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RABBINIC EXEGESIS OF WOMEN:  
A LOOK AT HANNAH, REBEKAH AND TZIPPORAH

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
Graduate Rabbinic Program  
New York, New York

March 28, 1988

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I dedicate this thesis to the memories of my maternal and paternal grandmothers:

Lena Pasternak and  
Sadie Zimmerman

both of whom gave me a love of Judaism and the will to reach my goals.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank Dr. Hoffman for his patience, guidance, honesty and expertise. A teacher to the highest degree, and a man who cares about his students.

I also want to thank my husband, Frank Hornstein for his humor, love and support. I treasure his belief in me, which once again saw me through a difficult challenge.

I thank my parents, Francis and Herbert Zimmerman, for their love and support. My sisters and their families who were pulling for me the entire way through. My grandfather whose knowledge of Judaism sparked my interest in the rabbinate.

To my in-laws, Drs. Lusia and Stephen Hornstein, Ruth, and Mark for their encouragement.

I want to acknowledge Rabbi Marjorie Slome, who freely gave me her support, time, and help, and who has been a friend and colleague throughout my years in rabbinic school. And Rachel Goldman who has through the years been a constant source of support and inspiration.

To all the HUC-JIR library staff for their resourcefulness and expertise.

And finally, to Hannah, Rebekah, and Tzipporah, three women who took on a life of their own-- I thank you all for struggling through this one with me.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Rabbinic literature holds the Jewish legacy of the past. These sacred texts are our link to our ancestral beginnings and reflect the Jewish peoples' struggle to know and understand its God. These texts, however, tell only part of the struggle since they are written and shaped by men. Missing from these ancient sources is a woman's voice. Surely, one must wonder how complete this Jewish legacy really is, without the voices of both men and women.

Today, our contemporary agenda demands the inclusion of a woman's perspective. As a woman, I too want my tradition to reflect my understanding of God. As a Jew, my journey begins with an investigation of the past. Eventhough, I do not find my voice in the rabbinic texts of my heritage, I can not dismiss the Jewish legacy for to do so is to discard a past full of tradition, meaning and value.

The ancient texts, therefore, only partially reflect the Jewish people's relationship with God. Rabbinic interpretation deletes the critical role of women in the Jewish people's struggle with God. Despite what I see as the limits of my tradition, it is important for one to examine the ancient texts to ascertain a clearer understanding of the rabbinic mind. Today's Jewish feminist agenda seeks to analyze the past

in order to create Jewish spirituality that is more meaningful for both men and women. A critical examination of rabbinic texts is necessary to create a tradition which is strong enough to include a woman's perspective.

This thesis is a journey back through the ancient texts. The work investigates rabbinic perspectives on three biblical narratives in which women perform specific ritual acts: Hannah (I Samuel 1:1-10), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21-23), and Tzipporah (Exodus 4:24-26). Each biblical section, as interpreted through the Tannaitic, the Amoraic, and the Geonic rabbinic literature, illuminates how the rabbis utilize these narratives to reflect their perspective on the texts.

Furthermore, my thesis includes the application of Mary Douglas' anthropological theory, adding a modern interpretation to rabbinic analysis of biblical texts. Her hermeneutic will serve to structure the rabbinic treatment of these three women.

#### Anthropological Theory:

Mary Douglas explains the process of conformity in society by the societal control of actions and beliefs through cultural categories:

....ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference



between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.<sup>1</sup>

According to Douglas, society controls relationships among people through the use of categories. These boundaries inform individuals of what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in relationship to others:

People really do think of their own social environment as consisting of other people joined or separated by lines which must be respected...Physical crossing of the social barrier is treated as a dangerous pollution. The pollution becomes a doubly wicked object of reprobation, first because he crossed over the line and second because he endangered other.<sup>2</sup>

If we apply Douglas' theory to the rabbinic understanding of women, we discover that the rabbis categorized women exclusively as wife and mother. The rabbis define women through their relationships to men, and emphasize women's roles as wife and mother. As Jacob Neusner describes, with regard to the Mishnah's division of women:

Mishnah is produced within and can only imagine a patriarchal society. Its legislation on women to begin with expresses the values of that

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<sup>1</sup> May Douglas, Purity and Danger, An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Ark Paperbacks, 1984) pg. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pg.139.

society. This is self-evident in that the critical points of the system--beginning, end of marriage--define what is important about women...Mishnah is a man's document and imagines a man's world. Women have rights protected by man and Heaven alike. But these rights pertain, specifically, to the relationship of women to men (and Heaven), and specified among them is none of consequence outside of male society. The reason, I think it is clear is that relationship is derivative and dependent upon that to which relationship is formed. Man is at the center. 3

Neusner asserts that for the rabbinic authorities, women form a separate category distinguished from men, and are defined solely by comparison to men. These categories determine rabbinic legislation and interpretation, and therefore, the rabbis react more favorably to women portraying the roles of wife and mother.

In her essay "Images of Women in the Talmud", Judith Hauptman agrees with Neusner and writes:

Emerging from this survey of legal and Aggadic sources is the image of a woman whose role in life was well defined along traditional sociological lines as caring for husband, children and home, and who was always dependent upon a man, be it her father, husband, or son, for satisfaction of her

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3 Jacob Neusner, Method and Meaning in Ancient Judaism. Volume I. pp. 94,95.

needs.<sup>4</sup>

As both Neusner and Hauptman contend, the role of a woman is defined by men. And, if we carry Douglas' hermeneutic to its conclusion, women who deviate from these social roles would be considered "crossing a social barrier" and will be treated as "dangerous pollution".

Douglas' anthropological approach can be applied to rabbinic sources. Since the rabbis had a paradigm of what is an acceptable role or category for women, it follows that the women who deviate from these rabbinically defined roles are treated as marginal characters or "dangerous pollution". The purposeful omission or inclusion of these women in rabbinic texts demonstrates the utility of Douglas' theory.

This thesis analyzes the rabbinic response to each of the three biblical female characters. The rabbinic interpretation reflects the specific roles of each woman. For example Hannah stands as the paradigmatic woman. She is barren and prays to God to conceive. When her petition is answered by her pregnancy, Hannah offers a thanksgiving prayer to the Holy One. Hannah fits into the rabbinic model of a pious woman, who never ventures into a ritual reserved for men. Therefore the

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Hauptman, "Image of Women in the Talmud" in Religion and Sexism, edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether. (Simon and Schuster, New York) 1974, p. 208

rabbis utilize Hannah in a variety of positive ways throughout the rabbinic literature.

Conversely, Rebekah is a mediate character, neither a threat nor a passive "ideal woman". She is a more complex personality and gives the rabbis difficulty. Like Hannah, she conforms to the rabbis' definition of a woman because she is both barren and gives birth. Rebekah, however, deviates from the rabbinic understanding of women's roles when God communicates directly to her. The rabbinic literature reflects an ambivalent attitude towards Rebekah, thereby producing a complex and often contradictory commentary.

