MORE THAN MISTRESS AND MAIDSERVANT:

A COMPREHENSIVE STUDY OF SARAH AND HAGAR

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Introduction

Now Abram's wife Sarai, who had not borne him a child, had an Egyptian slave named Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram: "Seeing as God has kept me from bearing a child, have intercourse with my slave; maybe I will have a son through her."[1]

Genesis 16:1-2

These two lines in the beginning of Genesis 16 set an active stage for the ensuing events in the lives of Sarai, Abram and Hagar. Within this short narrative, we learn that barren Sarai is married to Abram, Sarai has an Egyptian slave named Hagar and orders her husband to have intercourse with her slave. Five chapters later in Genesis 21, the dramatic story line becomes more intricate. We learn that Sarai (now renamed Sarah by God) loathes Hagar and Sarai orders Abram (now renamed Abraham by God) to exile Hagar and her son, Ishmael, from their home.

While the events in Genesis 16 and Genesis 21 are detailed and complex, the development of the female characters, Sarah and Hagar, within the biblical narrative is starkly lacking. Although dialogue between these two women does not exist within the biblical narrative, I was determined to come to an understanding about their relationship as well as to comprehend the thought processes of each.

To gain clearer insight into who Sarah and Hagar may have been and how their relationship may have played out with each other, I enlisted the help of midrashic sources such as Breishit Rabbah, Medieval Rabbinic commentators such as Rashi and Ramban, respected biblical scholars including Claus Westermann and Nahum Sarna, and a plethora

[1]Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, ed. and Andrea L. Weiss, ed. *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (New York: Women URJ Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), 71.

of feminist biblical scholars such as Phyllis Trible, Tikva Frymer-Kensky and Savina Teubal. I also studied other forms of Midrash including poetic and musical midrash in order to gain a greater perspective and appreciation of these women.

The first chapter of my thesis, "The Mistress and Maidservant before they meet: Who is Sarai? Who is Hagar?" begins with an exploration of Sarai during her journeys as she travels to the land of Canaan with her husband, Abram in Genesis Chapter 12. I surmise that due to her experiences on her journey to Canaan as detailed in Chapter 12, Sarai may have been physically and emotionally defeated, which may be a reason for her future harsh treatment of her maidservant, Hagar.

Within this first thesis chapter, I also examine the possible origins of Hagar before her interactions with Sarai in Genesis Chapter 16. While Hagar's ancestry remain a mystery, I address various theories regarding Hagar's possible genealogy and background leading up to her introduction into the biblical narrative.

Once I acquire a deeper understanding of these two women and their life experiences before they meet, I continue by exploring the ways in which they interact together in Genesis 16. My observations are found in part one of the second thesis chapter entitled, "A Biblical, Rabbinic and Midrashic Analysis of Genesis 16:1-16." I gain much insight by studying Rabbinic commentators' views on the incidents in Genesis 16:1-16, particularly those regarding Sarah. I learn that Sarah's unfavorable treatment of Hagar is often defended and justified by the early Rabbis. Hagar, on the other hand, is frequently overlooked by early commentators and fails to form an identity outside of her maidservant role.

Feminist midrashic writers, however, as evidenced in the second part of this chapter entitled, “Friends or Foes: Three Feminist Retellings of Sarah and Hagar,” view Sarah and Hagar’s relationship in ways that depart from the biblical text. Whether placing these women at odds with each other or understanding them as close, intimate friends, these feminist midrashic authors allow both women the opportunity to defend and explain their feelings and actions.

Chapter three, “Biblical, Rabbinic and Midrashic Analysis of Genesis 21:9-21,” primarily focuses on Hagar’s expulsion in the wilderness. I am particularly taken by Sarah’s motives in convincing Abraham to exile Hagar and her child. Most intriguing, to me, is the discovery of who Hagar becomes after she is cast out in the wilderness. At the end of Genesis 21, Hagar disappears, and her whereabouts are not determined.

To gain a better understanding of who Hagar may have become, I study the poetry of Hebrew poet, Anda Pinkerfeld-Amir in a section of the third chapter I call, “What happens next? Exploring Hagar through Modern Poetic Midrash.” Analyzing the way in which Pinkerfeld-Amir understands and portrays Hagar has helped me to answer a number of my own lingering questions. For example, is Hagar merely a womb Sarah enticed to fulfill her wifely duties? Is Hagar merely the concubine Sarah cast out due to jealousy? Or is there more to Hagar? And if so, is there more to the relationship between Hagar and Sarah than what ultimately amounts to a soap opera story set in biblical times?

The final chapter of this thesis, “Exploring Complexities of Character in Act I, Scene I of Sarah and Hagar,” focuses on Sarah and Hagar’s portrayal within Modern Jewish opera. Specifically, I generate a musical analysis of the first scene of Gerald Cohen’s *Sarah and Hagar*. Composers and librettists are now giving voice to Hagar and

to her relationship with Sarah. Through the medium of song, the inner struggles and intricate bond between these women are extensively revealed.

Throughout this thesis I insist that Hagar not be considered a mere footnote in Biblical history, and that one must analyze her relationship with Sarah. It stands to reason, given the two chapters devoted to the interactions between these two women, that their relationship is more complex than the rudimentary tale of master and servant, wife and concubine, helpmate and whore, whose ultimate purpose is to serve the needs of their man, Abraham.

I. The Mistress and Maidservant Before they Meet

A. Who is Sarai?

While Sarah and Hagar appear together twice within the Genesis narrative, Sarah, or Sarai as she is referred to originally, is introduced several chapters before she and Hagar are mentioned together in Genesis 16:1. Sarai first appears in Genesis 11:29-30 where she is introduced as the wife of Abram. While Abram's entire origin is specified, such as the names of his father and brothers, nothing of Sarai's ancestry is revealed. The first piece of information that is divulged states "Sarai is barren" (*vat'hi Sarai akarah)*.

After revealing that Sarai is childless, we learn in the same verse, "she had no offspring" (*ein la valad*). In Breishit Rabbah 38:14, Talmudic sage R. Levi argues that this phrase takes on an opposite meaning. He asserts that within Biblical stories, "whenever '*she had not*' is found, eventually '*she did have.*'" Elucidating on this point, R. Levi sites Genesis 21:1-2 where God remembers Sarah, erasing her barren state and granting her a child. R. Levi also refers to 1 Samuel 1:2 in which Hannah is childless and is eventually given three sons by God in 1 Samuel 21.[2] R. Levi is making the point that eventually, God does provide for these virtuous women. They do not conceive instantly, however God promises that they will be fulfilled in the future.

Biblical scholar Mary Callaway writes, "This midrash suggests a cycle of deprivation and fulfillment, of devastation and rejection..." which is in the hands of God.[3]

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[2] Breishit Rabbah 38:14. Unless otherwise specified, translations taken from Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, *The Midrash Rabbah.* (London: The Soncino Press, 1977).

[3] Mary Callaway, *Sing, O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash*, Ph. D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1979, 122.

As Callaway further notes, often we are able to see ourselves in these righteous women who were once barren. However, just as God reverses their barren states and provides for them, so too will God nurture us.[4] Although this example in particular discusses the state of barren women, it sends the message that in any situation, God can be counted on to uplift the less fortunate.

In Tractate Yevamoth 64b of The Babylonian Talmud, R. Nahman states in the name of Rabbah b. Abbuha that Sarai is incapable of procreation, as she did not even have a womb. In his rendering, the word *valad*, meaning child is understood as *beit valad* meaning womb.[5] This understanding is significant in that it implies a completely miraculous birth due to divine intervention.

According to contemporary Torah scholar, Dr. Avivah Zornberg (b.1944), these three Hebrew words, *ein la valad*, change the entire flow of the biblical narrative. While Genesis 11:10-11:28 recounts the genealogical line beginning with Shem, it is Genesis 11:30 with the introduction of Sarai where procreation stops and infertility begins.[6] Zornberg points out that the relationship between Abram and Sarai is the first in human existence where the idea of *ein*, or absence, creates an unfamiliar way of "being and having." Procreation has seemed to come easily to those who came before them and those currently close to them. Therefore an unprecedented challenge is set before this husband and wife.[7]

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Babylonian Talmud Yevamoth 64b, *The Soncino Talmud* (Brooklyn: Judaica Press, Inc., 1973).

[6] Avivah Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire, Reflections of Genesis* (New York: Doubleday Publishing Group, 1995), 73.

[7] Ibid., 74.

Sarai's condition as described in Genesis 11:30 indeed becomes extremely critical throughout the Genesis narrative. Biblical scholar Nahum Sarna (1923-2005) states that Sarai's childlessness is a precursor of events to come in the following chapter, Genesis 12[8].

At the beginning of Genesis Chapter 12, God appears to Abram alone, ordering him to "Go forth from your land, your birthplace...to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and it shall be a blessing."[9] Although Abram is given promises of abounding wealth and fortune by God, Abram must not overlook the reality that his wife is barren.[10]

Callaway draws attention to the fact that Sarai's barren state is mentioned at the end of Genesis 11 *before* God's divine promise is given to Abram at the beginning of Chapter 12. By placing this information within the genealogical line, Callaway continues, Sarai's childlessness is viewed as a serious problem from the very start.[11] Feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible (b. 1936) notes that Sarai's barrenness "... endangers the stability, order, continuity, and predictability that genealogy promotes," and immediately seems to predict the demise of a family which is only beginning to form.[12]

Therefore while the ingredients needed to create a great nation are not explicit in the first three verses of Genesis 12, one thing is certain according to biblical scholars.

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[8] Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 86.

[9] Translation of Genesis 12:1, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 61.

[10] Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 87.

[11] Callaway, 21.

[12] Phyllis Trible, "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: A Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. by Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell. (Louisville: Westminster Knox University Press, 2006), 34.

Without a child to carry on the genealogical line, there will not be a great nation. This could be interpreted to mean that the future is riding on Sarai.[13]

As Sarai and Abram go forth on their journey, Abram eventually speaks directly to Sarai for the first time in Genesis 12:11-13 as they are approaching Egypt. In Genesis 12:11 the first words Abram utters to his wife are, "I know what a beautiful woman you are!"[14] Abram's sudden discovery and recognition of Sarai's beauty has several possible explanations. One Aggadic Midrash, Tanchuma 5, states that Abram had not noticed Sarai's beauty until the two arrived at the Nile. There, Abram beholds Sarai's reflection "shining like the sun," stumbling upon her beauty "through an incident."[15] Breishit Rabbah 40:4 understands Abram's discovery in a different way. It states that Abram and Sarai were traveling through difficult conditions, and that this can take its toll on a person's appearance. Nevertheless, Sarai managed to retain her beauty, not allowing nature to get the better of her (Breishit Rabbah: 40:4).

After Abram's discovery of Sarai's appearance, Abram continues speaking to Sarai in Genesis 12:12-13 saying, "So when the Egyptians see you, and say: 'This is his wife,' they may kill me; but you they shall keep alive. Please say then that you are my sister, so that on your account it may go well for me, and that my life may be spared because of you." R. Azariah in Breishit Rabbah 40:4 provides a more detailed scenario in which Abram is speaking to Sarai as they are approaching Egypt. In his version, Abram says, "Now that we are entering a country whose inhabitants are swarthy and

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[13] Ibid., 35.

[14] Translation of Genesis 12:11, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 63.

[15] *The Torah: With Rashi's commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated by Rabbi Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg,* (New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1995), 121.

ugly, say, I pray thee, thou art my sister, that it may be well with me for thy sake (Breishit Rabbah 40:4)."

Medieval Torah commentator Rashi (1040-1105) finds merit with R. Azariah's hypothetical scenario, understanding the words "swarthy and ugly" as a reference to Mizraim and Cush. Mizraim and Cush were the sons of Ham, and Mizraim is considered to be the progenitor of the Egyptian tribe. According to Rashi, while the Egyptians are ancestors of Mizraim, they, too, must have been swarthy and ugly.[16] To further his argument, Rashi points to Jeremiah 13:23, where a reference is made to the Cushites saying, "Can the Cushite change his skin, Or the leopard his spots?"[17] It should be noted that although this verse refers to the Cushite's skin, it does not use the adjectives "swarthy and ugly." The term "swarthy and ugly" used by the Rabbis in Breishit Rabbah 40:4 and further encouraged by Rashi may suggest a certain notion of beauty. Being dark-skinned does not seem to fit into their category of beauty.

This interpretation of Breishit Rabbah 40:4 is not universally supported by the commentators. Ramban, for example, finds this argument invalid. Rather, Ramban asserts that Abram was most likely fearful of his marriage to the beautiful Sarai every time the two entered a city where a King resided. As Ramban points out, it was customary to bring to the king any woman who was beautiful and to subsequently kill her husband. In order to avoid this inevitable fate, Ramban asserts, Abram devises a plan in which he encourages Sarai to say she is his sister.

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[16] Ibid., 122.

[17] Translation of Jeremiah 23:13. *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 1067.

To further enhance this argument, Ramban recalls a future incident where Abram employs the strategy of pawning his wife off as his sister. At the beginning of Genesis 20, the couple, now renamed Sarah and Abraham by God, are sojourning in Gerar. Upon entering the land, they approach Abimelech, the King of Gerar. As they do so, Abraham immediately tells Abimelech that Sarah is his sister. According to Ramban, the fact that Abram uses this technique multiple time indicates that there must have been a need for this strategy. Biblical scholars have referred to such episodes as the sister-wife motif. Abram most likely passed his wife off as his sister any time he and his Sarai approached a king upon leaving Haran.[18]

The sister-wife motif only occurs in the Book of Genesis three times making it a significant element.[19] In addition to the passages involving Sarai and Abram, the sister-wife motif also exists in Genesis 26:16 between Isaac and Rebekah. In this instance, Rebekah, like Sarah, is given over to Abimelech by her husband. The fact that two patriarchs carry out this ploy shows that it was common for a man with a beautiful wife to fear entering a strange land. This occurs more than once and involves more than one patriarch. There was most likely an unspoken rule, therefore, that wives would be passed off as sisters in these precarious situations.

While the sister-wife motif is used throughout Genesis seemingly as a ploy, there is a theory which states that Sarai and Abram were actually sister and brother. The first evidence of this kinship, Sarna explains, is the omission of Sarai's parents from the long list of lineage which begins with the descendants of Shem and continues on to the

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[18]*Ramban, The Torah: With Ramban's Commentary Translated, Annotated, and Elucidated by Rabbi Yaakov Blinder* (New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2004), 303.

[19] Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books), 103.

descendants of Terah. In Genesis 11:26-30 we learn that, "Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran....Abram and Nahor took to themselves wives, the name of Abram's wife being Sarai and that of Nahor's wife Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah."[20] Sarai's origin, however, is not stated. Sarna asserts that the omission of Sarai's lineage must have been intentional, for there is no other reason to leave out such information. He theorizes that her ancestry is not mentioned here in order to build suspense leading up to Genesis 20. It is in this chapter, Sarna claims, where Sarai's true background is revealed.[21]

As stated above, at the beginning of Genesis 20, Sarah and Abraham approach Abimelech, and Abraham tells him that Sarah is his sister. This time, however, unlike his interaction with Pharaoh in Genesis 12, Abraham provides *details* regarding his kinship with Sarah. In Genesis 20:12 he proclaims to Abimelech, "And, as a matter of fact, she [Sarah] is my sister, my father's daughter, though not my mother's daughter, so she became my wife."[22] As Biblical scholar Savina Teubal (1926-2005) points out, sister-brother partnerships occurred throughout Egypt and Mesopotamia. Due to the patrilineal social line, the Bible usually traces lineage through the male descendants. Therefore if Abraham's statement to Abimelech is true, the marriage would have been acceptable[23]. As Biblical scholar A.E. Speiser further elucidates, the reason one marries in the ancient Near East is to provide an heir. The status of that heir depends on the status of the

[20] Partial translation of Genesis 11:26-30, *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 20.
[21] Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 87.
[22] Translation of Genesis 20:12, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 96.
[23] Savina Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess* (Athens: First Swallow Press, 1984), 6.

mother.[24] Sarah (whose name means "princess" in Hebrew), was assumed to be of considerable status, making her a perfect wife for Abraham.

Although it is not known for certain whether Sarah and Abraham were actually brother and sister, Sarna asserts that Sarah was awarded certain privileges for taking on this wife-sister role including superior protection and privileges beyond those of an ordinary wife.[25] As the narrative continues, however, it appears that the privileges were awarded to Abram rather than Sarai.

In Genesis 12:15, we learn that Sarai is "taken" (*tukach)* by Pharaoh. Whether Sarai acquiesces to the plan willingly or forcefully is unknown, as Sarai does not utter a sound. In fact as Trible points out, during this narrative Sarai is referred to as "isha," meaning "woman" or "wife" and not by her actual name. Beauty and gender define Sarai at this moment.[26]

Pharaoh subsequently showers *Abram* with gifts such as sheep, oxen, male and female slaves, donkeys and camels. Trible focuses on the beginning of this verse, *ul'avram*, meaning "and for Abram." As Trible points out, this emphasizes Abram's self-concern and personal achievement. Gifts were lavished upon Abram. Thus "Abram the pimp becomes a wealthy man."[27] Biblical Scholar, Dr. Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes (1943-1994), further notes un-approvingly in the Biblical text, that Abram's actions are presented as "exemplary,"[28] pointing to other examples in the Bible where handing over

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[24] Ibid., 12.
[25] Sarna, *Understanding Genesis,* 103.
[26] Trible, *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children,* 36.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Fokkelien Van Dijk-Hemmes, "Sarai's Exile: A Gender-Motivated Reading of Genesis 12.10-13.2" in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. by Althya Brenner, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 230.

wives or daughters to other men is lauded. In Genesis 19:8, for example, Lot offers his daughters to the men of Sodom in an effort to save his *male* guests. Further, in Judges 19:25, the Levite gives over his wife to the men from Gibeah in order to save his own life.[29] In none of these instances, does the Biblical text directly criticize this behavior. That said, there is some evidence that the text accords Sarai some agency.

In Genesis 12:17 God strikes Pharaoh with plagues "because of Sarai" (*al d'var Sarai)*. Most translations fail to include any of the literal meanings of *d'var*, meaning word, matter, thing or speech, leaving out the noun all together. However, as Trible points out, if the verse were translated more closely to the literal Hebrew wording, it could mean that God struck Pharaoh with plagues "because of the *word* of Sarai."[30] This alternate translation presents Sarai as a subject with *speech*, which could indicate that Sarai did not assent to Abram's plan, but was simply unable to stop it.[31]

This verse acknowledging the plagues taking place because of Sarai (*al d'var Sarai)* ends with the Hebrew words, *eshet Avram*, meaning "Abram's wife." Ramban asserts that this modifier was added to show that injustice was done not only to Sarai but to Abram as well. The plagues were thus a result of the cruelty done to both of them.[32] A more modern rendition characterizes the plagues as God's attempt to safeguard Sarai as Abram's possession, protecting this marriage for a divine purpose."[33] Dijk-Hemmes

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[29] Ibid.
[30] Trible, *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children*, 37.
[31] Ibid.
[32] *The Torah: With Ramban's Commentary* translated by Blinder, 307.
[33] Trible, *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children*, 37.

takes it a step further, asserting that God acts as Sarai's "covenant partner,"[34] concerned for her welfare and hearing her prayers, rather than the prayers of Abram.

In Genesis 12:19, Pharaoh says to Abram, "Look, now that it turns out that she is your wife: take [her] and begone!" Ramban makes note of the fact that when Sarai's true identity is revealed, Pharaoh reproaches Abram and not Sarai directly. Pharaoh himself takes no blame for this incident, focusing on his own interests and holding Abram responsible. For Pharaoh, as Djik-Hemmes suggests, Sarai's beauty has now become dangerous for him as well.[35] Throughout this encounter, Ramban explains, it is assumed that Sarai is silent and does not reveal her identity to Pharaoh, for it is not befitting for a wife to challenge her husband's authority. Sarna, however, deduces that upon receiving the plagues, Pharaoh must have questioned Sarai directly, and she in turn revealed her true identity to him.

Abram does not verbally justify his actions, although a sense of shame can be deduced from the continuing narrative. After Pharaoh confronts Abram, Pharaoh's men are said to have sent Abram out of Egypt (*vay'shalchu oto).* To simply say that Abram is "sent out" does not show the agitation that Pharaoh no doubt felt. Instead, the Hebrew phrase, *vay'shalchu oto,* could be translated as "they expelled" Abram, denoting a harsher method of treatment. This root of the verb *sh-l-ch* is used earlier in Genesis 3:23 as God expels Adam and Eve away from the Garden of Eden after eating the forbidden fruit. This is also the same root used in Exodus 5:1 when Moses asks Pharaoh to "let my people go" (*shalach et ami*).[36] The anger that Pharaoh perceives towards Abram when he

[34] Dijk-Hemmes, "Sarai's Exile" in *Feminist Companion to Genesis,* 232.
[35] Ibid., 233.
[36] Partial translation of Exodus 5:1, *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh,* 120.

was deceived is likely similar to the anger that God feels as Adam and Eve disobeyed God's orders, or that Pharaoh likely feels after the plagues when he decides to let the enslaved Israelites go.

