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**ABRAHAM'S FAMILY DYNAMIC IN THE LIGHT OF
ANCIENT AND MODERN CRITICISM**

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

**Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
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**February 21, 2006
Advisor: Dr. Stanley Nash**

Thesis Summary

Title: Abraham's Family Dynamic in the Light of Ancient and Modern Criticism

Contribution: I have attempted to present as thorough a consideration of Abraham's family dynamic as possible. My goal was to represent a large number of the ancient and modern views on such aspects of Abrahams' morally dubious behavior as his treatment of Hagar and his "lying" claim that Sarah was his sister. In every case I strove to make this a personal quest for a sophisticated modern understanding of these stories that would be in line with my own modern sensibilities. I sought a methodology for accepting the behaviors of Abraham in a manner consonant with the task of forging a proper and respectful preaching and teaching of the Biblical stories. The models of Speiser, and Cassuto and Phillip Davies were especially helpful to me in this quest, but I attempted to go beyond them in developing a non-apologetic creative reading for myself and for my congregants and students.

Goal of the Thesis: To closely examine the family dynamics of Abraham in Genesis. I examined the wife-sister motif of chapters 12, 20 and 26 as well as the love triangle between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in chapters 16 and 21. In looking at these chapters, I attempted to present an objective look at the character of Abraham, our first patriarch and to help elucidate the intentions behind his actions as well as the power struggle between members of his family. The issues of patriarchy, survival and status are to be examined.

Thesis plus one appendix

Materials: Primary Biblical texts, as well as midrashim from Breshit Rabbah, Tanchuma, Yisrael Zamora's collection of "Women in the Tanakh" and medieval Biblical commentaries of Rashi, Ramban and Ibn Ezra and modern commentators, Ephraim Speiser, Cassuto, Phillip Davies, Robert Alter and Phillis Trible. In addition to these sources, class lectures and published seminars were utilized.

Abraham is known as the father of the Jewish people, the first patriarch and a man of strong faith in God. Yet what little we know about his family dynamics seems disturbing. He says his wife is his sister and gives her off to the Pharaoh and to a king; he attempts to sacrifice one of his two sons and virtually sacrifices the other; and has two wives. These are some controversial family values, at least by today's standards.

In a world of patriarchy, how does the patriarchal system affect the lives of Abraham and his family? Who is this man that is our forefather, whose name we invoke in prayer every day, and how did he interact with his own family?

Many Bible commentators have attacked Abraham for his actions. The Rabbis have gone to great lengths to defend Abraham. In truth, we have little to no emotion in the Bible and therefore, often the motives of our Biblical characters are unknown. In our efforts to understand the biblical text, we can approach the recorded events in a variety of ways, we can defend a Biblical figure, we can attack the character or we can attempt to offer readings based on logic. All interpretations will be biased by what we, ourselves, bring to the text.

While Abraham is often attacked for acting inappropriately, Sarah at many times was to blame as well. Some feminists and biblical critics are quick to call Abraham a "pimp" or a womanizer.¹ While Abraham exerted much dominance over Sarah in the beginning to middle of the relationship, Sarah also held a great deal of authority and control of the events in her lifetime and in turn exerts much dominance

¹ Tribble, Phylis class notes 10/31/05; Visotzky, Burt Genesis: A Living Conversation, Bill Moyer, ed Double Day. NY 1996

over Hagar. It is Sarah who tells Abraham to take a maidservant, Sarah who tells Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael, and Sarah who has the son who is the heir to the covenant. Where do Hagar and Ishmael fall in the story? Is Hagar at all responsible for the course of events or are she and her son, Ishmael, merely innocent bystanders?

Was Abraham motivated by his own selfish pursuits or was he a loyal and protective husband to Sarah? Was Sarah truly the head of the household, a wife who bosses Abraham around? We notice that in entering the land of Egypt, Abraham asks Sarah to please say she is his sister, thus indicating that Abraham needs Sarah's consent and opinion.

In examining the family dynamics of the first family of the patriarchal narratives, we will examine the wife sister motif of Genesis 12:10-20, 20:1-18, and 26:6-11. Then we will examine the love triangle between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21. Within these narratives, we see the evolution of Abraham and Sarah's relationship, the effect of taking a second wife or a concubine, the dynamics of a household with two children sharing a father and having different mothers, and the power struggles and difficulties that arise.

Genesis 12:10-20, 20:1-18, and 26:6-11 are closely related narratives. They are all narratives that comprise the wife-sister motif. All three passages give essentially the same story: A patriarch visits a foreign land in the company of his wife. Fearing that the woman's beauty might become a source of danger to himself

as the husband, the man resorts to a ruse of passing himself off as the woman's brother.²

v10 וַיְהִי רָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ נִינְדָא אַבְרָם מִצְרִימָה לָגִיד שָׁם כִּי־כָבֵד הָרָעָב בְּאֶרֶץ

There was a famine in the land and Abram went down towards Egypt to sojourn there for the famine was heavy/severe in the land.

v11 וַיְהִי כִּשְׁעָר הַקֹּרֶב לָבֹא מִצְרִימָה וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ הִנֵּה־נָא תִּעָתִי

כִּי אִשָּׁה יִפְתִּי־מֵרָאָה אֶת

As he was close to coming towards Egypt, he said to Sarai, his wife, behold, I know that you are a woman of a nice appearance.

How do we translate תִּעָתִי נָא ? הִנֵּה־נָא can be translated as *behold*.

In classical Hebrew it is standard usage for the word, הִנֵּה to introduce the premise to the main subject: it is a fact that you are beautiful and on account of this, danger threatens.³ נָא is a formal polite word that is usually understood as "please" or "pray". It is a word used when one asks a favor of a person. Yet it can also be understood as "now." Genesis 19:2 gives an example of how the word can be read in both ways. In Genesis 19:2⁴ angels come to Lot and ask him to הִנֵּה־נָא to *please, now*, turn aside to your servant's house to spend the night, as the hour was getting late.

² Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p91

³ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p347-6

⁴ Sperling class notes 10/20/04

According to Rashi, in both Genesis 12:11 and 19:2 the Hebrew word **עַתָּה** does not denote a request, as it usually does, but rather it means, "now" as found in the verse "Behold **עַתָּה**, "now" my lords, turn aside, I pray you," (Gen 19:2). The Hebrew reads

עַתָּה הִנֵּה עֲשׂוּ סוּרוּ עַתָּה. Now since the request is covered by the second **עַתָּה** (at the beginning of the expression) it can no longer mean a request; rather it means now.⁵

Dr. David Sperling agrees with Rashi that the *pshat*, the plain meaning of the text, is "now is the time". Dr. Sperling interprets what Abram says as, "The hour has arrived to worry about your beauty." Now is the time to deal with the issue of your beauty, as we are approaching the land of Egypt. Of similar meaning is the verse, "Behold **עַתָּה** "now" the Eternal has restrained me from having children (Gen 16:2), meaning from my youth until this day, likewise the verse is **עַתָּה**, now.⁶

Rashi explains that **עַתָּה הִנֵּה עֲשׂוּ** Behold now, I know, is from the Midrash Agadah. Until now he had not perceived of her beauty. Why would Abraham not have "known" before that his wife was good-looking? The Midrash Agadah says it is because Abraham was modest and both Abraham and Sarah were modest towards each other. The Midrash concerning modesty between Abraham and Sarah is traditional. **עַתָּה** does not indicate only a new arisen matter; it may also be used with reference to anything which is presently in existence. **עַתָּה** is a statement may also be used to draw attention to something that has been present. It does not

⁵ Ramban on Genesis 12:11

⁶ Ramban on Genesis 12:11

⁷ Rashi on Genesis 12:11

have to be a new occurrence. In this case, what is new is that Abraham is now aware of Sarai's beauty and now in a new situation in which to deal with that dangerous beauty. "Behold now I know" from then until now "that thou art a woman of beautiful appearance" Now, however [he became cognizant of it] through an event [wading through a stream, he saw the reflection of her beauty in the water]⁸ Behold, please I know or I realize that you are beautiful.

It is explained in Tanchuma that they came to a river where he saw her reflection and realized how beautiful she was. According to an aggadic word play, a *drash*, until now, he did not recognize her in accordance with the piety between the two of them. And now, by means of an event, seeing her reflection in the נַחַל, *the stream or wadi*, he recognized/realized her.⁹ Another interpretation is that it is because of the exertion of traveling that a person usually becomes uncomely, but [Sarah] had retained her beauty.

"I know," ידעתי, is normally a first person perfect. Ehrlich has suggested that ידעת should be understood as a form of the second person feminine singular, with the archaic termination תי.¹⁰ Read in this way, Abraham would be saying to say, "You know that you are beautiful."

This view is supported in the Samaritan Pentateuch which uses תי for the customary ת (you, feminine) at the end of the verse. It is thus possible that the verb before us was similarly written as an archaic second person with final ך, as is actually

⁸Midrash Agada on Gen 12:11, Ramban on Genesis 12:11

⁹ Sperling class notes 10/20/04

¹⁰ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II, The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p347-6

the case in Judges 5:7. If so, the sense would be "you are well aware that you are beautiful," which would suit the context well.¹¹

Ramban explains the *pshat* as "Behold, now the time has come to be anxious because of your beauty. I have long known that you are a woman of beautiful appearance, but now we are traveling among black people, brethren of the Ethiopians, who have never been accustomed to such a beautiful woman."¹²

Why was Abraham suddenly fearful as he and Sarai approached Egypt? Rashi, not being much of a humanitarian, explains it that this was because the Egyptians were black and repulsive. This statement indicates a fear of foreigners. Today we live in societies that are integrated and we have come to understand differences in race and culture. In Biblical times as well as in the Middle Ages, when our commentators attempted to explicate the Bible they experienced such xenophobia about the unknown. In the same way that Rashi demonstrates a fear of a race different than his own, among people that were different than the Canaanites, Abraham and Sarah were fearful.

Moses Nachmanides, the "Ramban" says it is possible that Abraham and Sarah had no fear until they came into a royal city for it was their custom in cities to bring the king a very beautiful woman and to slay her husband through some charge they would contrive against him. Due to this custom, at every place Abraham would say, "She is my sister," as a means of protection. For so Abraham said, "And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house" (20:13). Scripture,

¹¹ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p90

¹² Ramban on Genesis 12:11

however, mentions it only concerning those places where something happened to them on account of it.

Thus now, Abraham alerted Sarah, as he had charged her from the beginning. Isaac, on the other hand, was not afraid in his country, and his city. Only when he came to the land of the Philistines, did he adopt his father's way.¹³

"When he came near to enter Egypt, etc" At first, when he feels the need to go, Abram is not worried lest they should encounter danger in Egypt, but as he draws near to the Egyptian border the possibility of a terrible peril occurs to him. In Egypt he will find himself in the position of a sojourner (v10): שֹׂמֵר לִגְוֵר without protection against the tyranny of the local inhabitants, and if the beauty of his wife should arouse the lust of any Egyptian, it will not be difficult for him to kill the unprotected stranger and to take his wife to himself.¹⁴

Each interpretation brings up different questions. If we understand נָא, to be a word asking favor, why would Abraham need Sarah's permission to undertake a plan? There is no response from Sarah, giving us no indication as to whether or not Sarah consented. It is also interesting that Abraham would ask Sarah's permission.

Phyllis Tribble understands this verse to be Abraham's attempt to manipulate Sarah with flattery. He wants her to lie on his behalf so he charms her by telling her how beautiful she is in the hopes that Sarah will do this favor for him.¹⁵

Yet it can also be read, that perhaps, Abraham was just alerting Sarah of the plan.

¹³ Ramban on Genesis 12:11

¹⁴ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p346

¹⁵ Tribble class notes 10/31/05

v12 וְהָיוּ כִּי-יֵרְאוּ אֹתְךָ הַמִּצְרַיִם וְאָמְרוּ אֵשֶׁתְּךָ זֹאת וְהָרְגוּ אֹתִי וְאַתָּה יֹחֵד v12

If the Egyptians will see you, they will say, "She is his wife," and they will kill me and they will let you live.

v13 אֲמַרְיָנָה אֶתְּךָ לְמַעַן יֵטֵב-לִי בְּעֹבוֹדְךָ וְהִתִּתָּה נַפְשִׁי בְּגִלְלֶךָ v13

Please say that you are my sister in order that it will go well with me on your account/because of you or for your sake and that I may remain alive because of you.

Abraham claims that he says Sarah is his sister and his wife out of fear, claiming in verse 12, "If the Egyptians see you and think, 'She is his wife,' they will kill me and let you live. He begs her or instructs her in verse 13, to "Please, say you are my sister, *"that it may go well with me because of you* (or, *for your sake*).

This begs the question of how appropriate it is for Abram to sacrifice his wife as a means of self-protection. Furthermore, the term "go well with me" indicates more than just survival but also benefit. Burton Visotzky, a professor at JTS and the chair of the Genesis Seminars, a series of open-forum discussions on the Genesis narratives, says:

Yes, he was worried about saving his life and preserving the promise.

But then Abraham adds, "so that it may go well with me on your account." This means "I am going to profit." And the proof that comes just three verse later—sheep, oxen, donkey, servants, maids,

she-asses, camels. This guy made a fortune off that transaction. There is something not happy there. It is not good.¹⁶

The Rabbis hold a different view. They believe that Abraham cared about Sarah more than any of his other possessions. The following midrash called, "Sarah in the crate," demonstrates this belief.

When Abram came before the border of the land of Egypt, he said to Sarai, his wife, "Come on, let me hide you in this crate and the Egyptians will not see you and they will not take you from me. Sarai hid in the crate and Abram went towards Egypt. The policemen of the city came to Abram and they said, "[You must pay] a tithe of the things in the crate!" Abram said to them, "I will give to you all of what you say to me!" The policemen said, "Maybe in your big crate there is some barley and you can give us a tithe!" Abram said, "Here, take for yourself, a tithe of the barely." The policemen said, "Maybe there is wheat in this crate?" Abram said, "Take from me a tenth of wheat." The policemen added to the things and they said, "Is it possible that there are some peppers that are placed in the crate?" Abram said, "Here, I will give you a tenth of the peppers." The policemen were astounded and they said, "Who knows, maybe there is placed in this crate, a kilo of gold?" Abram said, "Here, I am going to give you gold just as you will tell me" The policemen were astonished on these things and they took the crate and opened it and the face of Sarai illuminated all of the land of Egypt.¹⁷

¹⁶ Moyers, Bill, ed. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p164

¹⁷ Yisrael Zamora, ed., "Sarai in the Crate" Nashim ba-Tnakh. Israel: mahberot le-Sifrut, 1964 p193, see appendix text 1

Abraham was prepared to give a tenth of all the hypothetical contents of the box, and the Egyptians were increasingly amazed. What was most valuable to Abraham in the midrash was his wife, Sarah. Her beauty was something of which to be fearful. Knowing that he could not hide her beauty, the Biblical narrative tells us that he told the Egyptians she was his sister. Perhaps if they do not know she is my wife, they will not kill us, he thought.

V14 קָבֹוא אַבְרָם מִצְרָיִמָה וַיֵּרְאוּ הַמִּצְרִיִּם אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה כִּי-יָפָה הִוא מְאֹד

As Abram entered towards Egypt, the Egyptians saw that his wife was very beautiful

v15 וַיֵּרְאוּ אֹתָהּ שְׂרָפָה פֶּרֶעַה וַיְהַלְלוּ אֹתָהּ אֶל-פֶּרֶעַה וַתְּשַׁח הָאִשָּׁה בֵּית

פֶּרֶעַה

Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and they praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken to the house of Pharaoh.

The fact that Sarah was taken to Pharaoh's house confirms Abraham's fears that Sarah would be taken on account of her beauty. Abraham's assessment appears to be correct and it seems that the situation was inevitable. Knowing this, Abraham planned accordingly, saying that Sarah was his sister, so his life would be spared and so that he could acquire some wealth for himself and his wife.

v16 וַיֵּלֶצְבֶּרֶם הַיָּטִיב בְּעִבְרָהּ וַיַּחֲרִלּוּ צֹאן-וַיִּבְקֶר וְחֲמֹרִים וְעֶבְדִּים וְשִׁפּוֹת

וְצֹאֲנֹת וְגִמְלִים

It went well with Abram on account of her/because of her. He acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, and camels.

It is interesting to note that in these three verses, Sarah's name is never mentioned. She is referred to as "wife" or "woman", the same word in the Hebrew. She becomes a transition of property Sarah in exchange for cattle and slaves.

In effect the plan has worked—it has gone well for Abraham. He has not been killed and has, on top of this, received cattle and slaves. But at what cost?

Phyllis Tribble points out that here Sarah is manhandled by Abraham and Pharaoh, and later Sarah will manhandle Hagar. Sarah treats Hagar the same way that she has been treated. "Like oppressor, like oppressed," ventures Tribble.¹⁸

But how was Abraham to know he would receive gifts for giving Sarah to Pharaoh as a wife or a mistress?

The medieval Jewish commentator Ramban thinks that Abraham unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling block of sin on account of his fear for his life. "He should have trusted that God would save him and his wife and all his belongings for God surely has the power to save."¹⁹

Cassuto explains that if his intention were self-gain, the words, *that my life may be spared on your account*, would have preceded the clause, *that it may be well with me because of you*; for if a man does not remain alive, he can have no benefit from the gifts; on the contrary, he is unable to receive them. From Abram's initial statement (v11-12), it is evident that his objective in appearing to Sarai's brother is to be delivered from danger alluded to in v.12, *then they will kill me but let you live*; if, now, he clearly states at the outset that this is his purpose, it is inconceivable that as

¹⁸ Tribble, Phyllis Class notes 10/31/05

¹⁹ Ramban on Genesis 12:10

he continues speaking (v13b), he would change his reason, making the gifts his aim, and that at the end (v13) he would revert to his original intent, *that I may live on account of you*. If Abram had been prepared to engage in the vile business with which many commentators charge him, there would have been no need to say that Sarai was his sister, for a man who is concerned to protect his wife's honor may be killed but not one who is prepared to abandon his spouse for the sake of gain.