Tzipporah exemplifies a woman who does not conform to the rabbinic model of a woman. She performs her son's circumcision, a rite that was relegated exclusively to Jewish men during the rabbinic period. Tzipporah veers away from the rabbinic understanding and categorization of women. Thus the rabbis obscure her story, and choose to focus upon Moses and Eleazer. The rabbinic sources tell us very little about Tzipporah and the ritual act she performs.

The thesis will also illustrate how the rabbis use the texts concerning Hannah, Rebekah and Tzipporah. Specifically I will demonstrate that both the omission or inclusion of these three narratives as proof texts reflects the rabbis' categorization of women. In

addition, I will illustrate that the rabbis' focus mirrors their limited understanding of women, in which women's role is relegated to a particular form of piety.

Each biblical narrative and its subsequent rabbinic interpretation is included in order to give a broad picture of the rabbis perspective towards each biblical woman. The texts are ordered according to the focus of the rabbinic interpretation. An analysis of each passage is included and each biblical narrative is understood in relationship to the anthropological theories of Mary Douglas.

II. HANNAH

# Hannah:

(1) And Hannah prayed:  
 My heart exults in Adonai;  
 My horn is high through Adonai.  
 My mouth is wide over my enemies;  
 I rejoice in Your deliverance.  
 (2) There is no holy one like Adonai,  
 Truly, there is none beside You;  
 There is no rock like our God.  
 (3) Talk no more with lofty pride.  
 Let no arrogance cross your lips.  
 For Adonai is an all-knowing God;  
 By God's, actions are measured.  
 (4) The bows of the mighty are broken,  
 And the faltering are girded with strength.  
 (5) Men are sated must hire out for bread;  
 Those who are hungry hunger no more.  
 While the barren woman bears seven,  
 The mother of many is forlorn.  
 (6) Adonai deals death and gives life,  
 Casts down into Sheol and raises up.  
 (7) God raises the poor from the dust,  
 Lifts up the needy from the dunghill,  
 Setting them with nobles,  
 Granting them seats of honor.  
 For the pillars of the earth are Adonai's;  
 God has set the world upon them.  
 (9) God guards the steps of the faithful,  
 But the wicked perish in darkness--  
 For not by strength shall humans prevail.  
 (10) The foes of Adonai shall be shattered;  
 God will thunder against them in the heavens.  
 Adonai will judge the ends of the earth  
 (I Samuel 1:1-10).

In the pages that follow I will examine rabbinic usage of Hannah's prayer as proof text. An overview of the rabbinic material reveals the rabbis' view of Hannah as a model for all women. She stands firmly in the role of wife and mother, and communicates to God through the rabbinic medium of prayer. Therefore the rabbis use I Samuel 2:1-10 in a variety of capacities as proof for halachic and aggadic assertions. Each of the following

sections will quote, analyze, and discuss the texts as they use Hannah's prayer to demonstrate the issues of women, prayer, God's unique power, resurrection of the dead, messianism.



### Women:

Hannah's prayer (I Samuel 2:1-10) is cited by rabbinic literature, particularly when the rabbis seek to understand the nature of other biblical women's experiences. For example, in Exodus Rabbah, when the rabbis expound upon the conflict between Rachel and Leah, they cite the Hannah text.

"Men once sated hire out for bread" (Sam. I 2:5). This refers to Leah, who was full with children, yet she hired herself [by selling the mandrakes]. "And they that were hungry have ceased" (Sam. I 2:5). This applies to Rachel, who though hungry for children, yet ceased. "While the barren has born seven" (Sam. I 2:5). This refers to Leah who was born with no womb, but bore seven. "She that had many children has languished" (ibid) This refers to Rachel from whom it was natural that most of the children should be born, yet languished. And who caused this? "Adonai kills and makes life." (Sam I. 2:6).<sup>1</sup>

Bereshit Rabbah illuminates Rachel and Leah's predicament, by citing segments of Hannah's prayer. Verse five of the prayer portrays God as the powerful Divine Being who can change the natural course of events. The Divine can make a barren woman fertile, as well as stopping a fertile mother from bearing more children. Therefore, Hannah's prayer expresses Rachel

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<sup>1</sup> Bereshit Rabbah. Edited by M. A. Mirkin, (Tel-Aviv, 1956-64), Parsha 72.

and Leah's experience, for Rachel was barren, yet eventually gave birth, while Leah, the fertile mother, stopped having children.

Bereshit Rabbati illuminates the biblical narratives of Leah and Rachel by citing Hannah's prayer:

"They that are full have hired themselves out for bread." (Sam.I 2:5). This refers to Leah for she was full with children. She had four sons and an additional two rewarded to her. "They that were hungry have ceased" (ibid). This refers to Rachel for she was hungry for children. "The barren woman has born seven." (ibid). This refers to Leah, for she did not have a womb, as it says: "God saw that Leah was hated so God opened her womb." (Gen.29:31). She [Leah] bore seven children. "She who has many children has languished." (Sam.I 2:5). This refers to Rachel from whom it was natural that most of the tribes should be born, yet languished. Who caused this? "Adonai kills and gives life" (ibid 2:6). For all who do not have a child it is like death. Thus Rachel said: "Give me children or else I die." (Gen.30:1). "Adonai gives life" (Sam.I 2:6). in the hour that God gave her children.<sup>2</sup>

Bereshit Rabbati provides the same information as the Bereshit Rabbah's interpretation of Rachel and Leah. This midrash reflects a more extensive use of Hannah's prayer than the analysis of Rachel and Leah covered in

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<sup>2</sup> Bereshit Rabbati. (Jerusalem: Mosad Rav Kook, 1840), pp.122,123.

Bereshit Rabbah. It includes the number of Leah's sons, it mentions the twelve tribes, and Rachel's correlation between death and barrenness which are not in Bereshit Rabbah. In addition, this Bereshit Rabbati passage provides more biblical proof texts to further support the intent of the midrash.

In another midrashic compilation, the Tanhuma, the rabbis compare Hannah's situation to Rachel's. According to this midrash, both women respond to their barrenness with images of death.

"And God remembered Rachel" (Gen.30:22). What is written above this point? "When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister, and said: "Give me children or else I die." (ibid 30:1). Our masters said: 'From this you learn that all who do not have children, it is as serious as death as it is written with Hannah: "God kills and gives life" (Sam.I 2:6). Thus Hannah said: 'When I did not have a son it was like I was dead, but now that a son has been given to me I am alive.'" Rachel said to Jacob: "Give me children or else I die." (Gen.30:1). "And Jacob's anger burned against Rachel." (Ibid 30:2). The Holy Spirit said: "Should a wise man utter windy knowledge?" (Job 15:2). Jacob said to Rachel: 'Am I the highest dignitary<sup>3</sup> next to the Holy One?'

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3 There is a scribal error in the Hebrew text. The word " <sup>70'a'c'ic</sup> " which appears in this Midrash Tanhuma text is not a word. In Jastrow, on pg. 84, the term " <sup>70'p'c'ic</sup> " means a high dignatry in Caesar's court.

