a eunuch. And the truth in my eyes is that all that he (Potiphar) had was in his (Joseph's) hands- except for the bread – which he (Joseph) couldn't even touch, because of the fact that he (Joseph) was a Hebrew because here it is explained in "The Hebrews were not permitted to eat with the Egyptians." (Genesis 43:32) since Potiphar knew that Joseph was a Hebrew. And here his wife said – here they brought an Egyptian to us to mock us (referencing the quote to come in 39:14)*⁹

⁷ Page 355 of Ginzberg volume 1, see Midrash Hagadol Sefer Bereshit 590

⁸ Barry D. Walfish, "Medieval Jewish Interpretation," The Jewish Study Bible, Oxford Press, New York, 2004, page Ibid, page 1882

⁹ Author's translation

Rabbi Ibn Ezra begins his commentary to this verse by alluding to a comment made by Rashi's in which he says that that "lechem" is a euphemism for bread and then proceeding to deny it. By saying "there are some that say" he is being much more polite rather than to come out and say he doesn't believe that Rashi is correct. Ibn Ezra looks at the word, "syris" (used in 39:1 to describe Potiphar) taken by most to mean an officer and states that it means a "eunuch," thus asserting that Potiphar would in effect be incapable of marital relations with his own wife. Ibn Ezra thus offers another very strong reason for Potiphar's wife to seduce Joseph and desire sexual relations with him. Of course believing in this notion of Potiphar being a eunuch would cause difficulty for the reader to accept the previously discussed midrash in which it states that Potiphar's wife's daughter (presumably Potiphar's daughter as well) later married Joseph. For if Potiphar was a eunuch, it would have been impossible for Potiphar's wife be able to conceive a child. One possibility to reconcile these two stories is that Potiphar became a eunuch after fathering a daughter with his wife.

Ibn Ezra's explanation and use of the later verse also greatly helps to explain why Potiphar's wife would cry out that the Hebrew man was brought to mock her, for if Hebrews and Egyptians were forbidden from even eating together- all the more a great insult it would be if she said that the Hebrew servant tried to seduce her. Another interesting commentary by Ramban is his explanation of the place where Joseph is imprisoned in verse 39:20. Ramban is also able to explain the reason for events- thus stating that every character- even the unnamed cupbearer and baker have an important role to play since their dreams would, like Potiphar's wife's seduction, continue to set actions in play that would allow for Joseph to come to power under Pharaoh.

There are also additional midrashim which further detail Potiphar's wife's actions in

seducing Joseph. One such story has Zuleika offering to give up idol worship to be with Joseph and even telling him she'll get her husband to give up idol worship as well. Joseph refuses her offer reminding her that adultery is still a sin. Additionally she counters that she would even kill her husband so that she could be with Joseph thus she wouldn't be an adulterer, but she would be a murderer. Joseph begged her not to do that for if she did murder her husband, not only would she be committing the gravest of sins, but he also threatened to tell everyone of her actions. Zuleika even attempted to use magic to make Joseph fulfill her desires by casting a spell on his food, but he was able to realize the food was cursed before he ate any it.¹⁰

While these stories do not necessarily paint a particularly positive picture of Zuleika, Potiphar's wife, they do show how desperate she was and how much mental anguish she had to face due to Joseph's presence. As a whole these stories and the interpretations of Potiphar's wife by different scholars give the Biblical reader much more insight into this possibly misunderstood woman. Therefore, even some less favorable stories can still help the Biblical reader to have a better understanding of who Potiphar's wife really was and why she did what she did.

¹⁰ From 12 Testaments, Joseph 3-7, see Ginzberg page 352-353

Chapter Seven: Pharaoh's Daughter

Had it not been for the daughter of Pharaoh, it is conceivable that Moses, the greatest prophet the Israelites ever knew, would have continued to float in a basket down the river and maybe not even survive. However, in chapter two of Exodus this unnamed woman not only rescues Moses but also vows to bring him up as her own child. There is definite irony in that fact that this nameless woman is the one who gives Moses his name, which the Biblical text says that it means "I drew him out of the water."

Almost as quickly as the Biblical text introduces Pharaoh's daughter, she is forgotten about. She is mentioned only very briefly, only a few times in Exodus chapter 2:5-9 and then this adoptive mother of Moses is not mentioned again in the Biblical text. The midrashim, however are far more detailed about this modest heroine who knows she is saving a child that her own father decreed should be put to death merely for being Jewish.

One of the midrashim names Pharaoh's daughter as "Thermutis."¹ In this midrash it says that God had sent a plague of scorching heat, leprosy and boils to all the Egyptians². To ease the pain, Thermutis- Pharaoh's daughter went to bathe in the Nile River. According to this story she was also trying to "cleanse herself as well of the impurity of the idol worship that prevailed in her father's house."³ Thermutis saw a little

¹ See Josephus, Antiquities and related sources in Ginzberg, page 477-478

² Targum Yerushalmi Exodus 2.5 and related sources in Ginzberg page 479

³ Perkei d'Rabbi Eliezer and related sources, see Ginzberg, page 477-478

ark floating down the river and ordered her handmaids to retrieve it. They protested, saying, "O our mistress, it happens sometimes that a decree issued by a king is unheeded, yet it is observed at least by his children and the members of his household, and dost thou desire to transgress thy father's edict?"⁴ As a result of this, Gabriel the angel appeared and all of the handmaids, with the exception of one who Thermutis was able to keep for her personal service, were buried into the depths of the earth⁵.

Next, according to the midrash, Thermutis, Pharaoh's daughter, then stretched out her arm, which was miraculously lengthened and thus reached the ark. As soon as she touched the basket her leprosy disappeared.⁶ She saw that there was a beautiful baby boy who was circumcised, "the sign of the Abrahamic covenant" and thus that this was one of the Hebrew children ordered to be killed. She was about to abandon the child for fear of her father's decree, when again Gabriel came to the rescue, causing the baby to cry aloud. This story says that in the ark with Moses was his brother Aaron who also began to cry. (This is the only story which also mentions Aaron in the basket and his presence is not mentioned again with regard to Pharaoh's daughter.) Thermutis had a great deal of pity for the children and resolved to save them. She attempted to have an Egyptian nurse the child, but the child refused to suckle. The midrash explains the reasoning as the following: "*so that none of them [the Egyptians] might boast later on, and say, 'I suckled him that holds converse now with the Shekinah.' Nor was the mouth destined to speak with God to draw nourishment from the unclean body of an Egyptian woman.*"⁷ The

⁴ Sotah 12b and related sources see Ginzberg, page 477-478

⁵ Sotah 12b and related sources, see Ginzberg 478

⁶ Sotah 12b and related sources see Ginzberg 478

⁷ Sotah 12b and related sources see Ginzberg 478

story continues that at that moment, Moses' sister, Miriam, who had been hiding and watching to see what would become of her brother, approached Thermutis. Miriam said, *"It is vain for thee, O queen, to call for nurses that are in no wise of kin to the child, but if thou wilt order a woman of the Hebrews to be brought, he may accept her breast, seeing that she is of his own nation."*⁸ Thermutis then allowed for a Hebrew woman to be brought to nurse the child and of course, Miriam went and brought Jochebed- Moses' and her mother. Moses immediately began to suckle and Thermutis even offered Jochebed two silver pieces as payment for nursing the child.⁹

In another story about the rescuing of Moses, Pharaoh's daughter is not known as Thermutis, (which is probably an Egyptian name), but rather she is known by the Hebrew name Bithiah.¹⁰ According to this midrash Moses was known by a different name by each of his family members (see Chapter One: introduction). However, of all the names given to him, it is the name given by Pharaoh's daughter that is recorded in the Torah and by which God called him. "Pharaoh's daughter called him Moses, because she had "drawn" him out of the water, and because he would "draw" the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt in a day to come."¹¹ As a result of this, God then names Pharaoh's daughter Bithiah (probably better understood as Batyah) which the midrash explains as the following, God said to the princess: *"Moses was not thy child, yet thou didst treat him as such. For this I will call thee My daughter, though thou art not My daughter,"* and therefore the princess, the daughter of Pharaoh, bears the name Bithiah, "the daughter of

⁸ Ginzberg page 478-479, see Josephus, Antiquities II 9.5 and related sources

⁹ Yashar Shemot, 131 and related sources, see Ginzberg page 480

¹⁰ Vayikra Rabbah 1.3 and other related sources, see Ginzberg page 480-481

¹¹ Vayikra Rabbah 1.3 and other related sources, see Ginzberg page 480-481

God." This midrash also goes on to say that Bithiah even later married Caleb. He was a suitable husband for her since just as he stood up against his fellow spies who delivered lies about Canaan, "she stood up against her father's wicked counsels."¹² The midrash also records that since Bithiah rescued Moses among other pious deeds, she was permitted to enter Paradise alive.¹³