Gunkel finds in the text the intention to "exalt the shrewdness of the father of the nation, who is able to think up such ingenious schemes in order to extricate himself from trouble in an alien country. He also believes that text has the desire to eulogize Sarai, for sacrificing her honor in order to save the life of her lord, who has no hesitation in accepting gifts in compensation of his wife's honor"²⁰. He adds that the ancient Israelites, and Abram in particular, was devoid of the sense of "chivalry", which compels a man to protection of his wife and daughter at the risk of his life.²¹

Contrary to what Gunkel states, Cassuto believes that it is because Abram feels it his duty to offer his life in defense of his wife's honor that he is afraid that he will be slain, for he could not possibly prevail against all those who might covet his wife. Cassuto believes that it is Abram's desire to protect his wife with a less-than-ideal survival strategy. It should further be noted that what he fears is not only that he would be killed, but also, and even more so, that she would be spared (*but they will let you live*), alone and unprotected in the face of the lust of the Egyptians. For Cassuto, it is then obvious, therefore, that if Abraham wishes to represent Sarai as his

²⁰Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p348-9

²¹ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p348-9

sister, it is only because he thinks that in this way, he would be able to protect her honor more successfully than if he had to risk combat or even a series of combats with the local inhabitants in a foreign land. This could only result in his death without his wife's honor being saved.²²

Some commentators take a more cynical view towards Abraham.

"Abraham's life is in danger, he says, because his wife is so desirable he might be killed for her. It follows that her masquerading as an *available* woman will inevitably lead to the consequences that do, in fact, ensue. Abraham can see perfectly well what is going to happen, and for the first time he openly instigates a chain of events entirely for his personal benefit. He shows no interest in either offspring or land. He has left the land and now disposes of his wife. It is known that she is barren (Genesis 11:30), but Abraham does nothing to find another woman on whom to beget offspring.²³

Soon enough we found out what Abraham does want, and it isn't anything he is promised. According to Phillip Davies, he wants to be rich. Business beats blessings any day.²⁴ Abraham is beginning to look like an unscrupulous entrepreneur, a get-rich-quick merchant, to whom descendants and long-term land possession are unimportant. No matter what God wants for him, *he*, Abraham, continues to pursue his own goals. The Egyptian episode shows that Abraham's and God's interests are not identical. This will be a key thread of the story: In effect, the rest of the story

²² Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p349-50

²³ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p26

²⁴ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p26

shows how each of them does their own thing, although they stick together for mutual benefit.²⁵

This argument seems a little far-fetched. To say that Abraham does not care about land possession is ludicrous. Skipping ahead a few chapters to *חיי שרה* (ch. 23) Abraham goes to lengths to make sure he purchases the cave of Machpelah and its surrounding land for Sarah's burial. Furthermore, to go so far as to say he pursues his own goals over God, also seems unlikely. Why would Abraham leave his homeland to wander around like a vagrant, put himself in danger, and offer his son as a sacrifice, if he was motivated by self-interest?

Sarah argues this point when she prays to God in the following midrash in *Sefer HaYashar*, a tenth century source attempts to retell the Biblical story ::

When the courtiers of the king saw Sarai, they were amazed by her beauty and they gathered together all the courtiers and all of Pharaoh's servants to see Sarai, because she was very beautiful. The courtiers of the king ran and told Pharaoh all the things that they saw and praised Sarai to the king, and Pharaoh sent for and took her and the woman came before the king. She was very good in his eyes and he was very amazed by her beauty. The king was very happy and gave presents to the ones who came to tell him about her. Abraham was angry and concerned about his wife and he prayed to God to save her immediately from Pharaoh, and Sarai, his wife, also prayed, and saying:

"Adonai, God. You told my lord, Abram to go from his land and from the house of his father to the land of Caanan and you promised to make good his lot if he

²⁵ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000, p27

*would fulfill your commands; now behold, we have done what you commanded, that we had not known beforehand, and we came to this land to save our households from the famine and you and this calamity and bad circumstance came upon us. And now, Adonai my God, rescue us and deliver us from the hands of this wicked villain and render favor unto me for the sake of your gracious and compassionate name.*²⁶

Visotzky points out, "Rabbis do not normally ask questions about women, but I think it is within rabbinic tradition for us to have to ask: Where is Sarah in this story?"²⁷ Here Vistozky is incorrect because the midrash shows that the Rabbis did in fact consider Sarah's perspective. While the Rabbis create this midrash to explain gaps in our story, Sarah's voice has not been included in any of the biblical narrative. Visotzky points out that there are two ways the rabbis read the text, the midrashic reading and what the story actually says. Not one word of speech is documented of Sarah in this biblical narrative. We do not hear a response from Sarah in the biblical narrative when Abraham tells her the plan in 12:11-13. We are told that Pharaoh's courtiers see her and find her beautiful, yet her name is not even mentioned in their discovery and transport of Sarah to Pharaoh's palace. We are to assume that she went along with the plan in the beginning, at least. Abraham wants Sarah to say that she is his sister so he will not be killed and it will "go well" with him. What could be the benefit for Sarah?

26 Yisrael Zamora, ed., "The Angel and the Scepter" Nashim ba-Tnakh. Israel: mahberot le-Sifrut, 1964 p194-5 see appendix text 2

27 Moyers, Bill, ed. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p165

Sarah is barren up to this point. "Sarah is an equal partner in faith. She also hears the promise, and knows that she is childless."²⁸ Visotzky suggests that perhaps she thinks that having relations with Pharaoh is her only chance at producing an offspring for Abraham. "Maybe in her passion or her neurosis, she thinks, 'Maybe I am meant to be with Pharaoh. Maybe that is how I get with seed. After all he is a prince. He's King of Egypt. Maybe I should be bearing that seed.'"²⁹ While Visotzky offers a plausible reading of the text as Sarah desperate to produce an heir, he takes it too far. If Sarah was to be with child, she would attempt to pass off the child as Abraham's. It is a possible motive because she attempts a similar plan with Hagar, having Abraham consort with the handmaid to produce an heir. What makes this an implausible theory is that it was Sarah who was barren, not Abraham. While it is possible she did not know that, I doubt she was scientifically minded and progressive enough to realize it could be the man that was infertile.

Another commentator siding with Visotzky thinks Sarah is willing to give up Abraham all together. Davies feels that for Sarah, exchanging a wandering, selfish, and uncaring, husband for an appreciative and very rich sugar-pharaoh³⁰ is not a bad deal. Pharaoh, too, seems happy with the new addition to his harem. He certainly pays Abraham plenty for it.³¹

In Genesis 20:1-18 Abraham and Sarah repeat the same scam, this time with Abimelech in Gerar.

²⁸ Moyers, Bill, ed. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p165

²⁹ Moyers, Bill, ed. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p165

³⁰ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p27

³¹ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p27

v1 וַיֵּשֶׁב אַבְרָהָם אֶרֶץ הַנֶּגֶב וַיָּשָׁב בֵּין-קָדֵשׁ וּבֵין שׁוּר וַיֵּגֶר בְּגֵרָר

And Abraham traveled from there to the region of the Negev and settled in between Kadesh and between Shur and he sojourned in Gerar.

This parallels Genesis 12 in that Abraham is once again sojourning, living in a temporary location.

v2 וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֶל-שָׂרָה אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶתְנִי הִיא וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ מַלְכוֹ גָּרָר

וַיִּקַּח אֶת-שָׂרָה

Abraham said to Sarah, his wife, "She is my sister." Abimelech, king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took Sarah.

Once again the story follows a similar pattern. Abraham claims that Sarah is his sister upon entering a new land. Yet in Genesis 20, there is no documentation of any conversation or pre-meditated plan.

Ramban feels that this is different than what happens in Genesis 12. "This was not like what happened in Egypt. When they entered Egypt, they saw the woman was beautiful. They praised her to the lords and Pharaoh (12:14-15), as they were immoral people. But this king was perfect and upright and his people good. However, Abraham suspected them."³²

So why claim that she is his sister? This is precisely the question Abimelech asks in verse 10 when he confronts Abraham for tricking him, asking him how he could lie to him and say that Sarah was his sister. Abimelech asks Abraham "What is your purpose in doing this thing?"

³² Ramban on Genesis 20:2

Abraham responds in verses 11-13 that, "Yet she is my sister, the daughter of my father." Here, in Genesis 20, he responds to the charge, saying that he did not lie. Sarah is his sister. He ignores the fact that she is also his wife. "Ramban says that "I do not know the sense of this apology. Even if it were true that she was his sister and wife, when they wanted to take her as a wife he told them 'she is my sister' (v2) in order to lead them astray. He already committed a sin to them. It no longer mattered if it was true or false." Abraham Ibn Ezra also agrees that it was done in order "to put off Abimelech".³³ Dr. David Sperling thinks that he is justifying his actions because he is afraid for his life.³⁴

Ramban adds that Abraham answered "I did not know you, but I thought perhaps the fear of God was not in this place" (v11) for in most places in the world, there is no fear of God. I made this condition with her in all the places we wandered, for the matter is true, and I thought that by doing this, human life would be saved.³⁵ Here Ramban provides an apology for Abraham's behavior, claiming that he referred to Sarah as his wife, rather than his sister as a survival tactic. For this reason he claims, "And yet she is my sister, daughter of my father." Abraham tries to justify his behavior by explaining that he referred to Sarah primarily as his sister because it is true and I further thought that in the case they will want her, they will ask me if she is also my wife. Since the servants took her and did not ask, I said, "The fear of God, also is not in this place" and I remained quiet.³⁶

³³ Ibn Ezra on Genesis 20:12

³⁴ Sperling class notes 10/20/04

³⁵ Ramban on Genesis 20:11

³⁶ Ramban on Genesis 20:11

Abraham's actions act as a testing of the waters. He provides a safe identity for Sarah to see whether the Philistines will ask the customary questions of ownership for Sarah. Abraham tells the Philistines that Sarah is his sister as a precautionary method, omitting the information that she also his wife. Abraham's claim is that if the Philistines are in fact, God-fearing men, then they will also inquire if Sarah is in addition to being his sister, his wife. But how could a person be a sister and also a wife, and even if that is true, why would that be a normative status?

Ephraim Speiser explains a possible significance of Sarah's status as *achoti*, my sister, rather than *ishtu*, my wife, based on the neighboring Hurrian society. According to Speiser, in Hurrian society the bonds of marriage were strongest when the wife had simultaneously the juridical status of a sister, regardless of actual blood ties. This privileged wife-sister status was known as *achoti*. This is why a man would sometimes marry a girl and adopt her at the same time as his sister, in two separate steps recorded in independent legal documents. Violations of such sister-ship arrangements were punished more severely than breaches of marriage contracts. The practice was apparently a reflection of the underlying fratriarchal system, and it gave the adoptive brother greater authority than was granted the husband. By the same token, the adopted sister enjoyed correspondingly greater protection and higher social status. Indeed, the wife-sister relationship is attested primarily among the upper strata of Hurrian society. It goes without saying that a blood brother had automatically the same kind of authority over his sister when the father died. And when a brother, whether natural or adoptive, gave his sister in marriage, the law regarded the woman as wife-sister in such cases as well.

These particular wife-sister customs were peculiar to the Hurrians—and hence also to groups that took over Hurrian practices. There is not a trace of such usage among the Akadians, and it was expressly stigmatized by the Hittites, who otherwise had so much culturally in common with the Hurrians. The institution of the levirate affords no parallel whatsoever, since it is solely concerned with maintaining the line of the deceased brother. Nor can that institution be compared with the brother-sister marriages of the ruling houses of Egypt, and later those of Persia and certain Hellenistic States, for the Hurrian practice extended also to women who were sisters by law but not by blood.³⁷ Did the Israelite's patriarchal society follow such a custom?

According to Genesis 11:29 (J) Abraham's brother, Nahor married Milcah, his niece, who was the daughter of a younger brother named Haran. Furthermore, Nahor had evidently adopted Milcah as well.³⁸ The same verse tells of Abraham's marriage to Sarah without, however, indicating her family background, conceivably because she was already a member of Terah's family.³⁹

Under the law of such Hurrian centers as Harran and Nahr, a marriage of this type would carry with it the wife-sister provisions. We have fewer details in regard to Sarah, except that 20:12 (E) describes her indirectly as the daughter of Terah, but not by Abraham's own mother. This alone would make Sarah eligible for "sister-ship"

³⁷ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p91-2

³⁸ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p91-2

³⁹ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p149-50

status under the law of the land from which Abraham had set out on his journey to Caanan, with all the attendant safeguards and privileges which the law afforded.⁴⁰

In Isaac's case, the situation is appreciably clearer. Not only was Rebekah a native of Hurrian-dominated Har (r) an, but she was actually given as a wife to Isaac, through and intermediary, by her brother, Laban. As a matter of fact, the details as recorded in 24:53-61 are remarkably like a transcript of a Hurrian "sistership" document. There are thus sufficient grounds for placing the two marriages, those of Abraham and Sarah and of Isaac and Rebekah, in the wife-sister category.⁴¹ Speiser paints a positive picture of Abraham, by attempting to explain Sarah's heightened status as a "sister". This view is supported by the beginning of the parallel story in Genesis 12 where Abram tells Sarai he will say she is his sister, so that he will not be killed as so that it will "*that it may לי טוב go well with me because of you* בעבורך (v13)."

According to Speiser, the Biblical author retained the tradition that Sarah was an *achoti* but he does not know its original meaning. Instead he confused *achoti* with the Hebrew word אחותי and invented the story to go with it.⁴² Speiser uses this practice as a possible justification for Abraham's actions, while other biblical commentators remain cynical. A modern commentator Phillip Davies claims that in chapter 20, Abraham tries his "sister" trick again, this time giving Sarah to Abimelech of Gerar. He knows God doesn't like this trick, but he's teasing him,

⁴⁰ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p92-3

⁴¹ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p93

⁴² Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p93

waiting to see how God will react. God, not about to lose face again, intervenes to prevent anything from happening: Abimelech hasn't even "approached" Sarah, for one reason or another, but God has taken the precaution of closing all the wombs of all the women (Genesis 20:4, 18). So he won't have to give Abraham the satisfaction of witnessing his disapproval, God makes poor innocent Abimelech into the villain, accusing him of sinning (Genesis 20:3) and referring (surely tongue in cheek) to the wily Abraham as a prophet who prays for Abimelech (Genesis 20:7).⁴³

In verse three, Abimelech has a dream in which God tells him that Sarah is married:

וַיָּבֹא אֱלֹהִים אֶל-אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ בַּחֲלֹמָיו וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ הִנֵּה מֵת

עַל-הָאִשָּׁה אֲשֶׁר-לָקַחְתָּ וְהִיא בְּעֵלְתָּ בָּעַל

God came to Abimelech in a dream in the night and said to him, You are to die on account of the woman that you took, she is a married woman (or another's property).

The dream solves Genesis 12's problem of who informed Pharaoh that Sarah was a married woman. In Genesis 12:17,

וַיִּנָּע ה' אֶת-פָּרְעֹה וְגָעִים גְּדֹלִים וְאֶת-בֵּיתוֹ עַל-דִּבְרֵי שְׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ אַבְרָם

God (BDB) struck, (JPS and Speiser) afflicted, or possibly "touched" Pharaoh with a great plague and his house on account of the matter of Sarai, the wife of Abram.

But how was Pharaoh afflicted? The Rabbis offer a possible scenario in the following midrash,

⁴³ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p36

God heard the voice of Sarai and sent an angel to save her from the hand of Pharaoh. The King came and sat before Sarai and behold, an angel of God stood before them. The king said to her:

-The man that brought you here, what is he to you?

And she said,

-He is my brother.

The king said,

-We must elevate and exalt him, by as much as is in our power.

The king sent to Abraham, her husband a lot of silver and gold and stones of and much crystal and sheep and cattle and slaves and handmaidens. And the king commanded and they brought Abram and he sat in the courtyard of the king's palace. The king made Abram very great on the night. The king approached to talk to Sarai and the angel smote him hard and he was terrified and he ceased speaking to her. Any time that the king would approach Sarai, the angel would strike him to the ground, and this kept happening all night. The king was terrified from this, and also all of Pharaoh's servants and all his household the struck hard on that night. He struck them all hard on account of Sarai, and there was a great cry from all the men of Pharaoh's house on that night. Pharaoh saw all the cruelty upon him and said, "Only because of this woman has this matter come upon me.."

He distanced himself from her and appealed to her nicely::

-Please, tell me, concerning the man that came with you here.

And Sarai said:

-That man is my husband, and I said to you, he is my brother, because indeed I was very afraid lest you kill him in your wickedness.

*The king ceased from upon Sarai and the affliction of the angel of God ceased for him and his household. Pharaoh knew that he had been smitten on account of the matter with Sarai and he was dumbfounded at this.*⁴⁴

In the midrash, Sarah's prayer is heard by God, who in turn sends an angel to prevent the Pharaoh from touching her. Another version of the midrash from Tanchuma says:

*Sarai was taken to Pharaoh's house. She prayed to God, saying, "My father and my mother abandoned me and now I am also separated from my husband. Please God, have mercy upon me, and restore me in peace to Abraham. God heard the sound of her prayer and sent down an angel from heaven to earth with an iron scepter in his hand. No sooner had Pharaoh sent out to approach Sarai when the angel smote him with his scepter, hitting him hard. Sarai could not bear the pain of Pharaoh who was being hit. She said to the angel, "Stop! Stop from hitting him." When Pharaoh was given a little respite and recovered, he again began to approach Sarai. She gave a sign to the angel and he struck Pharaoh, hitting and wounding him. Pharaoh hurried and handed Sarai over to Abram and Hagar, his daughter, he gave to her as her handmaiden for he said, "It is better for you to be a handmaiden in the house of this holy man than a mistress in my house."*⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Yisrael Zamora, ed., "The Angel and the Scepter" Nashim ba-Tnakh, Israel: mahberot le-Sifrut, 1964 p195, see appendix text 3

⁴⁵ Yisrael Zamora, ed., From Tanchuma. Nashim ba-Tnakh, Israel: mahberot le-Sifrut, 1964 p194, see appendix text 4

Speiser translates **גָּדֹל**, as extraordinary. It literally means "great" but when the adjective describes unusual phenomena, it has the sense of "strange, wondrous, awesome."⁴⁶ This point is mentioned after the complement, *with great plagues*, at the end of the sentence, as though to say: and also his house was with him. We have a parallel here to the statement in verse 15 (and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house). The members of Pharaoh's household cooperated with him in detaining Sarai within the confines of the palace; now since they must share in his punishment.⁴⁷ Dr. Sperling explains that this is a "ruler punishment". When a ruler is punished, everything that belongs to the ruler is also punished.⁴⁸

Cassuto, always eager to defend both Abraham and Sarah and their motives as well as their purity, believes that the Bible intends us to understand that these plagues were inflicted on Pharaoh and his house before the king was able to approach Abram's wife. This is contrary to many of the commentators, who take an unfavorable view of the whole incident, and assume the purpose of the verse is to tell us that Sarai was not delivered from the danger threatening her, and that the plagues did not come until she had been defiled.⁴⁹

Cassuto disagrees for three reasons. Firstly, if God wished to save Sarah, He could do so in time, and there was nothing to hinder Him; he had plagues come after the woman's honor was violated, they would have served no purpose. Secondly, it is difficult to suppose that the story would have gained currency among the Israelites

⁴⁶ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p91

⁴⁷ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p357

⁴⁸ Sperling class notes 10/20/04y

⁴⁹ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p356

impugning the purity of the patriarchal family and the whole of Israel; and it is even harder to believe that the Torah would have incorporated such a tale. Thirdly, when Pharaoh said to Abram (v19) "Here is your wife," it seems as though he intends to say, "Behold, I restore to you that which I took from you; I am returning your wife to you as I took her. Apparently the Torah did not wish to speak openly about so delicate a matter, but it made it meaning clear to all who read the text without prejudice. In the word, ומג, which comes after the statement "*and the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house,*" the particle "and," the vav, is antithetic: it is true that the woman was taken into the Pharaoh's house, but the Lord afflicted the king in time, and thereby delivered her from jeopardy.