Sarai does not re-appear until the beginning of Chapter 16 where we learn once again that she is childless. This time, however, it is not simply stated that Sarai has no children as in Genesis 11:30, but rather Sarai had not borne *Abram* a child. We learn as well in this first verse that Sarai had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar. This is the first time in which Hagar is mentioned in the Bible.

B. Who is Hagar?

Nothing for certain is known of Hagar's background upon her introduction in Genesis 16:1, although scholars have speculated about her origins. One theory states that Hagar was the daughter of Pharaoh. According to R. Simeon in Breishit Rabbah 45:1, after experiencing first hand God's plagues carried out on Sarai's behalf, Pharaoh says, "Better that my daughter should be a maidservant in this household, and not the main wife in another household (Breishit Rabbah 45:1)." Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, an Aggadic Midrashic work written after 833 CE, reinforces this argument, albeit from a different perspective. In this retelling, after Pharaoh brings Sarai to his palace, he falls deeply in love with her. He is so enamored of her in fact, that he writes her a *ketuba*, showering her with valuable possessions and treasures including silver and gold, maidservants, the land of Goshen and his daughter, Hagar.[37] By asserting that Hagar is Pharaoh's daughter, the Rabbis are inflating Hagar's status above a mere servant or handmaid. The Rabbis therefore have a difficult time imaging Hagar as simply a slave. Because Hagar is specifically chosen as the surrogate for the first Matriarch and Patriarch of Israel, the Rabbis insist that Hagar must be from royal descent. Otherwise, she would not have been chosen to carry out this duty.

In Breishit Rabbah 45:1, R. Simeon plays on the word *Hagar* itself, equating it to the Hebrew word *agar* meaning "reward." In R. Simeon's scenario, Pharaoh hands Hagar over to Sarai saying, "Here is thy reward," thus asserting that *Hagar* is the reward (*agar)* (Breishit Rabbah:45:1). This makes Hagar simply a commodity to be exchanged.

[37] *Pirkei d' Rabbi Eliezer, The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great.* Translated by Gerald Friedlander (New York: Hermon Press, 1965), 190-191.

Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann (b.1909) deems it unnecessary to link Hagar with the "male and female slaves" given to Abram in Egypt in Genesis 12:16.[38] In addition, he sees no reason to explain the word "Hagar," claiming it is simply a personal name. Westermann further asserts that Hagar was given to Sarai as her personal servant, and the two shared a special bond. He attempts to understand their relationship by comparing it to American slavery. According to the terms of this southern analogy, Sarai is the girl who is given the present of a slave upon getting married. In these cases, the mistress and slave develop a close trusting relationship. Their bond would not break even if the slave were given as concubine to the mistress' husband.[39]

Westermann further maintains that the mention of Hagar's origin as Egyptian does not prove that she was given to Sarai and Abram during their sojourn to Egypt. He argues that the ethnic origins of slave, Egyptian or otherwise, are commonplace throughout the Bible and therefore such a conclusion can not be drawn. He points to 1 Samuel 30:13 in which David asks a slave "to whom are you from?" The slave answers, "I am an Egyptian boy."[40] While the slave helps David, no further details of the slave are given.

Like Westermann, African American writers link Hagar's struggles to American slavery, often identifying with Hagar's struggles on a personal level. As author and professor of African American studies Barbara Christian (1943-2000) comments, Hagar's story is that of "a female slave of African descent who was forced to be a surrogate mother, reproducing a child by her slave master because the slave master's wife was

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[38] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 238.

[39] Ibid., 248.

[40] 1 Samuel 20:13. *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, 640.

barren...."[41] Delores Williams, Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at Union Theological Seminary, similarly notes that for more than two-hundred years, African Americans have sympathized with Hagar. Within the Genesis narrative, Williams asserts, Hagar is involved in "slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic volence, homelessness, single parenting, and radical encounters with God."[42]

In her book, *Hagar the Egyptian*, Savina Teubal (1926-2005) further explores Hagar's background in reference to slavery. As Teubal notes, Hagar is first referred to as *shifchah.* The word *shifchah* is defined as handmaid, maidservant, slave or concubine. As Teubal indicates, *shifchah* may be connected to either the root *sh-f-h* or the root *s-f-h*. The former means "to pour out, shed blood" and has also been used when referring to the act of fornication.[43] The more viable root of the word comes from the Ugaritic root *s-f-h* meaning "being together," "to join" or "to attach oneself."[44] In fact, in Ugarit, there is a group of women known as *insht*, meaning "female companions," "intimate friends" or "someone who joins or is attached to a person or clan."[45] According to this interpretation, Hagar was the maidservant, handmaid and companion to *Sarai*. If we understand *shifchah* as a slave, however, Hagar's role in the text changes. Slavery was

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[41] Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 219-220.

[42] Delores Williams, "Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation" in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, 172.

[43] Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian*, 58. Here, Teubal defines *Shifchah* from F. Brown, S.R. Diver, and C.A. Briggs, *Hebrew Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1951), 1046.

[44] Ibid., 58.

[45] Ibid. Teubal is referring to the works of C. Umhad Wolf, *The Terminology of Israel's Tribal Organization* and Michael C. Astour, *Tamar the Heiroduk: An essay in the Methods of Vestigal Motifs*.

accepted in ancient Near Eastern cultures including Israel. According to Assyriologist E.A. Speiser (1902-1965), the female slave was treated as a commodity, meaning that "she was leased for work, given as a pledge, or handed over as a part of a dowry....she was subject to the burdens peculiar to her sex."[46] Speiser also denotes that the highest position in the slave hierarchy is a child-bearing concubine to her master, while the lowest would be as a professional prostitute.[47]

Because Hagar is clearly defined at the beginning of Genesis 16 as *shifchah* to *Sarai* and not to Abram, it appears that she is the property of Sarai. The difficulty with this assumption, Teubal suggests, stems from the fact that biblical women are generally defined by their relationship to men. In other biblical passages, the term *shifchah* typically refers to women who are the property of men. For example, Genesis 29:24 states that Laban gave *his* maidservant (*shifchato*), Zilpah, to his daughter as her maid. In Leviticus 19:20, the rules are stated for a *man* who comes in contact with a *shifchah* designated for another *man*. Within biblical narratives, as Teubal asserts, women are wives, mothers, princesses, harlots, concubines, and slaves.[48] While Hagar is clearly defined as *shifchah* to *Sarai*, she is ultimately the property of Abram. Therefore Hagar must negotiate between both of her masters, Sarai and Abram. While Hagar may wish to show loyalty to Sarai, she must be dutiful to Abram as well. Hagar's obedience to both of her masters, Abram and Sarai, manifests itself at the beginning of Genesis Chapter 16.

[46] Ibid., 53.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid., 50.

II. Sarah and Hagar: Genesis 16:1-16

A. A Biblical, Rabbinic and Midrashic view of Genesis 16:1-16

Sarai, who has been absent from the Biblical narrative since Genesis Chapter 12, returns at the beginning of Genesis 16:1. When Sarai first appears in Genesis 11:30, we learn that "Sarai was barren; she had no child."[49] Upon her reintroduction in Genesis 16:1, Sarai's barren state has not changed. However, the gravity of her childless condition is certainly more severe. As Genesis 16:1 states, "Now Abram's wife Sarai, who had not borne him a child, had an Egyptian slave named Hagar."[50] This indicates not only that Sarai not borne a child, but more importantly, she has not borne a child specifically to *him*.

While it may seem natural for a reader of Genesis 16:1 to understand "him," (the Hebrew word being "lo," meaning "to him") as a reference to Abram, Rabbis offer various interpretations to the word "lo" in this verse. According to R. Judah in Breishit Rabbah, "lo" indicates that Sarai does not bear *Abram* a child, yet were she to be married to another man, she would have borne children. This explanation implies that Abram is the cause of infertility and not Sarai, turning to the laws stated in Yevamoth 65a for further clarity. Yevamoth 65a states that in most situations, if a woman is unable to conceive with her first husband, she is given chances to conceive with her second, third, and sometimes even fourth husband. [51]

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[49] Trible, *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*. Trible's translation of Genesis 11:30, 34.

[50] Translation of Genesis 16:1, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 70.

[51] Yevamoth 65a.

Trible experiments with the syntax of this verse but focuses on the placement of Sarai and Hagar. Sarai, the first word of the verse, is the subject of the phrase and precedes the label of being Abram's wife. When first introduced to Sarai in Genesis 11:30, the fact that she is Abram's wife precedes her actual name. Interestingly, the last word of verse 16:1 is Hagar, the name of Sarai's *shifchah*. By placing Sarai and Hagar at two opposing ends of the verse, the narrator literally opposes them against each other. From this one verse, we learn that Sarai is seemingly older, married and barren, while Hagar is Egyptian, single, and presumably young and fertile. Abram, meanwhile, is both literally and figuratively placed in the middle of these women.[52]

In the following verse, Sarai speaks directly to Abram saying, "Seeing as God has kept me from bearing a child, have intercourse with my slave; maybe I will have a son through her."[53] The way in which Sarai responds to her infertility evokes a variety of interpretations. It is clear what she *does not* do. She does not leave Abram and marry another. She does not verbally blame Abram, and she does not verbally blame herself for her childlessness. However, she *does* verbally acknowledge that *God* has kept her from conceiving. Is she therefore blaming God for this fate, or simply stating a fact? Is she angry at God, at Abram, or herself?

According to Hellenistic Jewish Philosopher Philo (20 BCE- 50 BCE), the relationship between Sarai and God is an intimate one. Philo maintains that according to God, Sarai is the virtuous one -- not Abram. At the beginning of Genesis 16, Abram is not yet ready to be the father of this virtuous woman's offspring. He first must father

[52] Trible, *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, 38.
[53] Translation of Genesis 16:2, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 70-71.

Hagar's child in order to prepare him for his future fathering of Isaac with Sarai. [54] Philo notes that Sarai is showing both modesty and grace by calling herself barren. He points out that when Sarai announces her barren state to Abram, she does not actually say that God has stopped her from bearing *for you*. By omitting this phrase, Philo asserts, Sarai is taking responsibility for her misfortune, alleviating others of blame.[55]

Further viewing Sarai in a sympathetic light is Peskita Rabbati, an Aggadic Midrash composed around 845 BCE.. In Peskita Rabbati 42:1, Sarai is lauded for debasing herself in Genesis 16:2, acknowledging to Abram that God had kept *her* from conceiving. Peskita Rabbati references Yevamoth 64a in which R. Ammi states, "Abraham and Sarah were originally of doubtful sex,"[56] explained by Pesikta Rabbati to mean that both she and Abram were sterile.[57] By assuming full responsibility for the infertility despite Abram's condition, Sarai merits a future divine reward of miraculous conception.[58]

Biblical commentator and philosopher, Obadaiah ben Jacob Sforno (1475-1550), further understands Sarai's words and actions in Genesis 16:2 as righteous. Sarai, he asserts, holds steadfast to her belief that God will award Abram with many offspring. Rather, by acknowledging God role in conception, Sarai contends that the children are not necessarily guaranteed through her. She attempts to rectify this situation by telling

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[54] Calloway, *Sing, O barren One*. Calloway's explanation based on Philo's interpretation, 96.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Yevamoth 64a.

[57] *Peskita Rabbati: Discourses for Feasts, Fasts, and Special Sabbaths, Volume II*. Translated by William G. Braude (New Haven: Yale University Press), 737.

[58] Ibid.

Abram to "have intercourse with my slave. Maybe I will be built up through her." (*bo-na el shifchati ulai ibaneh memehnah).*

Rashi agrees with this interpretation and offers further thoughts. He points to Breishit Rabbah 71:7 which acknowledges Sarai bringing her "rival" into her home in order for her womb to be "built up." Hagar is referred to not as Sarai's handmaid, but rather as Sarai's *rival*.[59] It is Sarai's *sacrifice* of giving her maidservant to Abram, Rashi says, that will cause her to be built up.[60] Sforno, too, paints Sarai as a sympathetic character here. He asserts that by being "built up" through Hagar, Sarai will certainly feel jealousy. However, is it surely her hope to turn the jealousy into a "...powerful catharsis awakening her potential to conceive."[61] A contemporary feminist reader might take issue with these interpreters who laud Sarai's self-abasement.

As mentioned above, Sarai hopes to have a child through Hagar. The root of *ibaneh*, *b-n-h*, literally means "to build." According to Breishit Rabbah, the translation of this verse should read "It may be that I shall be built up through her," meaning that without a child, Sarai will literally be the opposite of built up. She will be demolished (Breishit Rabbah 45:2) For this interpretation, Breishit Rabbah 45:1 sights a future event in Genesis 30:1 in which Rachel, who is married to Jacob, is also barren (*lo yaldah).* Unable to deal with her infertility any longer, Rachel says to Jacob, "Let me have

[59] *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary*. Translated by Zvi Herczeg, 154.
[60] Ibid., 154.
[61] *Sforno: Commentary on the Torah*. Translated by Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd.,),76.

children; otherwise I am a dead woman!"[62] The saga continues by Rachel giving Jacob her maidservant, Bilhah, so that Rachel will be "built up" through her.[63]

Trible points out the imperative language that Sarai uses when speaking to Abram. She literally orders Abram to procreate with Hagar saying, "...have intercourse with my slave: maybe I will have a son through her."[64] This structure, according to Trible, shows Sarai as a commanding force, acknowledging the problem and determining the solution.[65] When Sarai speaks, she talks of being built up through her maidservant. She does not directly state the desire of bearing a child to Abram,[66] nor does she refer to Hagar by name. Sarai's motive is hers alone.

As noted above, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* translates this phrase in Genesis 16:2 to mean, "maybe I will have a son through her."[67] Based on the similarity between the root of the verb *b-n-h* and the noun *ben* (son), both Niditch and Sarna understand that *ibaneh* in this case could mean either "I will have a child" or "I will be built." Both definitions imply that Sarai becomes established by creating a family.[68]

The verse ends by stating that Abram heeds the voice of Sarai. R. Jose in Breishit Rabbah interprets the verse to mean that Abram listens to the "voice of the Holy Spirit" which tells her to speak, rather than to the voice of Sarai herself (Breishit Rabbah 45:2). He references 1 Samuel 15:1 in which Samuel says to Saul, "I am the one God sent to anoint you king over God people Israel. Therefore, listen to the word of God." This

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[62] Translation of Genesis 30:1, *The Torah: A Women's Torah Commentary*, 165.
[63] Ibid., 165.
[64] Partial translation of Genesis 16:2, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary,* 71.
[65] Trible, *Texts of Terror,* 10.
[66] Ibid., 11.
[67] Translation of Genesis 16:2, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 71.
[68] Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 119 and Niditch, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 71.

reference does not seem to make sense regarding Sarai. While 1 Samuel 1:15 urges Saul to listen to the words of *God*, Genesis 16:2 states that Abram listened to voice of *Sarai*. The fact that the Rabbis need to justify Abram listening to his wife by saying it was really the voice of God, further adds to the idea that a woman's word held little merit for a man.

The commentators, too, take issue with the voice being Sarai's alone. Rashi makes a grammatical case to buttress the Rabbis' argument. In Hebrew, Rashi claims, the words *sh'miah b'kol*, with the *bet* prefix, is usually translated as "obeying." He references Genesis 27:13 in which Rebekah urges her son Jacob, "obey me!" (*sh'mah b'koli*). However in this case, the Hebrew reads, *vayishmah avram l'kol Sarai*. The *lamed* prefix indicates that Abram listens to a certain "prophetic quality"[69] in Sarai's voice, as if she is being driven to speak by divine inspiration.

Ramban sees this verse differently. He notes that the Bible does not simply say, "and Abram did so." Rather, it says, "And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai." Ramban finds great significance in this phrase, for it marks not only the power that Sarai holds in this situation, but also the respect that Abram has for Sarai. Although Abram's desire to have children was great, his intentions first and foremost were to honor Sarai, so that *Sarai* may be built up through Hagar.[70] Ramban argues that Abram would not have been with Hagar without Sarai's permission. Both Sforno and Sarna agree with Ramban's stance on the issue, insisting that Abram responded only his to wife's request and did not have any selfish motives.[71]

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[69] *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary*. Translated by Zvi Herczeg,155. Rashi is quoting *Be'er Yitzchak.*

[70] *The Torah: With Ramban's Commentary.* Translated, annotated, and elucidated by Rabbi Yaakov Blinder, (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications: 1995), 371.

[71] Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary*, 119 and *Sforno*. Translated by Pelcovitz, 76.

Some commentators insist that a prophetic voice was speaking for Sarai, and others note Abram's respect for Sarai. Meanwhile, feminist commentators see Abram as less noble. Trible, for example, chooses to see Abram's acquiescence as passive rather than noble or selfless. He is so submissive, in fact, that the narrator answers for him. We thus learn that Abram heeds Sarai's word but does not verbally respond to her.[72] By failing to add his voice to Sarai's plan, Abram not only adheres to it, but he makes no attempt to stop it. In this case, actions speak louder than words. Perhaps we should see Abram as a man unable to take control of his own destiny. After all, God's promise of a prosperous nation is delivered to Abram alone. Therefore even if Abram were to enlist Sarai's opinion regarding this matter, Abram is being selfish and cowardly by placing the burden on Sarai alone.

Genesis 16:3 states that, "Ten years after Abram had settled in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took her slave Hagar the Egyptian and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife."[73] The Rabbis attach great significance to the ten year time lapse. According to Yevamoth 64a, "if a man took a wife and lived with her for ten years and she bore no child, he shall divorce her and give her her kethubah, since it is possible that it was he who was unworthy to have children from her."[74] The Rabbis base this law on Genesis 16:3. They were therefore creating a legal norm and using Biblical passages to back up their argument. The Rabbis further state in Yevamoth 64a that the husband

[72] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 11.
[73] Translation of Genesis 16:3. *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 72.
[74] Yevamoth 64a.

could also be the cause of infertility.[75] This shared blame, however, is not even remotely alluded to in Genesis 16:3.

The Rabbis also waver regarding the *husband's* rights if he and his wife fail to conceive after ten years. Yevamoth 65a argues, "if the husband states that he intends on taking another wife to test his potency, R. Ammi ruled, he must in this case also divorce [his present wife] and pay her the amount of her kethubah; for I maintain that whosoever takes in addition to his present wife another one must divorce the former and pay her the amount of her kethubah."[76] In the case of Sarai and Abram, there is no mention of divorce. Were this rule to apply to Sarai and Abram, perhaps Sarai is attempting to avoid divorce by offering up her handmaid as concubine to remedy this possibility. In Yevamoth 65a, Raba further states, "A man may marry wives in addition to his first wife, provided only that he possesses the means to maintain them."[77] Were this the case with Sarai and Abram, perhaps Sarai wanted to be the one in control of the situation, handing over her handmaid before Abram asked for her to do so.

While we do not know for certain if the ten year rule existed in the time of the Bible, we learn that after ten years, Sarai takes the matter of her barrenness into her own hands. She does not wait for Abram to divorce her or take another wife as the laws may have suggested. Rather she "takes" Hagar and "gives" her to Abram as wife. Of particular note is the verb used to define Sarai's action. The verb, *vatikach*, here translated to mean "took," is often reserved for the act of Jewish marriage which only men can initiate. In Genesis alone, this verb is used nine times to indicate a man taking a

[75] Ibid.
[76] Yevamoth 65a.
[77] Ibid.

woman "as wife." Therefore the fact that Sarai is giving Hagar to Abram complicates the situation. In being the subject of this verb, Sarai is showing masculine agency. Therefore is Sarai giving Hagar to Abram as "wife" or as "concubine"? Is there a significant difference between the two definitions, and if so, is there a miscommunication between Sarai and Abram regarding Hagar's treatment?

The Rabbis understand this definition of *tikach* to mean that Sarai gave Hagar to Abram *as wife*. Therefore according to the Rabbis, Hagar is not a concubine but rather enjoys all of the rights of a wife (Breishit Rabbah 45:3). Ramban agrees, further pointing out that this verse defines both Hagar and Sarai as *isha*, and in both cases, according to Ramban, *isha* should be defined as "wife." Sarai is not trying to distance herself from Abram and still considers herself to be his wife. She simply wants Hagar *also* to be his "wife" alongside of her. By seeing Hagar as wife and not concubine, Ramban believes that Sarai has a strong ethical character and respects her husband.[78]

Although the Rabbis define Hagar as "wife," her role is not clear. The ambiguity of Hagar's new role in the Sarai/Abram household is evident in the structure of this verse. First, Sarai is described as the "wife of Abram," a statement of relationship that seems redundant, as this fact has been known since Genesis 11:30. The description of Sarai as Abram's wife is followed by Sarai's action of taking Hagar and giving her to Abram. Here, Hagar is described as "the Egyptian, her [Sarai's] maid," a description which again seems superfluous at this point. Sarai proceeds by giving [Hagar] to Abram, "her [Sarai's] husband" as "wife." As Trible points out, the various pronouns and adjectives used in this verse create tension between Hagar as maid and Hagar as wife and between

[78] *The Torah: With Ramban's Commentary*, translated by Binder, 371.