According to Philo in *Vito Mosis*, Bithiah actually pretended that she was pregnant for some time so that people might believe that Moses was naturally hers and therefore he would be able to receive the full treatment that princes of Egypt received.¹⁴ It was also said that she constantly lavished love upon him and even feared to let him out of her sight because his beauty made it difficult for anyone to stop from looking at him.¹⁵ Thus, Bithiah, Pharaoh's daughter raised Moses as her own child since she had no children of her own. According to the legend she said the following to her father, "*I have brought up a child, who is divine in form and of an excellent mind, and as I received him through the bounty of the river in a wonderful way, I have thought it proper to adopt him as my son and as the heir of thy kingdom.*" Pharaoh responded so favorably to this, that in response he hugged Moses close to him.¹⁶

There is another story about Moses which starts out by having him sit on Bithiah's lap and also mentions another unnamed character, the Queen of Egypt. For in this story, there is finally a name given to the queen, which is Alfar'anit. While she

¹² Vayikra Rabbah 1.3 and other related sources, see Ginzberg page 480-481

¹³ 2 Alphabet of Ben Sira 28b and related sources see Ginzberg page 481

¹⁴ Philo in Vito Mosis 1.3 and other sources, see Ginzberg page 481

¹⁵ Tanchuma Shemot 8 and other sources, see Ginzberg page 481

¹⁶ Page 481 in Ginzberg from Josephus, Antiquities II, 9: 6-7 and related sources

doesn't play a role in the story, she is at least mentioned and the reader can infer that this oft-forgotten character was not only the wife of the Pharaoh, but most likely also the mother of Pharaoh's daughter who rescued Moses from the water. In this story, Moses who was three years old, was sitting on his adoptive mother's lap when he reached out and took the crown off the head of Pharaoh and placed the crown on his own head.¹⁷ The king (Pharaoh) was of course distraught by this and asked what should be done to Moses on account of his taking the crown. In response, Balaam, who is also present, says that even though Moses is only a child he "has the spirit of God" and does this out of wisdom as he has chosen himself to be the King of Egypt.¹⁸ Furthermore, Balaam says that it is the way of Hebrews to "deceive kings" and their people. He then recounts when the Hebrew forefathers were deceitful, such as both Abraham and Isaac saying their wives were their sisters, Jacob stealing the birthright, and when Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery.¹⁹ In this story, Balaam then says that Moses should be killed and it would be best if all the Judges and wise of men of Egypt could come to confirm that. The angel Gabriel (who is discussed in Chapter Five) comes disguised as one of the wise men. Gabriel made the following suggestion, *"If it please the king, let him place an onyx stone before the child, and a coal of fire, and if he stretches out his hand and grasps the onyx stone, then shall we know that the child hath done with wisdom all that he hath done, and we will slay him. But if he stretches out his hand and grasps the coal of fire, then shall we know that it was not with consciousness that he did the thing, and he shall live."*²⁰ Moses reached for the onyx, but Gabriel instead guided his hand to the hot coal. Moses than

¹⁷ Yashar Shemot 131b-132b and related sources see Ginzberg page 483

¹⁸ Yashar Shemot 131b-132b and related sources see Ginzberg page 483

¹⁹ Yashar Shemot 131b-132b and related sources see Ginzberg page 483

²⁰ Yashar Shemot 131b-132b and related sources see Ginzberg page 483

touched the coal and it burnt his hand and then he touched the coal to his lips and the subsequent burn is the reason that Moses became “slow of speech and of a slow tongue.” Seeing this, Pharaoh and all the men were assured then that Moses hadn’t acted with knowledge.²¹ After this, the story does return to Bithiah as the midrash continues to say that then “*his foster-mother snatched him away, and she had him educated with great care, so that the Hebrews depended upon him, and cherished the hope that great things would be done by him. But the Egyptians were suspicious of what would follow from such an education as his.*”²² Thus according to this midrash, not only is Pharaoh’s daughter responsible for rescuing Moses, but also for guaranteeing his wonderful education as well.

There is another story in which yet another name for the biblically unnamed daughter of Pharaoh can be found. According to this story, Pharaoh’s daughter was known by the name Merois. According to this story Merois was always very sad and because she and her husband were childless. Due to her depression, she mostly stayed indoors, but decided one day to walk out by the river. In doing she found the infant and decided to adopt him. Thus it can be assumed by this story that not only did Merois-Pharaoh’s daughter rescue Moses, but in a way, Moses rescued her from her depression as well.²³

Today, another way in which Pharaoh’s daughter continues to inspire “rescuing” is through the musical group, “Pharaoh’s daughter.” The music of this band, is a style all

²¹ Yashar Shemot 131b-132b and related sources see Ginzberg page 483

²² Josephus, Antiquities II 9.7 and Philo Vita Mosis I 5-7 and related sources, see Ginzberg page 483-484

²³ Philo, Vita Mosis I.4 and related sources, see Ginzberg page 479

unto its own, but represents many Jewish musical influences including Hasidic chants and mizrachi folk-rock.²⁴ Since the lead singer's name is Basya Schechter, it is only fitting that they help to keep the name of Pharaoh's daughter alive by calling their band by her namesake.²⁵

Pharaoh's daughter, or Therutis, or Bityiah, or Merois or whatever else she may be known as, will always be called a hero for the entire Jewish people. This adoptive mother of Moses, may not merit much description in the Biblical text, but the midrashim and stories about her lavish nothing but good things on this non-Jewish matriarch of the Jewish people.

²⁴ Band's website, www.pharaohsdaughter.com 2007

²⁵ Pers. Comm with Basya Schechter by Email on February 19, 2008

Chapter Nine: The Witch of Endor

A much lesser known, but incredibly intriguing nameless character of the Bible is that of the Witch of Endor. She appears in only one scene, in the book of Samuel chapter 28.

However, she is the only “witch” to appear in Bible, making her divination for the King all the more fascinating since divination or use of witchcraft is clearly forbidden by God.

In fact in multiple places the Bible makes it quite clear that divination is not allowed and in fact it is an abomination. The first prohibition appears in Leviticus 20:27 whereby the Biblical text states, *“A man or a woman that divineth by a ghost or a familiar spirit, shall surely be put to death; they shall stone them with stones; their blood shall be upon them.”*¹

And in Deuteronomy 18:10-12, the text states, *“there shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, one that useth divination, a soothsayer, or an enchanter, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or one that consulteth a ghost or a familiar spirit, or a necromancer. For whosoever doeth these things is an abomination unto the LORD; and because of these abominations the LORD thy God is driving them out from before thee.”*²

The story of the Witch of Endor starts out with the reader being reminded in Samuel 28:3 that Samuel was dead, having been buried in Ramah, and that the entire community mourned him. Next the reader is also informed, by way of foreshadowing,

¹ JPS 1917 translation

² JPS 1917 translation

that Saul, now the King, had imprisoned anyone who dealt in divination by bringing a ghost or spirit from the ground (i.e. bringing a spirit to life). Saul is described as being very afraid since the Philistines have prepared to attack Israel. Saul then attempts to reach out to Adonai, but God did not answer him. In fact, it says specifically in Samuel 28:6 that Adonai did not answer Saul in anyway- not by “dreams, nor Urim (which were a priestly device using stones to receive oracles³), nor prophets.” Thus in order to know his fate, Saul was left with no other option than to find a witch or “diviner” even though he himself had outlawed it, in accordance to Hebrew tradition. Saul asks of his servants (who like the witch remain nameless in the Biblical text) to find someone who can help him. The two men tell him there is woman “that divineth by ghost at En-dor.”⁴ Saul, who disguised himself, and the two men went with him at night (thus further in secret) to seek her out. In verse 28: 8 Saul then asked the woman, “*Divine unto me, I pray thee, by a ghost, and bring me up whomsoever I shall name unto thee*”⁵ Not knowing that her visitor was Saul himself, the woman attempted to refuse the request, reminding the man that Saul had outlawed divining and telling the men that bring up a spirit would put her life at risk and cause her to die.

Saul then assured her by the name of the Lord, that she would receive no punishment. Accepting his assurance, though still unaware that her visitor was King Saul, she asked him whom he wanted her to bring up from the dead. Saul asked her to bring up Samuel and she readily summoned him. When she saw Samuel, she cried out in

³ Greenberg, Moshe. "Urim and Thummim." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 20. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 422-423. 22 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Gale. HEBREW UNION COLLEGE. 20 Feb. 2008
<<http://find.galegroup.com/gvrl/infomark.do?&contentSet=EBKS&type=retrieve&tabID=T001&prodId=GVRL&docId=CX2587520235&source=gale&userGroupName=hebrewuc11&version=1.0>>.

⁴ JPS 1917 Translation

⁵ JPS 1917 Translation

a great voice and said, "Why have you deceived me, you are Saul."⁶ In response, Saul told the woman not to be afraid and asked her what she saw. In verses 28:13-14 the woman replied to Saul saying, "*I see a godlike being coming up out of the earth...An old man cometh up; and he is covered with a robe.*"⁷ Saul immediately "prostrated" himself and then Samuel rebuked Saul, asking him why he woke him from his slumber to bring him up. Saul responds to the ghost saying that he is very upset because the Philistines are preparing to attack and God has left him.