Cassuto further argues, one can not object that what was narrated in verse 16 must have taken a certain amount of time; for previously it was only stated, "and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house," but we are not told that she had already been brought to Pharaoh. Before Pharaoh asked for her to be brought to him, the Lord smote him what great plagues.

When we understand the plagues to have prevented Pharaoh from defiling Sarah, then the act of Abraham of accepting Pharaoh's gifts does not need to be viewed despicably as adultery.⁵⁰ The charge of Abraham as a "pimp" is thus less severe.

While Philip Davies is critical of Abraham, on this point he agrees with Cassuto in that God creates a plague in order to change the mind of the Pharaoh while

⁵⁰ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p357

at the same time Davies takes it farther by understanding it as an attempt to bring Abraham back on his path.⁵¹

Adultery was a capital crime in the Near East; חטא גדול, literally "a big sin".

This, according to Dr. Sperling, was the ancient term for adultery.⁵² Pharaoh declares to Abram that he did not sin against him and did not touch his wife, and he gives him presents in lieu of the penalty that a comparable ancient Near Eastern law prescribes.

A similar law is found in Tablet A of the Middle Assyrian Laws:

Paragraph 22 first part states "If in the case of the wife of a man, (one who is) not her father, her brother, nor her son, but another person, should cause (her) to go on any journey (apparently with him), without knowing that she is the wife of a man, he must take an oath, and give two tablets of lead to the husband of the woman."⁵³

Abram is able to accept and retain with a clear conscience what he has received at the hands of Pharaoh, since these gifts do not have the character of bounty but rather of a fine that must be paid to him by law.

Perhaps this is why, חטט *one dealt well with*, is used, as well as the neutral expression לו... *and there was to him*, as though it were

⁵¹ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p28

⁵² Sperling class notes 10/20/05

⁵³ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p357

avoiding terms as "giving gifts" and intended only to tell us that Abram received what was due to him by law and equity.⁵⁴

Pharaoh seems to immediately know the cause for the plague. How? Did Sarah tell him? In Genesis 20, it is God who tells Abimelech in a dream that he will die on account of taking Sarah into his house.

In Genesis 12, it never states that God told Pharaoh the reason for the plagues. Immediately after the dream in Genesis 20, the text informs us in v4, *וְאַבְיִמֶלֶךְ לֹא קָרַב אֵלֶיהָ* *Abimelech did not come near to her.*

This statements prevents any idea of thinking Abimelech is the father of Isaac. God intervenes here. He comes to Abimelech in a dream and tells him that Sarah is really Abraham's wife. Through God's intervention (perhaps through some sexual dysfunction), Abimelech was prevented from having intercourse with Sarah ("It was I who kept you from sinning," *וַיִּנָּע*, and (God) touched Pharaoh with lupus, a skin disease.⁵⁵

Sarah is returned to Abraham and the text tells us, "God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and females slaves so that they bore children" (Genesis 20:6, 17).⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p357

⁵⁵ Breshit Rabah 41:2

⁵⁶ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p50

God intervenes in Genesis 20 to prevent Abimelech from coming near Sarah and informs him of the reason for the prevention of his being able to "come close" to Sarah. As a result of this Abimelech confronts Abraham. In Genesis 12, Pharaoh is also afflicted, this time by plagues to him and his household, "on account of Sari, the wife of Abram." As a result of this, Abram confronts Pharaoh. Yet how does Pharaoh know that the plagues are **עַל־דִּבְרֵי שְׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲבְרָם**, "on account of the matter of Sarai, the wife of Abram?" This could also be read "according to the words of Sarai, the wife of Abram." Does Sarah tell him? Does Sarah give up Abraham's secret?

"Pharaoh knows that Abraham is the cause, so he sends away Sarah, Abraham, "and all that he [Abraham] had" (Genesis 12:17-20). But how does he know?

Ramban translates **עַל־דִּבְרֵי שְׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲבְרָם**, "because of the wrong done to Sarah," as well as to Abraham, and because of the merit of both of them, these great plagues came upon Pharaoh and his house.⁵⁷ Cassuto translates it as on account of the behavior towards Sarai, who was a married woman, the wife of Abram.⁵⁸

Still, how would Pharaoh know this was the cause for the plague? When Pharaoh took Sarai into his house he thought she was Abram's sister. Ramban explains that it is possible that when the plagues suddenly came upon him and his house at the very time Sarah was taken to his house, he thought to himself, "What is

⁵⁷ Ramban Genesis 12:17

⁵⁸ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p359

this that God has done to us?" (Gen 12:18) And so he asked her, and she told him that she is Abraham's wife. For this reason, he called Abraham and accused him.⁵⁹

In both stories, Pharaoh and Abimelech confront Abraham. In Genesis 12:18 Pharaoh sends for Abram and asks him

מה-זאת עשית לי למה לא-הגדת לי כי אשתך הוא

"What is this that you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?" (12:18)

למה אמרת איתי הוא נאמן אתה לי לאשה ועתה הנה אשתך בתי גלוי

"Why did you say she was your sister so that I took her as my wife? Now, here is your wife, take her and go!" (12:19)

Abimelech conducts a similar confrontation with Abraham in Gerar.

Abimelech summons Abraham and asks him

מה-עשית לנו ומה-הטאתי לך כי הבראת עלי ועל-ממלכתי חטאה גדלה

מעשים אשר לא-עשו עשית עמדי

"What have you done to us? And what sin have you brought upon us and upon my kingdom? A great sin! (or adultery)" (20:9)

מה ראית כי עשית את-הדבר הזה

"What then, was your purpose is doing such a thing?"

Sefer HaYashar continues,

In the morning, the king called for Abram and said,

⁵⁹ Breshit Rabbah 41:2, Ramban Genesis 12:17-18

-What is this that you have done to me? Why did you tell me, "She is my sister," and I took her to be my wife and bringing upon me and upon my household, this great plague. Now here is your wife, take her and go (lech lecha—perhaps a satirical play on the words of God's command to Abram) from our land, lest we be killed on account of her."

Pharaoh took more sheep, slaves, handmaidens, silver, and gold and gave it to Abram and returned to him his wife, Sarai.

The king said to his daughter:

-It is better for you, my daughter to be the handmaiden in the house of this man than to be the mistress in my house, after I have seen the evil that has come upon us on account of this man.

Abram arose and brought up from Egypt himself and all that was his, and Pharaoh commanded his people to attend him, and they dispatched him and all that he had. Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan at the site of the altar where he had formerly pitched his tent.⁶⁰

According to Cassuto, "What is this you have done to me?" (Genesis 12:18) is an expression of reprimand. Genesis 20:9 holds a similar reprimand, "What have you done to us?" Cassuto explains that Abram could have dealt the same rebuke to Pharaoh, for it was Pharaoh who wronged Abram, but Cassuto, in his usual defense of Abraham, explains this behavior as characteristic of tyrannical leaders. Cassuto blames Pharaoh for faulting Abram for his punishment. Cassuto sees the blame with Pharaoh for taking Abram's wife into his palace. Yet let us not forget, Abram is the one who tricked the Pharaoh. Cassuto admits this saying, "from a given viewpoint he

⁶⁰ Yisrael Zamora, ed. *Nashim ba-Tnakh*. Israel: mahberot le-Sifrut, 1964 p195-6, see appendix text 5

is justified, since it was actually the declaration of Abram and Sarai that they were brother and sister that misled him.⁶¹

In Genesis 12:18 Speiser explains that מה-זאת is not "what is this?" but rather the interrogative indefinite reinforced by a determinative pronoun emphatically applied.⁶²

The same form of the verb is found in Genesis 4:10 מוֹדַעְשִׁית, exactly as it appears in Gen 12:8 when God confronts Cain and Cain tells God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" This is also exactly what Abimelech says to Pharaoh in Genesis 20:9, מוֹדַעְשִׁית. In the case of Cain, God was asking a question in which God already knows the answer. It is a question meant to instill guilt and accountability. Based on this context, it appears Pharaoh and Abimelech are asking Abraham a similar question, in an almost taunting reprimand. Cain's response to God is evasive, "Am I my brother's keeper?" In Genesis 20, Abraham's response seems equally evasive, "She is in fact my sister." In Genesis 12, Abraham remains silent. Ramban says that Abraham did this out of great fear.⁶³

Pharaoh complains to Abraham that as a result of Abraham's comment that she is his sister, he takes her as his wife. Here, Pharaoh states his intention to take Sarah to be his regal wife, not just a concubine.⁶⁴ This is an important statement given what we know about the harsh way in which adultery was viewed in biblical times. By stating his intention to take Sarah as a wife, Pharaoh makes himself appear more honorable than taking a concubine, his intentions appear pure, and he makes it

⁶¹ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p360

⁶² Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p91

⁶³ Ramban on Genesis 12:19

⁶⁴ Ramban on Genesis 12:19

clear that he is not attempting to commit adultery. Furthermore, Cassuto points out, there is no evidence that any sexual act took place. He says, "the expression, 'I took' signifies only that the woman was taken into the king's harem. It may be added that it was precisely the verb *take* that is used in verse 15, in the sentence, "And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house" and therefore, unquestionably, it has the sense of having relations. Similarly, in chapter 20:2, it is said of Abimelech, "And...took Sarah" and in that narrative it is expressly stated (v4) "Now Abimelech had not approached her."⁶⁵ This is most likely more of an attempt by Cassuto to protect the purity of Sarah rather than to defend Pharaoh's intentions.

The account ends showing Pharaoh as the victim as he says to Abraham in disgust, וְיִקַּח אֶת שָׂרָה וְיֵצֵא, take your wife and go. "Take her and be gone." The verb "take" occurs there times. "I took her from you" (v15, 19) now you come back and take her back, but get away from me and my country; I do not wish you to remain any longer in Egypt. Possibly, the meaning here is that he wanted to remove them from his vicinity.⁶⁶

Abraham has no response. We are left to wonder if the silence is out of fear or guilt. Ramban explains the silence as fear. In fact, Ramban explains the whole account as a response to a fearful situation. Abraham is in dangerous foreign land, and he does not know the customs or ways of his neighbors. This fear causes him to protect his wife in the only way that he knows how, by having her separate from him, knowing that she will fair better as a free agent than as his wife.

⁶⁵ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p360

⁶⁶ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p360

Most men are protective of their wives, and it is almost counter-cultural to assume that a man would let his wife go to another man's house as a survival technique. It is possible that this seemed the most pragmatic approach for Abraham.

Abraham makes no reply to Pharaoh's reprimand. Some commentators think that Abraham is quiet because he is guilty. He cannot answer; his conscience tells him that he has sinned, and he is silent. By the fact that he is compelled to receive the rebuke in silence, the Bible shows us how Abraham was punished for his second transgression, the falsehood that he told.⁶⁷ Some even see a lesson in this. "This teaches us that untruth is not only ethically reprehensible, bringing retribution in its train, but it is also injurious from the practical point of view, since it has no foundation in fact and must sooner or later be exposed to do harm to the person who resorts to it".⁶⁸

Yet others who support the actions and intentions of our patriarch, Abraham, such as Ephraim Speiser, think Abraham's lack of response is characteristic of this Biblical author, J, that he does not indulge in justification or face-saving. But beyond that, Speiser views the Bible as recorded accounts of events we do not fully understand. Speiser attributes Abraham's silence to the fact that this is all the information that the author had. The author did not know Abraham's reasoning, and unlike midrash, the biblical author does not attempt to speculate.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000.

⁶⁸ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p360

⁶⁹ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p91

We do not know Abraham's intentions. We find them troublesome so we try to find a way to critique it. Abraham was either stating Sarah was his sister as a survival technique or he was a lecherous man for giving his wife to another man for financial gain and social gain. Not being in the physical and emotional situation of our characters, we do not understand the decisions they made.

Visotzky says, "Abraham does seem to be put in a different moral category, which lets him get away with things that do not belong in every day morality. This is a fellow that puts a scam on Pharaoh, one that involves selling his wife—not nice. By the end of the story, he's very wealthy, mainly because God has acted as his protector. God comes in later and says to Pharaoh, 'Don't touch the lady.' It's a horrifying story. God's choice of Abraham allows him to be metaethical—he can do anything and get away with it."⁷⁰

While Visotzky views the message of the story as that Abraham can do no wrong and is not to be held morally accountable, Reverend Eugene Rivers III sees Abraham's moral ambiguity as conveying a different message, [namely] that one does not have to be perfect to be an instrument of God.⁷¹ Our ability to relate to the human nature of our Biblical characters teaches us lessons, rather than display[ing] perfect deities that we could never wish to emulate. Reverend Rivers explains, "Like all of us, Abraham is a flawed human being. But he receives that call from God, and he responds to that call, even though the response is imperfect".⁷²

While it is easy for us to judge the actions of our ancestors from the comfort and safety of our homes, it is important to remember the context in which we find our

⁷⁰ Moyers, Bill, ed. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p157

⁷¹ Moyers, Bill, ed. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p157

⁷² Moyers, Bill, ed. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p157

characters. They have left their homeland to follow God's call only to be met by famine. They continue to wander without food or property, all the while trying to stay alive among foreigners.

Abraham's acquiring of cattle and slaves are not superfluous luxuries, but rather needed for survival and livelihood. Slavery is not to be condoned in our modern world yet we seem to have no reaction to reading this in the text. Reverend Reynolds makes the point that "We are viewing this story through a twentieth-century lens and then superimposing our own context onto a very complex historical, cultural, and political context, that we do not fully appreciate."⁷³ We are consumed with the idea that Abraham allowed his wife to be brought into Pharaoh's house that we overlook other biblical circumstances. In a world of famine, slavery, and tyranny, perhaps Abraham thought the safest place for Sarah to be was in the palace. It may not have been the best choice reflectively, but these were not normative situations. For Abraham and Sarah, survival took priority.

Azizah Y. al-Hibri, a Muslim and a professor of Law at the University of Virginia, shares this view. "We should not be sitting here in judgment over Abraham, because we did not go through what he went through. He had to go through all these difficulties and protect himself both in his own tribe and later, in Egypt. I could imagine someone facing a difficulty that might lead him to say, 'This is not my wife, this is my sister.' And then you would hope that God would come through and help you."⁷⁴

⁷³ Moyers, Bill, ed. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p163-4

⁷⁴ Moyers, Bill, ed. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p163

The fact that Sarah and Abraham's marriage survived beyond this act and that she exerts a place of dominance from then on in her household is an interesting message. A relatively quiet character in the wife-sister motifs of Genesis 12 and 20, she is "boss" in Genesis 16 and 21. We still not know what her unarticulated role is in the narratives of Genesis 12 and 20 had been. What did she tell Pharaoh was she involved in the scheme?

What does it mean that the child of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, repeats the same act with his wife Rebekah? Is this a survival technique that has been proven successful or are the patriarchs merely "misogynous".

The three narratives together have an important bearing on the documentary hypothesis. The first narrative, Genesis 12:10-29 bears the markings of J. YHWH is used for the name of God. The story is paralleled in Genesis 26:6-11, which echoes an identical experience by Isaac and Rebekah with Abimelech of Gerar. This narrative also can be traced to J. There is, however, a complete separation of cast, locale, and generations: Abraham-Sarah-Pharaoh-Egypt as against Isaac-Rebekah-Abimelech-Gerar. The two narratives are thus entirely appropriate in a work by an individual author. Genesis 20:1-18, on the other hand, juxtaposes Abraham and Sarah with Abimelech of Gerar it crosses the visitors of Genesis 12 with the host and locale of Genesis 26. It becomes obvious that the two narratives, Genesis 12 and 26 were by the same author and an additional narrative, Genesis 20 arose, in which elements from each story were combined into another narrative. The redactor kept all three narratives.

It would not seem to make sense if all three narratives were written by a single source. If all three reports stemmed from the same source, it would follow that (1) Abraham learned nothing from his experience in Egypt, because he attempted the same scheme again in Gerar (2) that Abimelech was in no way sobered by his all but fatal involvement with Sarah in an affair in which he went to such lengths to protest his innocence, if he proceeded to engage in another affair with Rebekah (3) Abimelech would have had to be a fool to accept Isaac's claim when his father attempted the same sort of deception; yet this passage depicts him as both wise and sincere; and lastly, (4) our king of Gerar would be much too old to be a candidate for Rebekah's attentions

The three parallel stories do not seem to be from the same source. As soon, however, as they are traced back to two separate sources, all the contradictions and inconsistencies are resolved automatically.⁷⁵

Genesis 20:1-18 has the markings of E and it has the most characteristics which go with that source: Elohim instead of YHWH; dreams as a medium of communication, and a marked tendency to explain and justify. The contrast with J is particularly sharp in this instance because the account before us parallels J's narrative in 12:10-20. The external differences stand out, therefore, that much more clearly. What is more, even without the discrepancies in vocabulary, style, and treatment, internal evidence from content would still show independently that the two accounts could not have been written by the same author.