"Am I in the place of God?" (ibid).<sup>4</sup>

The Tanhuma text links Rachel and Hannah through their common response. Both women compare barrenness to death. According to the Rabbis, the analogy between childlessness and death are common themes in Rachel and Hannah's narratives. In short, the Bereshit Rabbati text, like the Tanhuma midrash, connects Hannah with Rachel around the issue of death. Hannah's reference to death illustrates Rachel's reaction to her barrenness.

Similarly, Hannah's words concerning life illustrate Rachel's subsequent conception due to God's intervention.

"God deals death" refers to all who do not have a child. Thus as Rachel said: "Give me children or else I die" (Gen.30:1). "And [God] gives life" refers to the hour that God gave her children.<sup>5</sup>

In Bereshit Rabbati's exegetical midrash, the verse

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4 Midrash Tanhuma. Edited by Salem Buber (Vilna: Romm, 1885), page 78b.

5 Bereshit Rabbati. (Jerusalem: Mosad Rav Kook, 1840), 122, 12

from Hannah's prayer reflects Rachel's story in Genesis. In the biblical narrative Rachel articulates her desire to die, for she is childless. The rabbis extend the notion, equating barrenness with death. Hannah's prayer, used as a proof text aids the rabbis not only in their interpretation of the Rachel/Leah conflict, but also illustrates their own understanding of the importance of women having children.

Beyond the connection to the Rachel/Leah story, Hannah's story reflects the issue of barrenness. Many commentators assume that the words of Hannah's prayer refer to her relationship with Peninnah, Elkanah's second wife. *Pesikta Rabbati* focuses on Hannah and Peninnah's rivalry:

"And she conceived, and bore three sons and two daughter" (Sam. I 2:21), five children in all. But in her song, Hannah says that she had given birth to seven children. The statement is found in the verse that begins "They that were full of bread now seek to be hired." (Sam. I 2:5). What is meant by "now seek to be hired"? That they now hire themselves out to earn their bread. The verse goes on: "But they that where hungry have ceased" (ibid)--ceased being hungry. Then the verse speaks of the change in Hannah's fortune: "While the barren has borne seven" (ibid) --that is, Hannah who had been barren; and the verse concludes with a reference to the change in Peninnah's fortune: "She that had many children has languished." (ibid). But if, according to Scripture, Hannah bore five children, how is it that she

said "the barren woman has borne seven"? R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, and the Rabbis differed in their explanations. R. Judah said: Hannah bore five children; but she speaks of having seven because five were born after Samuel, and Samuel himself was regarded as equal to two--that is, to Moses and Aaron, as it is said: "Moses and Aaron among God's priests: Samuel among them that call upon God's name." (Ps. 99:6). R. Nehemiah said that besides Samuel she gave birth to five other children, but that she speaks of having seven more because she lived to see Samuel's two sons--"The name of the first born, Joel; the name of his second, Abijah" (Sam. I 8:2).--and the children of one's children are like one's own. Hence it is said: "While the barren has borne seven" (ibid 2:5). The Rabbis agreed that she bore no more than five [beside Samuel, but they accounted in a different way for the additional two she speaks of]. We find them setting forth their argument towards the conclusion of their exposition of the following passage: "And it came to pass on a day, when Elkanah sacrificed, that he gave to Peninnah his wife, and to all her sons and daughters, portions; but unto Hannah he gave a portion (pym)" (Sam. I 1:4-5).--that is, with a loving look (pym).<sup>6</sup> Another explanation: What is meant by pym? Before all people present.<sup>7</sup> Another explanation: Elkanah gave her the best looking of the portions. Another explanation of pym: he gave Hannah a double portion. Why? "He loved Hannah, but God had shut up her womb" (ibid). Now Peninnah used to vex her, and Hannah would weep and not eat, as it

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6 "pym", here is translated as "face."

7 The plural form of "face."

is written in the verse: "And as he did so year by year, when she went up to the House of Adonai, so he vexed her: therefore she wept, and would not eat" (ibid 1:7). "And Elkanah, her husband, said to her:...Why do you weep?" (ibid 1:8). by which he meant: Sarah who was barren, did she sit thus and weep the whole day? Rebekah who was barren, did she act thus? "Why is your heart grieved?" (ibid), by which he meant: Rachel who was barren, did she sit thus by herself? "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" (ibid). Here Elkanah was alluding to the ten heads of successive generations, such as are listed in the verse: "Now these are the generations, of Perez: Perez begot Hezron, etc. (Ruth 4:18)--ten in all.<sup>8</sup>

The Pesikta Rabbati midrash raises several questions. First, there is a contradiction between Hannah's prayer and her story. The prayer asserts that the barren women has seven children, but Hannah only bears five. Therefore, if Hannah refers to her own experience in prayer, a contradiction arises between five and seven. R. Jehudah, R. Nehemiah, and the Rabbis offer explanations of this contradiction. R. Jehudah counts Hannah's offsprings in a unique way. He asserts that Hannah had five additional children to Samuel, who because of his greatness is equal to two children, thus giving Hannah a total of seven offsprings. R. Nehemiah, however, assumes Hannah gave birth to five children,

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<sup>8</sup> Pesikta Rabbati Piska 43:7

including Samuel, but adds Samuel's two sons, which equal seven.

The rabbinic authorities focus on the Hebrew word pym which can mean "portion" or "face". The midrash creates a number of possible readings of the text based on a proof text from Samuel I 1:4-5. Later on in Pesikta Rabbati, the Rabbis explain the contradiction in the number of Hannah's children. The text continues:

Another comment, "Am I not better to you than ten sons?" (Sam. I 1:8). They argue that this may be an allusion to the ten sons of Peninnah. As things eventually turned out, when God came to remember Hannah, whenever Hannah gave birth to a child, Peninnah would be burying two of her children. By the time Hannah had given birth to four, Peninnah had buried eight. Hence when Hannah was pregnant with her fifth child, Peninnah was afraid that she would have to bury the two children that remained to her. What did Peninnah do? She went and besought Hannah, saying to her: 'I beseech you, humbling myself before you. I know that I have sinned against you. But be more forbearing than I deserve, so that the two children remaining to me will stay alive.' Then upon Hannah prayed before the Holy One, saying: 'Be forbearing towards her in regard to her two children and let them stay alive.' The Holy One said to her: 'As you live, they were destined to die, but since you have prayed in their behalf that they stay alive, I shall call them by your name and consider them as being yours.' Therefore, in saying "While the barren has born seven" (Sam. I 2:5), Scripture is implying that Peninnah's two remaining children



were accounted as though they were  
Hannah's.<sup>9</sup>

Pesikta Rabbati discusses the rivalry between Peninnah and Hannah, also. The texts suggest that the two women are the subjects of Hannah's prayer. Every time Hannah gives birth, two of Peninnah's children die, until, in the end, only two of Peninnah's children survive. Hannah adds Peninnah's two remaining children to her own, which gives her seven children in all. Thus the midrash solves the contradiction in the biblical text.

In verse five of Hannah's prayer, the text claims that God has the ability to reverse human events. The text says: "The barren women has born seven, and she that had many children has languished." (Sam.I 2:5). The Pesikta Rabbati connects this verse to Hannah and Peninnah. According to the midrash, Hannah is the barren women and she accepts two of Peninnah's children to make seven. On the other hand, Peninnah has ten children, but loses all of them to either death or Hannah. Peninnah ends up childless, while Hannah has seven children.