Saul again repeats that Adonai has not responded to him neither by dreams nor by prophets and therefore, all that Saul could think to do was to call upon Samuel for guidance. In what could almost be deemed as sarcasm, Samuel says to Saul "what do you want from me, since God has departed from you and became your enemy." Samuel continues to explain to Saul that Adonai has taken the kingdom from him and will give it to David because Saul did not listen to God's voice in "executing wrath upon Amalek." (In chapter 15 when Saul is in battle with the Amalekites, he *did not utterly destroy them as he was commanded to do*).

In the most dramatic part of his report to Saul, Samuel tells him that Adonai will "deliver Israel into the hands of the Philistines" and also states that "tomorrow you and your sons will be with me," thus letting Saul know that not only would he perish the next day, but so would his sons. Saul then collapsed having no strength because of the message he heard from Samuel and because he had not eaten at all that day. The Witch of Endor, in an act of great compassion and hospitality, says to Saul that since she has put

⁶ Author's translation

⁷ JPS 1917 translation

her life in his hands and listened to what he said to her, now he should listen to her and let her give him some bread so that he will have strength for his journey. Saul refused but at the urging of his men and the woman he finally agreed. The woman prepared a great meal for him and then he and his men ate and went on their way. At this point the chapter ends and this woman is never heard of again.

According to Jewish tradition, this unnamed necromancer is actually given different names. For example in one early source she is known as Sedecla (tzedek lo), meaning unrighteous, obviously because her acts of sorcery marked her as being unrighteous.⁸ It is also said that she was possibly known as Tobal according to Rashi in his explanation of Isaiah 7:6.⁹ According to Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer she is known by yet another name- that of "Zephaniah." This name means, the "hidden one," most likely because she herself had to remain hidden so as not to perish for her divination.¹⁰ In the play "The Witch of Endor: a Tragedy" by Robert Norwood, yet another name is given for this diviner, which is Lobuhamah, the Witch of Endor and Priestess of Ashtoreth.¹¹ Other than revealing her names, one of the only other details about her recorded in Jewish folklore is that she practiced sorcery for 40 years, thus deceiving Israel for quite a long time.¹²

⁸ See Pseudo Philo 59 cited in Ginsberg, *Legends of the Jews*, footnote 74, page 903, volume 2

⁹ Rashi as cited in Ginsberg page 903

¹⁰ See Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer as noted in Ginsberg, footnote 74 page 903, volume 2

¹¹ Norwood, Robert, "The Witch of Endor: A Tragedy" George H. Doran company, New York 1916

¹² Pseudo-Philo 64:3-5 in Balter, Shlomo. "En-Dor, Witch of." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 6. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 405. 22 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Gale. HEBREW UNION COLLEGE. 20 Feb. 2008
<<http://find.galegroup.com/gvrl/infomark.do?&contentSet=EBKS&type=retrieve&tabID=T001&prodId=GVR&docId=CX2587505948&source=gale&userGroupName=hebrewuc11&version=1.0>>.

Jewish legend may not go into more elaborate detail about the woman in Endor, however there is a description given as to the specifics of her divination in Midrash Leviticus Rabbah. This midrash explains that the woman, “did her performances, and spoke her formulas, and brought him up.”¹³ Furthermore, the midrash says that when the woman saw Samuel she was so startled that she cried out in a loud voice. At this point, she knew it was Saul who requested her services since the ghost comes up differently for a king than it does for an ordinary person. That is to say, “*for an ordinary person [the ghost] comes up face downwards, while for a king it comes face upwards.*”¹⁴ This story also explains how each of the people present perceived the ghost. For it is said, “*in regard to one who conjures up the dead by means of necromancy, ... he that conjures him up sees him but does not hear his voice, ... he that needs him hears his voice but does not see him, and ... he that does not need him neither hears his voice nor sees him.*”¹⁵ Therefore, based on this explanation, the woman saw Samuel but couldn’t hear him, Saul could hear Samuel but not see him and neither of his servants heard or saw Samuel.¹⁶

Within the midrash the unnamed men who accompany Saul are, like the witch, finally given names. One of the servants with him was Abner and the other one was known as Amasa.¹⁷ Jewish tradition says that Abner is actually the son of the woman in Endor. Furthermore, according to Pirkei De Rabbi Eleizer, Abner was the cousin of Saul which would make Abner’s mother Zephaniah, the witch, also a relative of Saul’s- either

¹³ Midrash Rabbah - Leviticus XXVI:7

¹⁴ Midrash Rabbah - Leviticus XXVI:7

¹⁵ Midrash Rabbah - Leviticus XXVI:7

¹⁶ Midrash Rabbah - Leviticus XXVI:7

¹⁷ Perkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 33 and related sources, see Ginzberg, page 900

his cousin or possibly even his aunt!¹⁸ According to the first book of Chronicles 8:33, it is also likely that Abner was actually Saul's uncle, not his cousin.¹⁹

While there is little detail given about the witch other than her name, her son Abner is more fully described. Abner was considered the most important figure in the entire court of Saul.²⁰ He is mentioned in 1 Samuel 20:25 as sitting by Saul's side, thus further proof that he was a very important person in Saul's court. Abner was renowned for his size and even considered to be a giant. It was said that a wall "measuring six ells in thickness could be moved more easily than one of Abner's feet."²¹ One story goes that King David was almost crushed to death when he got between the feet of Abner as he slept. Abner moved his feet and David was able to escape with his life.²² Conscious of his vast strength it is said that Abner once cried out: "If only I could seize the earth at some point, I should be able to shake it."²³

Even without specifics, there are other aspects of the characterization of the Witch of Endor that can be inferred by her actions. It is worth noting that she is one of only a few women in the entire Bible who has a prophetic role. This woman was also further unlike most other prophets by providing comfort to Saul when encouraging him to stay for a meal. Also, the text says that Saul specifically sought out a woman to divine for him, thus it can be inferred that woman, more so than man, had the power of being able

¹⁸ Perkei de Rabbi Eliezar 33 as cited in Ginzberg page 905

¹⁹ Ormann, Gustav. "Abner." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. Vol. 1. 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 263-264. 22 vols. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Gale. HEBREW UNION COLLEGE. 20 Feb. 2008

<<http://find.galegroup.com/gvrl/infomark.do?&contentSet=EBKS&type=retrieve&tabID=T001&prodId=GURL&docId=CX2587500162&source=gale&userGroupName=hebrewuc11&version=1.0>>.)

²⁰ Perkei de Rabbi Eliezar 33 as cited in Ginzberg page 905

²¹ Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 9.11 as cited in Ginzberg page 905

²² 2 Alphabet of Ben Sira 24b and related sources, see Ginzberg page 905

²³ Ginzberg, page 905 from Yalkut II 285 on Jeremiah 9.22

to call upon the spirits²⁴,”

Today, the name Endor continues to be known amongst Star Wars fans, as the home of the “Ewoks” is the place name of Endor. Others may know the name Endor as it is quite likely that the character of Samantha’s mother on the long-running sitcom of “Bewitched” was named “Endora” after this famous woman from the bible who also had supernatural abilities. The Biblical Witch of Endor also likely served as an inspiration for the macabre character, “Madame Endora” in the “Dark Realms” magazine.²⁵ Thus this unnamed character, not only affected Saul, but has left her mark on popular culture as well. While she is known mostly as someone who disobeyed both God’s rule and Saul’s law, she was woman of supernatural powers. It is worth noting that she didn’t suffer consequences from her actions, rather Saul who asked her to divine for him was told of his disastrous fate. This woman, who far too often was thought of negatively as a witch, was both hospitable and kind in her dealings with Saul. Thus Zedecia was in some ways righteous, and while she may have been hidden, her kindness was clear. Thus this woman legacy is not only of her power of conjuring spirits, but also she serves as a reminder for for all of Israel to beware of necromancy and divination.

²⁴ American Jewish Life, <http://www.ajlmagazine.com/archivesblog/2007/11/heretic-of-month-witch-of-endor.html>, Text by Jay Michaelson / Photo courtesy of Encyclopedia Judaica, Nov/Dec 2007 issue

²⁵ http://www.monolithgraphics.com/pages/vr.html?/pages/dr_current.html

Chapter Nine: Queen of Sheba

With regards to famous Queens, it is possible that the Queen of Sheba is second in the Jewish tradition only to that of Queen Esther. However the Queen of Sheba, nameless in the Biblical text has a story just as rich as she was purported to be. The story of the Queen from Sheba, which is probably modern-day Yemen ¹ (the region of Sheba is an alternate spelling of Saba), is told in 1 Kings Chapter 10 and repeated in 2nd Chronicles . The story begins that the Queen heard of King Solomon because of the name of Adonai came to her. She travelled to Jerusalem, with great wealth including gold and spices, to prove Solomon's wisdom by asking hard questions of him. After asking her questions she was well satisfied with his wisdom. However, after seeing all that he possessed and his offering to Adonai, "the spirit had left her."² She then said to the king that she had heard reports of how wise and wealthy he was, but the truth far exceeded what she had heard. She also observed how happy his servants were and anyone who was able to hear of his wisdom. In response to that, in verse 10:9, she offers a blessing to Adonai, saying, "Blessed be the Lord thy God, who delighted in thee, to set thee on the throne of Israel; because the Lord loved Israel for ever, therefore made He thee king, to do justice and righteousness³." After that, the Queen gave King Solomon gold, spices and stones which she had brought with her. Solomon also received sandal-wood from her with which he

¹Lemonick, Michael D And Andrea Dorfman , Monday, Sep. 10, 2001, "Searching for Sheba", Time magazine, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000720,00.html>

² JPS 1917 Translation

³ JPS 1917 Translation

made pillars for the house of Adonai. In turn, Solomon gave her all that she desired from his treasury and then she returned with her servants back to her land.