⁷⁵ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p151

The present section thus adds up to a strong argument in favor of a distinct narrative source that is not to be confused with J,⁷⁶ the source of our other two narratives. It appears that, before the Torah was written, various traditions were current in Israel concerning an episode involving the Matriarchs of the nation. Essentially these traditions were alike, but they differed in particulars: one told of Sarai-Sarah in Egypt; another also spoke of Sarah, but in another place, Gerar; while a third referred to Rebekah. Possibly all three flowed from one ancient saga, which assumed variant forms in regard to detail as it was handed down by one generation to another. Fluctuations in underlying oral tradition would readily account for the eventual confusion.⁷⁷ When the Torah came to be written, the three versions already existed, side by side, among the Israelites.

The Torah, whose object was not to investigate the collection of facts of the Patriarch historically but only to use the existing sagas for the purpose of religious and ethical instruction, was not concerned to examine the question of the relationship to these traditions, and certainly did not apply to them the principles of historical criticism, which were not yet known at that period. Seeing that each of the three tales could serve as its aim, and that the triplication of the theme enhanced the usefulness of the stories, Scripture did not refrain from including the three of them.⁷⁸

The stories provide chronological implausibilities as well. It seems odd that Abraham would be nervous about Sarah's beauty being a danger to his life in Genesis

⁷⁶ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p150-1

⁷⁷ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p151

⁷⁸ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p339

12:11. According to what we are told in Genesis 17:17, Sarah was only ten years younger than Abraham, and consequently she was already sixty-five years old when she left Haran, her husband being at the time seventy-five (12:4). It seems strange, therefore, that Abraham should have entertained the fears that he did about his wife after she had reached old age, and even more fantastic is the story related subsequently to what happened.⁷⁹ Before the Torah was written, the ancient tradition was passed down orally among the sages. This was unrelated to chronology. It is self-understood that in the narration of the episode of Sarai in Egypt, she was portrayed as a woman in the full bloom of her youth. When, however, the traditional tales were collected in one, big, comprehensive work, and were arranged and integrated into a homogeneous composition, it was necessary to establish a unified chronological system. Abram's age leaving Haran was fixed at seventy-five and Sarai's at sixty-five, although this dating did not fit in well with the incident in Egypt. It was not possible to change the chronological system, which was based on determinative factors; nor could the story be omitted, since it was well known among the people, and was suited to the plan and purpose of the Torah. There was thus no choice in the matter. The Bible included both elements—on the one hand the chronological date, and on the other the story—and hinted, as it were, between the lines, how they could be reconciled: Abraham and Sarai are described as persons endowed with unusual qualities, so much so that a son was born to them when he was a hundred years old and she ninety. Now if Sarah at the age of ninety was able to bear a son and suckle him, one may infer from this that when she was sixty-five, and

⁷⁹ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p346

even older (chapter 20), she could still be considered "beautiful of form and appearance."⁸⁰

It is wondrous that Sarah was still beautiful at age 65. According to Seder Olam, the earliest post-exilic chronicle preserved in the Hebrew language, the famine occurred in Egypt in the year in which Abraham left Haran. Now Scripture states, when he left Haran Abraham was 75 years old (12:14). Sarah was ten years younger (17:17). She was thus 65. Perhaps her youthfulness returned to her when the angel brought her the tidings, as the Rabbis said in Baba Metzia 87a, "Her skin became smooth, the wrinkles straightened, and beauty returned to its form."⁸¹

We saw the same sort of problems of chronology and age that arose in the Ishmael and Isaac stories. We do not think of Isaac being an adult in the story of the binding of Isaac, but according to the chronology, Isaac would have been about 30 years old. When Ishmael is banished we think of him as a baby, yet the chronology shows that he also must have been significantly older, much too old for Hagar to carry on her shoulder, as stated by the text.

We have, of course, no way of telling what happened on those visits to Egypt and Gerar, assuming that they did take place. Both Abraham and Isaac were married to women who enjoyed privileged status by the standard of their own society. It was the kind of distinction that may well have been worthy of emphasis in the presence of their royal hosts, since it enhanced the credentials of the visitors. Status has always

⁸⁰ Cassuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1964. p346-7

⁸¹ Ramban on Genesis 17:17

played a role in international relations, as far back as available records can take us. But popular lore has seldom been internationally oriented.⁸²

Why was tradition so interested in the matter, enough so as to dwell on it repeatedly? We now know that the wife-sister position was the mark of cherished social standing. This kind of background would be an implicit guarantee of the purity of the wife's descendants. The purpose of biblical genealogies was to establish the superior strain of the line through which the biblical way of life was transmitted from generation to generation. The integrity of the mission was to be safeguarded in transmission and the purity of the content protected by the quality of the container.⁸³

It also may have afforded women more of a position of power in a patriarchal society that limited their autonomy. By being a sister as well as a wife, they may have been endowed with a bit more equality. It is interesting to note that in Genesis 12, Abraham does ask Sarah to say he is his sister. The mere fact that he asks her permission offers a glimmer of hope that while she followed his orders, she may have had a voice in the actions that transpired. We also do not know how Pharaoh found out that Sarah was his wife. It was perhaps Sarah that informed him.

These patriarchal narratives show us little of the matriarch's voice in the past. The wife-sister motif shows an interesting play on the role of a woman as an equal versus a possession. When Sarah is a sister of Abraham, she is a free agent, and can be brought into Pharaoh's house; yet at the same time, she is clearly still a possession, being passed from one male to the next. Pharaoh is not angered by the fact that he

⁸² Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p93

⁸³ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day and Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p93-4

disrespected Sarah as a person but rather by the fact that he took another man's possession. Pharaoh takes the moral high ground, in which he is careful to remain respectful of another man's property.

The *achoti* status presented by Speiser offers a positive way of looking at the status of some elite women in our history. Ownership is an important motif in itself in the Bible. Disputes and inheritance of land, people, and possessions are the majority of what is discussed in our narratives.

The first story in the wife-sister motif ends with the midrashim of Pharaoh passing his possession, his daughter Hagar into Abraham and Sarah's possession as Sarah's handmaiden. In chapter 16, following Abraham and Sarah's adventure in Egypt, Sarah had still not borne Abraham any children.

v1. וְשָׂרַי אִשְׁתֹּת אַבְרָם לֹא יָלְדָה לוֹ וְלָהּ שִׁפְחָהּ מִצְרַיִת וּשְׁמָהּ הָגָר

Sarai, Abram's wife, had not borne him any children, and she had an Egyptian handmaiden and her name was Hagar.

v2. וַיֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל-אַבְרָם חֲזֹה-נָא עֲצָנִי יְהוָה מֵלֶדֶת בְּאִנִּי אֶל-שִׁפְחָתִי

אִלְנִי אֲבֵנָה מִמֶּנָּה וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרַי

Sarai said to Abram, Behold (BDB) or Look (JPS), God has restrained me from bearing. Please consort (JPS) or come (BDB) to my handmaiden, perhaps I will be built up from her⁸⁴ and Abram heard/heeded Sarai's request (JPS) (literally, "Sarai's voice").

⁸⁴ A play on words with בנה, build up and בן, son.

Speiser explains that the verb אִבְנָה "I shall reproduce" as it stands can only mean "I shall be built up" and the usage is confirmed by Deuteronomy 25:9.⁸⁵ Deuteronomy 25 discusses levirate marriage-what would happen in the event that amongst two brothers who dwell together, one were to die without a son. The brother is to consort with his deceased brother's wife to produce a family offspring in his deceased brother's name. If the man refused to "establish a name in Israel for his brother" he is אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִבְנֶה אֶת-בֵּית אָחִיו, a man that will not build up his brother's household.

At the same time, however, it is an obvious word play on בן, son, alluding to "I shall have a son" although this would not be grammatically correct. The above translation seeks to convey some of the same double meaning.⁸⁶

Ramban points out that when Sarah tells Abraham to consort with her handmaiden Scripture does not state "and he did so." Even though Abram wanted children, he did not do so without Sarai's permission. It was not his intention to build up a family from Hagar, and that his children be from her. His intent was merely to do Sarai's will so that she may build a family from Hagar, for she will find satisfaction in her handmaid's children or by the merit of this act she will become worthy enough to have children.⁸⁷

According to Breshit Rabbah 71:7, Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai said, Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter. When Pharaoh saw what was done on Sarah's behalf in his own house, he took his daughter and gave her to Sarah, saying "Better let my daughter be

⁸⁵ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p117

⁸⁶ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p117

⁸⁷ Ramban on Genesis 16:2

a handmaid in this house than a mistress in another house." Thus it is written, "And she had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar" ⁸⁸ Rabbi Yohai explains that Pharaoh is saying she is your reward (agar) a play on the name Hagar. ⁸⁹

Abimelech, too, when he saw the miracles performed in his house on Sarah's behalf gave his daughter to her, saying, "Better to let my daughter be a handmaid in this house than a mistress in another." ⁹⁰

This creates a bridge between the wife sister-motif and the children that Hagar and Sarai produce for Abram. Up until now, Abraham was promised a son but so far he has done nothing about it, even though he understands his wife, Sarah is barren. Sarah herself suggests the obvious solution—she can have a surrogate child (Genesis 16:2). ⁹¹

v3. וַתֵּלֶךְ שָׂרַי אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲבְרָם אֶת-הָגָר הַמִּצְרַיִת שִׁפְחָתָהּ מִשְׁלַח עֶשֶׂר שָׁנִים
לְשִׁבְתּוֹ אֲבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן וַתֵּתֶן אֹתָהּ לְאֲבְרָם אִשָּׁה לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה

Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant, after Abram had dwelled in the land of Caanan 10 years, and gave her to her husband, Abram as a wife (JPS-concubine) (BDB-woman).

Ephraim Speiser explains that the Hebrew אִשָּׁה may signify either "wife" or "concubine." ⁹² Clearly, Sarah was Abraham's wife. Men were able to have multiple wives in Biblical times, as demonstrated from Jacob. Yet just as Rachel and Leah

⁸⁸ Ramban on Genesis 16:2

⁸⁹ Ramban on Genesis 16:2

⁹⁰ Ramban on Genesis 16:2

⁹¹ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p32

⁹² Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p117

were of higher status than Bilhah and Zilpah, who are referred to as his concubines. Sarah would still be Abraham's wife, yet having a child raised ones esteem, for this is how the patriarchal structure continued. Sarah needed to give Abraham a male heir.

Ramban disagrees and believes that verse three tells us that Sarai "took" Hagar and gave her to Abram to inform us that Abraham did not hurry the matter until Sarai took Hagar and gave her to him. This is to allude that Sarah did not despair of Abraham and she did not render herself distant from him as she was his wife and he, her husband. She wanted that Hagar also be his wife. This is why the verse states, "And she gave Abraham, her husband to be his wife" meaning that she was not to be a concubine, but a woman married to him. All this reflects an ethical conduct of Sarah and her respect towards her husband.⁹³

The Biblical author makes it clear that Abraham and Sarah have dwelled in the land for ten years. Ten years is the established period for a woman who has lived with her husband and has not produced children, that he is bound to take another. The text also tell us that they "dwelt in land of Canaan" for those ten years. The time he dwelt outside the Land is not counted in the ten years. The intent [of the law which excludes the period one dwells outside the land of Israel from the ten year total] is that if a man lived with his wife five or ten years outside, its gives them ten years in the land, perhaps due to the merit of the land they will build a family.⁹⁴

Sarah knows that she must give Abraham a woman to produce an offspring or Abraham will have the right and even the outside pressure to take an additional wife. Ramban explains that Abraham was so respectful of Sarah that he did not do this until

⁹³ Ramban on Genesis 16:2

⁹⁴ Ramban on Genesis 16:2

Sarah told him to take Hagar as a wife. Azizah Al-Hibri agrees with Ramban. "At that time it was not unusual for a man to take many wives. Here is Abraham who is so busy with his God. He has no children. For most of his life, despite the promise, he has no urge to marry another woman. We do not hear him complaining in the Bible. 'Let me marry another woman. Let me have a child. God promised certain things for my offspring.' Neither does Sarah give him her slave until she is hopeless both about herself and him."⁹⁵ Al-Hibri, along with Lewis Smedes, a professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, both agree, that Sarah is possessive. She wants Abraham all to herself. Yet she is nervous that he may take additional wives, so she tries to control the situation.⁹⁶

If the midrashim are true that Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter, Pharaoh told Hagar it would be better for her to be a maidservant in Abraham's house than a princess in his own palace. Sarah was exchanged property in Genesis 12, changing hands between Abraham and Pharaoh. Now Hagar becomes the property in Genesis 16, changing hands from Sarah to Abraham. Phyllis Trible points out how Sarah, who was manhandled in Genesis 12 now manhandles Hagar in Genesis 16.⁹⁷ Vizotsky points out that Abraham "basically sold his wife to Pharaoh to save his skin and then in the end got even richer. Now look at the turnabout. Sarah, having been used that way, and perhaps feeling a lot of anger at Abraham, now turns the tables on him. She puts an Egyptian in his bed."⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Moyers, Bill, ed. . Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p193

⁹⁶ Moyers, Bill, ed. . Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p193

⁹⁷ Trible class notes 10.31.05

⁹⁸ Moyers, Bill, ed. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p189

A woman who held little power in the wife-sister motif of chapters 12 and 20, suddenly controls the actions of her husband. Tribble points out that Abraham and Sarah save themselves by manipulating each other.⁹⁹ According to Tribble, when Abraham was scared for his life in Egypt, he told Sarah she was beautiful in order to manipulate her into saying he was his sister so that he could pass her off to the Pharaoh as a single woman while in turn, Sarah, knowing she has not produced an heir for Abraham, tells him to take her maidservant so that Hagar will produce a child for Abraham. Tribble explains the contrast between Sarah who is Hebrew, barren, married, rich, free and old against Hager who is Egyptian, fertile, single, poor, a slave, and young and determines that the power belongs to Sarah.¹⁰⁰ Reverend Azizah Al-Hibri explains that Sarah sees Hagar as an alien "other." It is the "otherness" of Hagar that threatens Sarah beyond her expectations. The promise is being fulfilled through the alien of other.¹⁰¹ "Sarah sees herself as a failure," says Visotzky.¹⁰² Eugene Rivers III clarifies, "'Sarah says, 'I have failed as a wife.' [It is] old fashioned jealousy. That is what is so great about this at the level of just regular human beings. People can resonate to the basic 'funkiness' of human relationships like this. 'I am a failure as a mother' or 'I am a failure as a wife, and there is this younger thing that is going to upstage me, so Sarah responds...'"¹⁰³

v4

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים וַיִּבְרָא וַיִּבְרָא כִּי הָיָה וַיִּבְרָא וַיִּבְרָא בְּעֵינֶיהָ

⁹⁹ Tribble class notes 10.31.05

¹⁰⁰ Tribble class notes 10.31.05

¹⁰¹ Al-Hibri, Azizah, Genesis: A Living Conversation. Moyers, Bill, ed. Double Day. NY 1996. p190

¹⁰² Visotzky, Burt. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Moyers, Bill, ed. Double Day. NY 1996. p189-

90

¹⁰³ Moyers, Bill, ed Genesis: A Living Conversation. Double Day. NY 1996. p189-90

He came to (cohabitated with-JPS) Hagar and she became pregnant and when she saw that she was pregnant, her mistress was lowered in her esteem.

The literal meaning of the clause is "her mistress was lessened in her eyes."¹⁰⁴

A midrash speaks on this idea of a power shift:

The upstanding women that were in the place used to go to Sarai, day in and day out, to greet her. When Sarai would see them, she would say to them: "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you come to me every day? Indeed, is not there a woman in this place that is as good as I? Behold, Hagar, the daughter of Pharaoh sits in her tent—go to her, my ladies, and greet her, for there is not a woman as modest and decent in her ways as she!" When the women heard Sarai's words, they were astonished, saying "Has any one heard anything so great as this, that a mistress honors her handmaiden?!" So the women went to Hagar and greeted her and asked how she was. In the course of the women's sitting in her tent, Hagar said to them, "Do not say that Sarai is good in the eyes of God. For why has God not blessed her until this day and kept her from having any offspring?"¹⁰⁵

v5. וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָי אֶל-אַבְרָם חֲמָסִי עָלֶיךָ אֲנֹכִי נָתַתִּי שְׁפָחָתִי בְּחִיקָךָ

וַתֵּרָא כִּי הִרְתָּה וְאַסֵּל בְּעֵצֶיךָ יִשְׁפֹּט יְהוָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינֶךָ

Sarai said to Abram, "The wrong/offence (BDB-violence) (JPS-the wrong) done to me is your fault, I put my maid in your bosom, now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. God decide between you and me!"