Sarai as wife to Abram and now also as a second wife to Abram.[79] Interestingly, while the action of this verse revolves around Sarai and Hagar, there is no dialogue between them. They are defined in terms of their evolving relationship with *Abram*. While at one point these two women had a relationship with clear boundaries - that of mistress and maidservant -- the lines have now been blurred. Because the two women do not directly speak to each other, it is impossible to fully understand their new feelings for each other.

Because Hagar does not have a voice in this narrative, Biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky (1943-2006) asserts that Hagar is not given the chance to verbally consent to this plan. However, it should be noted that we do not know how any of the Matriarchs felt when they got married. For example, Rachel was never given an opportunity to express her feelings when she married Jacob. Nor do we know how Sarai felt when she married Abram. While this disregard for the women's feelings may seem insensitive to the modern reader, it was certainly commonplace through the Bible. Also standard practice throughout the Ancient Near East was the act of surrogacy.

The Laws of Hammurabi, Paragraph 146, states that if a man marries a priestess and she is unable to conceive, the husband will be permitted a slave to have his child. If she does not do this, then he is free to take a second wife. Because a second wife may be considered a rival, the women would in most cases prefer to give her husband a slave-girl.[80] In addition, the Nuzi contracts, clay tablets providing insights into the legal, military and commercial activities of the ancient city of Nuzi, state that if a wife is childless, she must give her husband a slave-girl for conception. The husbands upheld

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[79] Phyllis Trible, "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing" in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, 38.

[80] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 227.

this law in order to ensure an heir. In biblical accounts, Sarna points out, it is often the wives who initiate the law due to their own feelings of hopelessness when in a barren state. Sarna believes that the events taking place at the beginning of Chapter 16 could have been influenced by such laws.[81] However, this is simply speculation, as the contracts are not specifically mentioned anywhere within the biblical narrative.

The following verse, Genesis 16:4, states, "He (Abram) came to Hagar and she became pregnant; and when she saw that she had become pregnant, her mistress became for her an object of scorn."[82] Although a specific time frame for her conception is not given, some Rabbis, such as R. Levi b. Chaytha in Breishit Rabbah 45:4, understand this verse to mean that Hagar conceives during their first sexual act together. R. Chanina b. Pazzi further explains this through an analogy stating, "Thorns are neither weeded nor sown, yet of their own accord they grow and spring up, whereas how much pain and toil is required before wheat can be made to grow!" In this scenario, Hagar is like the thorns, "neither weeded nor sown" and Sarai is like the wheat (Breishit Rabbah 45:5). Similar to thorns, Hagar is wild and unpredictable, free to conceive of her own free will. Sarai on the other hand is similar to wheat, as both require care, time and turmoil before they can grow. Wheat is a cultivated grain that is a staple part of one's diet whereas thorns are unplanted, uncultivated and bothersome. These metaphors for Sarai and Hagar make clear whom the Rabbis most respect.

[81] Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 128.
[82] Translation of Genesis 16:4, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 72.

According to Rashi, the Hebrew word, *yavo*, meaning "he came," specifically indicates that Hagar instantly conceived.[83] In addition, he argues that the cantillation markings used on the words *Hagar* and *vatahar,* a *tipchah* and *etnachta* respectively, designate only a slight pause between words and actions, underscoring the idea of rapid conception.[84]

Upon the realization that Hagar is pregnant, Sarai becomes an object of scorn for Hagar (*vateikal g'virtah b'eineiha)*. More than that: some translations of this verse have Hagar despising Sarai, or looking upon her with contempt. Translations of this phrase show Hagar's disdain for Sarai, though they vary in degree, depending on the interpretation of the translator.

Some Rabbis and commentators have created scenarios where Hagar is given a voice and expresses the "scorn" that she feels towards her mistress. In *Breishit Rabbah* 45:4 for example, the Rabbis depict Hagar as drunk with power, taunting a powerless Sarai. Discovering her pregnancy, Hagar says, "My mistress Sarai is not inwardly what she is outwardly: she appears to be a righteous woman, but she is not. For had she been a righteous woman, see how many years have passed without her conceiving, whereas I conceived in one night!" (Breishit Rabbah 45:4). In their portrayal of Hagar as a haughty, selfish, disrespectful maidservant, the Rabbis set up a situation where Hagar's later expulsion by Sarai is seemingly justified. Surely were Hagar to act in such a manner upon the realization that she is pregnant, Sarai would have grounds to treat Hagar however she see fit.

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[83] *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary*, translated by Herczeg, 155. Here, Rashi is interpreting *Breishit Rabbah* 45:4.

[84] *Mikraot G'dolot Genesis Volume One A New English Translation.* Translated by Rabbi A. J. Rosenberg (New York: The Judaica Press, 1993), 188.

While the Rabbis have seen Sarai's act of giving Hagar to Abram as selfless, they viewed Hagar in quite the opposite fashion. Hagar is a thorn, a wild card, disrespectful and haughty. The feminist perception of Hagar, however, is more nuanced. Frymer-Kensky, for example, asserts that until the moment of conception, Hagar was a neutral entity, treated as nothing more than a "womb with legs" rather than a person with her own thoughts.[85] According to Trible, once Hagar conceives, the "hierarchical blinders disappear."[86] While Sarai had anticipated being "built up" through her handmaid, she does not anticipate Hagar's reaction or the fact that Hagar's status will increase. With Hagar's position raised, a situation arises in which the two women will cohabitate in a more equal relationship as dual "wives." However, this is not Sarai's plan.[87]

In the following verses, Genesis 16:5-16:6, Sarai speaks directly to Abram saying, "My wrong is on you head! I put my slave in your arms; no sooner did she see that she was pregnant, I became for her an object of scorn. Let God judge between us! So Abram said to Sarai, Look, your slave is in your hands; do to her as you please." Sarai then so afflicted her that she ran away."[88] A. E. Speiser sums up these verses saying, "Sarai's hatred of Hagar stemmed from the concubine's tactless behavior toward her childless mistress; and Abraham was either unable or unwilling to intervene in the bitter rivalry between the two head-strong women."[89] This action-packed scene no doubt serves up a feast of interpretations.

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[85] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible,* 228.
[86] Trible, *Texts of Terror,* 12
[87] Ibid., 12.
[88] Translation of Genesis 16:5-6, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary,* 72.
[89] Ibid., 72. Teubal quotes A. E. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, translation and Notes from The Anchor Bible,* 75.

It appears that from the beginning of Genesis 16:5, Sarai blames Abram for Hagar's behavior rather than blaming Hagar herself. R. Judan in Breishit Rabbah 45:5 asserts that Sarai holds Abram accountable because of his passivity in the situation. While Abram witnesses Hagar's act of scorn towards Sarai, he remains silent. The phrase in Hebrew, *chamasi aleicha*, literally means "my wrong is on you" or "my violence is on you." In this case, however, the Rabbis interpret the phrase, *chamasi aleich*a, to mean "what is stolen from me is on your account." Abram has literally robbed Sarai of the words that he should have spoken on her behalf (Breishit Rabbah 45:5). Rashi agrees with this interpretation, further inventing a possible conversation between them. Here, Sarai says to Abram, "What can You give me seeing that I go childless? You prayed only for yourself, but you should have prayed for both of us, and I, too, would have been remembered with you."[90]

When Sarai announces to Abram that "God should judge between us," speculation arises regarding to whom the "us" is referring, as well as the meaning of this phrase. According to Westermann, because Sarai is both embittered and impassioned by the news of Hagar's pregnancy, she demands a legal decision between herself and Abram. This expression, "Let God judge between you and me," Westermann points out, is a fixed legal formula used throughout the Bible. For example, Genesis 31:53 states, "May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor...judge between us." This expression is further seen in 1 Samuel 24:12 and 1 Samuel 24:15. Westermann clarifies that it does not mean Sarai wishes to literally go to a legal court. Rather, she expects Abram's further decision

[90] *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary*, translated by Zvi Herczeg, 156.

to take God's judgment into account, for God watches out for those who have been wronged.[91]

The Rabbis, however, take issue with Sarai standing up to Abram in this manner. In Breishit Rabbah 45:5, R. Tanchuma utters, "Whoever plunges eagerly into litigation does not escape from it unscathed. Sarai should have reached Abraham's years, but because she said, 'The Lord judge between me and thee,' her life was reduced by forty-eight years" (Breishit Rabbah 45:5).

Upon hearing these words from Sarai, Abram finally speaks. Instead of exercising power or authority over the situation, he remains passive, telling *Sarai* to deal with Hagar herself. Abram literally responds by saying, "do to her the good in your eyes." (*asi-lah hatov b'einayich*). The expression which Abram uses, "good in your eyes," is a word play on the previous verse in which "Sarai was lowered in her [Hagar's] eyes." Because Hagar no longer holds Sarai in great esteem, Sarai must regain that esteem by in turn hurting Hagar. As Trible explains, what is good for one is suffering for the other.

According to Trible, Sarai longs for the return of her superior status, the ranking which she unwittingly gave up by giving Hagar to Abram. Because Abram holds authority over Hagar as well as over her, Sarai demands that Abram fix this situation. Teubal further points out that Sarai ignores Hagar in this instance and focuses her anger solely on Abram, believing that no discord seems to take place between Sarai and Hagar before Abram became involved in their relationship. Therefore, Teubal imagines a strong closeness between them before Hagar conceived.

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[91] Westermann, 241.

[92]According to Frymer-Kensky, as Sarai utters these words, she is having a "click moment." She has now realized that she has lost all power in this situation, sees her position as being at risk, and therefore attacks Abram who holds the authority.[93] Abram understands Sarai's feelings, and that the issue here is power, and thus cedes control to Sarai.[94] In Genesis 16:6, Abram says, "Look, your slave is in your hands; do to her as you please." Interestingly, this is the first time that Abram speaks directly to Sarai about this situation, and as he does so, he again speaks from a passive position.

According to Breishit Rabbah 45:6, Abram does not feel that he can do either good *or* harm to Hagar. Because he has taken Hagar "as wife," the Rabbis argue, he can no longer treat her as a slave (Breishit Rabbah 45:6). The Rabbis point to Deuteronomy 21:14 stating that if a man brings a woman into his house and has intercourse with her, she will be his wife. If the man no longer wants her, he must release her outright, he must not sell her, and he must not enslave her.

Feminist Commentator Pamela Tamarkin Reis asserts that it is not the law to which Abram abides, but rather, he simply does not care about Hagar. He does not see her as his wife, viewing her strictly as Sarai's handmaid. He does not choose to deal with the issues of "wasted seed, infidelity, and hurt feelings."[95] While this dialogue strikes up a deluge of possible emotions between Sarai and Abram, Hagar is *still* not given a voice. Rather, as Frymer-Kensky points out, by passing Hagar from person to person, she is

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[93] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 228.

[94] Genesis 16:3, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 72. Frymer-Kensky's interpretation of Genesis 16:3.

[95] Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Hagar Requited." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* (2000), 87.

treated only as a slave no matter the terminology used to describe her. To acknowledge Hagar as a person, Frymer-Kensky notes, would interfere with Sarai's plan.

Sarai does as Abram suggests and takes matters into her own hands. Sarai "afflicts her" (*vat'anehah)*, and Hagar runs away. While the affliction is not specified, it has been understood in a variety of ways. In Breishit Rabbah 54:6, R. Abba believes that Sarai punishes Hagar by restraining her from cohabitation. R. Berekiah says that perhaps Sarai slaps Hagar with a slipper, while R. Abba suspects that Sarai makes Hagar carry water buckets and towels to the bath (Breishit Rabbah 54:6). According to Rashi, these interpretations imply that Sarai does not physically torture Hagar but merely diminishes her standing.[96]

Meir Leibush ben Jehiel Michel Weiser (1809-1879), Russian Rabbi and biblical commentator commonly referred to as Malbim, agrees with Rashi's interpretation and in fact speculates that the entire incident is just one big misunderstanding. [97] He asserts that realizing that she is pregnant, Hagar assumed that she was freed from Sarai. Because she could conceive and Sarai could not, Hagar no longer finds Sarai righteous and therefore treats her harshly. Malbim further asserts that Sarai must have believed that Abram had freed Hagar, for why else would Sarai become lowered in Hagar's eyes? Sarai in turn becomes angry at Abram for freeing Hagar without her permission.[98] Abram of course clears up the situation, assuring Sarai that Hagar is still her maidservant, and she can do

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[96] *The Torah: With Rashi Commentary,* translated by Zvi Herczeg,157. Rashi is commenting on Breishit Rabbah 45:6.

[97] Malbim commentary as stated in *Mikraot G'dolot Genesis Volume One A New English Translation*. Translation by Rabbi A. J. Rosenberg, 189.

[98] Ibid.

to her as she pleases. Sarai does not torture Hagar, Malbim explicates. Rather, she makes her work hard to demonstrate that she is still under Sarai's control.

Trible takes a different approach to the word *vat'anehah* believing this verb to connote extremely harsh treatment. Trible points to an article by German Biblical scholar and law professor David Daube (1909-1999), "The Exodus Pattern in the Bible," in which Daube argues, based on other biblical usages of the verb *'nh*, that it means "to afflict a dependent."[99] In Genesis 15:13 for example, God tells Abram that the Egyptians will afflict the Israelites saying "Know that thy seed will be a stranger and shall serve them, and they will afflict them." This "affliction" is carried out in Exodus 1:11.[100]

Both Sarna and Ramban concur that Sarai deals harshly with Hagar. Ramban in particular views Sarai's treatment of Hagar as a profound sin. He further continues by explaining that both Sarai and Abram must take responsibility for the situation. Sarai sins by dealing harshly with Hagar, but Abram also sins for letting her do so.[101] While ultimately Sarai's actions towards Hagar are unclear, it is certain that Hagar runs away because of this affliction.

While Sarai and Hagar's relationship is filled with turmoil, at this point in the Biblical narrative the focus shifts away from Sarai, Hagar and Abram as a unit and onto Hagar exclusively. In verses 16:7-8, "An Angel of God found her [Hagar] at a spring of water in the wilderness, at the spring on the road to Shur. [The angel] said, 'Hagar, slave of Sarai, Whence have you come and where are you going?' She answered, " I am

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[99] David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 26.

[100] Ibid. Daube examples of affliction in Bible.

[101] Ramban's commentary, as stated in *Mikraot G'dolot,* translated by Rosenburg, 189.

running away from my mistress Sarai."[102] This is the first instance where Hagar speaks in the biblical narrative. This is also the first time where Hagar is spoken to directly. Trible asserts that Hagar's escape from oppression finally frees her voice.[103]

When the angel approaches Hagar, the angel refers to her as "Hagar, handmaid of Sarai" (*Hagar, shifchat Sarai*). Although she is no longer in the presence of her mistress, she is unable to free herself of her dependent role. According to *Breishit Rabbah* 45:5, while Hagar's status may have increased due to her pregnancy, she still recognizes Sarai as her mistress, referring to Sarai as "*my* mistress" (*Sarai g'virti*) (Breishit Rabbah 45:5). Because the angel refers to Hagar as Sarai's handmaid and Hagar still refers to Sarai as her mistress, Hagar has yet to form an identity independent of her previous status.

The Rabbis, too, fail to accept Hagar as a person independent of her submissive role. They gloss over the fact that Hagar is the *first* person in Scripture whom a divine messenger visits. Most of their arguments revolve around the *number* of angels that visit Hagar rather than the fact that angels are visiting Hagar in the first place.

In Breishit Rabbah 45:7 for example, R. Isaac admits that Hagar sees angels, but he dismisses the impact that this may have on her. He rationalizes away this vision, assuming that Hagar is used to occurrences out of the ordinary because she was part of Abram's household. He refers to Proverbs 31 which describes the makings of a capable wife. Proverbs 31:27 specifically states, "She [the capable wife] oversees the activities of her household and never eats the bread of idleness." R. Isaac connects this verse to Hagar, implying that her experiences in Abram's house were manifold. She not only *sees* over the household, but she is also part of the household of *seers* (Breishit Rabbah 45:7).

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[102] Genesis 16:7-8, The Torah: A Women's Commentary, 73.
[103] Trible, Texts of Terror, 15.

Exactly what Abram's household is seeing, R. Isaac never explains. It is accurate to say, however, that R. Isaac and his contemporaries dismiss the awesomeness of Hagar's encounter with the angel.

As the conversation continues, the angel orders Hagar to return to her mistress and submit to her. The angel reinforces this command stating, "I will greatly multiply your descendants; they shall be too numerous to count."[104] The specific Hebrew verb which the Angel uses to describe this return to submission is "hit'ani," with the Hebrew root *'-n-h*. This word shares the same root as the Hebrew word used in Genesis 16:6, "t'aneha," where Sarai "afflicts" Hagar. Just as Abram has placed Hagar under the hand of Sarai before, the Angel is ordering Hagar to return to this same treatment of affliction.[105] The Rabbis fail to comment on the Angel's orders. While they dismissed Sarai's initial affliction of Hagar as nothing more than a slap on the wrist, they ignore this statement here. The only commentator who seems to acknowledge this return to affliction is Ramban. He asserts that by commanding Hagar to return to Sarai's abusive hand, the Angel is acknowledging the fact that Hagar will forever be under Sarai's rule. "Sarah's seed will always rule over her seed."[106]

Modern scholars have provided possible explanations for the Angel's command. According to Methodist and Liberation Theologian Elsa Tamez, Hagar is told to return so that she and her child will be saved. The only way to ensure this safety is to leave the

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[104] Genesis 16:6, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 73.

[105] "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing" by Phyllis Trible in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*, 41.

[106] Ramban's commentary, as stated in *Mikraot G'dolot*, translated by Rosenburg, 190.

desert and return to the house of Abram.[107] However, Frymer-Kensky asks, "is this the proper way to treat a runaway slave?"[108] She asserts that the angel is acting within the confines of ancient Near Eastern laws which state that a runaway slave must be returned to the owner. She proposes, however, that biblical law is different. One is ordered to help a runaway slave escape, not to return them to their owner. She points to Deuteronomy 23:16-17 which states, "You shall not turn over to the master a slave who seeks refuge with you from that master... You must not ill-treat them."[109]

On one hand, the Angel is ordering Hagar to return to the ill-treatment, yet on the other hand, the Angel tells Hagar, "I will greatly multiply your descendants." This blessing is extremely significant, as it is *never* presented to any other woman in the Torah. It is a formula reserved both in the past and in the future strictly for patriarchs as seen in Genesis 13:16, 15:5, 26:4 and 28:14. [110] The Rabbis gloss over this profound moment, merely acknowledging other cases where children have been promised to various men and women. They do not, however, deal with the significance of this phrase, being applied to this outsider woman.

Trible takes this concept one step further. While this promise is made to all of the Patriarchs of Israel, what is lacking in Hagar's case is a covenantal context, a *brit*. Therefore while this declaration by the Angel could signal comfort for Hagar, it also includes an element of uncertainty.[111]

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[107] Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 65. Alice Ogden Bellis is quoting Elsa Tamez.

[108] Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 230.

[109] Partial translation of Deuteronomy 23:16-17, *The Torah; A Women's Commentary*, 1177.

[110] *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 73.

[111] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 16-17.

The Angel continues by saying, "Look - you are pregnant and shall bear a son; call him Ishmael, for God has heard your affliction. Ishmael will be a wild ass of a man, and his hand will be against all, and the hand of all shall be against him; he will dwell in opposition to all of his kin."[112] The Rabbis ruminate over the description of the unborn son by the Angel of God.

Commentator Rabbi Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra (1092-1167), commonly referred to as Ibn Ezra, notes that the words chosen to describe Ishmael, "pereh adam," are often translated as "wild ass of a man." Ibn Ezra defines the term as "free among men" *and* as "wild donkey," pointing to a similar phrase in Job 39:5. Therefore Ishmael will be a wild donkey, meaning that he will be a savage individual.[113] In Breishit Rabbah 45:10, Resh Lakish understands Ishmael in much the same fashion. Whereas others plunder wealth, Ishmael will plunder lives (Breishit Rabbah 45:10).

The word "Ishmael" literally means "God will hear." Ramban suggests that God has heard *Abram's* plea for a child and answered *him*. This interpretation paints Hagar as merely a vessel for delivering a child. He further argues that while the angel orders Hagar to name her son Ishmael, she never actually names him herself. Ramban reasons that as a concubine, Hagar is fearful of naming her master's son.[114] Later in the narrative, Abram calls Hagar's son Ishmael, as if there is no proof that Hagar names him herself.

Although the portrayal of Ishmael's life is one of constant struggle and strife, Hagar does not respond negatively. Also, as Trible notes, Hagar does not comment on

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[112] Translation of Genesis 16:12-13, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 73.

[113] ibn Ezra's commentary, as stated in *Mikraot G'dolot*, translated by Rosenburg,191.