This story of the Queen of Sheba is repeated in the Hebrew Bible in 2 Chronicles, chapter 9 verses 1-12. The repetition of the story is almost identical. However, it does not begin by saying that the Queen heard of Solomon because of Adonai. Also in verse 9:4 of 2 chronicles it says, his ascent by which he went up into the house of the Lord” instead of “the offerings he offered to the Lord,” as it does in the Kings text. The blessing that the Queen offers differs slightly in Chronicles for in verse 8 she says, “Blessed be the Lord thy God, who delighted in thee, to set thee on His throne, to be king for the Lord thy God; because thy God loved Israel, to establish them forever, therefore made He thee king over them, to do justice and righteousness.⁴” Finally, the only other real difference is that in the Chronicles text there is reference to a special type of spice that the Queen brings where in the Kings text it alludes more to the abundance of spices she brings to the king.

In order to find out more details of the Queen of Sheba in Jewish lore, it is necessary to look in the Midrash to Proverbs, the Midrash ha-Hafez and the Targum Sheni, an Aramaic commentary to the book of Esther written around 500CE. ⁵ In the midrash to Mishle (Proverbs) according to Rabbi Jeremiah Bar Shalom, the Queen of Sheba intended to ask but one riddle of the King, “What is it? Seven depart and nine enter, two give drink but only one partakes.” The king responded, “No doubt, seven are the days of the menstrual period, nine are the months of pregnancy, two [refers] to the breasts that succor and one to the child born who drinks from

⁴ All biblical quotes are taken from the Jewish Publication Society translation, 1917

⁵ Lassner, Jacob, “Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam, Univeristy of chicago Press, 1993

there.” Since he got it right, she requested from him if she could ask another question and he agreed. The next question, “Your father is my father. Your grandfather is my husband. You are my son and I am your sister.” To which King Solomon responded, “the two daughters of Lot.” The text continues with her asking two more tests of King Solomon, which he also gets correct. The midrash ends with the message that men are wiser, that Israelites are preferred by God than gentiles and that the Queen of Sheba, “because she is so wise,” should recognize these “facts.”⁶

In the Midrash ha-Hafez, Rabbi Ishmael tells the story of the meeting between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon, detailing the same four tests in the midrash to Mishle and adding 15 more, many of which deal with biblical stories.⁷ In the story from the Targum the account of the Queen of Sheba is expanded by offering more details. While she still remains nameless, here she is summoned by a Hoopoe bird and urged to see King Solomon. This motif is similar to that of the Koran (see below). This legend also includes a scene in which the Queen of Sheba reveals her legs to avoid stepping in what she thinks is water, but is really a polished floor. In revealing her legs, Solomon acknowledges that though she is beautiful, her “hairy legs are shameful.” This version of the story tends to shed a negative light upon the Queen of Sheba where her hairiness is seen as being associated with demons.⁸

Judaism, Christianity and Islam also all use the story of the Queen of Sheba in various conversion motifs. Within Judaism there are those who see the Queen of Sheba as having converted to Judaism after praising King Solomon and his God. Within Christianity, the story of the Queen of Sheba, also called the Queen of the South in Luke

⁶ Lassner, Jacob, “Boundaries of Gender and Culture in Postbiblical Judaism and Medieval Islam, University of Chicago Press, 1993, page 11-12

⁷ Lassner, Jacob, page 13

⁸ Page 18, Bellis, Alice Ogden, The Queen of Sheba : A Gender-Sensitive Reading,

Journal of Religious Thought 51 no 2 Wint-Spr 1994-1995, p 17-28. ISSN:

0022-4235, 1994 Issued by ATLA: 20070815,

ATLA0001017259 Persistent link to this record:

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a6h&AN=ATLA0001017259&site=ehost-live> - Database: ATLASerials, Religion Collection

11:31 and Mathew 12:42, is connected with that of Jesus. Alice Ogden Bellis writes that in the Christian scriptures, *"Jesus rebukes his generation as an evil generation, saying that at the judgment, the Queen of the South will rise up with them and condemn them because she traveled far to hear Solomon's wisdom and something greater than Solomon has appeared. The implication is that Sheba submitted to Solomon in the same way that Jesus' generation should submit to him."*⁹

Similarly, in the Islamic tradition, this story of the Queen of Sheba is likened to a story of conversion. In the Koran, in Sura 27 verses 15-44 the story of the Queen of Sheba is retold and here, like in the above story from the Targum Sheni, the Hoopoe bird is involved. Here, Solomon was endowed not only with vast knowledge in general, but also with an ability to understand the language of the birds as mentioned in verse 27:16. In 27:20 it was first noticed that the Hoopoe bird was missing, however the bird returned and reported to the soldiers of Solomon that it had been to Sheba and reported that he saw the following in Sheba:

"[27:23] 'I found a woman ruling them, who is blessed with everything, and possesses a tremendous palace. [27:24] 'I found her and her people prostrating before the sun, instead of GOD. The devil has adorned their works in their eyes, and has repulsed them from the path; consequently, they are not guided.' [27:25] They should have been prostrating before GOD, the One who manifests all the mysteries in the heavens and the earth, and the One who knows everything you conceal and everything you declare. [27:26] GOD: there is no other god beside Him; the Lord with the great dominion.

In response, the Koran continues that King Solomon then gave a letter to the Hoopoe bird to bring to the people of Sheba. The Queen of Sheba excitedly received the letter and asks her counselors what she should do regarding King Solomon's letter,

⁹ Bellis, Page 18

which is in the name of God, and proclaims “Do not be arrogant; come to me as submitters.” The Hoopoe returns to Solomon with a gift, and Solomon then has the Hoopoe return to the Queen of Sheba proclaiming that “what God has given me is far better than what he has given you. You are the ones to rejoice in such gifts.”¹⁰ Solomon continued in his message, delivered by the bird, warning the Queen and her people of all the vast power and forces that he possessed. The story details that Solomon was strong enough to evict the Queen of her own land if he so chose. Towards the end of this story, the Queen visits Solomon. In the last verse, she shows her ignorance of thinking a crystal floor was actually water and thus lifting her skirt and exposing her legs. At the very end of the story, the Queen then rejects her belief of idols and submits to believing in God, saying, “My Lord, I have wronged my soul. I now submit with Solomon to God, Lord of the universe.”¹¹

Of all the various traditions, the story of the Queen of Sheba is perhaps held in the highest regard by those of Ethiopian descent. This is evidenced through the book, *Kebra Nagast*, or “The Glory of the Kings.” This work is made up of details from Rabbinic writings, pagan stories, Christian Egyptian sources, Arabian tales and Ethiopian sources. The earliest form of this text goes back to the 6th century CE.¹² While it is a very “Christian” text, it does include many interesting aspects of the Queen of Sheba, such as the following description:

¹⁰ <http://www.submission.org/suras/sura27.html>, Sura - 27 The Ant (Al-Naml) Order Of Revelation 48, Verse 27:36

¹¹ <http://www.submission.org/suras/sura27.html>, Sura - 27 The Ant (Al-Naml) Order Of Revelation 48, Verses: 93

¹² *Kebra nagast, The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek*, translated by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, Parentheses Publications, Ethiopian Series, Cambridge, Ontario 2000, preface

"Queen of the South (referenced by the Christian scriptures in Matthew XII, 42 and Luke xi, 31) of whom He spake was the Queen of Ethiopia. And in the words "ends of the Earth" [he maketh allusion] to the delicacy of the constitution of women, and the long distance of the journey, and the burning heat of the sun, and the hunger on the way, and the thirst for water. And this queen of the South was very beautiful in face, and her stature was superb, and her understanding was intelligence, which God had given her, were of such high character that she went to Jerusalem to hear the wisdom of Solomon; now this was done by the command of God and it was His good pleasure. And moreover, she was exceedingly rich, for God had given her glory, and riches and gold and silver and splendid apparel, and camels and slaves, and trading men. And they carried on her business and trafficked for her by sea and by land and in India and Aswan.¹³

The text is said to be the "the final authority on the history of the conversion of the Ethiopians from the worship of the sun, moon and stars to the Lord God of Israel.¹⁴"

According to this text, the King of Ethiopia was said to be a descendant of Solomon, King of Israel, by Makeda the Queen of Azeb, who was better known as the "Queen of Sheba."¹⁵ The introduction of the Kebra Nagast, lists that the Queen of Sheba was also known by the name of "balqis" to the Arabs, and Ethiopian writers called her Makeda. It further goes on to detail that it is doubtful that she was an Ethiopian, and it is far more probable that her home was Saba or Sheba in the south-west of Arabia. The Kebra Nagast explains that the Queen of Sheba was probably a princess among the Sabaens and according to a manuscript at Oxford, it says that five kings reigned in Ethiopia before her. If that was the case, and these kings were her ancestors, she was likely a native from a country on the western shore of the Red sea.¹⁶