Bereshit Rabbati is similar to the Pesikta Rabbati text that is cited above. There are differences, however, in the detail and editing process of the text:

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<sup>9</sup> Pesikta Rabbati; Piska 43:7.

"They that were once satisfied, must hired out for bread." (Sam.I 2:5). This refers to Peninnah. She was satisfied with children for she had ten children as it says: "Her husband Elkanah said to her [Hannah]: 'Am I not more devoted to you than ten children?'" (ibid 1:8). [The ten children] refer to Peninnah's children. "Those who are hungry have ceased," (ibid). This refers to Hannah for she was barren but gave birth to seven children. [The text] says seven but she gave birth to only five as it is written: "God took note of Hannah; she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters." (ibid 2:21). Thus what is [the reference] to seven? R. Jehudah said: 'The children of her children were added. This is intended [to include] Samuel's sons as it is written: "The sons of Samuel: his first born Vashni, and Abijah." (Chron.I 6:13). R. Nacmaya said: 'Peninnah had ten children. When Hannah gave birth to one, Peninnah buried two. When Hannah gave birth to two, Peninnah buried four. When Hannah gave birth to three, Peninnah buried six. When Hannah gave birth to four, Peninnah buried eight. When Hannah gave birth to five, Peninnah wept and prostrated herself before Hannah and said to her: 'Please forgive me for my sin to you.' as it is written: "Moreover her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that Adonai had closed her womb." (Sam.I 1:6). Thus the two children that lived remained during the time. Hannah prayed before the Holy One, she said: 'Master of the universe, give me her children so that they may live.' The Holy One said to her: 'Upon your life, it is suitable that they die but since you prayed for them [I] will summon them upon your name.' Thus it is said: "The

barren one will give birth to seven"  
(ibid 2:5). Peninnah's two children  
were given to her [Hannah].<sup>10</sup>

Like the Pesikta Rabbati text, the Bereshit Rabbati text expounds upon Hannah and Peninnah's relationship. In addition, the theme of the Bereshit Rabbati text focuses on the fact that prayer changes the normal chain of events. Therefore, the barren women becomes pregnant and the fertile women becomes barren. This confirms the power of Hannah's prayer to affect God's actions.

A number of differences remain between the two midrashic compilations, Pesikta Rabbati and Bereshit Rabbati. In Bereshit Rabbati two opinions emerge, those of R. Judah and R. Nehemiah. Pesikta Rabbati has three interpretations: R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, and the Rabbis. The two compilations also attribute different opinions to specific authorities. For example, in Bereshit Rabbati, R. Judah concludes that Hannah added her two grandchildren to her five children, while Pesikta Rabbati documents R. Judah's assertion that Hannah had six children including Samuel, who, because of his great stature equals two children. In addition, Bereshit Rabbati edits and shapes the midrashic material more thoroughly than Pesikta Rabbati.

In short, The aggadic texts emphasize the number of Hannah's children. This seemingly minor detail reflects

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<sup>10</sup> Bereshit Rabbati

the rabbis' focus on women's roles as wife and mother. Therefore, the rabbinic midrashim center on Hannah as childbearer.

Many of the biblical commentators approach Hannah and Peninnah's rivalry by using Hannah's prayer as proof text which state: "Talk no more so very proudly; let not arrogance come out of your mouth." This text refers to Peninnah's harsh words to Hannah. Peninnah insults Hannah when she is unable to bear Elkanah children:

"Talk no more so very proudly" (Sam. I 2:3). [These words] refer to Peninnah's haughtiness over her success. She boasted about herself. [The text] is understood according to the simple meaning. Thus is the understanding like the Targum of Jonathan.<sup>11</sup>

Hannah and Peninnah both are jealous of one another. Samuel I 1:6 portrays their turbulent interaction: "Her [Hannah's] rival [Peninnah], to make her miserable, would taunt her saying that Adonai had closed her womb." Rashi asserts that Peninnah's haughtiness inspires Hannah's words, "Talk no more so proudly."

Metzudat David supports Rashi's interpretation of the text:

"Talk not more so proudly" (Sam. I 2:3). [Hannah] said this against Peninnah and her children. 'Talk no more'--to speak lofty words as it

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<sup>11</sup> Rashi on Samuel I 2:3

says 'proud' equals haughtiness. [Also, the Hebrew word, gevual] is doubled. This is to teach it was great pride and great haughtiness.<sup>12</sup>

Metzudat David adds more detail to his commentary than Rashi. Hannah's anger is directed to both Peninnah and her children. Metzudat David emphasizes Peninnah's harshness by pointing out that the Hebrew term for pride is doubled in the biblical text.

Radak confirms both Rashi and Metzudat David's reading of the text and comments:

"Talk no more so proudly" (Sam. I 2:3). [This refers to what Hannah] said against Peninnah. And what [Hannah said] against their anger [Peninnah and her children's] at her.<sup>13</sup>

Radak includes Peninnah and her children's jealousy toward Hannah. He reiterates that Hannah refers to Peninnah in her prayer.

In addition to Rachel, Leah, and Peninnah, the rabbis connect Miriam to Hannah. The rabbinic literature bases the connection between Hannah and Miriam on a linguistic point. The two biblical narratives, I Samuel 2:1-10 and Exodus 2:4, both share the Hebrew root, de'ah. I Samuel 2:3, asserts that Adonai is an all knowing God. The Exodus passage reads, "And his sister stationed herself at a distance,

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<sup>12</sup> Metzudat David on Samuel I 2:3

<sup>13</sup> Radak on Samuel I 2:3

to know (l'de'ah) what would befall him." (Ex. 2:4). In this biblical passage, Miriam waits on the side of the Nile to guarantee the safety of her baby brother, Moses. In Tractate Sotah, the rabbis use Hannah's prayer as one of the proof texts to explain the Miriam passage.