¹⁰⁴ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p117

¹⁰⁵ Yisrael Zamora, ed., "Sarai and Hagar" Nashim ba-Tnakh. Israel: mahberot le-Sifrut, 1964 p194, see appendix text 6

Speiser translates צדק as "my injustice" in objective construction: the injustice done to me; the possessive is adequately reflected by "this," as happens so often in interchanging possessive and defined forms, such as "the boys" or "my men" in Genesis 14:24. For the Hebrew, צדק , "lawlessness, injustice" it is a strictly legal term which traditional "violence" fails to show adequately. The same force is reflected in the Akkadian verb *hablum*, "wronged." The Code of Hammurabi states explicitly that a slave girl who was elevated to the status of a concubine must not claim equality with her mistress (par. 146). Sarah is thus invoking her legal rights, and she holds her husband responsible (literally "it is against you") for the offense.¹⁰⁶

Sarah is thus not altogether out of order when she bitterly complains to Abraham that her rights have not been honored.¹⁰⁷ For the legal background in the case, we are limited to the provision of paragraph 146 of the Code of Hammurabi, which are pertinent only in part: A priestess of the *naditum* rank, who was free to marry but not to bear children, gives her husband a slave girl in order to provide him with a son. If the concubine then tries to arrogate to herself a position of equality with her mistress, the wife shall demote her to her former status of slave; but she may not sell her to others. This law is applicable to the case before us in that (a) the childless wife must herself provide a concubine; (b) the successful substitute must not forget her place. But these provisions are restricted to certain priestesses for whom motherhood was ruled out. No such limitation applied to Sarah.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p117-8

¹⁰⁷ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p120

¹⁰⁸ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p120

Her case, however, is covered in full by the family law of another society; one document in particular combines all the requisite details save only for the inescapable difference in names. It is a text from Nuzi, which was published in 1929, as No. 67. The document as a whole records the adoption of a certain Shennima and his concurrent marriage to Gilimninu. It is the marriage alone that we are concerned with here. These are the stated provisions (lines 17):

"If Gilimninu bears children, Shennima shall not take another wife. But if Gilimninu fails to bear children, Gilimninu shall get for Shennima a woman from the Lullu country (a slave girl) as concubine. In that case, Gilimninu herself shall have authority over her offspring." In other words, in this socially prominent lay family, the husband may not marry again if his wife has children. But if the union proves to be childless, the wife is required to provide a concubine, but would then have all the legal rights to the offspring. This must be the meaning of the term **אבנה** (I shall reproduce, be built up) as in verse 2, above.¹⁰⁹

The other provision of the Nuzi case are likewise paralleled in our narrative: Sarah is childless, and it is she herself who has pressed a concubine on Abraham (v. 2-3). What Sarah did, then, was no so much in obedience to an impulse as in conformance with the family law of the Hurrians, a society whose customs the patriarchs knew intimately and followed often.¹¹⁰

The extra-biblical material gives new meaning also to the next phrase in the story as described in verse 6. Although Abraham told Sarah to do to Hagar as

¹⁰⁹ Speiser, Ephraim The Anchor Bible, Genesis, Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p120-1

¹¹⁰ Speiser, Ephraim The Anchor Bible, Genesis, Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p121

she pleased, Sarah stops short of expelling her slave. Hammurabi Law 146 would forbid it in these circumstances, as does also Deut 26:14. But there is nothing in either source (the meaning of the key verb in Deut is "to pledge for debts" not "to treat brutally") to discourage intolerable abuse, which eventually drove Hagar to flight.¹¹¹

Beyond all legal niceties, however, are the tangled emotions of the characters in the drama: Sarah, frustrated and enraged; Hagar, spirited but tactless; and Abraham, who must know that, whatever his personal sentiments, he may not dissuade Sarah from following the letter of the law.¹¹²

Elizabeth Swathos, a writer, musician, and artist whose current work concerns characters and themes from biblical narratives, thinks Sarah's character is somewhat steadfast. She is a matriarch, a strong lady. She has been through a lot. She has been waiting. She is still waiting and she believes in the future... She is ready to do what an ancient Jewish woman is supposed to do—to take charge of the future. The key moment is when Sarah sees another woman who is about to succeed her in taking charge of the future by having a child.¹¹³

v.6. וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל-שָׂרַי הִנֵּה שְׁפָחָתְךָ בְּיָדְךָ עֲשִׂי-לָהּ חֵטוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ
וְהַעֲנֵה שָׂרַי וְתִבְרַח מִפָּנֶיהָ

¹¹¹ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p121

¹¹² Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p120

¹¹³ Swathos, Elizabeth. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Moyers, Bill, ed. Double Day. NY 1996. p189-90

Abram said to Sarai, Your handmaiden is in your hands. Do with her as you think right (literally "as is good in your eyes"). (Speiser translates it as, "as it pleases you.") and Sarai oppressed her and she fled from before her.

Why does Abraham, who happily handed Sarah over to Pharaoh, give in to her now and allow the pregnant Hagar to flee? (Or why did Sarah, who seemed quite capable of asserting herself at this point, give in to Abraham in Egypt when he turned her over to Pharaoh?) Davies claims that it is obvious that having a son is not as important to Abraham as domestic harmony. This is why he gives in to her.¹¹⁴

Visotzky points out that Sarah never actually looks at Hagar as another person. "Had she thought about Hagar as human being with a name, she might have realized that it was all going to fall apart because if you put your husband in bed with a real person, something is going to happen. And poor Abraham! I feel terribly sympathetic to Abraham. He is in the classic position of the damned if you do and damned if you don't. Sarah says, 'Go sleep with the cleaning girl.' He says, 'Okay' and then he does. Sarah says, 'You slept with the cleaning girl!' He is really smart about it, though. He says, 'she is yours. You take care of this. I'm out of here. I will not deal with this.' But Sarah does not let it go. She says, 'No, God has to judge between you and me.'"¹¹⁵

When Hagar becomes pregnant, a conflict develops between the secondary wife and her mistress. Hagar may well have harbored notions of replacing Sarai as the primary wife. Sarai is given the authority to discipline Hagar severely. Although

¹¹⁴ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p32

¹¹⁵ Visotzky, Burt. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Moyers, Bill, ed. Double Day. NY 1996. p192

pregnant, Hagar flees into the unforgiving desert south of Beer-Sheva. The survival of Hagar—and her unborn child—is at stake. Will the potential heir perish?¹¹⁶

Verse 6 tells us that

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל-שָׂרַי הִנֵּה שָׂכַחְתִּיךָ בְּגֵרָה עָשִׂי-לִּי חֲטוּב בְּעֵינֶיךָ

וַתַּעֲנֶה שָׂרַי וַתִּבְרַח מִפָּנֶיהָ

לָנֶחֱ is used in Genesis 32 to explain the abuse done to Dina. It is also used in Exodus when the Egyptians abuse the Hebrew slaves. Dr. Sperling explains the term as “exerting dominance over another.” Sarai reasserted her power over Hagar when she felt less powerful with Hagar’s impending motherhood.

v7. וַיִּמְצְאֶהָ מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה עַל-עֵין הַמַּיִם בְּמִדְבָּר עַל-הָעֵין בְּדֶרֶךְ שׁוּר

An angel of God found her under a spring of water in the wilderness under the spring on the way to Shur.

Hagar responds by fleeing to the wilderness where the angel of the Lord finds her by a spring on the way to Shur. Shur is a place near the Egyptian border (Gen 20:1, 25:13).¹¹⁷ Again God intervenes.¹¹⁸ And angel of God comes to her. The Hebrew noun מַלְאָךְ meant originally “messenger” exactly as its Greek equivalent, *angelos*. In association with a divine term, the noun refers to the manifestation of the Diety, but not necessarily a separate being. In the present chapter, for instance, the

¹¹⁶ Davies, Philip R. “Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding.” Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p48-9

¹¹⁷ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p117

¹¹⁸ Davies, Philip R. “Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding.” Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p49

angel is later identified with God himself (v13). For one reason or another, an angel is interposed, in human form as a role, to avoid direct contact between God and mortals. The concept was obviously familiar to J (Gen 19:13), the corresponding manifestation in E is "angel of God" (Gen 21:17, Gen 31:11). The use of the term to describe a distinct class of supernatural beings is of later date.¹¹⁹

v8. וַיֹּאמֶר הָאֵל שְׁפָתַי שְׁכַחְתָּ שְׂכִי אִימָתָה בָּאת וְאַתָּה תִּלְכִּי וַיֹּאמֶר מִפְּנֵי שְׁכִי

גְּבִרָתִי אֲנִי בִּנְחֹת

[The angel] said, "Hagar, handmaiden of Sarai, From where have you come and where are you going?" And [Hagar] said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai, I am fleeing."

v.9 . וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֶלֶאכֶךָ יְהוָה שׁוּבִי אֶל-גְּבִרָתְךָ וְהִתְעַנִּי תַּחַת יָדֶיהָ

And the angel of God said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her harsh treatment(JPS)/abuse." (BDB-be bowed down)

v.10 וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֶלֶאכֶךָ יְהוָה הֲרֵבָה אֶרְבֶּה אֶת-זַרְעֲךָ וְלֹא יִסְפָּר מִרְבֵּה

And the angel of God said to her, "Your offspring will be so numerous you will not be able to count them."

v.11 וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מֶלֶאכֶךָ יְהוָה הִנֵּה הָרָה וְיִלְדֶּת בֶּן הִנֵּה הָרָה וְיִלְדֶּת

בֶּן וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל כִּי-שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל-עֲנִיָּהּ

And the angel of God said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and will give birth to a son and you shall call him, Ishmael, for God heard/heeded your suffering (JPS)/affliction (BDB)."

¹¹⁹ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p117

v.12 וְהָיָה יִשְׁמָאֵל כְּאַדְמָס בֶּלֶל וְזָד כָּל בֶּן וְעַל-פָּנָיו כָּל-אָחָיו יִשָּׁכְנוּ

And he will be a "wild ass" (JPS, BDB) of a man and his hand shall be against everyone,

and everyone's hand against him, he shall dwell alongside all his kinsmen.

Rashi interprets this as one who loves the wilderness and to hunt animals as it says, "He dwelt in the desert and became a shooter, an archer." Rashi explains that "his hand was against everyone" means he will be a bandit, and everyone's hand will be against him. Everyone will hate him and attack him. Rashi's opinion is that Ishmael will possess two characteristics. Firstly, he will be a man who loves the wilderness and loves to hunt and secondly, He will be a he will be a bandit despised by all. According to Rashi, "he will be a wild ass of a man and his hand will be against everyone.,," are two separate and unrelated prophecies.¹²⁰

In Ramban's opinion the two expressions are connected and refer to the same traits. Ramban understands פְּרָא אָדָם as describing Ishmael's essence being פְּרָא, a wild ass, who appears to be a man. Ramban explains that "amid all his brothers shall he dwell" refers to the fact Ishmael's offspring would be more numerous than any of their brother's tribes.¹²¹

The Rabbis associated Ishmael with the enemies of the Jews. Ishmael, like Esau, represented neighboring people having occasional but ongoing relationship with the Israelites.¹²² In contrast to the Bible and the collections of Jewish narrative exegesis, the Islamic sources rarely assign special significance to the birth of

¹²⁰ Rashi on Genesis 21:12

¹²¹ Ramban on Genesis 21:12

¹²² Firestone, Reuven. Journeys in the Holy Lands. State University of NY Press 1990. p39

Ishmael.¹²³ The Islamic tyrant legend parallels Genesis. The recurring thematic narrative is found three times in the book of Genesis. The Jewish version of the legend is in Bereshit Rabbah, Palestinian Targum, Pesukei de Rabbi Eliezer, and Sefer HaYashar.¹²⁴

Speiser defines פרא אדם as "a wild colt of a man." The qualifying Hebrew noun פרא could stand either for wild ass or wild horse.¹²⁵ An example of this is in Job 6:5 which reads, תִּקְרַק פֶּרֶא עֲלֵי-דָשָׁא, "Does a wild ass bray when he has grass?" The phrase, פרא אדם, recalls the Akkadian *lullu-awelu*, approximately "savage of a man" which the Akkadians used to describe both Enkidu and the first primitive man created by the gods.¹²⁶

Shimeon Bar Efrat sees the term פרא אדם in a more positive way. He explains that this means that Ishmael will be a free man, a man who is independent. Ishmael will not be a slave like his mother.¹²⁷ In this way, God truly would heed Hagar's suffering by freeing her son from such abuse.

This interpretation is so powerful that it sets a compassionate background for the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. By banishing them from Sarah's house, Abraham prevents their future abuse, and furthermore, allows a slave woman to be free.

¹²³ Firestone, Reuven. Journeys in the Holy Lands. State University of NY Press 1990. p39

¹²⁴ Firestone, Reuven. Journeys in the Holy Lands. State University of NY Press 1990. p39

¹²⁵ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p119

¹²⁶ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p119

¹²⁷ Bar Efrat, Shimon. Narrative Art in the Bible. The Almond Press, Syracuse, NY, 1989.

Regardless of what is meant by פרא אדם, the angel tells Hagar that her offspring will be numerous and to return to Sarai to await the birth of her son, who shall be called Ishmael. Hagar returns home and bears a son, who is then named Ishmael by Abram, his father. Abram is 86 years old when Ishmael is born.¹²⁸

The angel tells Hagar to "return to your mistress and to "submit yourself under her hands." Ramban thinks that this implies that she will not go out free from her, as Sarah children will ever rule over her children.¹²⁹

It appears that even though Hagar must remain a slave, her prayers will be answered and suffering heard through the prosperous life of Ishmael and his offspring.

v.13 ותקרא שם־יהוה הדיבר אליה אלה אל ראי כי אמנה וגם היום
ראיתי אסתי ראי

She called to the God that had spoken to her, "You are El-Roi"¹³⁰ meaning, "Did I not go on seeing here after he had seen me?"

v.14 על־כן קרא לבאר באר למי ראי חנה בין קדש וברד
Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi¹³¹, between Kadesh and Bered.

This is the very place where Isaac later settles following his mother Sarah's death.

(Gen 24:62).¹³²

¹²⁸ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p76

¹²⁹ Ramban on Genesis 16:9

¹³⁰ El roi apparently means God of seeing

¹³¹ Apparently, "the Well of the Living One Who sees Me"

¹³² Cohen, Norman. Self Struggle and Change. Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 1995. p68

Phyllis Tribble points out the significance of Hagar naming God. Naming gives Hagar power. It is rare for a woman to have an interaction with God or an agent of God in the Bible. Furthermore, the name of God, is a name based on seeing God and God seeing her. "Hagar sees God and lives."¹³³

v.15 וַתֵּלֶד הָגָר לְאַבְרָם בֶּן וְיִקְרָא אַבְרָם שֵׁם בְּנוֹ אֶשְׂרָיִלְדָּה הָגָר יִשְׁמָעֵאל

Hagar bore Abram a son and Abram called the son that Hagar bore him, Ishmael.

Abraham names his son Ishmael, yet the angel tells Sarah that this will be the name her son will be called. How could Abraham know that was to be Ishmael's name? Was the angel offering a prophetic vision to Hagar or did Hagar tell Abraham of her encounter with the angel in the wilderness?

Rashi says Abraham either called him his name on his own, with the intent that God hear him and answer him or the Holy Spirit rested upon him, as Rashi said, and he called him Ishmael because God heard his mother's affliction.¹³⁴

Ramban says that the angel commanded Hagar that she call him so, but she being a concubine was afraid to give a name to her master's son. She revealed the matter to him and Abraham fulfilled the word of God.¹³⁵

The narrative ends with a documentation of genealogy:

v.16 וַאֲבָרָם בֶּן-שְׁמֹנִים שָׁנָה וְעֶשֶׂשׁ שָׁנִים בְּלֶדֶת-הָגָר אֶת-יִשְׁמָעֵאל לְאַבְרָם

Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

There is a gap of ten years in our text, and we do not return to the story again, until Abraham is 96 in Genesis 17. God appears to Abraham then and again in

¹³³ Tribble class notes 10.31.05

¹³⁴ Rashi on Genesis 16:11-15

¹³⁵ Ramban on Genesis 16:11-15

Genesis 18, this time in the guise of three men. Abraham is exemplified for his hospitality towards the men, quickly offering them food to eat and bathing their feet. After the three visitors had eaten, they say to him in verse 9:

אַיִה שְׁרָה אִשְׁתְּךָ וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה בְּאֹהֶל

"Where is your wife, Sarah? And he said, 'There, in the tent.'"

Robert Alter points out the fact that the visitors know her by name without asking is the first indication to Abraham that they are not ordinary humans.¹³⁶ Furthermore, Phyllis Tribble points out that it would be socially inappropriate to ask a man about his wife.¹³⁷

The visitor continues,

וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוּב אֲשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כָּעֵת הַזֶּה

וְהוֹדָה בְּךָ לְשָׂרָה אִשְׁתְּךָ וְשָׂרָה שֹׁמְעֶת פֶּתַח הָאֹהֶל וְהִנֵּה אֶחָדָהּ

"I will surely return to you at this very season, and behold, Sarah, your wife, shall have a child." Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him.

Rashi clarifies that the angel was not announcing that he would return to him, but rather he was speaking to him as God's agent, [meaning that God would return]. Rashi explains that this is similar to when the angel told Hagar that she would make her offspring numerous in 16:10. The מלאך has no power to multiply and therefore, he was speaking as God's agent. Here, as well, the angel or messenger spoke as God's agent.¹³⁸

¹³⁶ Alter, Robert. Genesis: Translation and Commentary. W.W Norton & Company. New York. London. 1996 p78

¹³⁷ Tribble class notes 11.14.05

¹³⁸ Rashi on Genesis 18:10

Ramban thinks the term *אֶשְׁכּוּב שָׁנָה* is similar to the phrase *לְהַשׁוּבָה חֶשְׁבֶּנָה* (2 Samuel 11:1) which means, *at the return of the year*. Ramban understands the verse to mean, "I will surely bring back to you a time as this time; that you will be alive and Sarah your wife will have a son."¹³⁹

Alter explains that the phrase, "at this very season" and explains that is characteristic of an annunciation type-scene of which this is the first instance. According to Alter, the narrative motifs of the annunciation-type scenes, in sequence, are: the fact of bareness, the promise of a son by God or angel or holy man; and the fulfillment of the promise in conception and birth. But only here is the emphatically matriarchal annunciation displaced from wife to husband, with the woman merely eavesdropping on the promise; only here is a barren woman actual postmenopausal; and only here is the long postponement, filled in with seemingly unrelated episodes, until the fulfillment of the promise in chapter 21. "Thus, the patriarch takes over the center-stage location of the matriarch, and the difficult—indeed, miraculous—nature of the fulfillment is underscored."¹⁴⁰

v.11 וְאֶבְרָהָם וְסָרָה זָקְנִים בָּאִים בְּיָמֵם חָדָל לְהָיוֹת לְסָרָה אֵרָה בְּנָשִׁים

Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in days, Sarah no longer had a woman's flow. Ramban explains the phrase, *בָּאִים בְּיָמֵם*, *advanced in days*, as a contrast to *standing in days*, what a man is called in his youth. He explained that they are referred to as "his days" because they belong to him. But when he gets old and has lived longer than most people of his generation, it is said of him that he *בָּא בִּימֵם*,

¹³⁹ Ramban on Genesis 18:10

¹⁴⁰ Alter, Robert. *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*. W.W Norton & Company. New York. London. 1996 p78-9

came into days because it as if he came into another land, traveling from and arriving in a city each and every day.¹⁴¹

v.12 וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּהּ לֵאמֹר אֲחִמָּי בְּלִתִּי הִתְחַלֵּי עֲדָה נָאֲדָנִי זָקֵן
And Sarah laughed inwardly, saying, "After I am worn out (BDB)/withered(JPS), Am I to have enjoyment with my husband so old?"