¹³ Kebra nagast, The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek, translated by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, Parentheses Publications, Ethiopian Series, Cambridge, Ontario 2000, page 15-16

¹⁴ Kebra nagast, The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek, translated by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, Parentheses Publications, Ethiopian Series, Cambridge, Ontario 2000, page 15-16

¹⁵ Kebra nagast, The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek, translated by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, Parentheses Publications, Ethiopian Series, Cambridge, Ontario 2000 introduction

¹⁶ Kebra nagast, The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek, translated by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, Parentheses Publications, Ethiopian Series, Cambridge, Ontario 2000 page 27

It is also recorded in this legend in the Kebra Nagast, that after arriving in Jerusalem, the Queen of Sheba spent many months in the quarters of King Solomon. After much time had passed, the King threw a banquet in her honor and that night he took her as a wife. When the Queen or Makeda (as she is called in Ethiopic tradition) knew that she was with child, she bade farewell to Solomon. He gave her a ring as a token, and upon her return to her home her son Menyelek was born (he has many names according to Ethiopic literature, one of which translates into "the son of the wise man"). When Menyelek reached manhood, he insisted that he be allowed to see his father in Jerusalem and she gave him the ring with which to return to King Solomon.¹⁷ Since his resemblance to his father was striking, upon meeting him the only proof King Solomon needed was seeing the ring he had given to Makeda. The story continues that King Solomon trained his son Menyelek and truly treated him as royalty. However, after a few months Menyelek wanted to return to his mother's country. She had originally asked Solomon for a portion of the fringe covering the Tabernacle to represent God's presence. Solomon agreed to that, however, on his departure, Menyelek stole the entire "Tabernacle Zion" (which contained the two Tables of the law, the pot of manna, Aaron's rod and more) because he believed in doing so they would keep the God of Israel with them. Solomon chased after them, but to no avail, and Menyelek safely reached the Ethiopian kingdom. There he modeled it after the kingdom of Solomon and introduced the laws of God and "admonitions of Moses" to the people. Menyelek was well received and his mother even

¹⁷ Kebra nagast, *The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek*, translated by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, Parentheses Publications, Ethiopian Series, Cambridge, Ontario 2000 page XXVIII

abdicated the throne to him. After she passed the throne to her son, Queen Makeda is not mentioned again in the Kebra Nagast.¹⁸

Today there are even those who can, through her son, link the Queen of Sheba to the incredibly popular reggae singer, Bob Marley. According to legend, King Solomon gave to the Queen of Sheba a ring that had the lion of Judah engraved on a black stone for her to give to her firstborn child- who was his son as well. Supposedly, when their child, Menlik¹⁹ (alternate spelling) place the ring on his finger, “felt a surge of electric burning energy suddenly coursing through him.”²⁰ It is reported that this ring was then handed down through all the generations of the ruling family of Ethiopia through to the coronation in 1930 of the Emperor Haile Selassie, who was also called Ras Tafari. Supposedly after Selassie’s death, his son gave Bob Marley the famous ring. Marley, who was buried with the ring had told his mother that sometimes the ring would burn his finger like fire...thus continuing the legend of divine energy felt when the ring was first worn.²¹

These legends of the Queen of Sheba have intrigued people all over the world. “Westerners” have actually been looking for the exact location of her “kingdom” since at least 1843 when a French apothecary by the name of Joseph Thomas Arnaud went in search of the spices she reported to have brought to King Solomon. Since 1988 an international team of archaeologists from Yemen, the United States, Canada, Britain,

¹⁸ Kebra nagast, The Queen of Sheba and her Only Son Menyelek, translated by Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, Parentheses Publications, Ethiopian Series, Cambridge, Ontario 2000 page XXIX-XXX- *for more details of their time together- the queen and King Solomon- page 97- How the Merchant returned to Ethiopia- How the Queen brought forth and came to her own country page 114*

¹⁹ Alternate spelling of Menelyk

²⁰ Raver 129 from timothy White, to Catch a fire London: corgi Books, 1984 page 62-3

²¹ Raver 129

Australia and other places have been searching for proof of the Queen's existence in Yemen. Their search has led them to a 3,500 year-old temple complex in the north (about 80 miles from Sanaa, the capital of Yemen) known as Mahram Bilqis- "the Queen of Sheba's sanctified place." The temple complex covers 15 acres and is the largest pre-Islamic sanctuary on the Arabian Peninsula. Based on the archeological findings, the complex was used from 1200 BCE until the 6th century CE, which was during the time that the queen supposedly lived, at around 950 BCE.²² Currently, the Yemenite government has even petitioned the United Nations to make this site appear on the list of World Heritage Sites.²³

The Queen of Sheba continues to be immortalized today as she has been for thousands of years. There have been musical pieces, movies and much artwork created to portray her and her supposed amorous encounter with King Solomon. There are many people who also believe that the Queen of Sheba was the true inspiration for King Solomon's Shir Hashirim- the Song of Songs. Within the African American community, it is also quite common to quote chapter 1:5 of Song of Songs, where it states, "I am black, but beautiful (comely),"²⁴ as an affirmation of the beauty and legacy both of the Queen of Sheba and black women in general. The famous American poet Maya Angelou details this in her poem, "Now Sheba Sings the Song," which affirms the strength of all women- no matter their color of skin. (See appendix)²⁵ Furthermore, the Queen of Sheba still remains incredibly relevant today, as one of the theories for how there came to be

²² Michael D. Lemonick And Andrea Dorfman , Monday, Sep. 10, 2001, "searching for Sheba", time magazine, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000720,00.html>

²³ "Archeological site of Marib," United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1717/> 29 January 2008

²⁴ JPS 1917 and author's translation

²⁵ Angelou, Maya, "Now Sheba Sings the Song," New York, EP Dutton, Dial Books 1987

Jews in Ethiopia, most of whom now live in Israel, is through her union with King Solomon.

It is clear that this Queen is seen quite differently by almost every different culture. In the main she is nameless and known only by her role as the Queen, yet as detailed in legends there are those who think of her as Makeda and Balkis and even “Black Minerva” by the Greeks.²⁶ No matter how she is called, she is generally thought of in a very positive light. In fact, a common cliché when someone is acting too haughty is to say to them, “Who do you think you are, the Queen of Sheba?”²⁷ For only someone possessing all the wonderful qualities that the Queen did would have the right to act in such a manner. Whether nameless or not, all accounts of her life describe her as being beautiful, intelligent, and powerful. While many other details contradict each other or remain unknown, her legacy has impacted the generations of long ago and will surely continue to impact the generations of many cultures left to come.

²⁶ Michael D. Lemonick And Andrea Dorfman , Monday, Sep. 10, 2001, “searching for Sheba”, time magazine, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000720,00.html>

²⁷ Raver, page 129

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

While it is not particularly clear why any of these characters have remained unnamed, it should be apparently evident that all of these unnamed characters are far more important than just being someone's wife or daughter, a queen or a visiting man. Each character, as experienced through the midrash and other sources possess far more characteristics and importance than a name alone could bestow. For whatever reason they are nameless, perhaps that the original name was lost or the character was not initially deemed important enough to have a name, all these characters enrich the Biblical narrative and also possess a very rich story themselves.

What has been detailed in this thesis can really be seen as a portion of the study of the unnamed characters. There are still other unnamed characters, some whom were mentioned in passing in this thesis. Also, there are plenty of modern midrashim still left to be written. Thus, this is a continually evolving field. Hopefully, this work will also inspire others to find the unnamed individuals in the Bible and elsewhere and try not only to find out their name, but more importantly find out who these characters really were and thus truly bring them to life.

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Appendix:

Whether or not a character has a name clearly has no effect on whether or not that character can be a true inspiration. In fact, all of the characters discussed in this thesis have inspired artists to create truly beautiful works of art, over fifty of which appear on the following pages. Each creation is as different as the legends that surround each Biblical personality.

Some of the artwork reflects only details from the Biblical text and others are based quite closely on the midrashic sources or other legends which describe the characters. This also means that one artist's portrayal may be completely different from another's. An example of this is seen in artworks showing The Queen of Sheba- some have her as a black woman and others as a white woman.

In some instances the artists have created their work appropriate to the customs and time period of the Bible, whereas other artists have created their works by placing the Biblical character in the artist's time period. This is evidenced in the works of art that portray characters such as Potiphar's wife, where some of them have her dressed in garments that would have been worn in medieval Europe.

Another differentiating factor about the artworks portraying these unnamed characters is their style, technique, and even mediums. For example, artists have created representations of the story of Noah's ark in stained glass windows, oil paintings, frescos, mosaics and much more.

Just as the unnamed characters have inspired artists to create, the artists in turn can inspire the Biblical reader. For a study of some of the artwork will allow the reader to perceive some of the unnamed characters in a much deeper sense. The artwork that follows truly brings the characters to life and allows them to be known in a much greater manner than simply by their roles or relationships that might otherwise limit the Biblical reader.