"And his sister stood at a distance" (Ex. 2:4). R. Isaac said: This verse deals with the presence of the Shechinah. Thus it says 'and stood', as it is written, "And Adonai came and stood" (Sam. I 3:10). 'His sister', as it is written, "Say unto wisdom, you are my sister." (Prov. 7:4). 'at a distance', as it is written, "Adonai appeared at a distance from me." (Jer. 31:3). 'To know', as it is written, "For Adonai is a God of knowledge." (Sam. I 2:3) 'What', as it is written, "What does Adonai require of you?" (Deut. 10:12). 'Done', as it is written, "Surely Adonai, God will do nothing." (Amos 3:7). 'To him', as it is written, "And called to him, Adonai is peace." (Judges 6:24).<sup>14</sup>

The Bereshit Rabbah text also connects Hannah's prayer and Miriam, quoting the same argument as the talmud passage from Sotah. The midrashic compilation, however, changes a number of details of the talmudic text. First, the Bereshit Rabbah text attributes the opinion to the Rabbis rather than R. Yitzhak. While all the proof texts are the same, the reference to God is different. In Sotah, the opinion of R. Yitzhak names God the Shechinah, while in the midrashic compilation

the Divine Spirit (Ruach Elohim), is mentioned. The Bereshit Rabbah text reads:

His sister stood at a distance" (Ex. 2:4). Why did Miriam stand afar off? R. Amram in the name of Rabbi [Jehudah ha-Nasi] said: Because Miriam prophesied, 'My mother is destined to give birth to a son who will save Israel'; and when the house was flooded with light at the birth of Moses, her father arose and kissed her head and said: 'My daughter, your prophecy has been fulfilled.' This is the meaning of "And Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel." (Ex. 15:20). 'The sister of Aaron,' but not Moses?--[She is so called] because in fact she said this prophecy when she was only the sister of Aaron, Moses had not been born yet. Now that she was casting him into the river, her mother struck her on the head, saying: 'My daughter, what about your prophecy?' This why it says: "And his sister stood afar off" (Ex. 2:4), to know what would be the outcome of her prophecy. The Rabbis interpreted the whole verse as referring to the Holy Spirit. 'And she stood', hinting at "And Adonai came and stood" (Sam. I 3:10). 'His sister', hinting at: "Say unto wisdom: You are my sister" (Prov. 7:4). 'From afar', hinting at: "From afar Adonai appeared unto me" (Jer. 31:3). 'To know what would be done to him', hinting at: "For Adonai is a God of knowledge" (Sam. I 2:3).<sup>15</sup>

The rabbis link biblical texts concerning women. For example, the rabbis would use Hannah's prayer to support a verse referring to Miriam, even though the

women's experiences are different. Technically, the Hannah text is used because of the similar Hebrew root found in both texts, but that root can be found in a variety of other verses. One can only speculate that the rabbis intentionally linked Miriam and Hannah together because they are women.

In the Talmud, Megillah 14a, seven prophetesses are mentioned. The talmudic passage supports seven women as prophetesses by explaining their role in the biblical text.

'Seven prophetess'. Who were these?--Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda and Esther. 'Sarah', as it is written: "The father of Milkah and the father of Yiscah" (Gen. 11:29). Yiscah is Sarah; and why was she called Yiscah? Because she discerned [sakethah] by means of the holy spirit, as it is said: "In all that Sarah said unto you, hearken to her voice" (Gen. 21:12). Another explanation is: because all gazed [sakin] at her beauty. 'Miriam' as it is written. "And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron" (Ex. 15:20). Was she only the sister of Aaron and not the sister of Moses?--R. Nahman said in the name of Rabbi [Jehudah ha-Nasi]: [She was so called] because she prophesied when she was the sister of Aaron [only] and said: 'My mother is destined to bear a son who will save Israel.' When he was born the house was filled with light, and her father arose and kissed her on her head, saying: 'My daughter, your prophecy has been fulfilled. But when they threw him into the river her father arose and tapped her on the head, saying: 'Daughter, where



is your prophecy? So it is written, "And his sister stood afar 2:4). 'to know', that is. what would be with the latter part of her prophecy. 'Deborah', as it is written: "Now Deborah a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth [meaning flames]" (Jud.4:4). What is meant by a 'woman of flames'? [She was so called] because she used to make wicks for the Sanctuary. "And she sat under a palm tree" (ibid 4:5). Why just a palm tree?--R. Simeon b.Abishalom said: [To avoid] privacy. Another explanation is: Just as a palm tree has only one heart, so Israel in that generation had only one heart devoted to their Keeper in heaven. 'Hannah', as it is written, "And Hannah prayed and said, My heart exalts in Adonai, my horn is exalted in Adonai." (Sam.I 2:1). [She said] 'My horn is exalted', and not 'my cruse is exalted', thus implying that the royalty of [the house of] David and Solomon, who were anointed from a horn, would be prolonged, but the royalty of [the house of] Saul and Jehu, who were anointed with a cruse, would not be prolonged. 'Abigail', as it is written: "And it was so, as she rode on her ass and came down by the convert of the mountain" (Ibid. 25:20). 'By the convert [sether] of the mountain'? It should say 'from the mountain'--Rabbah b. Samuel said: It means that she came with reference to blood that came from the hidden parts [setharim]. She brought some blood and showed it to him. He said to her: 'Is blood to be shown by night?'<sup>16</sup>

Tractate Megillah presents the notion of seven prophetess in Israel. According to this text, all seven

women foresaw future events concerning the Israelite people. Hannah, in particular, is called a prophetess, due to the fact that she predicted that Samuel, and by extension David, constitute the link in the messianic line. The first verse of her prayer, which talks about an "exalted horn", refers to the triumph of Samuel and David over Saul and Jehu, and is cited in the above aggadic passage.

Seder Olam Rabbah Ha-Shalem, uses Hannah's prayer to prove that Hannah acts as a prophetess of Israel. The midrash asserts that Hannah prophesied the eventual reign of the Davidic kingdom.

[In referencel to Abraham, our father, it is said: "Now, therefore, restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet" (Gen.20:7). [In referencel to Sarah it is said: "the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah." (ibid 11:29). From where are all our forefathers and foremothers called prophets? As it says: " When they went from one nation to nation, and from one kingdom to another people, he suffered no man to do them wrong: but he reprov'd kings for their sakes, saying, Do not touch any anointed, and do my prophets no harm. (Chron. I 16:21,22). [In referencel to Miriam as it is said: "Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a trimbel in her hand." (Ex. 15:20). [In referencel to Deborah as it is said: "And Deborah, a prophetess" (Judges 4:4). [In referencel to Hannah as it is written: "Hannah prayed: saying My heart rejoices in Adonai, My horn is exalted through Adonai" (Sam. I 2:1). [In referencel to Abigail

prophesied for David, thus David said to her: "blessed be your discretion" (Sam. I 25:33). [In referencel to Hulda it is said; "went to the prophetess, Huldah" (Kings II 22:14). [In referencel to Esther as it says: "Then Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail wrote a second letter" (Esther 9:29). There are 48 prophets and 7 prophetesses that prophesied to Israel and wrote it in the writings.<sup>17</sup>

Seder Olam identifies the prophetesses of Israel. This text recognizes these woman and affirms their power. Specifically, Hannah foretells the coming of the Messiah through David's lineage. Hannah's reference to a horn confirms that David is the rightful guarantor of the messianic line. Because David was anointed with a horn, as opposed to Saul, who was anointed with a flask.