Visotzky sees this dialogue as an indication of marital dysfunction. "When the angels tell Sarah she is going to have a child, she laughs, and she says, 'Look, first of all I am an old lady. I am postmenopausal. Forget it.' And then she adds the kicker line, 'And my husband's and old man.' In those words, in Hebrew, you get a glimpse of a really dysfunctional marriage. And I get a sense of Abraham's impotence there, too. They have not had sex in a long time. So here is Sarah, faced with no children, and with an Egyptian who reminds her of her own misadventure. Abraham is always saying, 'Yeah, we would have offspring and fulfill God's promise if only you were not barren, dear. Right?' And she is thinking, 'Me barren? He is impotent! I'll call his bluff.' And she gives him Hagar."¹⁴²

Yet other commentators would argue the opposite, claiming that Abraham was instead always attempting to create a harmonious environment between himself and Sarah. We see this when he follows her command to take Hagar as an אִשָּׁה, and his willingness to let Sarah deal with her as she sees fit after Sarah is jealous or angered by their relationship and angered by that fact that Hagar is pregnant while Sarah is barren. Furthermore, Abraham goes as far as to banish Ishmael and his future son in order to appease Sarah.

¹⁴¹ Ramban on Genesis 18:11

¹⁴² Visotzky, Burt. Genesis: A Living Conversation, Moyers, Bill, ed. Double Day. NY 1996. p189

The following midrash shows God intervening once again, this time to preserve domestic harmony. A plague and possible erectile dysfunction prevented Pharaoh or Abimelech from having sexual relations with Sarah. Here, again, God attempts to preserve the peace of the marital couple.

"And the Lord said unto Abraham: Why did Sarah laugh, saying...Seeing that I am old(Genesis 18:13)" Bar Kappara said: Great is peace, for even Scripture made a mis-statement in order to preserve the peace between Abraham and Sarah. Thus, it is written, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying: Shall I surely bear a child?" It does not say, "Since my lord is old," but "Seeing that I am old."¹⁴³

Ramban explains that Sarah's original statement that, "I am old" was true, but for the sake of peace, God did not reveal what she also said, namely, "my lord also being old (v.12)" for if God was quoting Sarah, God should have said, "I and my lord are old." As Sarah had laughed concerning both of them.¹⁴⁴ Rather, God wanted to keep the peace.

God does not like being laughed at, and God asks Abraham in v.13,

לָמָּה זֶה צָחַקְתָּ שָׁרָה לֵאמֹר הֲאֵנִי אִמָּנוּם אֵלֶּךָ וְאֵנִי זָקֵנָה

"Why did Sarah laugh at me, saying, 'Shall I, in truth, bear a child as old as I am?'"

v.14 הֲיִפְלֵא מִיָּהוָה דְּבַר לְמוֹעֵד אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כָּעֵת חַיָּה וְלִשְׁרָה בֶן

"Is anything too wondrous for God? I will return to you at the same season next year, and Sarah will have a son."

v.15 וַתִּכְחַשׁ שָׁרָה לֵאמֹר לֹא צָחַקְתִּי כִּי יִרְאָהָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא כִּי צָחַקְתָּ

Sarah lied saying, "I did not laugh," for she was frightened. God said, "No, you did

¹⁴³ Breshit Rabbah 18:13 see appendix text 7

¹⁴⁴ Ramban on Genesis 18:13

laugh."

How could Sarah lie to God? Ramban suggests that perhaps Sarah was not aware that the visitors were angels of God. It is also possible that she did not see them at all, and had laughed to herself overhearing something that seemed impossible, as Abraham had not yet told her it was God who had revealed the secret to her.¹⁴⁵ Phyllis Tribble also points out that the text does not say that Sarah herself receives an annunciation, as Hagar did. It is only Abraham and Hagar who have interactions with agents of God.¹⁴⁶

The angel's prediction comes true and Sarah gives birth to Isaac. Our story continues with chapter 21.

v.1 נִיחַנָּה פָּקַד אֶת־שָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוָה לְשָׂרָה כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר

God took note of Sarah as He had said, and God did for Sarah as He had Spoken.

v.2 וַתֵּהַר וַתֵּלֶד שָׂרָה לְאַבְרָהָם בֶּן לִזְקֻנֹּי אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אֲתָן אֱלֹהִים

Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age at the appointed time (BDB) of which God had spoken.

v.3 וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם אֶת־שֵׁם־בְּנֵי הַנּוֹלֵד־לּוֹ אֲשֶׁר־יָלְדָהּ־לּוֹ שָׂרָה וַיִּחָק

Abraham called the son that Sarah had borne him by the name, Isaac.

It is possible that Abraham named him Isaac, meaning laughter, because Sarah laughed when he told her she was to have a child at her old age. If this is the case, it can be seen as a playful name, perhaps showing the miraculous power of God or it can be seen as a name that Abraham gives Sarah to taunt her for her lack of faith.

¹⁴⁵ Ramban on Genesis 18:15

¹⁴⁶ Tribble class notes 11.14.05

v.4 וַיִּמַּל אֲבִרְהָם אֶת-יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ בֶּן-שְׁמֹנֶת יָמִים כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה אֱלֹהִים

Abraham circumcised his son, Isaac, when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.

By circumcising Isaac and not Ishmael, Abraham makes it clear that Isaac is the son who is heir to the covenant. The circumcision follows God's command in chapter 17, right after God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son. It is this son, the son through Sarah that would be the covenantal offspring.

v.5 וַאֲבִרְהָם בֶּן-מֵאָה שָׁנָה בְּהוֹלִיד לֹו אֶת יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ

Abraham was 100 years old when his son, Isaac, was born to him

This is four years from when the messengers of God told Abraham that he would have a child with Sarah, as Abraham was 96 at the beginning of chapter 17, when the three men come to visit Abraham and Sarah. The appointed time is apparently four years from then. We are told in Genesis 16 that Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born. This would make Ishmael 14 years older than Isaac.

v.6 וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרָה צָחֵק עָשָׂה לִי אֱלֹהִים כָּל-הַשְּׁמָע צָחֵק-לִי

Sarah said, God has made me laughter, everyone who hears, will laugh at me.

Alter explains that the ambiguity of both the noun צָחֵק and the accompanying preposition לִי is wonderfully suited to the complexity of the moment. It may be laughter, triumphant joy, that Sarah experiences and that is the name of the child, Isaac ("he who laughs"). But in her very exultation, she could well feel the absurdity of a woman so old becoming a mother. צָחֵק also means "mockery" and perhaps God is doing something to her as well. In poetry, צָחֵק is often linked in parallelism with *la'ag*, to scorn or to mock, and it should be noted that *la'ag* is invariably followed by

the preposition ל, as לִּי, is here. All who hear of it may laugh, rejoice, with Sarah but the hint that they might also laugh at her is evident in her language.¹⁴⁷

Speiser thinks the word לִּי is a double allusion by E to the name Isaac. The derisive "laugh at" is ruled out by the tenor of verse 7.¹⁴⁸ Aviva Zornberg says, "The birth of Isaac is an outrageous flouting of law and necessity, of common wisdom and stoic, philosophical acceptance. The reaction, the explosion of laughter may run a long gamut (from mockery to joy, as Ramban puts it) but the very fact of laughter places man firmly, absurdly at the center of the world. (Ramban 17:1)"¹⁴⁹

v.7 וַתֹּאמֶר מִי מֵלֵל לְאַבְרָהָם הִינִיקָהּ בָּנִים שָׂרָה כִּי־לִדְתִי בָּן לְזָקְנִי

And she said, Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle (JPS)/ nurse (BDB) children? Yet I bore a son in his old age.

מֵלֵל is a term that occurs only in poetic texts and is presumably high diction, perhaps archaic.¹⁵⁰

v.8 וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּנְמָל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֶּה גָדוֹל בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת־יִצְחָק

The boy grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

¹⁴⁷ Alter, Robert. *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*. W.W Norton & Company. New York. London. 1996 p97.

¹⁴⁸ Speiser, Ephraim. *The Anchor Bible. Genesis*. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

¹⁴⁹ Zornberg, Aviva Gottlieb. *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*. Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, Jerusalem, 1995, p100.

¹⁵⁰ Alter, Robert. *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*. W.W Norton & Company. New York. London. 1996 p98

To this day, weaning takes place in the Near East as late as three years or more; it is often followed by a celebration.¹⁵¹ The feast caused many Biblical commentators to speculate. We can perhaps equate having a lavish feast at the weaning of his son to today's over-the-top Bar Mitzvahs. Abraham here appears to fall victim to conspicuous consumption. Aviva Zornberg points out that there is mention of the *seudah*, the banquet that Abraham apparently prepared so lavishly yet he is missing the thanksgiving sacrifice to God for his child. Is he being accused of hypocrisy? Zornberg points out Genesis 12:7-8 and 13:4 are references to altars in Abraham's early career. Does the accusing voice insinuate that since Isaac was granted to him, that Abraham has lived a life of self-indulgence and virtually forgotten God?¹⁵² Zornberg sees this as a possible explanation for God's testing of Abraham with the *akedah*. After the crisis is over, God says "Now I know that ירא אדני, that you fear Adonai." Perhaps God doubted Abraham's loyalty after he had been granted as soon. Rashi seems to agree with this viewpoint, using the test as a means for one to defend the merit and loyalty of Abraham. Rashi says, "From now on, I have a reply to Satan and other nations who are puzzled by my special love for you. From now on, I can answer back (literally. I have an opening of the mouth) since they see that you do fear God."¹⁵³

Zornberg also offers a positive way of looking at the feast. She explains that "the birth of Isaac initiates the period of fasting and laughter, of the bearable lightness

¹⁵¹ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

¹⁵² Zornberg, Aviva Gottlieb. Genesis: The Beginning of Desire. Jewish Publication Society. Philadelphia, Jerusalem, 1995. p98

¹⁵³ Rashi on Genesis 22:12

of being. It has its precedent in a feast that Abraham serves the angels who come to announce the imminence of the birth. "The Lord appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre." (18:1) Abraham is usually understood for his hospitality.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps Abraham was just being his hospitable self by holding a feast so others could partake in his own happiness.

Things do not remain as cheerful in the household of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. After all, three is not a comfortable number, especially when it comes to love relationships. Now that Sarah has produced a child for Abraham, once again the household dynamics change,

v.9 וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת-בְּרִהָתָהּ הַמִּצְרַיִת אֲשֶׁר-יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar, the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing (JPS and Speiser) laughing (BDB and Alter)

Once again Ishmael's name is not mentioned, here he is merely referred to as Hagar, the Egyptian's son. Even more so, Hagar is identified quite clearly as the "other" woman, the woman who bore Abraham a son. She is not referred to as Abraham's אִשָּׁה, second wife or concubine.

Sarah claims that she saw Ishmael מִצְחָק. Speiser translates the פעל form of the verb צחק, as "was playing" in further wordplay on the name Isaac.¹⁵⁵ Rashi translates מִצְחָק as "making sport". Rashi explains that this refers to worshipping idols, murder, and sexual immortality. "[Ishmael] quarreled with Isaac about inheritance, saying, 'I am the first-born and will take a double portion' (Deut 21:17).

¹⁵⁴ Zornberg, Aviva Gottlieb. Genesis: The Beginning of Desire. Jewish Publication Society. Philadelphia, Jerusalem, 1995.p101

¹⁵⁵ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

They then went into the field, and Ishmael took his bow and shot arrows at Isaac, just as you say, *As a madman who casts firebrands, arrows and death, so is the man who deceives his neighbor, and says, Am I not in sport (Proverbs 26: 18-19)*. It is from Sarah's complaint to Abraham—*for the son of this bondswoman shall not be heir, etc (v10)* that you learn [that they were quarreling about inheritance].¹⁵⁶

Rabbi [Akiba] disagrees with Rashi, saying "that Ishmael quarreled with Isaac about the inheritance" also does not appear correct for if so, this must have happened much later when Isaac was grown up and Ishmael would then have been too big for his mother to carry him on his shoulder (v14).¹⁵⁷

In addition to this the Rabbis have also said,¹⁵⁸ that Ishmael was seventeen years old [at the time he left his father's house]. If this is so, this happened at the time Isaac was weaned. (At the time of Isaac's birth, Ishmael was fourteen years old. He was thirteen at his circumcision (17:25) and a year later, Isaac was born). Now since Ishmael was seventeen when he left his father's house, Isaac was three years old at the time, at which age he was weaned (v8) [and Isaac was thus too young for Ishmael to quarrel with him about the inheritance].¹⁵⁹

Yet precisely because he was so much bigger, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra said this is in line with the literal interpretation of Scripture in which מצחק means playing as it is normal for every boy, and she was jealous of him because he was bigger than her son.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Rashi on Genesis 21:9

¹⁵⁷ Ramban on Genesis 21:9

¹⁵⁸ Yalkut Shimoni Genesis, 95

¹⁵⁹ Ramban on Genesis 21:9

¹⁶⁰ Ramban p270

The matter is also discussed in the Tosefta. Rabbi Akiva says "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had born unto Abraham, making sport." "Making sport" is but a designation for idolatry, etc."¹⁶¹

Ramban says, "But I say, Heaven forbid that such be in the house of the righteous one! It is possible that he, of whom he was written, "For I have known him, to the end that he may command his children and his household, etc" (18:19) will have in his household idolatry, sexual immortality and murder? "Making sport" mentioned here is but a designation for the inheritance. When Isaac was born and everyone rejoiced, Ishmael said to them, "Fools, I am the first born, and I take a double portion." From the complaint of our mother, Sarah to Abraham you learn [that making sport refers to the inheritance]. And my interpretation seems more acceptable than that of Rabbi Akiva."¹⁶² Speiser disagrees, claiming that traditional "mocking" would require the preposition ב to designate the object. To judge, however, from some of the ancient versions, the original text appears to have included "with her son Isaac," which is lacking in the masoretic text, perhaps through a mistake in the transcription. According to Speiser, his "playing" with Isaac would need to mean no more than that the older boy was trying to amuse his little brother. There is nothing in the text to suggest that he was abusing him, a motive deduced by many troubled readers in their effort to account for Sarah's anger."¹⁶³

Davies explains that "Genesis 21 holds a deeply enigmatic scene in which we find the teenage Ishmael at play with his little half-brother at the feast celebrating the

¹⁶¹ Tosefta Sotah 6:6,

¹⁶² Ramban on Genesis 21:9

¹⁶³ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible. Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

fact that Isaac has been weaned from the breast. The festivities are ruined for Sarah because she oversees Ishmael doing *something* to Isaac (Genesis 21:9), something so disturbing that Sarah promptly demands that Ishmael and his mother be cast out into the wilderness. The Bible says that Sarah sees Ishmael מצחק young Isaac. Some translations of the word are mocking or playing. We are asked to believe that thanks to a single adolescent taunt, Sarah drives the mother and son into the desert to die. Unless, that is, she saw something much worse. One of the meanings of the word מצחק is "laugh"—a play on Isaac's name יצחק—and that's the one on which translators, old and new, have relied, suggesting that Ishmael merely "mocked" or "laughed" at Isaac. Another meaning of מצחק is "to fondle." The original Hebrew text of the Bible may indicate what Sarah actually saw was some sort of sex-play between Ishmael and his little brother. The same word, מצחק, appears only a few lines later in Genesis to describe Isaac fondling Rebekah outside the window of Abimelech (Genesis 26:8). The Masoretic text includes only a shortened description of what Ishmael is doing when Sarah sees him. "Sarah noticed that [Ishmael] is playing" (Genesis 21:9). But the early Greek version of the Bible, the Septuagint and the Latin version, the Vulgate, both of which were translated from Hebrew manuscripts, some perhaps even more original than the Masoretic text, give the same version as "Sarah noticed that [Ishmael] was playing with her son Isaac." Some Bible critics have suggested that the pious editors of the Masoretic text sought to play down the disturbing sexuality of the scene by leaving out the key phrase "with her son Isaac."¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington,

Dr. David Sperling also believes that Sarah saw Ishmael "playing" with Isaac.

Dr. Sperling explains מצחק to mean *lewd sexual behavior*.¹⁶⁵ The *aggadah*, Jewish folk lore, sees the playing as mere jesting and playful in nature. In "The Legends of the Jews" Louis Ginsberg explains that the Rabbis explained away the whole episode by suggesting that Ishmael liked to play with a bow and arrow and "was in the habit of aiming his missiles in the direction of Isaac, saying at the same time that he was but jesting."¹⁶⁶ As a result of this Sarah did not want her son to be around such wild behavior and to be influenced by his older half-brother, Ishmael. This would be along the same lines as Rashi's understanding. It is not surprising that the Rabbis would cast Ishmael, who is understood to be the ancestor of the Muslim people, as someone wild. They did the same with Esau. This always seems to me as an apologetic text because of the manner in which Ishmael and Esau are unjustly treated. Yet we do not know for sure. Perhaps Ishmael was indeed abusive to his younger brother.

Speiser says that "His 'playing' with Isaac need mean no more than that the older boy was trying to amuse his little brother. There is nothing in the text to suggest that he was abusing him, a motive deduced by many troubled readers in their effort to account for Sarah's anger."¹⁶⁷

Alter's justification is much simpler. Alter attempts to put the story into context.

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¹⁶⁵ Sperling class notes 10/20/04

¹⁶⁶ Ginsberg, Louis. Legends of the Jews. 7 vols. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909-1938. vol. 1, p264.

¹⁶⁷ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

He paints a picture in which "sometime after the birth of Isaac, when Ishmael, presumably is still no more than a toddler [although the chronology of the text would in my opinion tell us differently], Sarah is said to see Ishmael, "laughing." Now, that word, which I have translated as "laughing" can also mean "mocking." Remember, the word for Isaac, יצחק means "he who laughs." So I think Sarah sees Ishmael, this child of the slave girl, *presuming to be Isaac*. Here we seem to get to the element of class issue. That is to say, Sarah now at last has a son. This son is everything she has been so emotionally invested in. All of a sudden, here comes Ishmael, "Yitzhaking" it, imitating or mocking Isaac. And then the fascinating thing—Sarah never refers to Ishmael or Hagar by name. She says, "Banish, drive out, expel the son of this slave girl." She refers both to Ishmael and Hagar only by social status.¹⁶⁸

As a result of seeing this, Sarah once again tells Abraham to banish Hagar, as she did in Genesis 16, this time along with her now born son, Ishmael. Of course Sarah does not refer to them the mother and child by name.

v.10 וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרֶשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בְּנֵי־הָאִמָּה
הַזֹּאת עִם־בְּנֵי עִם־יִצְחָק

She said to Abraham, "Cast out (JPS/Speiser)/drive out (BDB/Alter) this slave-woman and her son, the son of that slave-woman will not share in the inheritance with my son.