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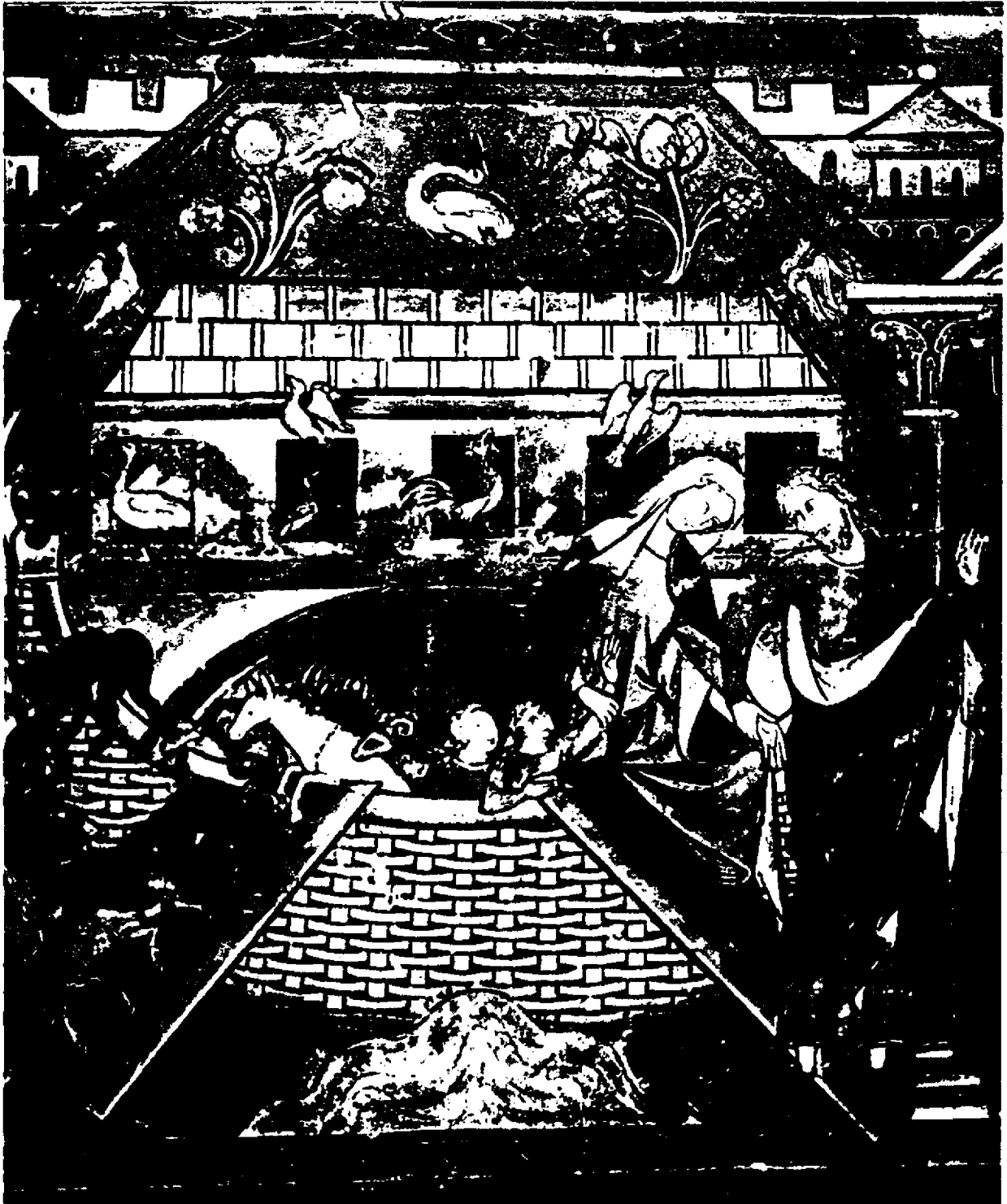
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Noah's Ark by School of Bassano



"Noah's Ark" by Joseph H. Hidley



Noah and his family with the animals going forth from the Ark
French Gothic Manuscript Illumination from Morgan Crusader Bible



Noah and his family and the Animals Leaving the Ark,
St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice



The Noah Window- detail of Noah, his wife, and two sons

Chartres Cathedral



"Noah in the Ark" by Detlen Blunck



"Noah: Building the Ark" by John August Swanson



“Entry of the Animals into Noah’s Ark” by Jacopo Basano il Vecchio produced in collaboration with the painter’s son Francesco Bassano II



Lot Departing from Sodom with His Wife and Daughters

by Raphael A.M. Zanetti



Lot and his Daughters and Sons



Angels Lead Lot and His Wife and Daughters out of Sodom

by Philips Galle

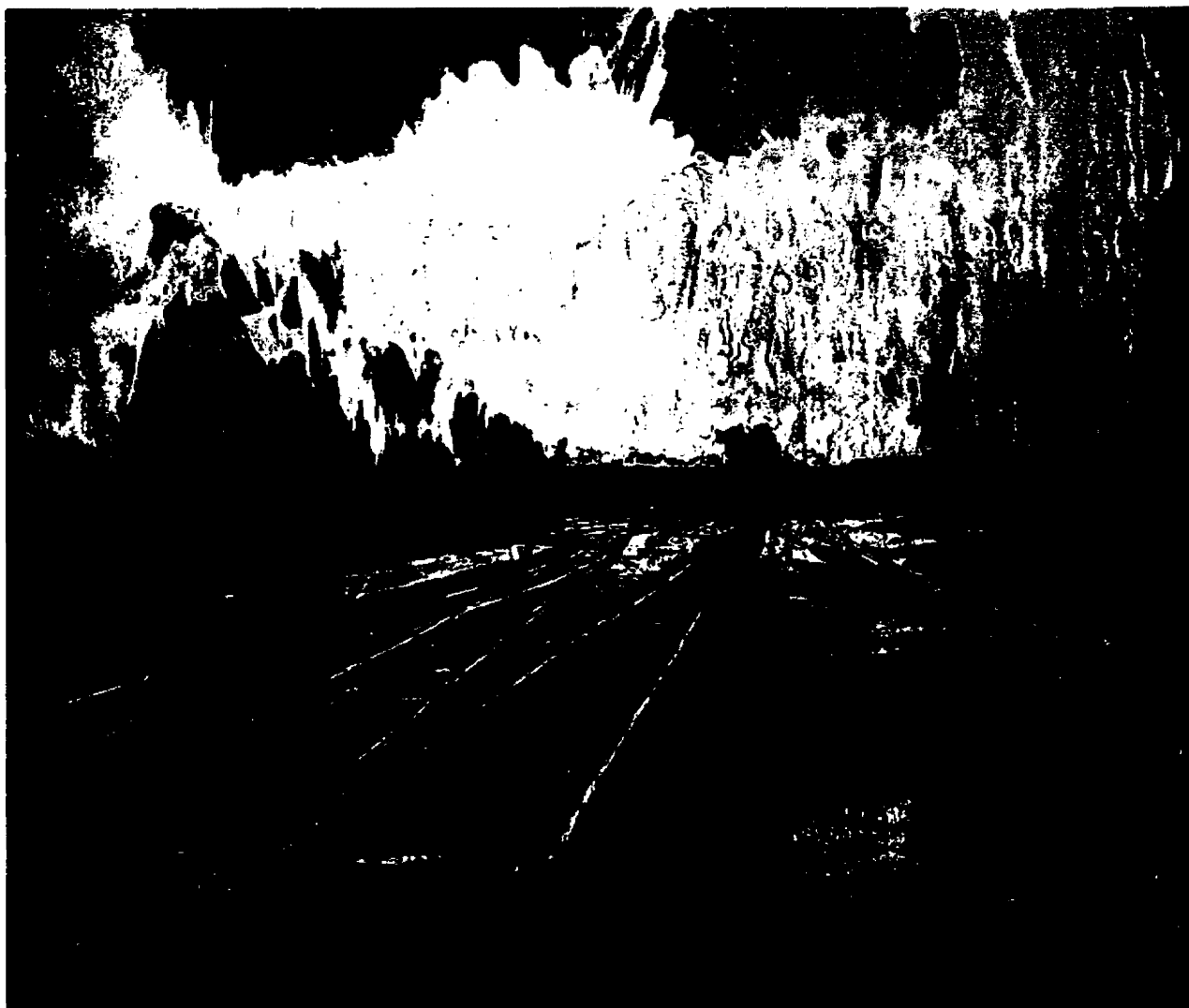


Lot with his wife and Daughters Leaving Sodom

by Raphael Orazio Borgiani



Lot Leaves Sodom. His Wife Turns to Stone. and His Daughters Commit Incest
with Him While Drunk