In addition, the use of Hannah's prayer as proof text connects other biblical women's experiences, such as the thanksgiving song is also thought to have inspired Mary's Magnificat prayer in the New Testament. In this section of the New Testament, Mary visits Elizabeth, and both the births of Jesus and John the Baptist are announced. The passage parallels the story of the birth of Samuel in Hannah's prayer. The prayer in Luke reads as follows:

(46)And Mary said: 'My soul

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<sup>17</sup> Seder Olam Rabbah Ha-Shalem. (Vilna:Ratner, 1897), perek 21.

magnifies the Lord,  
 (47) and my spirit rejoices in God  
 my Savior,  
 (48) for God has regarded the low  
 estate of his handmaiden. For  
 behold, henceforth all generations  
 will call me blessed;  
 (49) for he who is mighty had done  
 great things for me, and holy is  
 God's name. (50) And God's mercy is  
 on those who fear God from  
 generation to generation.  
 (51) God has shown strength with  
 God's arm, God has scattered the  
 proud in the imagination of their  
 hearts,  
 (52) God has put down the mighty  
 from their thrones, and exalted  
 those of low degree;  
 (53) God has filled the hungry with  
 good things, and the rich God has  
 sent empty away. (54) God has helped  
 the servant Israel, in remembrance  
 of God's mercy,  
 (55) as God spoke to our ancestors,  
 to Abraham for posterity forever."  
 (Luke I. 46-55)

Modern scholars debate the background and origin of  
 the Magnificat. Some scholars think that originally it  
 was said by Elizabeth not Mary, while others assert that  
 the prayer was taken from the Greek text, the  
 Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew Bible. The point at  
 which all scholars agree concerns the similarities  
 between the Magnificat found in the New Testament and  
 Hannah's prayer in the first book of Samuel.

Luke 1:45 states: "My soul magnifies Adonai";  
 similarly in Samuel I 2:1, Hannah says: "My heart exults  
 in Adonai". In verse 53, Mary talks about God giving  
 the hungry food, and the rich are sent away with

nothing. I Samuel 2:5-7 also refers to the unexpected societal changes, where the hungry are satisfied and the well-fed must hire out for bread.

A comparison of the Magnificat and Hannah's prayer underscores the similarities, in both words and circumstances of each text. For example both women rejoice in God's favor for the birth of a son by offering a prayer of thanks to God. Each women bear a child who symbolizes the messianic hope for each tradition.<sup>18</sup>

In short, rabbinic literature uses Hannah's prayer in a variety of ways to connect Hannah to other women in the Bible. The Rabbis compare Hannah's experience to the stories of Rachel and Leah. In addition, the rabbinic literature expands on the biblical narratives of Hannah and Peninnah through the use of Hannah's prayer as proof text. The rabbis connect Hannah's prayer as proof text in a number of texts concerning Miriam. Hannah's story is not parallel to Miriam's story, but the rabbis, nonetheless utilize the I Samuel text to connect these two women in the Bible. In addition to individual female biblical personalities, Hannah is also considered one of the seven prophetesses

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<sup>18</sup> A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament; Samuel Tobias Lachs; (Ktav Publishing House Inc., New Jersey, and The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith; New York, 1987.) pages 23-25

of Israel. Hannah's prayer is quoted to support her ability to predict the future events of Israel.

While the rabbinic texts use Hannah's prayer as proof text, her prayer is also used as reference for New Testament literature. Mary's Magnificat borrows ideas and phrases from Hannah's prayer, thereby connecting women intertestamentally.

The rabbis herald Hannah as the paradigmatic model, and I Samuel 2:1-10 plays a major part in connecting other women in the Bible. The rabbis choice to associate Hannah with other female biblical characters presents a model for analysis of women's biblical experiences.

**Prayer:**

Hannah's prayer in Samuel I 2:1-10, is used in reference to prayer in two places. One is in tractates Berachot and Sanhedrin, the other in midrash Tanhuma. The Talmud passage asserts that:

"Havdalah asserts; 'that graciously is granted with knowledge'." What is the reason?--R. Joseph said: Because it is a kind of wisdom, it was inserted in the benediction of wisdom. The Rabbis, however, say: Because of the reference is to a weekday, therefore it was inserted in the weekday blessing. R. Ammi said: Great is knowledge, since it was placed at the beginning of the weekday blessings. R. Ammi also said: Great is knowledge since it was placed between two names, as it says, "For a God of knowledge is Adonai." (Sam. I 2:3). And if one has not knowledge, it is forbidden to have mercy on them, as it says, "For it is a people of no understanding, therefore God that made them will have no compassion upon them." (Isa. 27:11). R. Eliezar said: Great is the Sanctuary, since it has been placed between two names, as it says, "You have made, Adonai, the sanctuary, Adonai" (Ex. 15:17). R. Eleazer also said: Whenever a man has knowledge, it is as if the Sanctuary had been built in his days; for knowledge is set between two names of God and the Sanctuary is set between two names of God.<sup>19</sup>

I Samuel 2:3 is used to confirm the importance of knowledge in this Berachot passage. In Hannah's prayer

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<sup>19</sup> Talmud Bavli, Berachot 33a; This same text is also in

Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 92a

the word, "knowledge", is also set between two names of God. In addition when R. Eleazer quotes a verse from Isaiah, the word "sanctuary" is framed on either side by the tetragrammaton YHVH. R. Eleazer asserts that knowledge is equal to building the Temple's Sanctuary. Again, Hannah's prayer is used as proof text to support the importance of knowledge.

The Talmud Yerushalmi records a discussion between R. Nachman and R. Sheshit. The exchange focuses on the issue of a person who accidentally recites the daily Tefillah on Shabbat. In the end of the argument, R. Isaac holds that knowledge in prayer is crucial. The Hannah text is again used to support the importance of knowledge.

What if a person stands and prays (the Tefillah) on Shabbat but forgets [the blessings] for Shabbat and remembers [the blessings] for everyday? R. Hunnah said: R. Nahman b. Jacob and R. Sheshet disagree. One said: 'stop [in the middle of the] blessing.' The other said: 'finish the blessing: all of Modim. In Honan Ha-Da'at that one should finish it, this is according to Rabbi [Jehudah ha-Nasi]. Rabbi says: I will say that one voids Honan Ha-Da'at on Shabbat if one does not know the prayer. From where does this come from? R. Isaac said: Great is knowledge that it is placed between two times God's name is mentioned, as it says: "For Adonai is an all knowing God" (Sam. I 2:3). From this inquiry this means from knowledge "Then you shall understand the fear of Adonai"



(Proverbs 2:5). 20

Similarly, in the Talmud Bavli text concerning the Havdalah service, the Talmud Yerushalmi underscores the importance of knowledge in prayer. The Yerushalmi text, however, focuses on the Tefillah, which is the central prayer for the rabbis. The rabbis are concerned about persons mistakenly reciting the daily Tefillah during Shabbat. Many opinions surface in this talmudic text. At the end of the passage, both Hannah's prayer and the Proverbs verse suggest the need for understanding and knowledge is paramount in Jewish prayer.

In addition to the value that knowledge in prayer is necessary, Hannah's passage in the first book of Samuel is also used to support the existence of nine benedictions in the High Holiday Tefillah. In the midrash Tanhuma, Rabbah bar Hanninah says:

Why on Rosh Hashanah do we recite nine benedictions in the Tefillah? Rabbah Bar Hanninah says: For the nine times that God's name is mentioned in Hannah's prayer. "And Hannah prayer" (Sam.I 2:1). 21

Hannah's prayer is used to support the recitation of nine benedictions on Rosh Hashanah, and it is the first time the rabbinic literature uses the Hannah text to support a rabbinic practice. This is a significant

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20 Talmud Yerushalmi; 34b parsha:4; Halacha:4

21 Midrash Tanhuma. (Jerusalem: Sefarim Eshkol, 1972), Parshat Verah; pg. 71

point since Hannah's prayer was used in an exegetical way to underscore a rabbinic value, namely, for women to procreate. The passage, however, is not used to support rabbinic practice.