Trible points out that this term, גֵּרֶשׁ, is used in the Garden of Eden narrative. Adam and Eve, too, were cast out. In Exodus the Pharaoh will cast out the Hebrew

¹⁶⁸ Alter, Rober. Genesis: A Living Conversation. Moyers, Bill, ed. Double Day. NY 1996. p191

slaves to save the first born. In this story, Tribble believes that God does not identify with the suffering servant Hagar but rather with the "oppressor" Sarah.¹⁶⁹ In verse 14, it is said that Abraham *הִפְלִיגָהּ* sent away Hagar. Tribble points out how this word is also used in the Garden of Eden narrative. She says this demonstrates a parallelism between the two stories.¹⁷⁰ *הִפְלִיגָהּ* is used for both a divorce and for the release of a slave.¹⁷¹ Hagar is at once divorced and treated as a slave, not as a wife, concubine or mother of Abraham's child.

The following midrash, shows an interesting rationale for Sarah's anger and reaction on the part of Abraham:

"And she said to Abraham to banish this slave woman and her son" (Genesis 21:10) Rabbi Akiva said, "It is taught that our mother, Sarah saw Ishmael building altars, hunting grasshoppers, and offering up incense to idols. She said, "Lest my son learn this and worship like this—and it will result in profaning the Name in Heaven being desecrated through the matter. Abraham said to her, "After you treat a person in a meritorious manner, you then ascribe guilt to them? We have made her a mistress and brought her to this prestige, we are going to throw her out of our house? What will people say about us? Would not this be seen as a desecration of The Name in Heaven on the matter? She said to him, "Since you (also) say this is a desecration of The Name in Heaven, let God decide between my words and yours."¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Tribble class notes 11.14.05

¹⁷⁰ Tribble class notes 11.14.05

¹⁷¹ Tribble class notes 11.14.05

¹⁷² Yisrael Zamora, ed., "Abraham's Seed" *Nashim ba-Tnakh*. Israel: mahberot le-Sifrut, 1964 p193, p190 the third paragraph see appendix text 8

v.11

וַיַּרְע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אוֹדֹת בְּנוֹ

*The matter distressed (JPS) (was evil רעע (BDB))Abraham very much for**it concerned his son(JPS)/**on account that the cause (BDB) was his son**/for the son was his, too (Speiser)**/because of his son (Alter).*

What does *על אוֹדֹת בְּנוֹ* mean? Ramban explains that the *peshat*, the plain meaning is that Abraham was distressed regarding her telling him to be sent away.¹⁷³ Rashi explains that Abraham was greatly distressed because he heard of Ishmael *שיצא*, that he had gone forth to do evil behavior.¹⁷⁴ Tanchuma says¹⁷⁵ "Had the verse said only, 'The matter greatly distressed Abraham' it would have been clear from the context that it referred to Sarah's demand to send Ishmael away. The superfluous "regarding his son" alludes to the report of Ishmael's sinful behavior¹⁷⁶ It mentions the distress of Ishmael alone (not Hagar). It is only over Ishmael that he was distressed *מְאֹד*, greatly.¹⁷⁷

v.12

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל-אַבְרָהָם אַל-יִרְעַ בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל-הַנָּעַר וְעַל-אִמּוֹתָיִךָ כֹּל

אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בְיִצְחָק יִשְׂרָאֵל לָךְ זָרַע

God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the matter over the lad, and over your slave-woman, all that Sarah tells you, heed her voice (do as she says) for it is through Isaac that your offspring shall be continued."

¹⁷³ Ramban on Genesis 21:11¹⁷⁴ Rashi on Genesis 21:11¹⁷⁵ Tanchuma Shemot Rabbah 1:1¹⁷⁶ (Gur Aryeh) (Be'er Yitchak) in Ramban on Genesis 21:11¹⁷⁷ Tanchuma Shemot Rabbah 1:1

v.13

וְגַם אֶת־בֶּן־הָאִמָּה לְנָוִי אֲשִׁימוּ כִּי זֶרַעַךְ הוּא

"And also, the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed."

Speiser explains that the verse literally reads, "your seed shall be called or identified"— meaning that the important branch of your family will descend through Isaac rather than Ishmael for a comparable employment of "seed" (17:12).¹⁷⁸

v.14

וַיֵּשֶׁב אַבְרָהָם בְּבֶקֶר וַיִּקַּח־לֶחֶם וְחֶמֶת מַיִם וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־הָעֹלָה שָׂם

עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ וְאֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּשְׁלַח וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּתֵן עָלֶיהָ בֶּרֶךְ בְּיָדָהּ שָׂבָע

Early in the morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water(BDB/JPS)/ a canteen and gave them to Hagar, He placed them over his shoulder, together with the child, and he sent her away. She wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba.

Speiser explains that while עַל־שִׁכְמָה means "on her shoulder" but the term covers also the upper part of the back in general. The problem is Ishmael's age at the time. If the boy was a teenager, her mother would not have carried him on her back. Obviously the present narrative depicts Ishmael as younger (v15) but still old enough to play the big brother to a weaned Isaac (v8). The various changes that have been proposed merely substitute one set of problems for another. An acceptable solution has yet to be discovered.¹⁷⁹

Davies critiques Abraham: "Giving them bread and water, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness of Beer-Sheva where they wandered until the water is gone and the weak child can only lie on the ground and await death. Hagar

¹⁷⁸ Speiser, Ephraim The Anchor Bible, Genesis, Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

¹⁷⁹ Speiser, Ephraim The Anchor Bible, Genesis, Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

weeps in despair. God hears the voice of Ishmael, and the angel of God calls to Hagar saying, "Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad... Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation" (Genesis 21:17-18). God opens Hagar's eyes, and she sees the well. His Ishmael's life is saved, and Ishmael lives to become an archer in the wilderness of Paran (and the ancestor of the Arab nations).¹⁸⁰

Ramban defends Abraham saying "All this occurred to Abraham because he had been commanded to do whatever Sarah said, and she commanded that he send him away immediately, and it was at her command that he did not give them silver and gold, servants, and camels to bear them."¹⁸¹

The following midrash based on the verse, וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּטְעַע בְּמִדְבַּר בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע (She went and wandered (went astray) in the wilderness of Beer Sheba.) offers a different interpretation.

Abraham took the water barrel and tied it to the waist of Hagar, in order that it would drag after her. Abraham wanted to see Ishmael, his son, and to see the way they had went. And because of (or thanks to) the merit of Abraham, they did not lack water from the canteen. She went and strayed from the path to the wilderness that was close to Beer Sheba.

As soon as she arrived at the entrance of the wilderness, she started to go astray after the idol-worship of the house of her father. Immediately, the water ran out from the canteen and Ishmael became exhausted from thirst. He went and threw

¹⁸⁰ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p76

¹⁸¹ Ramban on Genesis 21:14-15

himself under the thorn-bushes of the wilderness and said, "God of Abraham, my father! If you wish to give me water to drink, give me water; if not, take my life, so that I do not die of thirst, because to die of thirst is the hardest of all deaths. The Holy One, Blessed be He, heard the prayer of the lad, and by virtue of the merit of Abraham, he sent an angel of Adonai to Hagar from heaven and said to her: "What is troubling you Hagar? Do not be afraid, because God has heard the voice of the lad..."

The well opened up before them, the well that was created during the twilight time of Genesis, and they went and drank and filled up the canteen. The ministering angels sought to accuse him (concerning this matter). They said before God : Master of the Universe! A man that is ready to kill your sons through thirst, for him do you bring forth a well?" The Holy One, Blessed be He said to them, "As of now, what is he, righteous or wicked?" They answered him, "righteous." He said to them, I do not judge a man except according to his actions at the specific time he stands before me in judgment. "182

Another midrash offers a more compassionate view of Abraham and the belief that Abraham kept contact with his son after he was sent away,

"Abraham arose early in the morning...and sent her away" (Genesis 21:14) He took a water jug and tied it to Hagar's waist, in order that it would drag after her. When Abraham wanted to see Ishmael, his son, he would see the path that they had traveled. Ishmael dwelled in the wilderness of Paran and took for himself a wife from the wilderness of Moab, and her name was Esah.

¹⁸² Yisrael Zamora, ed., "Hagar" Nashim ba-Tnakh. Israel: mahberot le-Sifrut, 1964 p119, see appendix text 9

After three years, Abraham went to see Ishmael, his son in the wilderness of Paran, and he swore to Sarah that he would not go down from the camel in the place that Ishmael was found. He arrived to the place midday. He found there Ishmael's wife. He said to her, "Where is Ishmael?" She said to him, "He went to bring fruit and dates from the wilderness." He said to her, "Give me a little water and a little bread, because I am tired from my travel in the wilderness." She said to him, "There is no bread and no water." He said to her, "When your husband, Ishmael comes, say to him, 'An old man came from the land of Canaan to see you and said that the threshold of the house was not good.' When Ishmael came, his wife told him the matter, and he divorced her and sent her away and he took another wife from the house of his father, from the land of Egypt, and her name was Fatima.

After three years, Abraham went to see Ishmael, his son in the wilderness of Paran. Like the first time he swore to Sarah that he would not go down from the camel in the place that Ishmael was found in. He arrived to the place midday. He saw there Ishmael's wife. He said to her, "Where is Ishmael?" She said to him, "He and his mother went to graze the camels in the wilderness." He said to her, "Give me a little bread and a little water, because I am tired from my travels in the wilderness." She brought it out and gave it to him. Abraham was standing and praying before the Holy One, Blessed be on behalf of his son and the house of Ishmael was filled with goodness. When Ishmael came, his wife told him of this matter, and Ishmael knew that all this time his father's mercies had been upon him.¹⁸³

¹⁸³ Yisrael Zamora, ed., "Sarah and Hagar" Nashim ba-Tnakh, Israel: mahberot le-Sifrut, 1964 P190-1 see appendix text 10

This midrash tells us many things. For one, it tells us that while Abraham may have still went to visit Ishmael, he promised Sarah he "would not get off the camel." It appears he does get off the camel in the story, but it seems to indicate that he is fearful of upsetting Sarah. He does whatever she says: he Takes a handmaiden, casts out the handmaiden, and casts out his son. He still does what he wants to do, but he works hard to appease Sarah.

The midrash also shows that Abraham cares about Ishmael's life. He wants Ishmael to have a good wife and to be with someone who is hospitable, a value in which Abraham is praised. Here Abraham seems to take great concern in the life and livelihood of Ishmael.

Dr. Norman Cohen appears to share the view that Abraham was distressed over his love for the boy. Dr. Cohen, however, does not seem to think he has intentions of seeing his son again at the time. He offers his own midrash:

Abraham stood at the opening at his tent for a very long time as he watched Hagar and Ishmael slowly making their way out of the camp. Seeing his son disappear over the next hill as Ishmael and his mother headed into the wilderness of Beer Sheba and realizing that he would probably never see Ishmael again, Abraham began to shudder. Abraham felt chilled as tears rolled down his cheeks. From the very outset of Abraham's journey from Ur, he experienced a sense of separation from his family.¹⁸⁴

We reach the climax of our story. Hagar and Ishmael have been sent away and they reach the wilderness and no longer have enough water.

v.15 וַיִּקְלוּ הַמָּיִם מִן־הַחֲמָת וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד פָּתַח אֶמֶד הַשִּׁיתִם

¹⁸⁴ Cohen, Norman. Self Struggle and Change. Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT, 1995. p63

When the water was gone from the canteen, She threw (BDB)/left (JPS)/flung (Alter) the boy under one of the bushes.

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra explains, "*And she cast* for she had taken him onto her lap when he was weakened by thirst [and seeing that he was expiring from thirst, she cast him from her]."¹⁸⁵

According to Ramban, thirst overtook Ishmael and he was unable to walk, and so his mother laid him under a tree, cast away and abandoned. It may be that the word *ותשלך* (*and she cast*) is similar in sense to the verses: *And He cast them into another land*; (Deut 29:27) *Cast me away from your presence* (Psalms 51:13) meaning "sending away."¹⁸⁶ Just as Hagar and Ishmael had been sent away from her home, Hagar sends away Ishmael. The repetition of this word by the biblical author shows a theme of the narrative.

A midrash tells us that Ishmael was sick at the time Abraham sent him away, and therefore he put the child on her shoulder. This is the sense of the word, *ותשלך* (*and she cast*) him: [until that point she had carried him].¹⁸⁷

v.16 ותלך ותשב לך מנגד כרחק במסרחי קשת כי אמרה אל-אֶרְאָה
בְּמוֹת הַיָּלֵד ותשב מנגד ותשא את-קולה ותבך

She went and sat and sat a bowshot distance across, when she said to herself, "let me die see as the child dies, and she raised her voice and cried.

The bowshot distance away is a foreshadowing of Ishmael's future. In Genesis 21:20 it says that Ishmael will become a bow-shooter.¹⁸⁸ Tribble thinks Hagar moves

¹⁸⁵ Ibn Ezra on Genesis 21:15

¹⁸⁶ Ramban on Genesis 21:15

¹⁸⁷ Breshit Rabbah 53:17

¹⁸⁸ Tribble class notes 11.14.05

away to create some psychological distance through the physical, as she feels

Ishmael's death is inevitable.¹⁸⁹

v.17 וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-קוֹל הַנֶּעֱרָה וַיִּקְרָא מַלְאָךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶל-הָגָר
 מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַה-לָּךְ הָגָר אֶל-תִּירָאִי כִּי-שָׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶל-קוֹל
 הַנֶּעֱרָה בְּאֶשֶׁר הוּא-שָׁם

God heard the voice of the boy and an angel of God called to Hagar from Heaven and said, "What's this? What is going on? (What troubles you?) Do not be afraid because God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.

Why did God claim to respond to the voice of the boy when it was Hagar who cried? Speiser explains that in the Septuagint, followed by most moderns, substitutes the masculine pronoun, thus making Ishmael the subject, evidently because of verse 17. There, however, the noun "sound, voice" is not expressly connected with weeping; moreover, the text employs the unambiguous feminine prefix twice, the Hebrew idiom in this instance being made up of two verbs ("she lifted up her voice and she wept") which would mean a double emendation. As for the idiom itself, the tendency to interpret in the sense of "she wept aloud" is not in accord with good Hebrew usage. Elsewhere, the verb נשא is used with bodily organs (eyes, feet, 29:1, hands) not with the sense of "to lift" to signify degree or volume, but with the shading of "to pick up" to focus attention on the activity involved; Hagar's weeping was audible but not necessarily loud; the above translation reflects, furthermore, the "ingressive" force of the phrase (29:1).¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Tribble class notes 11.14.05

¹⁹⁰ Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

Alter explains that the narrator had only reported Hagar's weeping. Now that we learn that the boy has been weeping or crying out, and it is "in his anguish that elicits God's saving response. In the earlier version of the banishment of Hagar (chapter 16), the naming of her future son, Ishmael stands at the center of the story. Here, as though the writer were ironically conspiring with Sarah's refusal to name the boy, Ishmael's name is suppressed to the very end. But the ghost of its etymology—"God will hear"—hovers at the center of the story."¹⁹¹

Speiser also points out in that "hearing" the voice of the boy, there is a play on words with Ishmael's name. It is another explanation of the name "Ishmael" (16:11)¹⁹² This play on words functions in the same manner as Isaac's name. Ishmael's childhood is placed in a background of Hagar's pleas to God. God repeatedly tells Hagar that he has heeded her and the boy's plea. Isaac's birth comes forth from laughter and his childhood is later made complicated by the mysterious act of מצחק.

v.18 קוּמִי שֵׂאִי אֶת־חֲנֹצֶר וְחִמְצִקִי אֶת־יָדָךְ בֶּן־כְּלָגִי גְדוֹל אֲשִׁימֶנּוּ
"Come, lift up the boy and grasp him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

Speiser translates חִמְצִקִי אֶת־יָדָךְ as "make your hand firm upon him" and explains it is idiomatic for lending support and encouragement; the traditional

¹⁹¹ Alter, Robert. Genesis: Translation and Commentary. W.W Norton & Company. New York. London. 1996, p100.

¹⁹² Speiser, Ephraim. The Anchor Bible, Genesis. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

"seize him by the hand" or the like, would require "get a hold of his hand" in the Hebrew for which Gen 19:16 uses three times.¹⁹³

Trible points out in this moment Hagar is diminished. In chapter 16, God had promised to make Hagar's descendants numerous. Now God transfers the prophecy to Ishmael.¹⁹⁴ It becomes clear that in a patriarchal society it is the male heirs that are important. Sarah and Hagar act as vehicles to produce heirs for Abraham. Even though Ishmael is not an heir to the covenant, he is still promised a multiple offspring.

v.19 וַיִּפְתָּח אֱלֹהִים אֶת-עֵינֶיהָ וַתֵּרָא בְּאֵר מַיִם וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתִּמְלֵא אֶת-הַחֲמָת
מַיִם וַתִּשְׁקֵה אֶת-הַנֶּעֱר

God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water and she went and filled the canteen with water and gave the boy water.

v.20 וַיְהִי אִתּוֹ אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הַנֶּעֱר וַיִּגְדֵּל וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּמִדְבָּר וַיְהִי רֹכֵחַ קֶשֶׁת
God was with the lad when he grew up and he dwelled in the wilderness and was a bow-shooter.