[114] Ramban's commentary, as stated in *Mikraot G'dolot*, translated by Rosenburg,191.

the God who *hears* her voice. Rather, she names the God who *sees*.[115] In Genesis 16:13-14 Hagar says, 'You are El Ro'i' -- meaning by this, 'Even here I have seen the back of the One who looks upon me!' " [116] According to Breishit Rabbah 45:10, Hagar meant the following: "I was favoured [to see the Angel] not only when with my mistress, but even now that I am alone." The idea of having previously seen angels refers back to the Rabbis' explanation of why Hagar sees angels in the first place. She is already accustomed to seeing them in Abram's home, only now she is able to see an angel without her mistress (Breishit Rabbah 45:10). Rashi extends this interpretation even further. He says that because Hagar can see the angel without her mistress, she has finally realized that God sees "the humiliation of the humiliated."[117]

Reis notes that during Hagar's conversation in which she names God, Hagar has been called "nonsensical, formidable, corrupt, difficult, and awkward" by such respected commentators as Gunkel, Sarna and Skinner.[118] Contrary to these readings, Reis interprets Hagar's words as expressions of astonishment at the "long-sightedness" of the angel that appears to her. This angel can indisputedly see Hagar's descendants for generations to follow.[119] Trible understands Hagar's naming of God a bit differently, but favorably nonetheless. By naming God, Trible claims, Hagar is uniting "the divine and human encounter: the God who sees and the God who is seen."[120]

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[115] "Ominous Beginnings" by Phyllis Trible in *Hagar, Sarah and their Children,* 41.

[116] Translation of Genesis 15:13-14, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 74.

[117] Rashi's commentary, as stated in *Mikrot G'dolot*, translated by Rosenburg,191.

[118] Reis, 91.

[119] Ibid., 92.

[120] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 18

As the verse continues, the narrator gives an explanation of Hagar's location. The well where the Angel finds her is located between Kadesh and Bered and is called "Be'er lachai-ro'i" meaning "the well of the living one who sees me."[121] According to Sarna, the time in which this well was named remains unknown. It could be an older name meaning, "the well belonging to the clan of Roi." Although this well is originally referred to as a "spring of water" in Genesis 16:7, Sarna asserts that the two descriptions depict the same spring of water. [122] While the precise origin of the well is not known, Susan Niditch recounts that Hagar is the only woman whose major experience includes a place name. No matriarch receives such an honor. Therefore according to Niditch, the narrator of this passage regards Hagar with not only sympathy, but with respect as well.[123]

Interestingly, Genesis 16 ends strictly with facts. At the end of the chapter, we learn that Hagar bears Abram a son, and Abram calls the son Ishmael. Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. As Trible notes, the first word of this chapter in Genesis 16:1 describes Sarai, and the last describes Abram. As Sarai has not borne Abram a child, Hagar does instead. But the text acknowledges only Abram. The verse also credits Abram with naming Ishmael, although the Angel of God had given this task to Hagar as mentioned earlier.

Finally, Trible asserts, the narrative undermines Sarai. Sarai originally tells Abram to take Hagar so that Sarai would be built up through Hagar. However, Sarai is

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[121] Ibid., 18.

[122] Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 122.

[123] *The Torah, A Women's Commentary*, 74. Niditch's interpretation of Genesis 16:7.

not even mentioned at the end of this chapter.[124] Therefore, while the chapter began with the women, Sarai and Hagar, the ending brings the focus back to the patriarch and away from the matriarch.

Teubal further points out that the actual birth of Ishmael is not detailed. Had the birth been documented, Teubal argues, the relationship between Sarai and Hagar may have been better understood. She goes on to say that the way in which a child is born establishes his social status. Had Ishmael been born literally "on Sarah's knees," which Teubal says is the noted method for a priestess to receive an heir, then Ishmael would have certainly belonged to Sarai. Further unclear is the birthplace of Ishmael. Was he born in the desert, in Abram's house, or in another location?[125] This lack of clarity leaves the reader asking many questions regarding the role of both Sarai and Hagar in the upbringing of this child. Hagar does not reappear in the Genesis narrative until Genesis 21:9, in which only some of these questions will be answered.

[124] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 19.
[125] Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian*, 82.

B. Friends or Foes? Three Feminist Retellings of Sarah and Hagar

Feminist scholars in particular have begun to re-write and re-work aspects of this story. By doing so, they have created more nuanced images of both Sarai and Hagar, giving voice and emotion to them as individuals and as a unit. These Midrashic writers use some aspects of the original narrative to create a new story that focuses primarily on the characteristics of female characters. Individual interpretations of the story vary from one author to another. These newly created stories validate what many Rabbinic commentators fail to acknowledge: the relationship between Sarai and Hagar is more complex than the standard tale of mistress and servant, wife and concubine, helpmate and whore, both of whose ultimate purpose is to serve the needs of their man, Abram.

Naomi Graetz offers a rendition of Genesis 16:1-6, that places Sarai and Hagar in an explicitly antagonistic relationship. In Graetz' rendition, the events between Sarai and Hagar take place in Egypt while Sarai and Abraham are still on their journey. Although a slave, Hagar is quite regal in appearance. Sarah and Hagar form a close bond instantly, and Hagar becomes a loyal companion to Sarah. As Graetz's story continues, however, Hagar exposes Sarai to the religious ideas of the Egyptian upper class which cause Sarai to question her own belief in God. Hagar goads Sarai, pointing out that God has demanded Sarai to act obediently time and again yet still has not given Sarai a child. Sarai begins to agree with Hagar and thus mocks Abram's belief that he will be the father of an ancestral line. She taunts Abraham saying, "The only way you will get a child out of me is through my bondswoman Hagar." So, Abram does as Sarai suggests, Hagar conceives, and Sarai is filled with such rage that she is abusive to Hagar, causing Hagar

to flee. Graetz sees Hagar as a manipulator in this scenario, causing Sarai to doubt her belief in God in order to get what she wanted -- Abraham.[126]

Author Rosellen Brown (b.1939) also recounts the events in Genesis 16:1-6. Unlike Graetz, Brown creates a fanciful scenario in which Sarai and Hagar are respectful of one another and sympathetic with each other's feelings. In her rendition, upon learning that Hagar has conceived, Sarai has mixed emotions. She is both joyous that the household will grow with Abram's child yet also sorrowful as she physically does not provide this joy.

Upon seeing her mistress in tears, Hagar approaches Sarai and asks, "How is it with you? Was it not your wish that your house and your husband's house wax with my waning?" Hagar does not imply malice by posing this question to Sarai. Rather, Hagar is obviously confused by Sarai's reaction, as it was Sarai's plan that Hagar conceive in order to be built up through her. Hagar's question leads Sarai to cry on her handmaid's shoulder, allowing herself to be comforted by Hagar's embrace. Hagar, feeling Sarai's emotion, assures her of the loyalty she feels towards to her mistress, asserting, "You also shall be as a mother to this child."[127] Rather than choosing to see Hagar as mocking or insensitive, Brown understands Hagar as a caring individual who values Sarai's feelings as well as her own. In turn, Sarai, too, has conflicting thoughts, feeling guilty for feeling guilty. By ending in an embrace, Sarah and Hagar appear in this situation together without antagonism.

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[126] Naomi Graetz, *S/He Created Them: Feminist Retellings of Biblical Stories* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2003), 36.

[127] Rosellen Brown, "Hagar and Sarah, Sarah and Hagar" in *Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days*, ed. by Gail Twersky Reimer and Judith A. Kates (New York: Gail Twersky Reimer and Judith A. Kates, 1997), 32.

Psychologist Karen Prager also retells the Sarah and Hagar saga but sticks closer to the original text than Graetz and Brown. In her depiction, the story does not end in a warm embrace as in Brown's rendering. Nevertheless, in her version Sarah and Hagar are able to discuss their feelings, and the argument that ensues between them contains multiple layers. In Prager's presentation, upon hearing that Hagar has conceived, Sarai asks, "Do you think you are better for Abram than I because you are pregnant with his child?" Hagar answers, "I am your servant; I endure your aging husband at your bidding. Do you now begrudge Hagar her only child?" Sarai then admits that she grieves for the child she never had, and that Hagar's belly taunts her in her loss. Sarai thus becomes enraged and throws Hagar out the house.[128] While Sarai's feelings towards Hagar remain similar to those in the Biblical text, Sarai is able to verbally express her feelings to Hagar. Simultaneously, Hagar is given a voice, allowing Hagar to stand up for herself.

Graetz, Brown and Krager all create scenarios involving various relationships between Sarai and Hagar, giving each a voice, dialogue and back story -- three things that the Biblical narrative fails to provide in any significant way.

[128] Karen Prager, "God's Covenant with Sarah" in *Biblical Women in the Midrash: A Sourcebook.* ed. by Naomi M. Hyman (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1998), 24.

III. Sarah and Hagar: Genesis 21:9-21

A. A Biblical, Rabbinic and Midrashic Analysis of Genesis 21:9-21

While the story of Sarai and Abram, whom God renames Sarah and Abraham in Genesis 17, continues throughout the next four chapters of Genesis, Hagar does not re-appear until Genesis 21:9. Leading up to Hagar's return, many events take place in the Genesis narrative, which will directly affect the upcoming mistreatment of Hagar by both Sarah and Abraham.

In Genesis 17:19-22, God promises Sarah that she will bear a son to Abraham. God will establish a covenant with Sarah's son, Isaac, and all of his descendants after him. As for Ishmael, God promises that he, too will be fruitful, and God will make of him a great nation. However, it is with Isaac, Sarah's son, that God's covenant will be established. As promised, in Genesis 21:1-8, Sarah becomes pregnant at the age of 90 and bears a child named Isaac. While Sarah is shocked and even laughs at the notion that she could bear a child at her age, she and Abraham are ultimately elated. Following Sarah and Abraham's joy in their son Isaac, drama ensues when Hagar and Ishmael are reintroduced into the mix.

In Genesis 21:9-10, after a feast is held in celebration of the weaning of Isaac, we learn that "Sarah saw the son that Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, playing. She said to Abraham, 'Throw this slave girl and her son out. The son of this slave girl is not going to share in the inheritance with my son Isaac!'"[129] In Hebrew, the word *m'tsacheik,* which is often defined as "playing," can also mean mocking, jesting, joking,

[129] Translation of Genesis 21:9-10, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary,* 98.

or amusing oneself.[130] Did Ishmael actually *do* something to trigger Sarah's reaction, or is it simply that she sees the child playing and having fun, and this alone makes her angry?

In Breishit Rabbah 53:11, the Rabbis define *m'tsacheik* in three ways. R. Akiva defines *m'tsacheik* as sexual impropriety. He asserts that Sarah sees Ishmael ravish maidens, seduce married women and dishonor them. R. Ishmael defines *m'tsacheik* as idolatry. He points to Exodus 32:6, in which people were "making sport" after building the Golden Calf and worshipping before it. R. Eleazar defines *m'tsacheik* as committing murder. He refers to 2 Samuel 2:14 which states, "Let the young men come forward and sport before us."[131] The sins of murder, fornication and idol worship are capital offenses. All three of these Rabbinic interpretations display an anxiety about the severity of Sarah's desire to expel Hagar and Ishmael. They try to justify her actions by inflating Ishmael's sins.

R. Shimon b. Yochai in Breishit Rabbah 53:11 sheds a somewhat kinder light on Ishmael's actions, but likewise ustify the expulsion. R. Shimon argues that Sarah is angered not because of Ishmael's actions, but rather by his words and assumptions regarding the inheritance. R. Shimon states, "For when our father Isaac was born, all rejoiced. They were actually making a mockery of Ishmael, at which point, Ishmael says to them, 'You are fools, for I am the firstborn and I receive a double portion.'" (Breishit Rabbah 53:11) In agreement with R. Shimon's statement is R. Azariah who asserts that if

[130] Definitions of *m'tsacheik* according to *Bibleworks* (Jerusalem: BibleWorks, LLC, 1992).

[131] Translation of 2 Samuel 2:14, *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh,* 646.

Ishmael talks to the family in this manner, Sarah's orders to banish Ishmael would be justified.[132]

Rashi concurs with the Rabbis who assert that Ishmael must have committed some capital offense. Ramban, on the other hand, argues that the only Rabbinic interpretation that he deems logical is the one involving inheritance. Ramban understands the word *m'tsacheik* to mean "scoffing." Perhaps in this instance, Ishmael is scoffing at his younger brother and the significance of his birth. According to Ramban, Abraham most likely demands that everyone in his household observe the commandments of God. Therefore, it is unlikely that anyone in his household would commit idolatry, sexual immorality or murder. Scoffing, therefore, makes more sense in this context, for after seeing Ishmael "m'tsacheik," Sarah says to Abraham, "the son of that slavewoman shall not inherit with my son, with Isaac."[133]

The Rabbis and commentators agree that Ishmael somehow provokes Sarah. But is it fair to assign all blame to him and none to Sarah? With regard to Ishmael, as Sarna asserts, the legal position is clear. Sarah orders Abraham to have intercourse with Hagar in order for Sarah to be "built up" through Hagar. Sarah herself initiated this match between Abraham and Hagar, and there is no question that Ishmael is Abraham's legitimate son. According to the Laws of Hammurabi, Ishmael is entitled to a share of Abraham's estate because Abraham accepted Ishmael as his son. Sarna goes on to argue that Sarah's demand to throw Ishmael out of the house refers to earlier laws known as Lipit-Ishtar. In this law, the father may grant freedom to a slave woman and her children.

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[132] Translation of Breishit Rabbah 53:11 taken from Jewish Studies Portal.
[133] *The Torah: With Ramban's Commentary,* translated by Blinder, 485.

Upon freedom, their inheritance is forfeited. In Sarna's assertion, Sarah is thus asking Abraham to exercise this law.[134]

Trible draws particular attention to Sarah's language in Genesis 21:10. Sarah refers to Ishmael as "her [Hagar's] son," and continues by saying that he will not share the inheritance with "my son, Isaac." By referring to Isaac by name and not affording Ishmael the same respect, Sarah is showing "possession, intimacy, exclusivity, and attachment" to *her* child.[135] In addition to the lack of respect she shows Ishmael, Sarah is also creating a divide between herself and Hagar. In Genesis 21:10, Sarah does not refer to Hagar by name, nor does Sarah call Hagar *her* handmaid. Rather, Sarah calls Hagar "this slave girl" (*ha'amah*). By changing the description of Hagar from *shifchah* to that of *amah*, Hagar's status has diminished in Sarah's eyes. Hagar is no longer Sarah's maidservant, but rather she is simply a slave.[136]

According to feminist scholar Arie Troost, Sarah's reaction to Ishmael arises due to God's "Arch-parental" promises that God has made to Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. As Troost notes, all three of them are promised his or her own heir. Abraham has an additional problem in that he must negotiate between *two* sons, Isaac and Ishmael. While he recognizes that priority must be given to Isaac, as Isaac has received the covenant from God, Abraham is still faced with the dilemma of how to keep both of his sons together. As Troost further asserts, Sarah is the first both to notice and to verbalize

[134] Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 147.
[135] Trible, "Ominous Beginnings" in *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children*, 45.
[136] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 21.

Abraham's dilemma. Her solution is to exile Hagar and Ishmael, as Sarah holds no claim to Ishmael.[137]

As the narrative continues in Genesis 21:11-13, we learn that Sarah's orders "...grieved Abraham greatly, on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be grieved over the boy or your slave. Do whatever Sarah tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be called yours. Yet I will also make a nation out of the children of the slave's son, for, he too, is your offspring.'"[138]

Upon hearing these verses, the question arises, why exactly is Abraham grieving in the first place? Is he distressed by Sarah's orders, or is he distressed by Ishmael's supposed bad behavior? According to Ramban, Abraham is distressed over losing his son, implying that his grief has nothing to do with losing Hagar. Had Sarah ordered Abraham to drive out Hagar alone, Abraham would have fulfilled her wish without hesitation. Because his son is involved, he is greatly disturbed. Ramban also asserts that God understands Abraham's hesitation to send Ishmael away, which is why God promises to make Ishmael a great nation and will bless him.[139]

Sarna builds on Ramban's interpretation, claiming that the narrator finds it necessary for God to justify Abraham's actions in order to ensure that Abraham would not be seen in a morally negative light. According to Sarna, the narrator does this by stating two facts. First, the line of Abraham will be continued solely through Isaac. Second, Hagar and her son will not be left alone in the wilderness, for God promises that Ishmael will have a bright future. Sarna also points out that there is a shift in these

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[137] Arie Troost, "Reading for the Author's Signature: Genesis 21.1-21 and Luke 15.11-32 as Intertexts" in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, 262.

[138] Translation of Genesis 21:11-13, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 99.

[139] *The Torah: With Ramban's Commentary*, translated by Blinder, 487.

verses, as the narrative moves from Sarah's motivation to God's motivation. For example, in the hopes of protecting her own inheritance, Sarah orders Abraham to force out Hagar and Ishmael at the beginning of this narrative. The action then shifts to God's ultimate assurance and promise to Abraham regarding future generations.[140]

In light of Abraham's angst, Teubal raises an interesting perspective. If Abraham is so distraught about his son's departure, then what influence does Sarah have in his decision? What gives Sarah the power to decide whether Ishmael has or does not have a stake in Abraham's inheritance?[141] How does God feel about Abraham's angst over his son? Trible weighs in on this argument, pointing to the language used when God speaks to Abraham. God tells Abraham not to be distressed "on account of the *lad.*" When referring to Ishmael, God does not describe him as "your [Abraham's] son." Trible asserts that Sarah may not be the only one trying to change Abraham's vision of Ishmael. God may be trying to do the same thing, as if God is encouraging Abraham to create distance between himself and his son.

Moreover, God refers to Hagar as "your slave woman" and not as "your wife". This description is similar to that of Sarah's upon telling Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael.[142] Here again, it seems that God is attempting to create a divide between Abraham and any feelings that he may have for Hagar.

Taking this into account, why does Abraham ultimately cast out his son? The Rabbis in Exodus Rabbah 1:1 point to Proverbs 13:24 which states, "He that spareth his rod, hateth his son." According to the Rabbis, this verse teaches that when a man refrains

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[140] Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis,* 147.
[141] Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian,* 125.
[142] Trible, *Texts of Terror,* 23.

from admonishing his son, the son will fall into evil ways. The father will then come to hate his son. This, the Rabbis claim, is what happens to Abraham in relation to Ishmael. They claim that in Ishmael's early years, Abraham loved his son to the point that he was unable to chastise him. Then, when Ishmael fell into his evil ways, Abraham's love turned to hatred. He loathed his son so much, in fact, that Abraham cast Ishmael out of his house empty-handed.

Therefore in Genesis 21:14, The Rabbis justify Abraham's actions when, "early the next morning, Abraham got up and took bread and a waterskin and handed them to Hagar, placing them and the boy on her shoulder. Then he cast her out...."[143] According to Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, Abraham took a wheeled water tub and tied it to Hagar so that she could pull it behind her. This way, whenever Abraham wanted to see Ishmael, he would be able to find the trail.[144] This view maintained in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer clearly sympathizes with Abraham, yet says nothing of Hagar's plight.

In Breishit Rabbah 53:13, the Rabbis justify Abraham's actions yet again asking, "Do you really think that Abraham, of whom it is written: And Abram was very rich in cattle (Gen. 30: 2), could send away his wife and son from his house empty-handed without clothes or means of livelihood? But this is to teach you that when Ishmael became depraved he ceased to think about him." Here, the Rabbis uphold that Abraham is a rational man and would never have treated his son so harshly had he not deserved this punishment. Rashi agrees with the Rabbis, justifying Abraham's stingy gifts, as if to say

[143] Partial translation of Genesis 21:14, The Torah: A Women's Commentary, 99.
[144] *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, translated by Gerald Friedlander, Chapter 30.

that Ishmael's behavior was so evil, that he and his mother are lucky they were given anything at all.[145]

Why do the Rabbis and subsequently the commentators make excuses for both Sarah and Abraham's behaviors, blame Ishmael for a supposedly unforgivable yet unknown act, and dismiss Hagar all together? This entire incident is indeed disconcerting from a feminist perspective. While the focus primarily centers around Abraham, as Frymer-Kensky points out, this entire episode also shows "the oppression of one woman by another."[146]

Once Abraham casts out Hagar and Ishmael, Hagar once again finds herself in the desert as in Genesis 16:7-14. Having been cast out from Abraham and Sarah's home for second time, she and her son Ishmael are alone in the desert. Genesis 21:14-21 reads as follows:

"She wandered aimlessly in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was all gone, she cast the child away under a bush; she walked away and sat down on the other side at a remove of about a bowshot thinking, 'Let me not see the child's death.' There, on the other side, she sat and wept in a loud voice." God heard the boy's cry, and from heaven an angel of God called to Hagar and said, 'What is troubling you, Hagar? Have no fear, for God has heard the cry of the lad where he is. Get up, lift the boy, and hold him with your hand, for I am going to make of him a great nation.' God then opened her eyes and she saw a well. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy to drink."[147]

Interestingly, the Rabbis do not comment on Hagar's early days in the desert before God comes to the rescue. Even though they reflect on Hagar's conversation with the angel, they have nothing positive to add in terms of Hagar's character[148]. They do not

[145] *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary*, translated by Zvi Herczeg, 222.
[146] *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 98.
[147] Translation of Genesis 21:14-16, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 99.
[148] This point will be discussed on the following page.

speculate upon her possible heart-ache, her fear or her struggle. However, this is not true of every early Biblical commentary written.