The midrash in Pesikta de-Rabbi Kahanah focuses on the chain of events that led Hannah to create her thanksgiving prayer. The midrash attempts to explain Hannah's motivation to pray to God.

"God makes the barren woman keep house and be a joyful mother of children." (Ps. 113:9). As it is written: "Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children." (Sam.I 1:2). She [Hannah] was the barren one inside the house in order to give her children so that they would make her happy. "God took note of Hannah and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters" (Sam.I 2:21). She said to God: 'Master of the Universe what should I do? [Should I] sing songs and praises to you, Hallelujah who brought Israel out of Egypt. "Hannah prayed and said my heart is exalted in Adonai and my horn is raised in Adonai" (Sam.I 2:1).<sup>22</sup>

In Pesikta de-Rav Kahanah the rabbis create a conversation between Hannah and God to fill in the biblical narrative. The midrash creates background explaining Hannah's decision to offer thanks to God.

Exodus Rabbah, Parshat Bo, examines Hannah's intentions for prayer:

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<sup>22</sup> Pesikta de-Rav Kahanah. Edited by Z. Margoliot. new York: Menorah Institute for Research and Publishing, 1962), parsha 2.

"And Adonai said unto Moses and Aaron: This is the ordinance of the Passover" (Ex.12:43). It is written: "The heart knows its own bitterness; and with its joy no stranger can intermeddle" (Prov.14:10). This refers to Hannah who was sorely pained, as it says: "And she was in bitterness of soul" (Sam.I 1:10). Only she felt this bitterness; hence when she was remembered, it was her alone that God remembered, as it says: "And with its joy no stranger can intermeddle." (Prov.14:10). Hence it is written: "My heart exults in Adonai...because I rejoice in Your salvation" (Sam.I 2:1). that is: 'I rejoice by myself, for nobody else rejoices with me.'<sup>23</sup>

In Exodus Rabbah, the emphasis is on Hannah's unique experience praying to God to end her barrenness, and she recites a thanksgiving prayer. The Rabbis understand that Hannah prayed alone, hence labeling her worship as "personal prayer." This is an important distinction in eyes of the rabbis, as women are allowed to recite personal prayers, and are exempt from the public forum of prayer.

The common theme running through these rabbinic texts is Hannah's knowledge that prayer was the appropriate response upon giving birth. The Rabbis repeatedly, rely upon Hannah's thanksgiving prayer to assert the appropriateness and the power of prayer.

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<sup>23</sup> Exodus Rabbah. M.A. Minkin. (Tel-Aviv:1956-64), parshat Bo; 19:1

### God's Power:

A number of rabbinic texts utilize Hannah's prayer to contrast God's power with human power. Hannah offers thanks to God, for God alone opened her womb. Only God has the ability to make a barren women conceive, as we see in the following exemplary text:

R. Shimi b. Ukba (others say Mar Ukba) was often in the company of R. Simeon b. Pazzi, who used to arrange aggadah's [and recite them] before R. Johanan. He said to him: What is the meaning of the verse, "Blessed Adonai, O my soul, and all that is within me bless God's holy name?" (Ps.103:1). He replied: come and observe how the capacity of human beings falls short of the capacity of the Holy One. It is in the capacity of a human being to draw a figure on the wall, but a human cannot invest it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines. But the Holy One is not so; God shapes one form in the midst of another, and invests it with breath and spirit, bowels and intestines. And that is what Hannah said: "There is none holy as Adonai, for there is none beside You, neither is there any rock [zur] like our God" (Sam.I 2:2). What means, 'neither is there any rock [zur] like our God'? There is no artist [zayyar] like our God. What means, 'For there is none beside You'? R. Judah b. Menasiah said: Read not, 'There is none beside you [biltekah], but, 'There is none to consume you [lebalothekah]. For the nature of flesh and blood is not like that of the Holy One. It is the nature of flesh and blood to be outlived by its works, but the Holy One outlives

the Divine works.<sup>24</sup>

The rabbis use the Hebrew words, zur and biltekah, to assert that God is the all-powerful, all-knowing Creator. Hannah's prayer supports the notion that God's creations far surpass human creativity.

The midrash in Mekilta de-R. Ishmael, focuses on pregnancy, the creation of life within another living thing, to affirm God's creative powers.

The laws pertaining to flesh and blood: when a person comes to paint a figure one must begin at the head or on one organ or another and must finish it, but who in the world is not like this. The fashioner of an entire image at one as it says "For it is God who formed all things" (Jer.10:16). and it says: "there is none holy as Adonai, for there is none beside You, neither is there any rock [zur] like our God" (Sam.I 2:2). There is not artist [zayyar] like our God. A man says to him [an artist]: 'Make for me a portrait of my father. He says to him: 'Your father should come and stand before me. Or bring me his portrait, then I will make a picture for you. Who in this world does not do this, for God can give a person a child from a drop of water and its image is in the likeness of its father? 25

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24 Talmud Bavli; Berakot 10a; This text is also found in Talmud Bavli; Megillah 14a and in Mekilta de-Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai. Edited by Epstein and Melamed. (Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1956), pgs. 93-94

25 Mekilta de-R. Ishmael. edited and Translated by Jacob Z. Lauterbach. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1949), pg.65. This is also found in Mekilta de-R. Shimon b. Yohai. Edited by J. Epstein and E. Melamed. (Jerusalem:

This midrash elaborates on the distinction between human creations and Divine creations. The former are limited, whereas God, can even make a human out of the tiniest drop of water.

The Midrash on Psalms adds examples where the Divine art of creating far exceeds the human's ability to create, it too utilizes Hannah's prayer as proof:

Hannah said: "There is no holy one like Adonai, and there is no rock like our God" (Sam.I 2:2). There is no artist [zayyar] like our God. A [human] artist can not paint in water, but the Holy One forms in water; as it is said: "And God said: Let the waters swarm abundantly with moving creatures that have life" (Gen.1:20). A [human] artist cannot paint in the dark, but the Holy one can create in the dark; as it is written: "My frame was not hidden from you, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lower parts of the world" (Ps. 139:15). A [human] artist cannot draw figures unless the artist has many pigments; red, black, white, green, but the Holy One with one drop of white or one drop of red forms humans. A [human] artist can make nothing at all except by hard work; but the Holy One makes things by the mere breath of a word, as when God said: "Let there be light" (Gen.1:3). A [human] artist cannot draw a figure all at once, only little by little; but the Holy One makes a figure, all of it, in one stroke, as it is said "God is One who forms all" (Jer.10:16). The artist the creation of the artist's hands does

not eat, but he eats; the Holy One's creature eats, but the Holy One does not eat; more; God gives creatures what they eat. The artist dies, but the creation of his hands endures; the Holy One's creature dies, but the Holy One lives for ever and ever and ever.<sup>26</sup>

This midrash on Psalms portrays God as the ultimate creator, among which there is Hannah herself to whom God, the creator of all can grant miraculous procreative will.