Lot's Wife- Lot's Frau by Anselm Kiefer



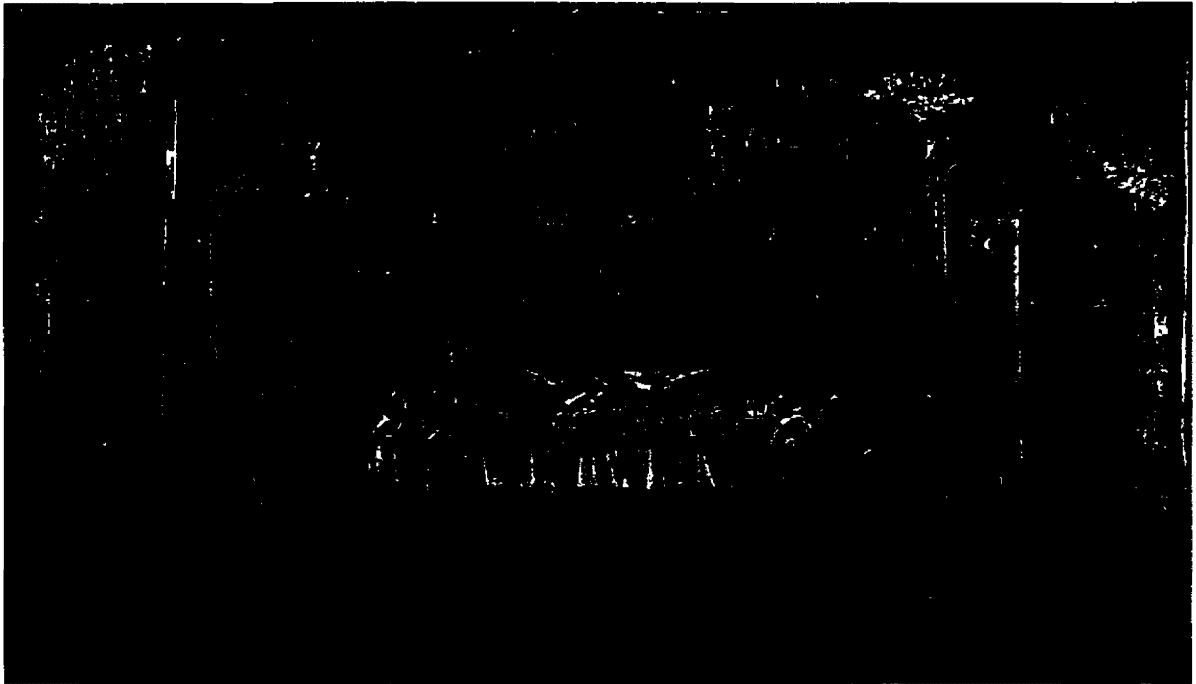
Lot's Wife by Kiki Smith Sculpture



“Lot’s Wife Turned into a Pillar”



Abraham with the Three Angels



Hospitality of Abraham (Anonymous Late Byzantine)



Abraham Entertaining the Three Angels



Abraham visited by Three Angels by Jose Rafael Aragon



The Angels Appearing to Abraham by Francesco Guardi



Abraham et les Trois Anges (Abraham with the Three Angels)

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Abraham with the Three Angels (Vatican Loggia Vault 4)
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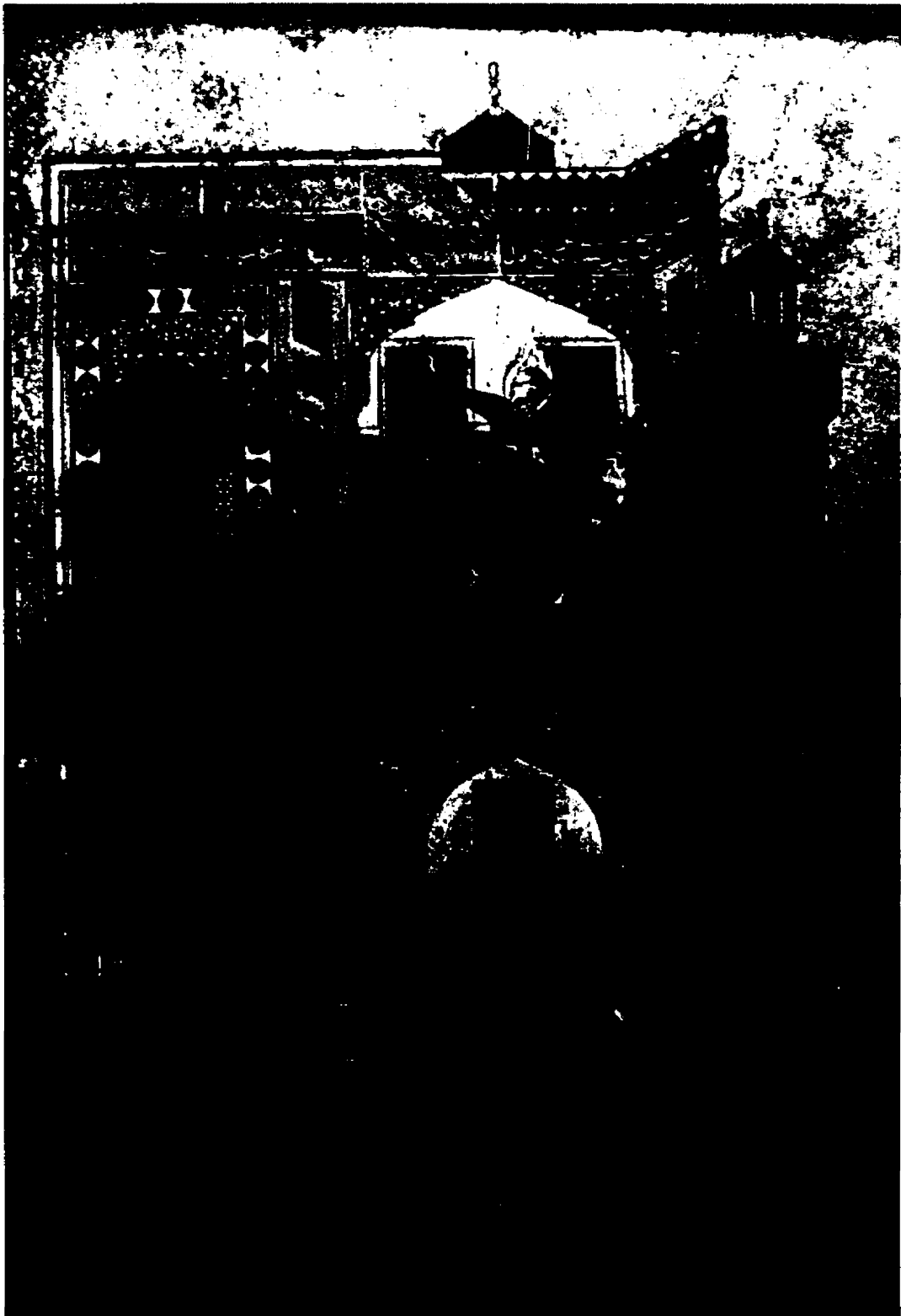
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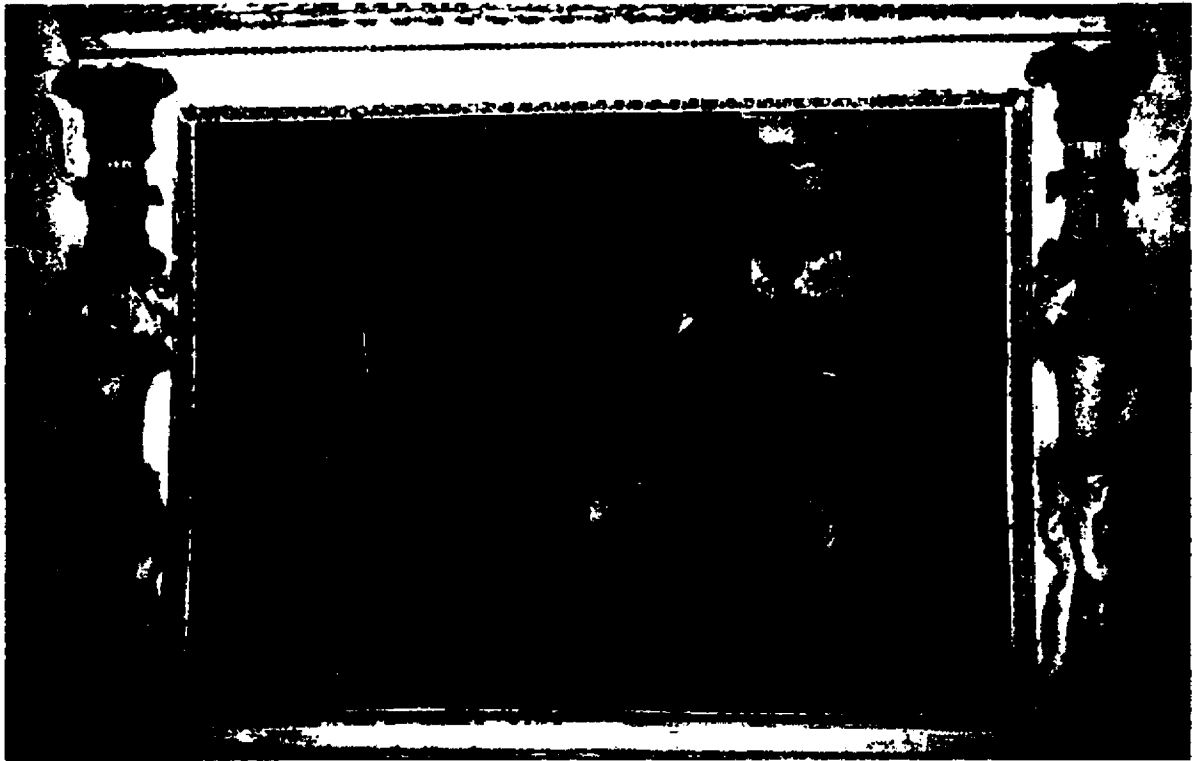
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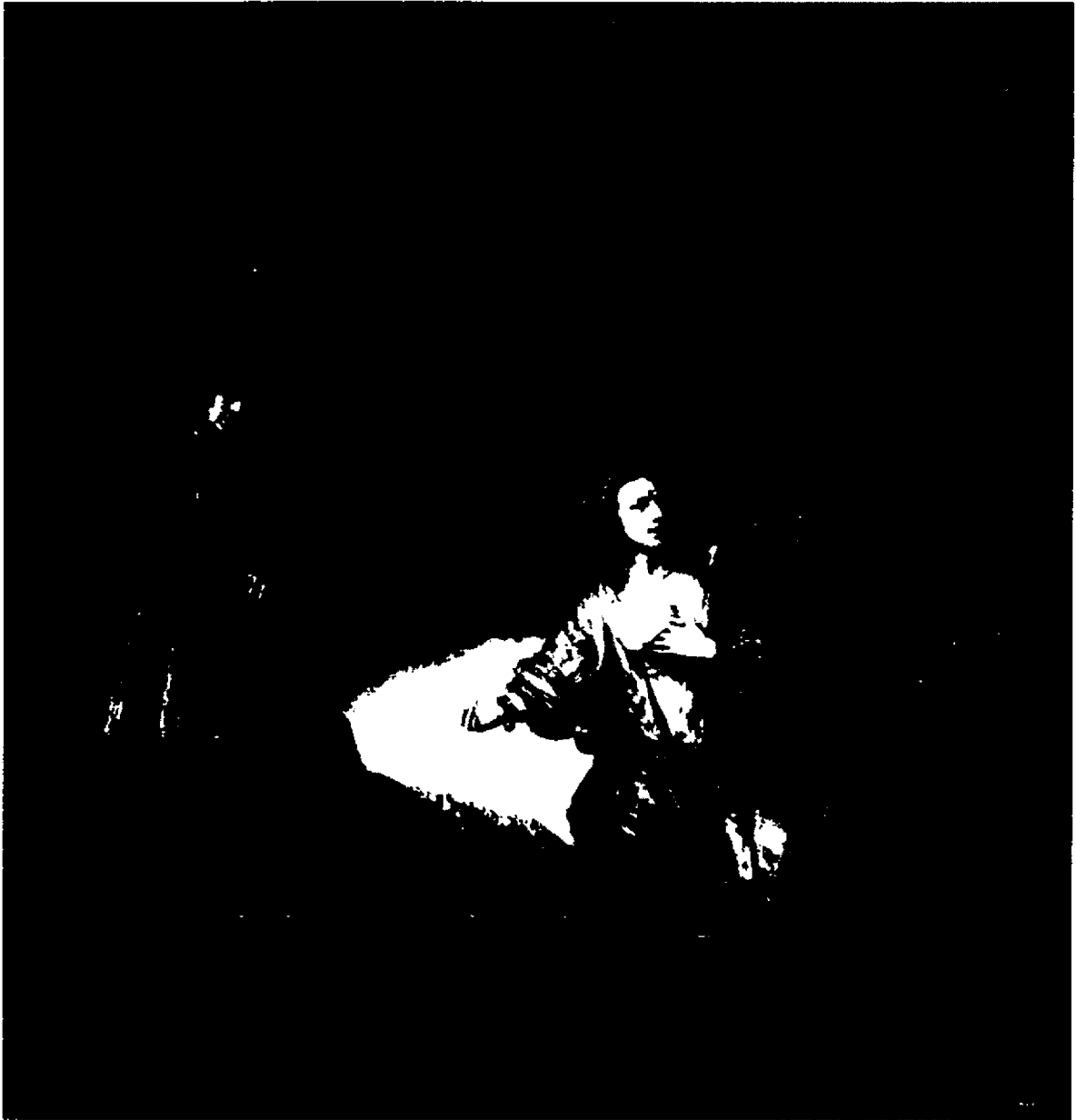
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Joseph and Potiphar's Wife by Giovanni Lanfranco