Ramban translates רֹכֵחַ קֶשֶׁת as an archer. He explains that since קֶשֶׁת is an adjective, Ibn Ezra and Radak have said that רֹכֵחַ is one who shoots arrows, the word being derived from the expressions: *His archers compass me round about (Job 16:13); the archers have dealt bitterly with him (Gen 49: 23)*, and קֶשֶׁת is one who makes arrows.¹⁹⁵ Ramban says רֹכֵחַ is a shooter, and it can refer to one who shoots arrows or throws stones or other objects, even as it is said, *Behold, this heap...which I*

¹⁹³ Speiser, Ephraim The Anchor Bible. Genesis, Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

¹⁹⁴ Tribble class notes 11.14.05

¹⁹⁵ Ramban on Genesis 21:20

have thrown up between me and you (Job 32:51). Therefore, the verse describes him further by saying that he was a shooter with the bow. In similar sense is the verse, *And the shooters of arrows by the bow overtook him.*¹⁹⁶ Speiser explains that "a skilled bowman" קשת רבה a combination of two agent nouns, hence a bowman קשת who does something, not a person who uses the bow. Moreover, no such meaning as "to shoot" can be established in the first element, which might be connected at best with the Hebrew for "great" or Aramaic for "youth" not without some difficulties in either case. The general type of compound, however, recalls in its construction "a wild colt of a man" (16:12). The present translation is conjectural.¹⁹⁷

v.21

וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּמִדְבַּר פָּאֵרָן וַתִּקַּח לוֹ אִמּוֹ אִשָּׁה מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם

[Ishmael] dwelled in the wilderness of Paran and his mother took for him a wife from the land of Egypt.

In ancient Near Eastern society the father had to obtain a wife for his son and assume the cost involved; here it is Hagar who has to take over the responsibility.¹⁹⁸ Tribble explains how, despite the fact that Hagar was diminished by the transfer of multiple offspring from herself to her son, here she reclaims a sense of power.¹⁹⁹ Hagar is not only the first surrogate mother, but now our first model of a single mother.

¹⁹⁶ Ramban on Genesis 21:20

¹⁹⁷ Speiser, Ephraim. *The Anchor Bible, Genesis*. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

¹⁹⁸ Speiser, Ephraim *The Anchor Bible, Genesis*. Double Day & Company, Inc. Garden City, NY 1964. p155

¹⁹⁹ Tribble class notes 11.14.05

Still, Dr. Cohen makes the point that Abraham was later reunited with his family. Abraham remarries after Sarah dies. He marries a woman named Keturah, of which a midrash tells was Hagar. Ishmael and Isaac both bury their father together, suggesting an ongoing relationship between the brothers.

Many artists transformed the stories about Ishmael and Hagar into visual images. The artistic conceptions of chapter 21 usually combine the first two scenes of the text, in which Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away, having provided them with bread and water from the harsh journey, while in the background Sarah and her small son Isaac watch the event for which they are blamed. These episodes from chapter 21 of the biblical text have been depicted by such artists as Rembrandt and Gustave Dore. Often, all the characters of the story are included; Abraham, who feels sorrow at the need to send away his son Ishmael with Hagar, the rival female, Abraham's wife Sarah, who watches her husband so that he will not give in to his feelings and reverse the decision; and Isaac, Sarah's son, who will carry the blessing.²⁰⁰

Rembrandt depicted the biblical account of chapter 16. Rembrandt illustrates Sarai's complaint to Abraham that Hagar despises and scorns her. Abram does not interfere with his women and gives Sarai freedom to act according to her own judgment in regard to her pregnant maid, Hagar. In Rembrandt's drawing, Sarai, the mistress of the house, turns to her husband, Abram. Abram turns away from Sarai and does not even glance at Hagar, the future mother of his son, as if to indicate that it

²⁰⁰ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. P78

is the responsibility of Sarai to deal with the rebellious pregnant maid, who has lost respect for her barren mistress.²⁰¹

We have no way to know the emotional elements of the characters in our biblical narratives. We can only speculate on how one who feel in their given circumstances and in their biblical context.

These stories of multiple households that combine to create a new household is not a foreign story to us. While Abraham holds most of the external power within a patriarchal society, it is clear that Sarah runs many of the activities of the household. A man who had schemed that his wife was his sister in Egypt, perhaps for survival, perhaps for gain; turns into a man who's affairs are regulated by mistress of the house.

Sarah and Hagar attempted to gain whatever power they could in a patriarchal society. Abraham was attempting survival in a land foreign from his birth. He tried to follow God's instructions while maintaining the harmony of his household.

Was Sarah the antagonist in the family dynamics? Was it her manhandling in Egypt that taught her to establish control the only way she knew how? We never hear Sarah's words after chapter 21. She tells Abraham to send away the slave-woman and her son, uttering her last words, "cast them out "

Our story continues with the akedah, the binding of Isaac, in which Sarah is not even mentioned until her death in the following chapter. Did commanding Abraham to send away the mother of his child and his own son create a distance between the couple?

²⁰¹ Davies, Philip R. "Abraham and Yahweh: A Case of Male Bonding." Shanks, Hershel, ed. Abraham and Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives. Biblical Archeology Society, Washington, D.C 2000. p87

Isaac, too no longer speaks to his father on the way down the Mount Moriah after his near death experience.

To say that there is a lack of communication in these narratives would be an understatement. There are clever plays on words and language filled with double meaning. There are so many different ways to read the text and to understand the intentions of our characters that we can choose to critique them or to give them the benefit of the doubt. Abraham and Sarah represent the forefathers of our tradition. It does not benefit our cause to offer our own critiques from our modern perspectives and sensibilities. Sure, we can learn from their mistakes, and use the tools of science and modernity to revisit our past viewpoints. Still, we must see our ancestors for what they were worth-fellow human beings attempting to navigate through a vast and unknown world, attempting to create familial structures and a meaningful way of life. Hopefully we bring integrity to all that we do in life and learn to meet people where they are at.

"Do not judge your *chaver*, until you have reached his place.." (Pirkei Avot 2:4)

Appendix

Text #1

שרי בתבה

והיו לבוא אברהם עד לפני גבול ארץ מצרים ואמר אל שרי אשתו: הבה אחביאך בתבה הזאת ולא יראוך המצרים ולא יקחו אותך ממני: ותחבא שרי בתבה ויבא אברהם מצרימה ושוטרי העיר באו אל אברהם ואמרו: עשר את הדברים אשר הבאת! ואמר אברהם: ככל אשר תאמרו אלי אחן לכם: ואמרו השוטרים: אולי יש בתבתך הגדולה הזאת שעורים ונתת לנו מעשר: ואמר אברהם: הנני לתת לכם מעשר השעורים: ואמרו השוטרים: אולי חטים בתבה הזאת? ואמר אברהם: קחו ממני מעשר חטים: ודסיפו השוטרים לדבר ואמרו: הן יוכל תיזה כי שמת בתבה סלמלים? ואמר אברהם: הנני ונתתי לכם מעשר סלמלים: ושתאו לו השוטרים ואמרו: מי ידע — שמת בתבה הזאת שקלל וזה? ואמר אברהם: הנני ונתתי לכם חב ככל אשר תאמרו אלי...! ושתופמו השוטרים על הדברים האלה ויקחו את התבה ויפתחוה ויאירו פני שרי את כל ארץ מצרים:

(תנחומא)

Text #2

והיו כראות שרי המלך את שרי ויחממו מאד מיפית ויחבקצו יחד כל חשרים וכל עבדי פרעה לראות את שרי כי יפה היא מאד. וירוצו שרי המלך ויגידו אל פרעה את כל הדברים אשר ראו ויחללו את שרי אל המלך. וישלח פרעה ויקח ותבוא ואשה לפני המלך. וירא פרעה את שרי ויטיב מאד בעיניו ויחמם מאד מיפית וישמח בה המלך מאד ויהן מתנות להם כשרים אותו בה.

ויהי לאברהם על אדמתו ויחמלל אל ה' להציל מיד פרעה. ותחמלל גם שרי בעת הזאת ותאמר:

— ה' אלהים! אתה אמרת לאדוני אברהם ללכת מארצו ומבית אביו ארצה כנען ותבטחתי לחיטיב לך כי יעשה את דברך: עתה הגה עשינו את אשר צויתנו ונעזוב את ארצנו ואת משפחתנו ונלך אל ארץ נכריה ואל עם אשר לא ידענו תפול שלשות ונבוא בארץ הזאת להציל את בתינו מן הרעב ויבוא עלי המצב והמקרה תרע הזה. ועתה ה' אלהי הצילנו בא תושיענו מיד הצורר הזה ועשה אתי טובה למען חסדך.

Text #3

ושמע ה' בקול שרי ושלח מלאך להציל את שרי מיד פרעה. המלך
בא וישב לפני שרי והנה מלאך ה' עומד עליהם. ואמר אליה המלך:
— האיש אשר הביאך הנה מה הוא לך?

— ותאמר:

— אחי הוא.

ואמר המלך:

— עלינו לבדל ולנשאו מאד ולעשות לו ככל הטוב אשר בידנו.
וישלח המלך לאברהם בעת ההיא כסף וחלב ואבני שוהם ובוזלח הרבה
מאד וצאן ובקר ועבדים ושפחות. ויצו ויביאו את אברהם וישב בהוצר בית
המלך. ויגדל המלך את אברהם בלילה ההוא מאד. ויגש לדבר אל שרי
ויכתו המלאך מכת רבה ויכהל ויחדל מדבר אליה. והיו כאשר יקרב המלך
אל שרי ותכתו המלאך על הארץ ויעש לו כמעשה הזה כל הלילה ויחדל
המלך מזה. וגם את כל עבדי פרעה ואת כל ביתו ואת המלאך בלילה ההוא
מכה רבה על דבר שרי. והיו צעקה גדולה בכל אנשי בית פרעה בלילה
ההוא. וירא פרעה את כל חרעה הבאה עליו ואמר: אך הנה על תאשה
בא אלי הדבר הזה.

ויתרחק ממנה וידבר על לבה דברים טובים:

— תגידו נא לי אחיות האיש אשר באת עמו הנה.

ותאמר שרי:

— האיש והוא אישי הוא. ואומר אליך: אחי הוא. כי ירא יראתי מאד
מן המיתות ברעיהם.

ויהלל המלך מעל שרי ויחללו ממנו. ומפיתו מכת מלאך ה' וידע
פרעה כי בעבור שרי הוכה. ויתמה מאד מזה.

Text #4

המלאך ושרביטו

ותקח שרי ביתה פרעה ותחמלל אל י' לאמר: אבי ואמי עזבוני ועתה
נפרדתי גם מאישי! אבא י' ורחם אותי. וחשיבני בשלום אל אברהם. וישמע
י' בקול תפלתה וירד מלאך משמים ארצה ושרביט ברזל בידו. והיו אך
אמר פרעה לגשת אל שרי. ויד אותה המלאך בשרביטו מכה רבה. ולא יכלה
שרי נשא את צרות פרעה המכה. ותאמר למלאך: הריני וירף ממנו. והיו
כאשר הונח מעט לפרעה. ואמר לגשת עוד הפעם אל שרי. ותתן אות למלאך
ויד את פרעה וכה ופצע. וימתי פרעה וסב את שרי לאברהם ואת הגר
בתו נתן לה לשפחה. כי אמר: טוב היותך שפחה בבית האיש הקדוש
הזה מהיותך גבירה בביתי.

(תנחומים)

Text #5

ויהי בבוקר ויקרא המלך לאברהם ואמר:
— מה זאת עשית לי? למת אמרת, אחותי היא, ואקח אותה לי לאשה.

ותביא עלי ועל ביתי מכה רבה מאוד עתה הנח אשתך, קח ולך לך
מארצנו, פן נמות כולנו בעבורך.

ויקח פרעה עור צאן ועבדים ושפחות וכסף זהב ויתן לאברהם וישב
לו את שרי אשתו. ויקח המלך בשר אתה אשר לו, אשר ילדה לו פילגשו
ויתנה אל שרי לשפחה. ויאמר המלך אל בתו:

— טוב לך, בתי, אשר תהיי לשפחה בבית האשה הזאת מהיותך גבירה
בביתי, אחרי אשר ראינו את הרעה הבאה עלינו בעבור האשה הזאת.
ויקם אברהם ויעל ממצרים הוא וכל אשר לו, ויצו עליו פרעה אנשים
וישלחו אותו ואת כל אשר לו. וישב אברהם ארצה כנען אל מקום המזבח
אשר עשה, אשר נסה שם אהלו בתחילתו.

(מתוך "ספר הישר")

Text #6

שרי והגר

הנשים הכבודות אשר במקום שרי תלכנה מדי יום ביומו אליה לשאל
לה לשלום. ובראות שרי אותן ואמרת להן: מדוע מצאתי הן בעיניכן לבא אלי
יום יום? האמנם אין במקום הזה אשה טובה ממני? הנה הגר בת פרעה
יושבת באהלתי. — לכן אליה גבירותי, וברכתן אותה, כי אין כמות
אשה ענוה וחסימת דרך. ויהי כשמוע הנשים את דברי שרי ותשתאינה
לה לאמר: הנשמע מדבר הגדול הזה, כי תכבד ככה גבירה את שפחתך?
ותלכנה הנשים אל הגר ותברכנה אותה ותשאלנה לה לשלום. והיה מדי
שבת הנשים באהלתי ואמרת אליהן הגר: אל תאמרנה טובת שרי בעיני
י כי מדוע לא ברך אותה עד היום הזה וימנע ממנה פרי בטן?
(בריר)

Text #7

בראשית רבה

זו אומר ה' אל
שרה' איז אברהם: (יח) ויאמר אברהם למה זה צחקת שרה לאמר. בר קפרא אמר לנדרול השלום שאף

הכתובים דברו בדברים בשביל להטיל שלום בין אברהם לשרה. ותצחק
שרה בקרבה לאמר אחרי כלותי דיתת לי עדנת ואדוני זקן. לאברהם
אינו אומר כן אלא למה זה צחקת שרה לאמר האם אמנם אלך ואני זקנה.
לא דיבר הכתוב כמו שאמרת שרה ואדוני זקן אלא ואני זקנה.

Text #8

ותאמר לאברהם גרש האמה הזאת ואת בנה" — אמר ר' עקיבא:
מלמד שהיתה אמה שרה רואה את ישימאל בונה במסין וצד חבין ומעלה
ומקטיר לעבודת ה' ורעה. אמרה: שמא ילמד בני כך וילך ויעבד כך — ונמצא
שם שמים מתחלל בדבר. אמר לה [אברהם]: לאחר שזכין לו לאדם
חבין לו: לאחר שעשיגה גבירה והכנסנה לגולה זו — נסדרנה מתוך
ביתנו: מה הבריות אומרות עלינו? לא נמצא שם שמים מתחלל בדבר:
אמרת לו: הואיל ואתה אומר חלול השם בדבר, יכריע המקום בין דברי
לדבריך.

Text #9

ותלך ותחזק במדבר באר-שבע

לקח אברהם את-הדודור וקשר במתנית של הגר, כדי שיהא סוחר אחרית.
 שרצה אברהם לראות את-ישמעאל בנו ולראות את-הדוד שהלכו בת
 ובזכות אברהם לא חסרו המים מן החממה. הלכת ותעלה מן הדרך למדבר
 הסמוך לבאר-שבע.
 וכיון שהגיעה לפתח המדבר, התחילה תרצה את עבדה זרה של בית
 אביה ומיד חסרו המים מן החממה ועיפה נמשו של ישמעאל בצמא.
 הלך והשליך עצמו תחת חולי-המדבר ואמר: "אלהי אברהם אבי! אם
 יש לפניך רצון להשקות אותי השקני מים, ולא קח את-נפשי ולא אמות
 בצמא שמתת הצמא קשה מכל-המיתות!" — ושמע הקדוש-ברוך-הוא
 תפלתו של נער בזכותו של אברהם וקרא מלאך יי' להגר מן השמים ואמר
 לה: "מהלך הגר? אל תיראי כי שמע אלהים את קול הגר..."
 נפתחה להם הבאר, שנברא בין השמשות החלכו ושתו ומלאו החממה.
 חסרו מלאכי השרת לקטרגו. אמרו לפניו: "רבונו העולמים! אדם שעתיד
 להמית בניך בצמא, אתה מעלה לו באר?" — אמר להם הקדוש-ברוך-הוא:
 "עכשיו מזהר? צדיק או רשע?" — אמרו לו: "צדיק." — אמר להם:
 "איני דן את-האדם, אלא לפי מעשיו אותה שעה שעומד בה בדין לפני."

Text #10

שרה והגר

ויושכם אברהם בבקר... וישלחה — לקח את הדודור וקשר במתנית
 של הגר, כדי שיהא סוחר אחרית, וכשירצה אברהם לראות את-ישמעאל בנו
 יראה את הדרך שהלכו בה, וישב ישמעאל במדבר פארן ולקח לו אשה
 מערבות מאב ועיסה שמה.

לאחר שלש שנים הלך אברהם לראות את ישמעאל בנו במדבר פארן,
 ותשבע לשרה שלא ירד מן הגמל במקום שישמעאל שרץ שם, ותגיע לשם
 בחצי-היום. מצא שם אשתו של ישמעאל, אמר לה: היכן הוא ישמעאל?
 אמרה לו: הלך הוא ואמו להביא פרות ותמרים מן המדבר, אמר לה:
 תני לי מעט מים ומעט לחם, כי עיפה נפשי בדרך המדבר, אמרה לו:
 אין לחם ואין מים, אמר לה: כשיבוא ישמעאל בעלך, אמר לו: בא זקן
 אחד מארץ כנען לראותך ואמר שסן הבית אינו טוב, כשבא ישמעאל הגידה
 לו אשתו את הדבר — ושלחה, ושלחה אמו ולקחה לו אשה מבית אביה
 מארץ מצרים ושמה פטימה.

לאחר שלש שנים הלך אברהם לראות את ישמעאל בנו במדבר פארן,
 לשרה כפעם ראשונה שלא ירד מן הגמל במקום שישמעאל שרץ שם,
 ותגיע לשם בחצי היום. מצא שם אשתו של ישמעאל, אמר לה: היכן
 הוא ישמעאל? אמרה לו: הלך הוא ואמו לרעות את הגמלים במדבר.
 אמר לה: תני לי מעט לחם ומעט מים, כי עיפה נפשי בדרך המדבר.
 הוציאה ותתנה לו עמר אברהם והיה מתפלל לפני הקדוש-ברוך-הוא על
 בנו ונתמלא ביתו של ישמעאל כל-טוב, וכשבא ישמעאל הגידה לו אשתו
 את-הדבר הזה, וידע ישמעאל שעד עכשיו רחמי אביו עליו.
 (מדריג ל: מה"ג וירא)