In his article, "Hagar: Victim or Villain," Christian Theologian John Thompson surveys 16th Century Catholic and Reformed commentary, and presents Hagar as playing a more complex role. Thompson focuses in particular on the portrayal of Hagar upon her banishment.

For example, Thomas de Vio Cardinal Cajetan (1469-1534), Catholic author of one of the earliest commentaries on Genesis from the Reformation era, expresses concern for the safety of Hagar and her son after Abraham casts them out in Genesis 21:14. Cajetan worries that perhaps Abraham does not give enough provisions to Hagar and Ishmael. Rather than blaming Ishmael for the banishment as medieval Rabbinic literature tends to do, Cajetan says "bread and water" should be understood as "all kinds of provisions." Cajetan also assumes that Abraham provides animals and attendants to accompany the two on their journey. To have sent them out with any less would have been "impious."[149] Thompson argues that while Cajetan's main concern may have been to defend Abraham's actions, he also cannot bear to think that Abraham could be so cruel, and therefore, Cajetan amends the text of Genesis 21:14.[150]

Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther (1483-1546) also displays concern for Hagar as she is cast out for the second time. Luther states, "This is surely a sad story if you consider it carefully....After Abraham is sure about God's will, he hastens to obey....He simply sends away his very dear wife, who was the first to make him a father, along with

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[149] John L. Thompson, "Hagar, Victim or Villian? Three Sixteenth Century Views," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, (April, 1997), 219. Thompson is quoting Thomas de Vio, Cardinal Cajetan's, *Commentary on Genesis 21:14*.

[150] Ibid., 220.

his firstborn son....But does it not seem to be cruelty for a mother who is burdened with a child to be sent away so wretchedly, and to an unfamiliar place at that - yes, into a vast and arid desert?"[151] Luther further maintains, however, that it was God's intention to *spiritually* kill Hagar so that God could then raise her up. Luther insists that Satan is ultimately at work here, as Satan is the one who afflicts Hagar with negative thoughts while she and Ishmael are in the desert. In Luther's view, an Angelic vision eventually visits Hagar to comfort her.[152]

Even greater sympathy for Hagar is demonstrated by feminist Biblical scholars, who commiserate with Hagar's plight, providing insight into her struggles in the desert. Trible, for example, finds the narrative description of Hagar when in the desert to be particularly disturbing. In Genesis 21:14, the narrator states that Hagar "wanders" in the wilderness. The Hebrew word for "she wanders" is *vateitah*, which as Trible points out, indicates uncertainty and a lack or loss of direction. Trible further notes that unlike Shur where Hagar is first cast out, Beersheba is not surrounded by water, and thus is a dry and foreign place, a point that Martin Luther makes as well.[153]

As Hagar weeps, we learn that God hears the boy's cry, *not* Hagar's cry. The Rabbis understand this phrase to mean that the Angel of God calls to Hagar *for Abraham's sake*. Therefore they dismiss Hagar's feelings altogether. According to R. Simon in Breishit Rabbah 53:14, the ministering angels quickly harken to God on Ishmael's behalf because, although God knows that in the future Ishmael will one day "slay children with thirst himself", God is judging Ishmael only as he is at that

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[151] John Thompson, "Hagar, Victim or Villian", 226. Thompson is quoting thoughts of Martin Luther in his work, *Commentary on Genesis 21:14*.

[152] Ibid., 229.

[153] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 23.

moment[154]. At this very instant, R. Simon argues, God hears the voice of Ishmael because he is ill, and "a sick person's prayers on his own behalf are more efficacious than those of anyone else." While Rashi further asserts that God helps the boy because he is ill, Ramban argues that God helps because of Ishmael's promised future.[155]

Whether God hears the cries of Ishmael because of his present state or because of a future promise, the Rabbis do not even consider Hagar's feelings during this time. The way in which God views Hagar in this narrative is perhaps even more troubling. It is as if God sees Hagar as nothing more than a conduit through which to save a future leader of a nation. For example, as the narrative continues and God orders Hagar to "lift up the boy, and hold him in your hand, for I am going to make of him a great nation,"[156] Ishmael is simply referred to as "the boy". He is *not* called the son of Hagar. Therefore as Trible asserts, Hagar is not considered Ishmael's *mother* in this case, so much as Ishmael's support system.[157]

In Genesis 21:19, "God then opened her [Hagar's] eyes, and she saw a well. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boys to drink."[158] The Rabbis now take the time to comment on Hagar's actions, but their reactions portray Hagar in a negative light. Benjamin b. Levi and R. Jonathan b. Amram in Breishit Rabbah 53:14 both insist that because Hagar goes to fill the bottle with water, this proves that she is lacking in faith. By running to the well, she does not have faith in God that the well will remain. (Breishit Rabbah 53:14) It is difficult to understand why here the Rabbis suddenly

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[154] Translation of Breishit Rabbah 53:14 in Judaic Classics: Jewish Studies Portal.
[155] *The Torah: With Ramban's Commentary*, translated by Rabbi Yaakov Blinder, 489.
[156] Partial translation of Genesis 21:18, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 100.
[157] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 26.
[158] Translation of Genesis 21:19, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 100.

consider Hagar's actions, when up until this they have focused solely on Ishmael and his well-being. Why question Hagar's faith in God now? After all, Hagar is the first person to name God. She does as she is told, returns to the harsh treatment of her mistress, gets thrown out into the wilderness, and then takes care of her child. How do any of her actions denote a lack of faith in God?

As Trible alludes, no promises are made to Hagar herself. Although in Genesis 16:3 Hagar *names* God "El-Roi, the God of seeing, Hagar no longer has a voice or a vision of God in regards to herself. Hagar now accepts God's role as sustainer of Ishmael, rather than sustainer of Hagar. Therefore in the words of Trible, Hagar moves "...from bondage to expulsion to homelessness."[159]

The saga of Hagar and Ishmael comes to an end in Genesis 21:20-21 where we read that, "God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became a bowman. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt."[160] This is the final time that Hagar is mentioned in the Bible. Hagar has been left in the wilderness with Ishmael. While the narrative suggests that God accompanies Ishmael throughout his adolescence, it is not clear if God is also mindful of *Hagar*. The reader continues to want a greater understanding of Hagar's inner struggles.

[159] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 27.
[160] Genesis 21:20-21, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 100.

B. What happens Next? Exploring Hagar through Anda Pinkerfeld-Amir's "Hagar"

Feminist writers, poets, artists and musicians have been known for adding depth and dimension of character to biblical women who are often sparsely represented within the original biblical narrative. This form of artistic expression is known as feminist midrash. Anda Pinkerfeld-Amir (1902-1981) exemplifies the poetic side of feminist midrash through her poem entitled "Hagar." Her work consists of a lengthy opening section followed by fourteen short poems. In this work, Pinkerfeld-Amir takes the reader on an odyssey, first through the perspective of Abraham, then through Hagar's heart. She explores Hagar's tortured thoughts and complex emotions in the wake of her banishment by Abraham.

While the narrative in Genesis 21:14 articulates that Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away with bread and water, Abraham's feelings are not elaborated. Rather, the story focuses on Hagar and Ishmael's journey upon their expulsion, leaving Abraham's thoughts on the consequences open for interpretation.

Pinkerfeld-Amir begins her poem where this biblical narrative leaves off, exploring the perspective of Abraham. Interestingly, Pinkerfeld-Amir does not portray Abraham as conflicted or as sympathetically distraught over his decision to expel Hagar and Ishmael as the biblical narrative suggests. Rather, Pinkerfeld-Amir creates a heartless Abraham. As Wendy Zierler notes, Abraham is presented as "...abusive, even

murderous, a man who places his former wife and son 'in the heart of the desert' to be 'lion's prey.'"[161]

At the beginning of this cycle, Abraham delivers a monologue to the exiled Hagar proclaiming,

Surely I hate you Hagar my handmaid
You have wound yourself like a vine
Between the palms of my feet
And will not let go.
The more I pained you, the more you loved....

...And you, in the stubbornness of your love
You deceived your own heart
That I indeed bore your affection;
And you did not know,
Nor did not want to know
That I was indeed plotting.[162]

Abraham's words constitute an outpouring of emotion. Clearly, he is disgusted by Hagar's self-abasement, as she endures his torment time and again. According to this poem, Abraham blames Hagar for *his* abusive behavior. Pinkerfeld-Amir portrays Abraham as a man full of intense hatred towards his former spouse. As the poem continues, Abraham contemplates strategies to humiliate and permanently exile Hagar. He also dreams of the various ways that Hagar might be murdered in the wilderness. Pinkerfeld-Amir is creating an Abraham with a dark, sadistic side far different from the Abraham that biblical readers have come to know. Pinkerfeld-Amir's personal background may have leveraged her decision to create Abraham in such a way. A native of Poland, Pinkerfeld-Amir was raised in an anti-Zionist home where the Hebrew

[161] Wendy Zierler, *And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 113.

[162] Sue Ann Wasserman, "Women's Voices: the present through the past (Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College, 1987), 66. Wasserman's translation of first poem.

language and Jewish culture were not celebrated. At the age of eighteen, she became a victim of pogroms while studying in Lvov. This experience influenced her decision to transfer from a Polish school to a Jewish one. Pinkerfeld-Amir eventually became a committed Zionist, moving to Palestine, and abandoning Polish writing for Hebrew.[163] One who experienced two completely different worlds, first in Poland and then in Palestine, Pinkerfeld-Amir was aware of what it meant to live in two worlds and experience painful transitions. By abasing Abraham, the first father of Israel, and in turn celebrating Hagar, the mother of Ishmael who becomes the father of Islam, Pinkerfeld-Amir asserts her own thought regarding the influence the Bible holds over both religious and nationalistic decisions.[164] Her poetic feminist midrash, therefore, challenges the accepted views of the time. By creating an evil Abraham, a character on the opposite end of the Biblical extreme, Pinkerfeld-Amir challenges the reader to understand Abraham in a different manner. Perhaps the reader of this poem will reconcile Abraham's character as falling somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. He is neither the sacred saint that the Bible portrays nor simply the sordid sinner that Pinkerfeld-Amir creates.

Pinkerfeld-Amir reserves Hagar's voice for the second series of poems, where Hagar demonstrates a broad range of feelings for Abraham. These include anger at Abraham's lack of assertiveness and affection, unrequited and intense love, overwhelming feelings of inadequacy, and finally peace with herself and with Abraham. As Zierler writes, Hagar is presented in this work as displaying "...an almost pathological

[163] Wendy Zierler, "Anda Pinkerfeld Amir", *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. December 17, 2009 http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/amir-anda-pinkerfeld.

[164] Ibid.

willingness to submit to more abuse, a capacity to love unrequitedly that borders on self-destruction and/or self sacrifice."[165]

Pinkerfeld-Amir begins the subsequent set of fourteen short poems with a quotation from Spanish Jewish poet R. Yehuda haLevi (1075-1141) translated to mean, "...the more you hurt me the more will I love you. For it is wonderful to me."[166] Because Pinkerfeld-Amir commences the poem with haLevi's words, she attests that unrequited love, while an intense sensation for Hagar, is a universal and timeless sentiment. Hagar should not be ashamed to feel great love and loss, nor should she apologize for her broken heart.

After this moving quotation, Hagar begins her emotional odyssey. In the first poem, Hagar speaks of the carpets she affectionately wove for Abraham. Her nostalgia turns to anger, as she believes that these carpets should be a constant, tangible reminder of her love for him. She is disturbed that the time and tears she put into the carpets' colorful threads and soft flowers leave him callous and cavalier.

The second poem moves from the details of the carpets to the intricacies of Abraham and Hagar's physical relationship. Hagar remembers Abraham's touch, trying to emulate the sensation but unable to do so without him. While in the first long poem Abraham calls Hagar "submissive," in this second, short poem, Hagar is calling herself the "stubborn one."[167] Within this poem, her actions demonstrate both characteristics of submission and stubbornness. On the one hand, Hagar submits to Abraham's abuse

[165] Wendy Zierler, *And Rachel Stole the Idols*, 113.

[166] Wasserman, "Women's Voices", 69. Wasserman's translation of haLevi's quotation.

[167] Ibid., 90.

when they are together. On the other hand, Hagar's body is stubborn in that it will not allow her to forget the satisfaction she felt through the acquiescence of abuse.

The third poem transforms the woman who misses Abraham's caress into the woman who misses Abraham's daily presence in her life. Within this ten line poem, Pinkerfeld-Amir twice employs the Hebrew phrase, "yom achar yom," meaning "day after day." In the first usage, Hagar says, "Day after day sings, sparks with a myriad of light, to greet you." Here, she is routinely hopeful that Abraham will reappear. However, Hagar follows this phrase with the realization, "Day after day withers and falls, lights are extinguished, because you did not come."[168] Only in her dreams does Abraham emerge.

In poems four and five, Hagar continues to persevere, admitting that every time Abraham kills her, she rises up again. He "kills" her a total of seven times. According to Rabbi Sue Ann Wasserman, the seven deaths may be a representation of a week of wandering in the desert. She dies each night yet continues to rise each morning, overcoming Abraham's abuse.[169] However, Pinkerfeld-Amir's reference to death is not clear. Hagar also could be alluding to the resilience of her spirit. Her soul is battered daily to the point of death, yet Hagar comes back stronger each day. She questions Abraham about the source of his hatred, acknowledging that Abraham has rejected her soul and left it defective.

Pinkerfeld-Amir addresses Hagar's pregnancy in the sixth poem. The biblical narrative offers no specific details about Hagar as expectant mother. We are told only that, "Hagar bore to Abram a son, and Abram called his son whom Hagar had borne

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[168] Ibid., 71. Wasserman translation of poem "Gimmel".
[169] Ibid., 90. Wasserman's interpretation of poem "Daled".

Ishmael."[170] In her poem however, Pinkerfeld-Amir imagines a shared, loving experience between Hagar and Abraham in sharp contrast to the biblical narrative that views Hagar's pregnancy and birth of Ishmael only in terms of its impact on Sarah and Abraham's family. For example, Hagar remembers Abraham's emotions during this period as proud, solicitous and tender. Hagar even recalls her labor pains and swollen body, details that are never mentioned in the biblical narrative. Thus, Pinkerfeld-Amir acknowledges the joy as well as the suffering that Hagar's body and spirit endured during her pregnancy, as well as the bond that she and Abraham shared along the way. The poet humanizes Hagar's gestational and maternal experience. It also depicts Abraham as a loving father and husband, if only for an instant. By understanding Hagar in this way, the poem affords the reader a greater sympathy towards Hagar when she and her son are exiled by the very man who initially stood by her side. By the end of this poem, Hagar wonders if perhaps she had imagined it all, as if these loving moments with Abraham were simply a fantasy.

In the seventh poem, Hagar acts on her feelings. Instead of only imagining Abraham's physical location, she wanders to find him. While on her pilgrimage, she pledges not only to endure all the difficulties along her path but also to make a clear passageway for Abraham. She says:

> I will remove every stone from the roads.
> I will weed them of every weed.
> I will straighten them and smooth them by hand:
> And when the day comes
> That you stride upon them-
> You will not wound your feet

[170] Translation of Genesis 16:15. *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 74.

On the sharpness of the stones.[171]

According to Pinkerfeld-Amir's portrayal, Hagar will do anything to ease Abraham's pain and seldom considers her own well-being. She thus renders Hagar as a nurturing, self-sacrificing caregiver at any cost. In Genesis 21:16 for example, when Hagar and Ishmael are cast out in the wilderness, Hagar weeps over the reality that her son is suffering and most likely will die. She cries, "Let me not see the child's death."[172] The same characteristics are exhibited in this poem, but this time the concern is directed towards Abraham. Pinkerfeld-Amir therefore portrays Hagar as the righteous and dutiful one in the biblical narrative -- not Abraham. In the eighth poem, Hagar suddenly stops walking along the path in search of Abraham. She is angry at herself for not focusing more intently when they had walked the hills together. She believes that she took their relationship for granted, not realizing that soon they would no longer be hand in hand. She cries to the hills and the trees, begging to understand why they did not warn her that Abraham would leave. By the next poem, Hagar is spent, both physically and emotionally. She begins hallucinating, asking her legs where they are leading her. Her legs reply that they are bringing her to Abraham's house. Hagar finds herself standing before Abraham's threshold, lost and alone. Within the second part of this poem, however, Hagar regains her energy determined to find him. Hagar admits that when she eventually finds him, Abraham will still look at her "with eyes of stone" (*b'einei-even*) and ask her, "what are you doing here?" (*Mah lach po*).

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[171] Wasserman, "Women's voices," 73. Wasserman translation of Pinkerfeld-Amir poem "Zayin."

[172] Partial translation of Genesis 21:16, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 99.

In the tenth poem, Hagar shifts attention away from her quest to reunite with Abraham to her disdain for Sarah. Her focus returns to Abraham in poems eleven and twelve. Her anger is gone. She has accepted the fact that she will be forever in love with Abraham, and she always will be there for him. Nevertheless, Hagar will cease acknowledging her unconditional and unrequited love for him, as she is determined to maintain a healthy life from this point forward. In the second to last poem, for example, Hagar reflects:

> My life is again in confusion:
> It is tossed about without an anchor
> On the great waters;
> But the blueness from above
> Calm and tranquil
> Prophesy for me an end to wandering.[173]

This portrayal of Hagar and Abraham is compelling on a number of levels. Upon first reading of this poem, it seems that Pinkerfeld-Amir is setting up Abraham as the evil villain and Hagar as the sympathetic victim. However, this poem has a deeper meaning. Pinkerfeld-Amir's "Hagar" is making a point about Biblical characters specifically and about human behavior in general. Abraham and Hagar, and by extension all human beings, are highly complex individuals. A reading of the Biblical narrative alone, however, does not do justice to their multi-faceted traits. Abraham is the righteous, noble man. Or is he? Hagar is merely the mischievous maidservant. Or is she? As Pinkerfeld-Amir proves, people are not always as they seem.

Medieval Rabbinic commentators, under most circumstances, vindicate the behavior of biblical characters even when it seems less than laudable. In terms of

[173] Ibid., 79. Wasserman's translation of poem "Yud-Gimmel."

Abraham's situation, these Rabbis justify Abraham's decision to exile Hagar and Ishmael never blaming him directly.

In contrast, Pinkerfeld-Amir stands up to this traditional view, holding Abraham responsible for his actions. How bold it is of this poet to create such a critical view of Abraham. However, along with Abraham's vehement hatred of Hagar, I believe comes passionate love for this maidservant. It is inconceivable to me that Abraham would exhibit such extreme animosity towards Hagar if he did not experience all-consuming love for her as well. Pinkerfeld-Amir's Abraham walks a very fine line between love and hate, two emotions that do not get expressed directly in the Biblical narrative.

Regarding Sarah, we never truly know how Abraham feels about her either within the Biblical narrative or in this poem. Yes, she is his wife, but is his love for her ardent or passionate? While Sarah's "affliction" of Hagar can be explained away by jealousy over Hagar's pregnancy, how does Abraham feel? The fact that Pinkerfeld-Amir creates an Abraham capable of such intense emotion towards Hagar leads me to believe that his passionate love is reserved for Hagar alone. The comfortable intimacy that he may have with Sarah differs from the undeniable yearning he has for Hagar.

While Pinkerfeld-Amir sheds new light on Abraham, the most remarkable element in the cycle is her treatment of Hagar. Pinkerfeld-Amir offers the reader a lens into Hagar's heart concerning her feelings for Abraham. As previously mentioned, the Biblical narrative acknowledges Hagar's concern over her child, but it does not discuss the idea of romantic love. Pinkerfeld -Amir creates a woman capable of love for her child as well as amorous love, thereby allowing a whole, multi-dimensional person to develop.

Initially, I took issue with the fact that it took fourteen poems for Hagar to come to the conclusion that she must take charge of her own life. My sympathy towards her became mixed with frustration as Hagar continued to obsess over his man. Then I realized, perhaps this is Pinkerfeld-Amir's point. Regardless of whether one agrees with my interpretation of Abraham as a man capable of consummate love as well as extraordinary disdain, one must acknowledge that Abraham is at the very least emotionally abusive in both this poem and in the Biblical text.

I am unable to fully empathize with a person who remains in an abusive relationship or continues to obsess over an abuser. As a self-proclaimed feminist and an admirer of Hagar, I admit that I was hoping to find Hagar strong and independent from the onset of the poem. After a closer reading of this work however, I understand Pinkerfeld-Amir's reasoning for including fourteen poems to explain Hagar's emotional state. She is too battered by Abraham to overcome her pain in a shorter, more succinct period.