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Joseph and the Wife of Potiphar by Marc Chagall



The Infant Moses Cast Adrift in a Basket and Finding of Moses by Pharaoh's Daughter

(from the Morgan Crusader Bible)



The Finding of Moses by Sebastiano Ricci



Moses' Birth and Education: Finding of Moses

by Pierre van der Borch



The Finding of Moses by Antoine Coypel



Pharaoh's Daughter Discovers the Infant Moses among the Bullrushes



Saul and Servants with Witch of Endor
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Spirit of Samuel called up Before Saul by the Witch of Endor
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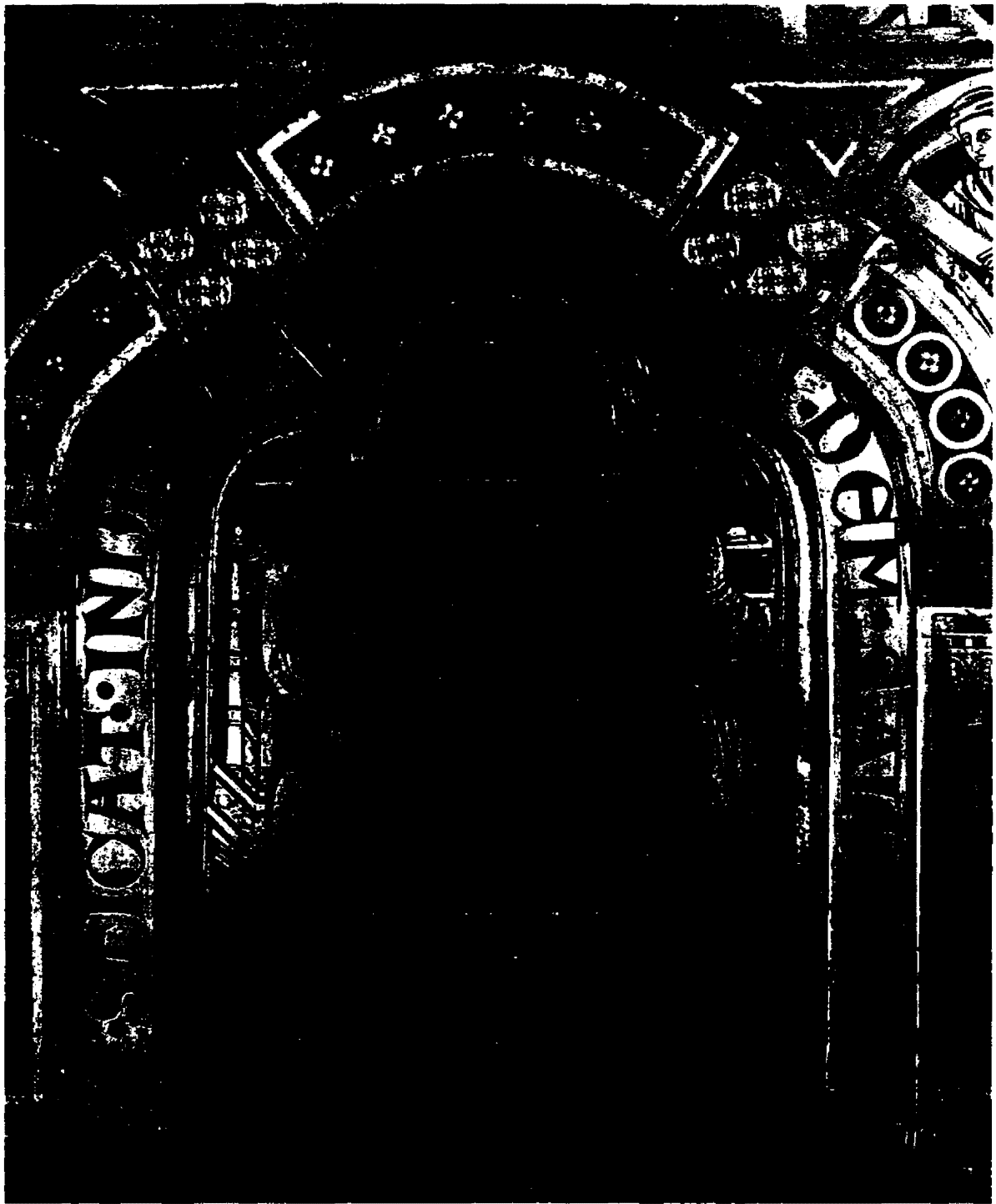
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Klosterneuburg Altar showing the plaque of the Queen of Sheba Bringing Gifts to King Solomon by Nicholas of Verdun



Console of a statue of the Queen of Sheba (Anonymous)



Illumination of the verse from Song of Songs,

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