I believe that Hagar is a heroine in this saga, but I would not go so far as to say she is *the* heroine of this story. Sarah is a heroine too. As I have described throughout this thesis, we do not know what kind of abuse Sarah endured during the time leading up to her encounter with Hagar. Pinkerfeld-Amir does not detail many events involving Sarah. Even when Hagar curses Sarah in the tenth poem saying, "Let her pathetic skin turn yellow and harden, let it feel like parchment in your palms..."[174], ultimately I believe that Hagar's hatred of Sarah primarily stems from Abraham's abuse. There is no question that Sarah was abusive towards Hagar in her own right. However, I also believe

[174] Ibid. Translation of poem "Yud."

that Sarah's difficult past, as detailed sparingly in Genesis Chapter 12, affected her on an emotional level that is never discussed within the Biblical narrative. In my opinion, Sarah was battling a deeper, emotional issue which led to her deplorable treatment of Hagar. Sarah should not merely be viewed as a petty, jealous woman threatened by a younger, more fertile one. I need to perceive Sarah as more than a woman ultimately defined by her treatment of Hagar and her relationship to Abraham.

I am particularly taken by Pinkerfeld-Amir's conclusion of the poem, as she finally portrays Hagar as a woman coming to terms with herself. Hagar is a woman who is proud of her journey and accepts that she can move forward. She knows that one day she will be able to approach anyone and say, "Look, here is my life, look and accept it: behold my life is pure before you, there is nothing else except for this one bright crystal. Accept it!"[175] Pinkerfeld-Amir creates a character who ultimately takes responsibility for herself, eventually deserving of a fruitful, happy life full of *requited* love.

[175] Wasserman, "Women's Voices," 80. Wasserman's translation of final poem.

IV. Exploring Complexities of Character in Act I, Scene I of *Sarah and Hagar*

According to the first three verses of Genesis 16, Sarai decides to entrust her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar, with the duty of giving her husband, Abram, the one thing that she herself cannot - a son. Not only does she make this decision in this seemingly brief amount of time, but she also carries out the plan. While only three biblical verses determine an action that will change the course of three people's lives forever, one begins to speculate about the true feelings and motivations behind Sarai's decision and Hagar's compliancy. Regarding Sarai, what is her relationship to Hagar, to Abram and ultimately to herself? In a decision that determines Hagar's fate, Hagar is not given a voice or a choice. Rather, she is simply "taken" from Sarai and "given" to Abram. Yet, is this truly how the events occurred? These three verses taken from Genesis 16:1-3, have been expanded to nearly an entire operatic scene in the 2007 opera, *Sarah and Hagar*. Both the music and libretto by Gerald Cohen and Charles Kondek respectively, illustrate Sarai and Hagar in multidimensional ways with distinct personalities, bringing nuance, heart and complexity to this seemingly simple story.

While the Biblical narrative contains no dialogue between Sarai and Hagar, both Cohen and Kondek give voice to these women. The Mistress and Maidservant engage in a poignant exchange accomplished not only through the libretto but also through specific music elements. By employing such musical techniques as motifs, call and response and counterpoint, Cohen finds innovative ways to place these women in harmony with each other, while also revealing an often haunting dissonance between them.

In the first scene of Act I, Sarai is distraught over the thought that she will not bear a son for Abram, expressing her barren frustration with Hagar. Although Hagar

shows sympathy and tries to comfort Sarai through the first part of scene one, measure 136[176] is a turning point in the scene. Here, Hagar admits that she would do anything to help Sarai, thus trading in her reactive state for one of proaction.

Hagar enters this measure with a sustained high F followed by a series of descending major thirds, as if she is lamenting on Sarai's situation. These falling thirds create a *leit motif* that is heard throughout the opera. However, when Hagar utters Sarai's name at the end of this phrase (m.140), she moves from her signature descending major thirds to a leap of a major seventh just before Sarai enters. Interestingly, this major seventh is a recurring theme throughout the opera for Sarai. It is as if Hagar forgets her carefree, major ways and is thus giving honor to her master by adopting her *leit motif* if only for a moment. Within this scene alone, Sarai sings this major seventh leap at two poignant moments. The first is found in measure 209, as Sarai sings to Hagar, "you are young, you're time will come." Sarai seems agitated at Hagar in this measure, almost annoyed that Hagar shares her desire to want a child. Sarai's signature leap also occurs at the end of the scene in measures 261 and 263 as Sarai utters Hagar's name, as it dawns on her that Hagar should carry her child.

At the beginning of this scene, as Sarai enters following Hagar's desire to help her in measure 141, she does so in a determined fashion, leaping first to a minor sixth and then to a minor seventh in measures 141-142. Sarai does not imitate Hagar's motif, rather she stays on her own course.

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[176] See Appendix for musical references in this chapter. All musical examples taken from Gerald Cohen, *Sarah and Hagar: Opera in 2 Acts* (New York: Gerald Cohen, 2008), 16-25.

As the two women begin to engage in a dialogue, a series of ascending major triads are heard in the baseline, one quarter note per measure, creating a sense of both stability yet increased tension, as a tonal center is never completely determined. Through the course of five measures (mms. 141-145), the baseline moves through B major, C# major, Eb major and E major. In addition, a trilled D is heard throughout the melody above these major chords, making the listener aware that at the moment, nothing has been resolved. In measure 146, the ascending major triads now become ascending *minor* triads, and the trill originally stabilized on D begins to ascend chromatically, thus creating a true feeling of tension. While the baseline ascends diatonically and the trill ascends chromatically, Sarai continues to reiterate her need for a son. As she expresses that the "the dream never ends" (m. 147), she does so with her signature major seventh leap.

After doing so, Hagar reenters with her descending major thirds, but this time, her plea to help is climaxed as she begins on her highest note yet - a high Ab. As she descends, she does not adhere to Sarai's melody, as Hagar confidently expresses her thoughts with her own *leit motif* represented by these descending thirds. This pattern of descending thirds, although using different notes, is the same pattern Hagar sings as she first enters this scene (measures 135-139). She also chimes in with her signature major thirds in measure 176, as she listens to Sarai sing of her powerful husband yet powerless womb.

As Hagar holds on to her seemingly true desire to help her master in measure 149, Sarai is in a panicked state, singing of her desired children, "where are they?" The baseline adds to Sarai's frenetic mood with octave leaps alternating between B and Bb,

then moving to C#. By the end of this section, Hagar sustains a D, Sarai sustains an E natural and the baseline is leaping from low to high C#. While the tonality of this section seems to anchor in D, it is Hagar who holds onto this foundation. In turn, Sarai is vocally as well as cerebrally dissonant with Hagar by the end of this section.

A new musical development briefly occurs in the melody line of measure 155, which foreshadows events to come in a lullaby between Sarai and Hagar at the end of the act. In the meantime, however, quickly diverging from the forthcoming lullaby theme, Sarai reenters the scene in measure 158. The key of A minor is immediately established upon her entrance, which is the first stabilized key of this section. With the solidity of the key also comes a stable vocal line. As Sarai begins, she does so on a dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note, hovering around A natural and C natural. This opening statement is heard one scene later by Abram himself as he states that he hears the voice of God, trusting each word and heeding each command. Here, he takes on the stability of both the steady sixteenth note pattern in the melody line as well as the steady key of A minor (Act I, Scene 2 mms. 33-38). Therefore while Sarai and Abram are not in this scene together, their common musical theme shows that they are still a united force.

In fact, as Sarai enters, it is Abram on whom she briefly focuses. She ceases from discussing her desire for a child, and begins to explain that first, she is "the wife of the man who defeated the King of Elam" and second, she reminds herself, "many kings allied with him." Clearly, this is no small feat. Sarai's vocal line, laden with dotted rhythms and a steady repeating eighth note baseline, may prove that she is an important person, but without a son she is ultimately miserable.

Between these two thoughts, however, Hagar's motif of descending thirds reappears in the melody line for one measure only, practically emulating her previous opening line of their dialogue in measure 136, "Oh I wish there was some way for me to ease your pain." While Hagar's melody creeps in, the baseline remains in Sarai's now stable style. Therefore it is as if Hagar is clearly in Sarai's thoughts, and she is thinking of ways in which Hagar could truly help her current unfortunate situation.

Shortly after Hagar's motif appears, Sarai realizes that she cannot fight her feelings, and in measure 167, Sarai admits that she would trade all of her power and all of her wealth for her one true desire - a son. As she does so, the piece leaves its stable A minor key, moving briefly to C# minor and finally into E major. As the piece moves from the minor to major mode, the dotted rhythms which are associated with Sarai shift from the vocal line to the melody and baseline. Because this dotted rhythm is now joined with a major key, a key associated more with Hagar than with Sarai, it is as if the two worlds of these women are about to come together.

Indeed, Hagar enters once again in measure 176 with her signature descending major thirds, picking up where the accompaniment left off repeating the words, "Enough Sarai". The second time she says Sarai's name (m.177-178), she makes a musical leap as she did at the beginning of the piece (m.140). While she may be developing a thought of her own, she is still showing honor to Sarai and certainly does not want to alienate her master at this moment. As she sings Sarai's name, dotted rhythms indicative of Sarai are now in Hagar's melody. In addition, as seen in measures 178-181, there is an octave doubling in the bass, the same pattern which occurred when Sarai was asking Hagar,

"where are my children." This time, however, instead of rising with agitation, they are descending, foreshadowing a sense of calm that is about to occur.

The piece moves briefly into what seems like C major as Sarai enters in measure 182, and a new serenity is indeed heard. It is as if Sarai, just for a moment, has either given up her dream of having a child, or she is too overwrought to express her desire vocally. Instead, she and the melody line play off of each other in a sort of duet, alternating between quarter notes and half notes. As the piece continues in this fashion, the tonal center begins to move, as descending whole tones occur in the bass line. As calmness is heard in all aspects of this section, this is the first time that Sarai tells Hagar how she feels about her. Sarai informs Hagar that she is like a daughter to her, and for that she is blessed. As she reiterates her point, descending whole tones disappear, and the melody line begins to ascend. This ascension allows the listener to feel that Sarai is honest in her emotions for her maidservant.

After stating that she is blessed in her relationship with Hagar, the motif of Hagar reappears in the melody line from measures 202-205. As Hagar enters, she admits that she also dreams about having a son. As she does so, she musically takes on not only Sarai's ideas but also Sarai's musical motifs. Hagar enters with a dotted quarter note soon followed by two sets of triplets (mms. 206-207). Below her in the melody line is a D and an A, while in the baseline is a Bb and E, all in a tremolo. Therefore while Hagar's vocal line is sung in a stately line comfortably in D minor, the texture below is thickening. These tones continue as Sarai enters, moving the piece out of D minor as she almost immediately enters with her characteristic major seventh leap. She informs Hagar

that she is young and that her time will come. Although Sarai says this, Hagar does not seem to hear her. Hagar then enters with the words "a son."

For the first time within the opera, both Hagar and Sarai have the same thought, or so it seems. Sarai follows Hagar's entrance, reiterating not only the same words, but repeating them with the same rhythm a third lower directly following Hagar. The two then come together, repeating the words "a son" a major third apart, vocally moving in a descending whole step pattern (mms. 214-216). The women sustain three consecutive descending whole notes - the longest phrase in the opera thus far, allowing them to ruminate on what it would mean to mother a child.

These whole tones which are heard a third apart, lead into a different world entirely of D major. The two women are now completely together in their music and in their thoughts of wanting a son, as they enter into a lullaby, singing to a the possibility of a baby boy. According to Gerald Cohen, the lullaby was the first musical portion of the opera fully written. Once Cohen received the libretto from Kondek, he instantly knew that in his mind it needed to be a central focus of this act and of the opera in general. He therefore believed that it needed to be treated differently from other sections.[177]

Sarai begins this lullaby, outlining the D major triad while whole tones a second apart are heard in the baseline. While the vocal line is peaceful, immediately there is a dissonance between the F# and the E natural head in the baseline, creating the idea that all may not be as it seems, as if there is lurking danger ahead. While measures 218-220 stay in D major, with the melody echoing the dotted rhythms and sixteenth notes of the Sarai's vocal line, as the lullaby continues, it does not rest in D major. Rather, the piece

[177] Gerald Cohen, Interview on opera *Sarah and Hagar*, June, 2009.

begins to move, outlining a series of keys which are built upon one another, much like the beginning of this scene starting in measure 136. The style, in fact, is quite impressionistic, displaying similar qualities to that of French composer, Clause Debussy (1862-1918).

At the end of measure 219, a hint of F major is heard with the C natural in the melody line. This is followed by a full measure resting briefly in F major (m. 220) as outlined by a full F major triad. The piece moves again, finding its way to Gb major, as the lullaby continues to ascend through all the voices. The end of measure 225, which is in Gb major, and the beginning of measure 226 share a common tone. The Gb in measure 225 becomes an F# in the following measure, moving the lullaby, and settling back into its original key of D major. The lullaby therefore comes full circle at the beginning of measure 227 after Sarai finishes her first stanza. Helping to sustain these various tonal centers is the ostinato baseline, which moves in a series of whole tones a second apart throughout the lullaby. In the form of a dotted eighth note followed by a quarter note, these tones with their steady movements help to create the true motion of a lullaby, rocking back and forth.

Sarai begins the second stanza of the lullaby which again repeats the same tonal structure of the first stanza. This time, however, as Sarai begins to use stronger verbs and becomes more descriptive, so too does the accompaniment. The melody line seems to "billow [its] sails with wind" and "light [its] way to a star" as Cohen creates descending leaps and near repetitions of the melody line, as seen in measures 228-231. Interestingly in the second stanza, not only does the ostinato baseline continue, but steady whole notes are also heard above the moving baseline, which helps to counter this constant feeling of

motion (mms. 228-232). As the tonal center continues to move, so too do the whole notes.

After Sarai sings the first two stanzas of this lullaby, Hagar joins her, picking up the same idea of dotted eighth notes followed by sixteenth notes, yet does so in a slightly varied way. For example, Sarai's last note is the highest one for her thus far in the opera - a high E. This note allows Hagar to pick up where Sarai left off. Now, the tonal center has moved away from D major to a relative key of A major. The lullaby increases in intensity once Hagar begins to sing. The once lilting accompaniment has now been replaced with ascending tones outlining A major, as well as a sustained chord in the baseline.

Just as Sarai's vocal line often creates a dissonance with the melody line, a similar situation occurs through Hagar's line . In measure 239 for example, as Hagar tells her baby-to-be that she will "bewitch you with tales of bandits and kings," a dissonance occurs between Hagar's E and the melody line's D#. Throughout this section, it is as if a trio is occurring among the vocal line and the two melodic lines heard in the piano. The second line of the piano accompaniment repeats the outline of the E major scale in an ascending fashion and thus appears to be the most stable of the lines. As stated earlier, it is the first line of the piano and Hagar's vocal lines where the clashing of sounds occur. Although the key is steadily felt in A major, Hagar does not always stay in this key, as she sings a F natural instead of an F# in measure 237, going against the grain of the lullaby.

As Hagar continues, she sings the line "Fill you with breath and song and joy" in measures 240-241. This vocal line was heard earlier in measure 155 in the melodic line

before Sarai begins to talk about her role as wife to the omnipotent Abram. It is therefore as if the lullaby had been in the back of her mind before it even began. In fact, after hearing Hagar sing this line, Sarai once again joins in with Sarai at the end of measure 241. The women are in sync as both sing "and hope and angels and sun." For the first time, these women sing the same notes for almost an entire measure until Hagar ends the phrase sustaining a high A while Sarai moves through a series of notes, as if she is too excited to rest simply on one note (mms. 243-244).

Below them, however, things are not always in harmony. The bass line beginning in measure 240 for example establishes an ostinato pattern, further adding a coloring and layering to the sound. For example, on the word "hope," as the women sustain a D natural, a dissonant Eb is heard in the second piano line. Nevertheless, the two women come together again, singing the words, "my precious boy" in measure 246. While they are singing in harmony, both women refer to the "precious boy" as their own, making the listener wonder once again if they have the same intensions. Interestingly, as both women sing a C in measure 246, Hagar stops singing at the end of the measure, yet Sarai continues to sustain the note, as if perhaps she is developing a plan. She then repeats the words, "my precious boy" followed by "my son." While Hagar does not repeat these words along with Sarai, Sarai does sing the words "my son" on a descending Gb major triad - a major triad previously associated with Hagar.

After Sarai sings these words, the melody of the lullaby is repeated in both the first and second piano line in measures 253-256, as if they are playing off of each other while the women become silent. In addition, in measure 253, the tonal center finds its way back to D major, as did the beginning of the lullaby. An ostinato baseline is heard as

well, with repeated eighth notes which also help to outline the D major scale. All of these characteristics combined create a brief feeling of closure.

This all changes, however, in measure 257. While the ostinato baseline is still in tact, the second line in the piano drops out, and the first piano line takes over, repeating Bb, Eb and C. The first piano line now has nothing to do with the previous lullaby, and a new idea is established in addition to the previous one. The Eb in the top piano line creates a dissonance with the F# in the baseline, which happens in measures 257-260. Because the Eb in these measures is sustained and the F# in the baseline is repeated twice per measure, it is impossible for the listener to feel alleviated from the dissonance. The same is true of the D natural in the baseline which also clashes with the Eb in the piano line.

Sarai finally reenters at the end of measure 258, singing her motif of a major seventh on the word Hagar. It is at this moment that the idea has finally dawned on her - Hagar could truly help her. She then repeats the word, "Hagar" after a short break of one measure. The second time she does so, she again sings her signature interval of a major seventh, yet this time instead of simply saying Hagar's name, she is asking something of Hagar. Her plea becomes more intense as she leaps from a C# to an E and then descends through a series of sixteenth notes, all the while creating a crescendo followed by a decrescendo with her question. Act one, Scene one ends in this fashion, with Sarai quietly uttering Hagar's name in measures 261-262 and again in measure 263.

Certainly, the events expressed in Act One, Scene One of Cohen and Kondek's *Sarah and Hagar* creatively expand the three verses of Genesis 16:1-3. Sarai is shown as a conflicted soul searching for true meaning in her life. She expresses her deep affection

for her maidservant, even admitting that she is a like a daughter to her. At the end of this scene, the listener feels both comforted and troubled by Sarai, unsure of her next step. Hagar is also finally given a very strong and very high voice in this scene. Her desire to help Sarai is evident, yet the strong will of this young woman is also clearly expressed both musically and textually. Throughout this scene, Cohen and Kondek portray Sarai and Hagar as complex, warm, yet also conflicted females, leaving the listeners at the edge of their seats, waiting to hear how these characters will continue to evolve.

Conclusion

"Now Abram's wife Sarai, who had not borne him a child, had an Egyptian slave named Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram: "Seeing as God has kept me from bearing a child, have intercourse with my slave; maybe I will have a son through her." -- Genesis 16:1-2[178]

I initially encountered these verses nearly five years ago during my first year of Cantorial School. Our young Hebrew class was assigned the daunting task of translating Genesis 16:1-6 from Hebrew into English. As I struggled with this assignment, I genuinely thought that my translation of the narrative was incorrect. I read the story as such: Sarai can't bear a child, so she tells her husband to have intercourse with this mysterious maidservant named Hagar. Once Hagar gets pregnant, Sarai yells at her husband, "afflicts" Hagar and throws her out of the house. At the time, the entire story seemed unfathomable.

As it turns out, my basic reading was correct. What remained unclear, however, was the nuance of the verses. What did it mean for Sarai to "have a son *through* [Hagar]?" How exactly does Sarai "afflict" Hagar? Who was "Hagar," and why did Sarai choose her to bear a child? Our class only spent two short sessions on these six verses which seemed endless in interpretive possibilities.

The juxtaposition of Sarah and Hagar remained on my mind throughout my years in Cantorial School. I decided that for my final project, I wanted to study in depth the story of these enigmatic women through various perspectives. I was eager to understand

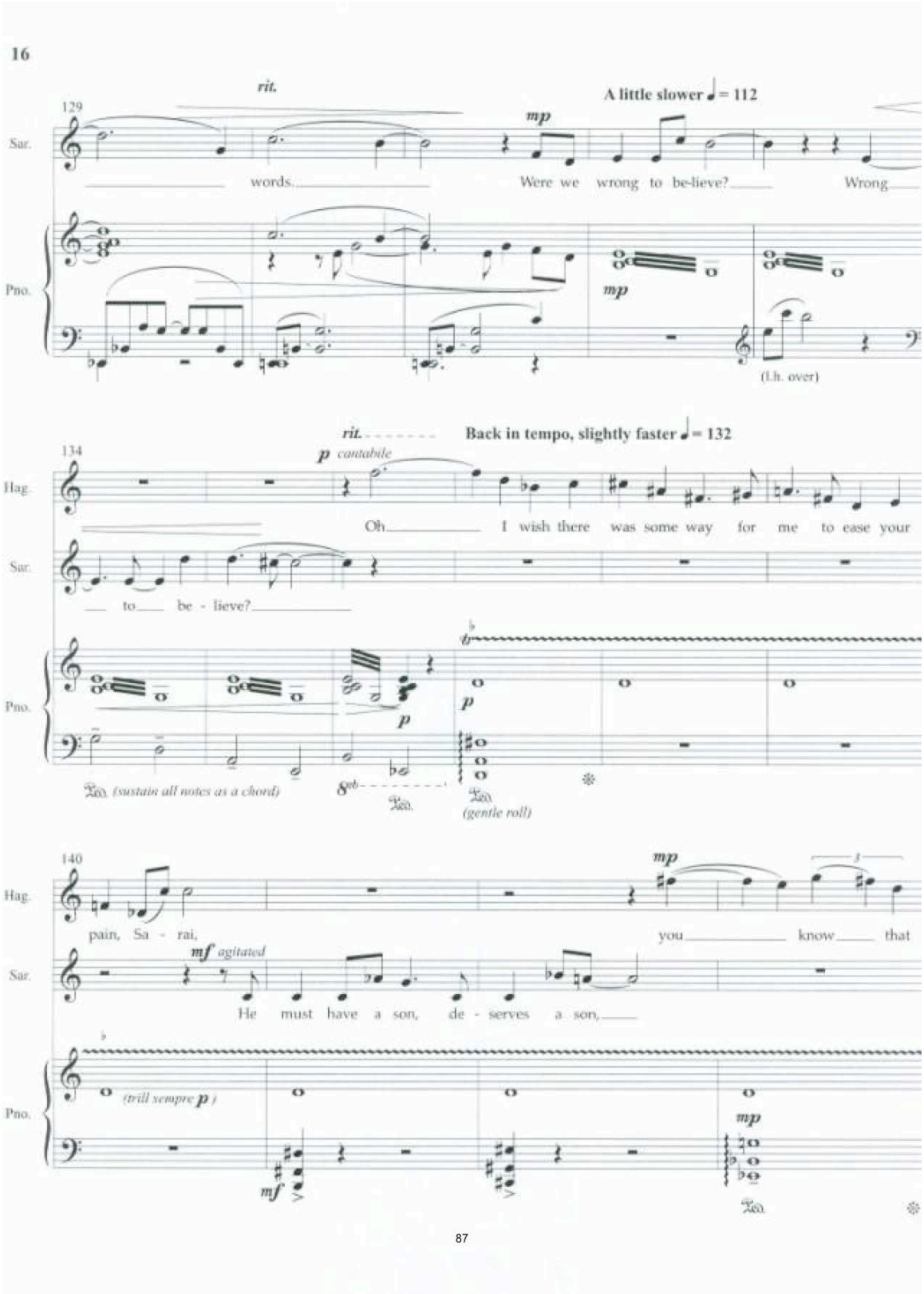
[178] Translation of Genesis 16:1-2, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 71.

how traditional as well as feminist Biblical scholars expounded on these women and their relationship.

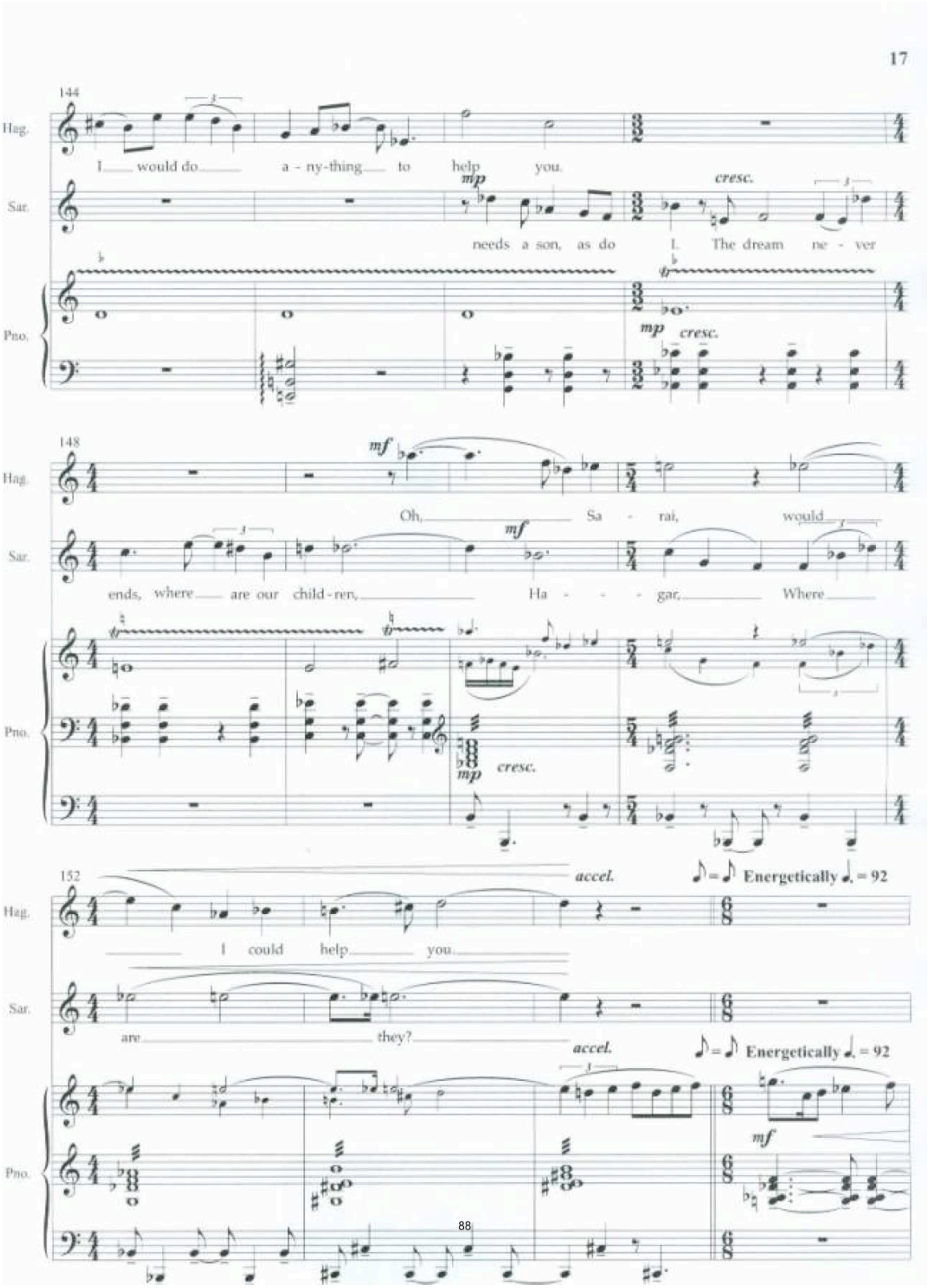
In addition to traditional and feminist scholars taking interest in these women, musical composers also have shown fascination with Sarah and Hagar. Through my research, I have discovered a variety of written music on Sarah and Hagar that has been scarcely recorded or performed. These include a 1683 oratorio by Alessandro Scarlatti entitled *Agar et Ismaele esiliati* as well as an 1807 piano and voice composition by Franz Schubert called *Hagar's Klage.* Within the confines of this thesis, I analyzed the musical elements of one scene from the 2007 opera, *Sarah and Hagar*. It is clear from this study that modern composers are finding an innovative way to place these women in harmony with each other, while also revealing an often haunting dissonance between them.

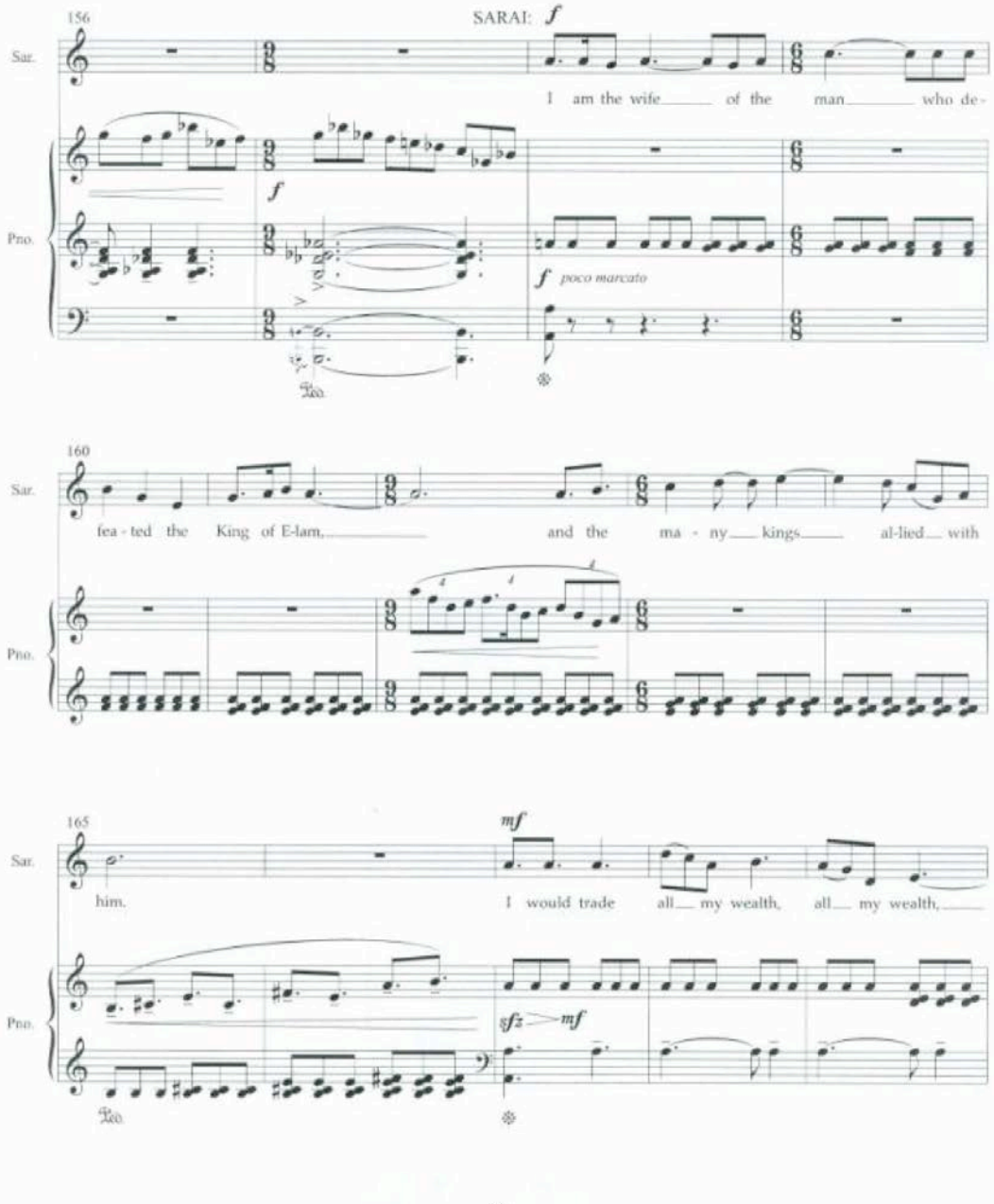
Finally, through my study with Wendy Zierler, I discovered a Hebrew poem that resonated with me, "Hagar," by Anda Pinkerfeld-Amir. Selections from this poem will be placed in the hands of a composer to provide yet another outlet for Hagar's emotions. Trained vocalists have the extraordinary opportunity literally to give voice to Sarah and Hagar. It is my hope that this thesis and subsequent recital will create a heightened interest and learning opportunity for others.

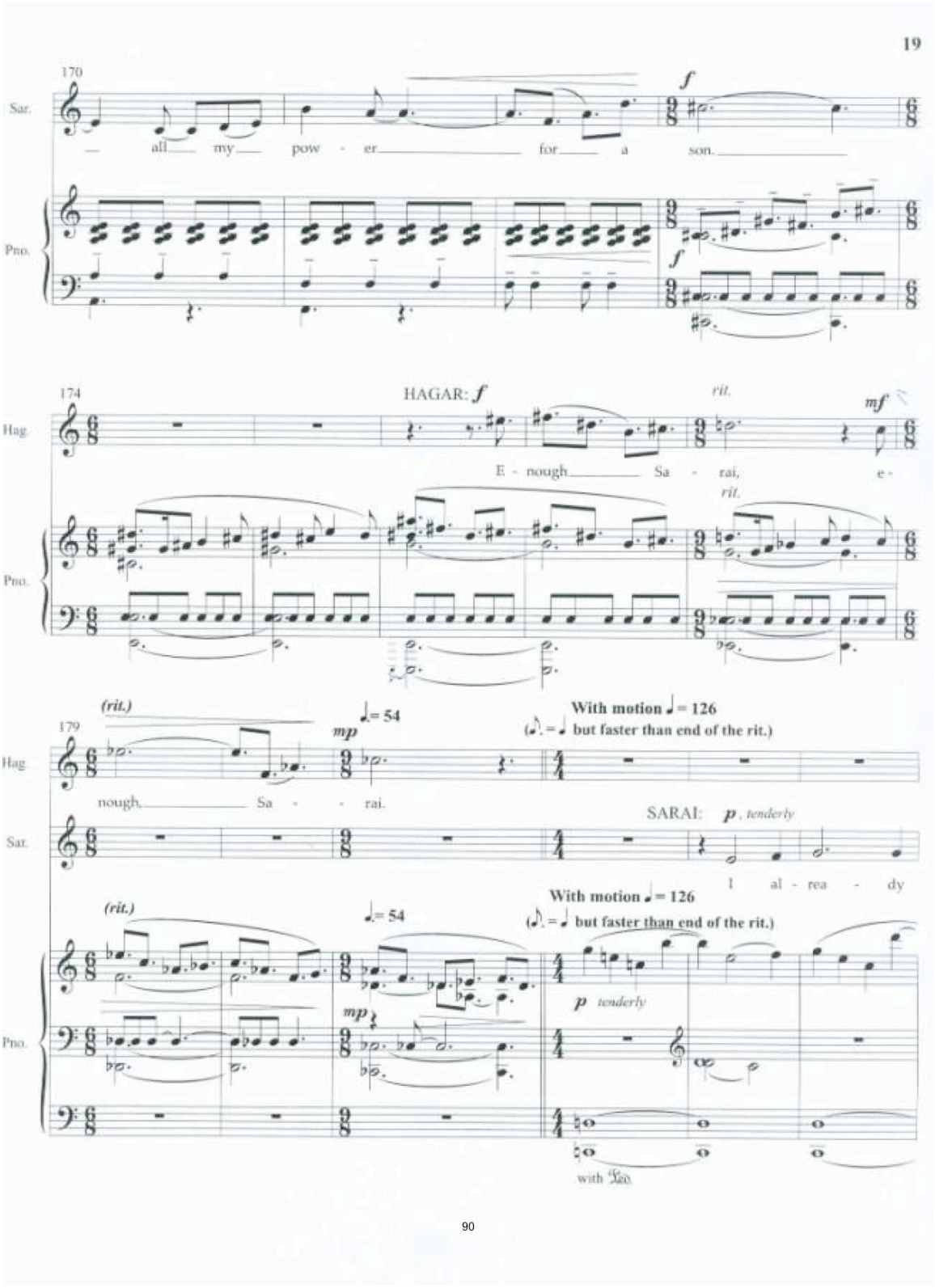
Initially, I understood Sarah and Hagar as polar opposites. Sarah was the evil, heartless, jealous shrew, while Hagar was the victimless, naive, seductive harlot. As this thesis proves, neither interpretation is correct. These women are just as complex and difficult to decipher as any intelligent, thoughtful and emotionally distraught woman, whether in Biblical or modern times.


16
rit.
A little slower ♩ = 112
129
Sar.
words.
mp
Were we wrong to be-lieve?
Wrong
Pno.
mp
(l.h. over)
rit.
Back in tempo, slightly faster ♩ = 132
134
Hag.
p cantabile
Oh
I wish there was some way for me to ease your
Sar.
to be - lieve?
Pno.
p
p
(sustain all notes as a chord)
(gentle roll)
140
Hag.
mp
pain, Sa - rai,
you
know
that
mf agitated
Sar.
He must have a son, de - serves a son,
(trill sempre p)
Pno.
mf
mp

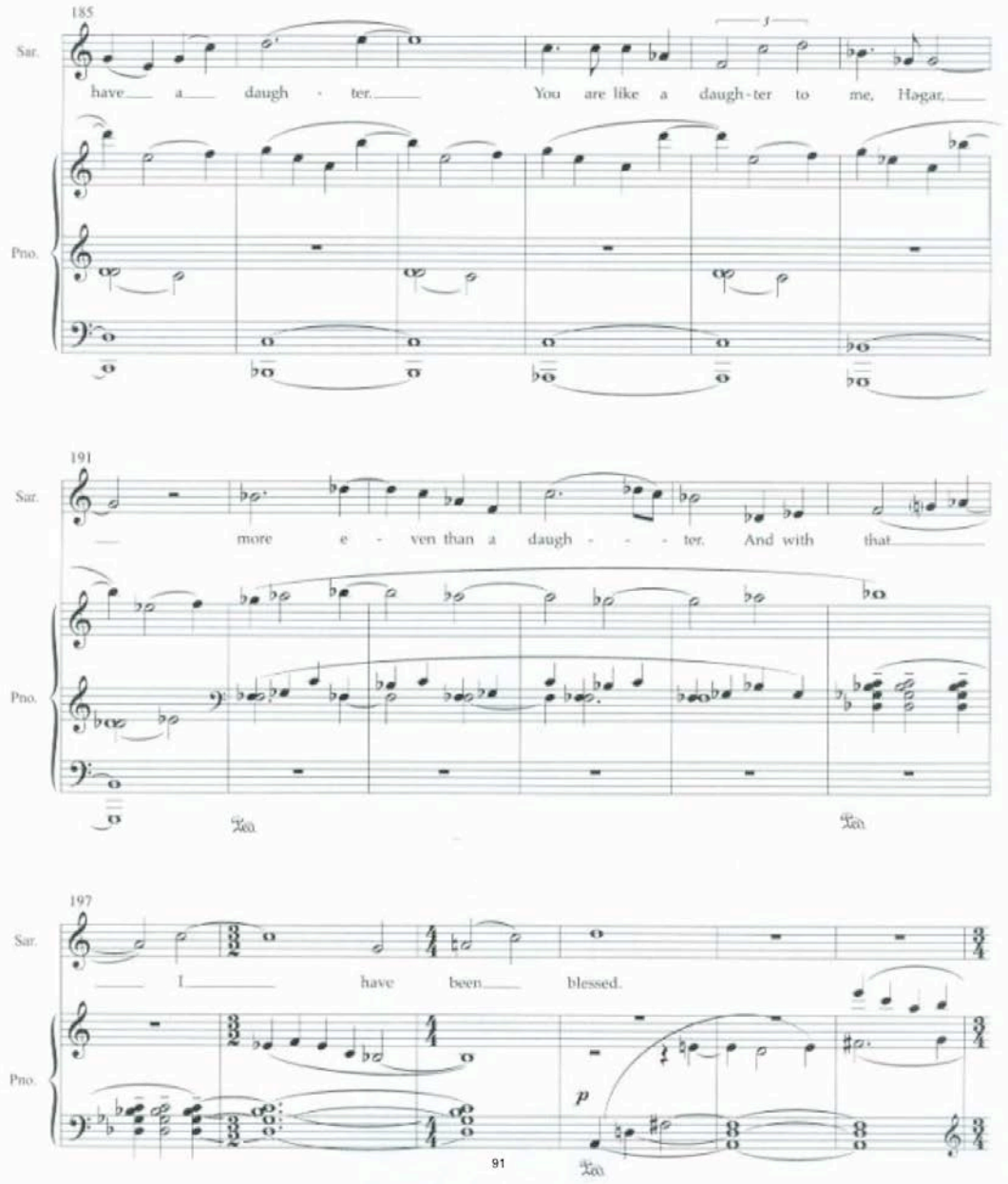
87

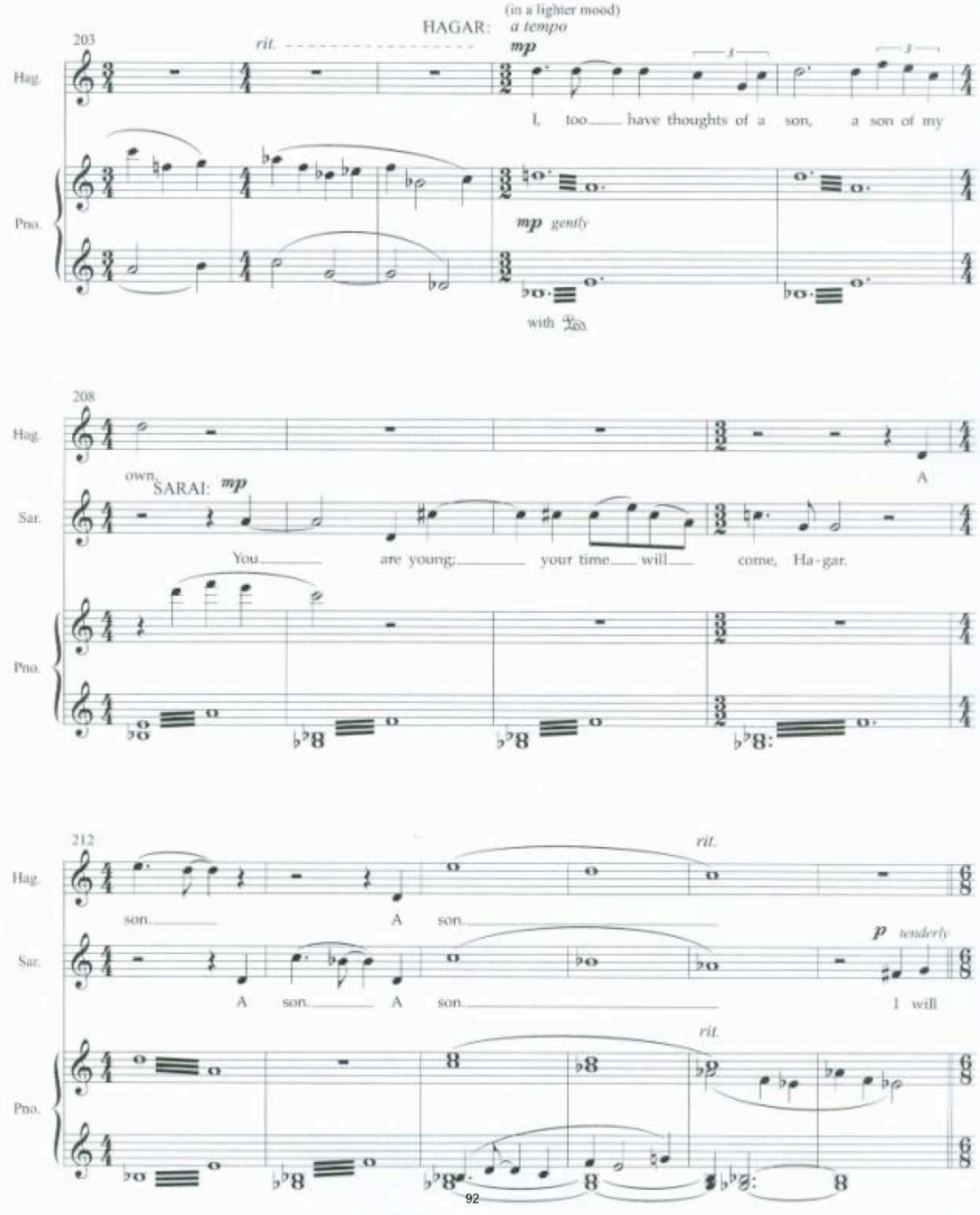

144
Hag.
I would do a - ny-thing to help you.
Sar.
mp
cresc.
needs a son, as do I. The dream ne - ver
Pno.
mp
cresc.
148
Hag.
mf
Oh, Sa - rai, would
Sar.
mf
ends, where are our child-ren, Ha - - - gar, Where
Pno.
mp
cresc.
152
Hag.
accel.
Energetically ♩. = 92
I could help you.
Sar.
are they?
accel.
Energetically ♩. = 92
Pno.
mf
88

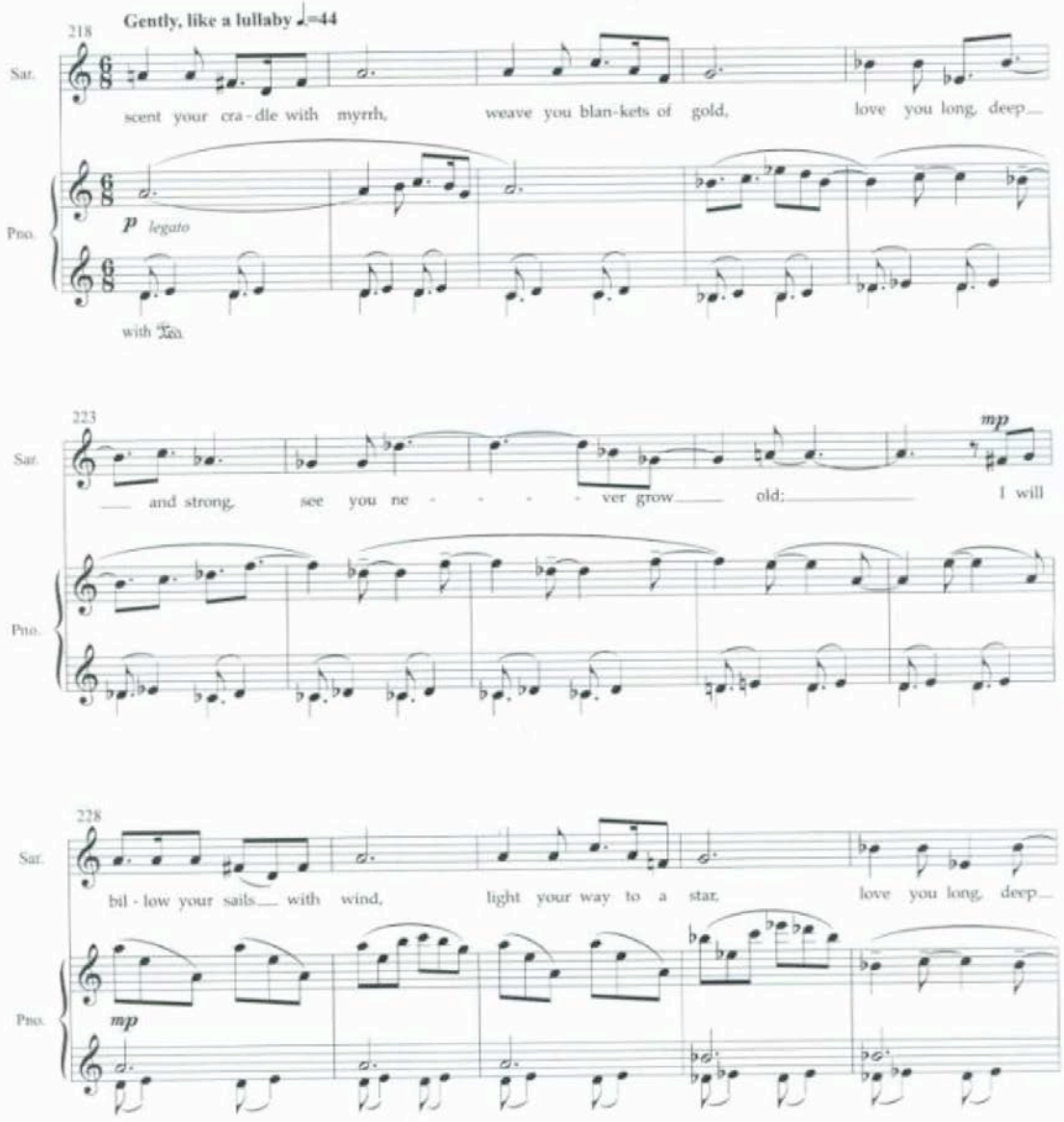

156
SARAI: f
Sar.
I am the wife of the man who de-
Pno.
f
f poco marcato
160
Sar.
fea - ted the King of E-lam, and the ma - ny kings al-lied with
Pno.
165
mf
Sar.
him. I would trade all my wealth, all my wealth,
Pno.
sfz mf

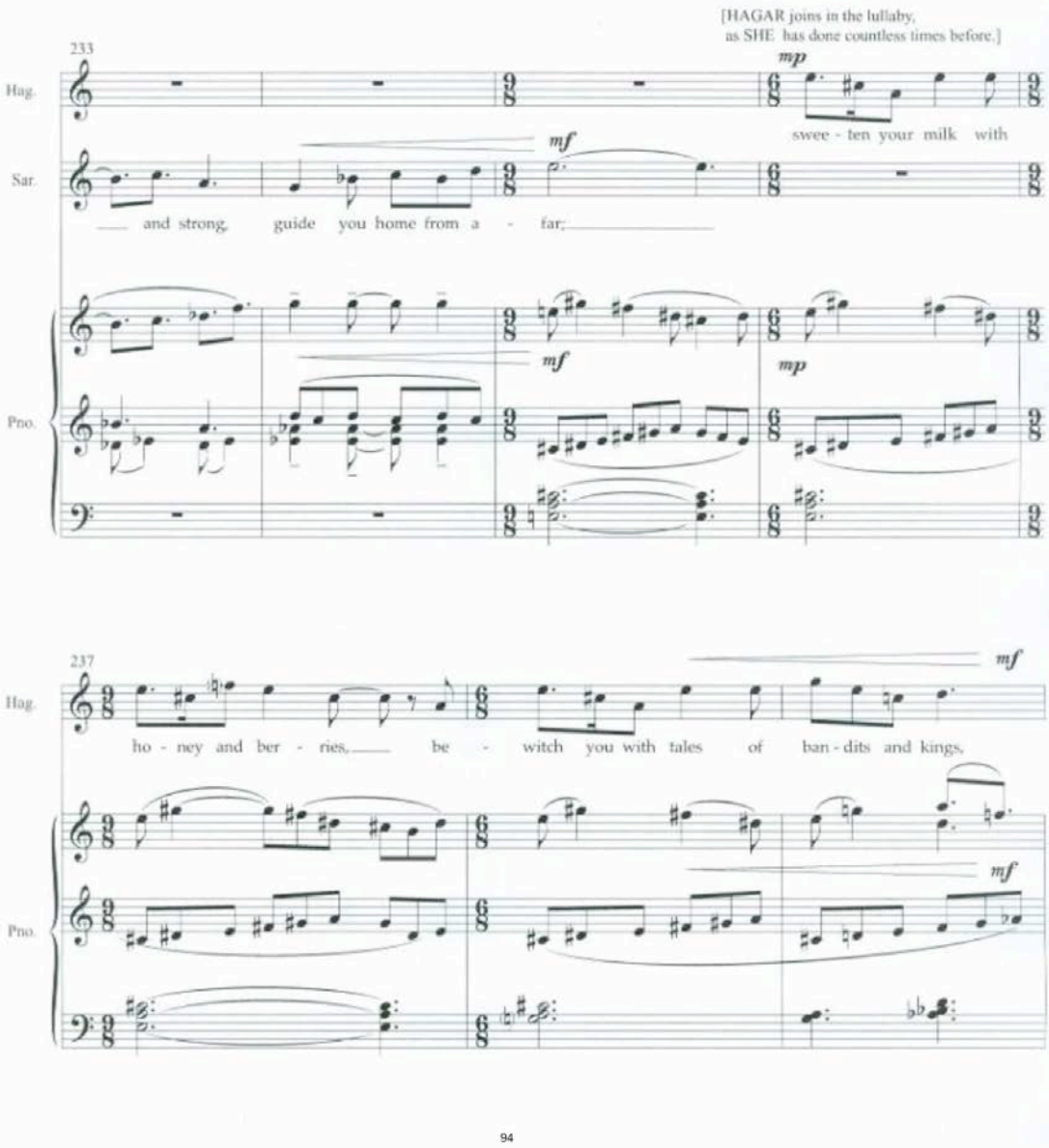

170
Sar.
— all my pow - er for a son.
f
Pno.
f
174
Hag.
HAGAR: f
rit.
mf
E - nough Sa - rai, e -
rit.
Pno.
(rit.)
179
mp
♩= 54
With motion ♩= 126
(♪. = ♩ but faster than end of the rit.)
Hag.
nough. Sa - - rai.
SARAI: p, tenderly
Sar.
I al - rea - dy
(rit.)
♩= 54
With motion ♩= 126
(♪. = ♩ but faster than end of the rit.)
mp
p tenderly
Pno.
with Ped.

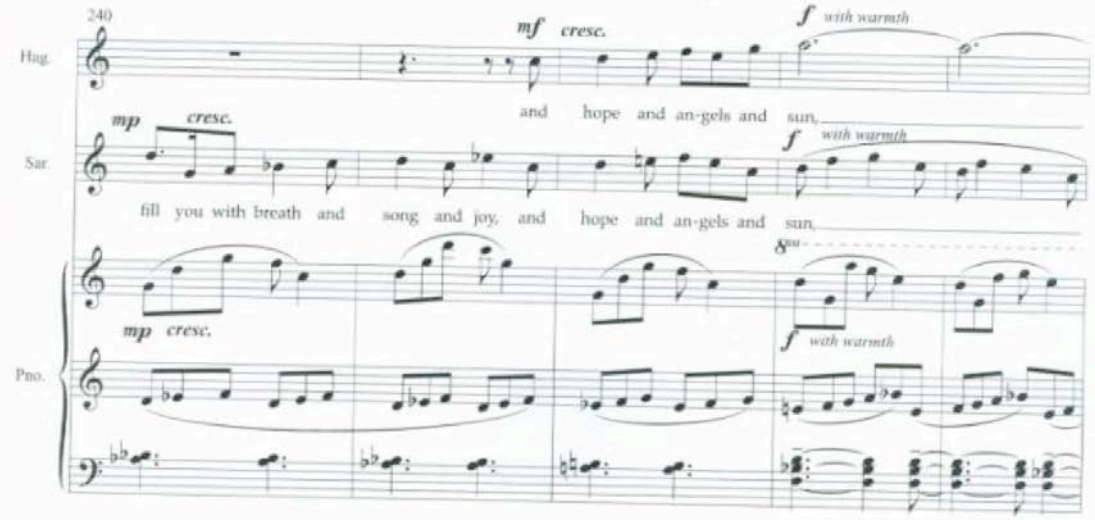
90

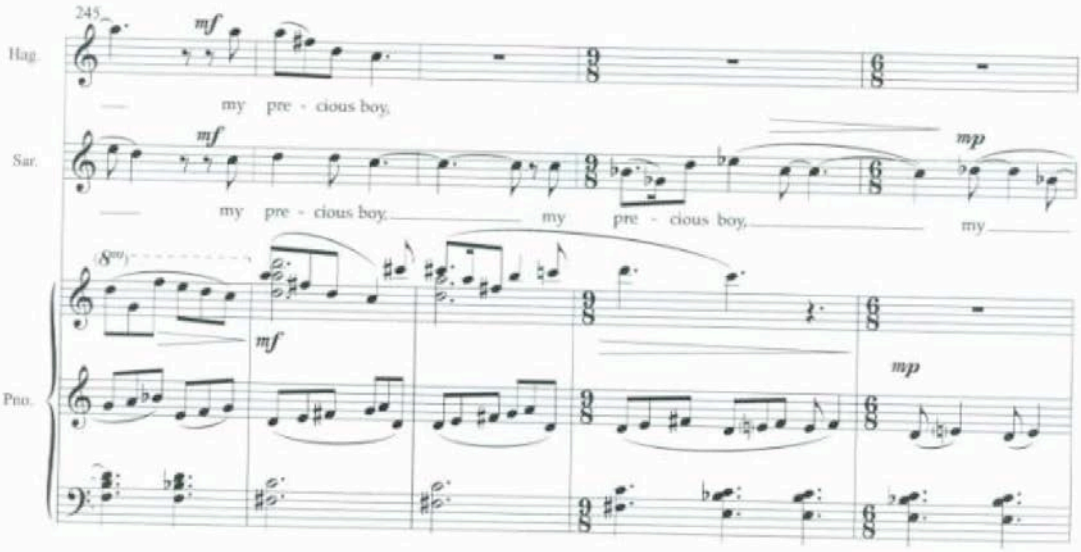

185
Sar.
have a daugh - ter.
You are like a daugh-ter to me, Hagar.
Pno.
191
Sar.
more e - ven than a daugh - - - ter. And with that
Pno.
Ped.
Ped.
197
Sar.
I have been blessed.
Pno.
p
Ped.

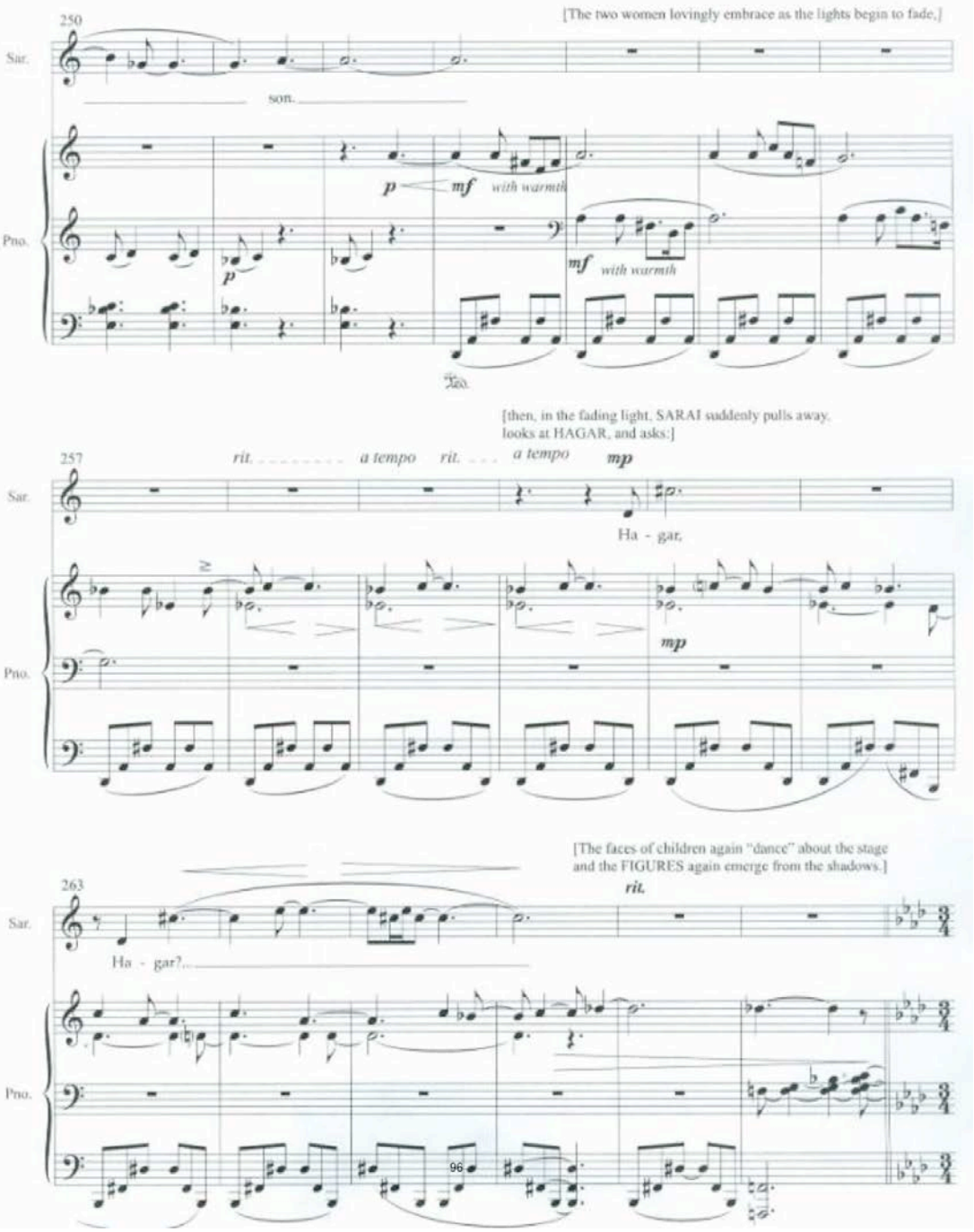

(in a lighter mood)
HAGAR: a tempo
203
rit.
mp
Hag.
I, too have thoughts of a son, a son of my
Pno.
mp gently
with Ped.
208
Hag.
own. A
SARAI: mp
Sar.
You are young; your time will come, Ha-gar.
Pno.
212
rit.
Hag.
son. A son.
Sar.
p tenderly
A son. A son. I will
rit.
Pno.


Gently, like a lullaby ♩=44
218
Sar.
scent your cra - dle with myrrh, weave you blan-kets of gold, love you long, deep
Pno.
p legato
with Ped.
223
Sar.
and strong, see you ne - - - - - ver grow old; I will
mp
Pno.
228
Sar.
bil - low your sails with wind, light your way to a star, love you long, deep
Pno.
mp


[HAGAR joins in the lullaby,
as SHE has done countless times before.]
233
Hag.
mp
swee - ten your milk with
Sar.
mf
and strong, guide you home from a - far;
Pno.
mf
mp
237
Hag.
mf
ho - ney and ber - ries, be - witch you with tales of ban - dits and kings,
Pno.
mf


240
Hag.
Sar.
Pno.
mf cresc.
f with warmth
and hope and an-gels and sun.
mp cresc.
fill you with breath and song and joy, and hope and an-gels and sun.
8va
mp cresc.
f with warmth


245
Hag.
Sar.
Pno.
mf
my pre - cious boy.
mf
my pre - cious boy.
my pre - cious boy.
my
mp
(8va)
mf
mp


[The two women lovingly embrace as the lights begin to fade.]
250
Sar.
son.
Pno.
p
mf with warmth
mf with warmth
[then, in the fading light, SARAI suddenly pulls away, looks at HAGAR, and asks:]
257
rit.
a tempo
rit.
a tempo
mp
Ha - gar,
Pno.
mp
[The faces of children again "dance" about the stage and the FIGURES again emerge from the shadows.]
263
rit.
Sar.
Ha - gar?
Pno.
96

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