Maimonides also uses the verse in Hannah's prayer that refers to God as a rock to confirm God's power. But unlike Mishnat R. Eliezer above, Maimonides introduces this own philosophical consideration. For him, the rock [zur] denotes God as the efficient cause.

Rock [zur] is an equivocal term. It is a term denoting a mountain. Thus, "And thou shalt smite the rock"(Ex.17:6). It is also a term denoting a hard stone like flint. Thus: "Knives of rock"(Josh.5:2). It is, further, a term denoting the quarry from which quarry-stones are hewn. Thus: "look unto the rock where you were hewn"(Isa.51:1). Subsequently, in derivation from the last meaning, the term was used figuratively to designate the root and principle of every thing. It is on this account that after saying: "Look unto the rock where you were hewn"(ibid), Scripture continues: "Look unto Abraham your father, and so on"(ibid 51:2), giving, as it were, an interpretation according to which the rock whence you were hewn

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<sup>26</sup> Midrash Tehillim. (New York: Tzom, 1948), Psalm 18:26

is Abraham your father. Tread therefore in his footsteps, adhere to his religion, and acquire his character, inasmuch as the nature of a quarry ought to be present in what is hewn from it. On account of the last meaning, God, may God be exalted, is designated as the Rock, as God is the principle and the efficient cause of all things other than the Divineself. Accordingly it is said: "The Rock, God's work is perfect"(Deut.32:4); "Of the Rock that begot you was unmindful"(ibid 32:18); "Their Rock had given them over"(ibid 32:30); "And there is no Rock like our God"(Sam.I 2:2); "The Rock of Eternity"(Isa.26:4). The verse "And you shall stand erect upon the rock"(Ex.33:21) means: Rely upon, and be firm in considering, God, May the Divine be exalted, as the first principle. This is the entryway through which you shall come to God, as we have made clear when speaking of God saying [to Moses]: "Behold, there is a place by Me"(Ex.33:21).<sup>27</sup>

Maimonides quotes the Bible to equate the term, zur, with strength. The Hannah text is utilized to examine the strength of God, who is seen as all-powerful.

In short, these texts reveal the distinction between human and Divine creation. Focusing upon God's ability to make a barren women fertile, Hannah's prayer articulates the power of Divine intervention, and thus, the uniqueness of God's creative powers.

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<sup>27</sup> Guide To the Perplexed. Moses Maimonides. (Jerusalem: Mosad Rav Kook, 1972), 1:16.



### Messianic References:

In the first verse of Hannah's prayer, a reference is made to a horn raised up in exaltation. During the rabbinic period, the horn was generally considered symbolic of the Messiah. This verse particularly is used, therefore, to validate the monarchy of David, and subsequently Solomon, as the Rabbis connect the Messiah with the Davidic line.

The Talmud Bavli passage from Megillah is typical in its understanding of the horn of exaltation as a prophetic statement, determining David's reign which will eventually behold the messiah:

"Hannah prayed; and she said: May my heart exalt in God, and my horn is high in Adonai" (Sam.I 2:1). My horn is high, not my flask is high. David and Solomon were anointed with a horn, which prolonged their kingdoms. Saul and Jehu were anointed with a vessel and their kingdoms did not continue.<sup>28</sup>

"All the horns of the wicked I will cut; but the horns of the righteous shall be lifted up"(Ps.75:11). There are ten horns that the Holy One gave to Israel. The horn of Abraham, as is said: "Let me sing of my well-beloved, a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well-beloved had a vineyard in the horn, of the son of oil"(Isa.5:1). The horn of Isaac, as is said: "Behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns" (Gen. 22:13). The horn of Moses, as is said: "The

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<sup>28</sup> Talmud Bavli; Megillah 14a;

skin of his face sent forth horns" (Ex. 34:29). The horn of Samuel, in her [Hannah's] prophecy that it is written: "Hannah prayed, and said: "My heart is exalted in God, my horn is high through Adonai"(Sam.I 2:1). The horn of Aaron in the High Priesthood, as is said:"His horn shall be exalted in honor"(Ps. 112:9). The horn of the Sanhedrin in Torah, of which is said: "He had horns coming forth from His hand"(Hab.3:4). The horns of Heman in the Levitical office, as is said:"All these were the sons of Heman...to lift up the horn"(Chron.I 25:5). The horn of Jerusalem at the building of the Temple, as is said:"Thou has heard me from the horns of the wild ox" (Ps.22:22). The horn of the Messiah in Sovereignty, as is said:"Adonai...will exalt the horn of God's anointed"(Sam.I 2:10). The horn of David in the light of the day-to-come, as is said:"There will I make the horn of David to bud" (Ps.132:17). 29

The symbol of the horn reflects the strength from the patriarchs through King David.

In addition, to the horn symbolizing the final redemption, it also reflects a feeling of glory in the rabbinic literature. In Lamentations Rabbah the ten horns of Israel are used as examples of the honor given to Israel. The specific carriers of the horn are different in the Lamentations Rabbah text than in the midrash on Psalms. In Lamentations Rabbah, the Davidic line is not explicitly mentioned.

"God has cut off in fierce anger all the horn of Israel"(Lam.2:3). There are ten horns: of Abraham, of Isaac, of Joseph, of Moses, of the Torah, of the priesthood, of the Levites, of prophecy, of the Temple, and of Israel. There are some who add: the horn of the Messiah. The horn of Abraham, as it is said: "My well-beloved had a vineyard in a very fruitful hill"(Isa.5:1). The horn of Isaac, as it is said: "Caught in the thicket by his horns" (Gen. 22:13). The horn of Joseph, as it is said: "And his horns are the horns of the wild-ox"(Deut.33:17). The horn of Moses, as it is written: "The skin of his face sent forth beams" (Ex. 34:29). The horn of the Torah, as it is written: "Horns has God from God's hands"(Hab.3:4). The horn of the priesthood, as it is written, "His horn shall be exalted in honor" (Ps.112:9). The horn of the Levites, as it is written: "All these were the sons of Heman the king's seer in the things pertaining to God, to lift up the horn" (Chron.I 25:5). The horn of prophecy, as it is written: "My horn is exalted in Adonai" (Sam.I 2:1). The horn of the Temple, as it is written: "From the horns of the wild-oxen do You answer me" (Ps.22:22). The horn of Israel, as it is said: "God lifts up a horn for God's people" (Ps. 148:14). There are some who add the horn of the Messiah, as it is written: "And God will give strength to God's king, and exalt the horn of God's anointed" (Sam.I 2:10).<sup>30</sup>

In Lamentations Rabbah, Hannah's prayer is used to support her ability to predict the messianic line. The passage emphasizes the purpose of including the I

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<sup>30</sup> Lamentations Rabbah. Edited by M. A. Minkin. 9 vol. (Tel-Aviv, 1956-1964), 2:6

Samuel 2:1 text is to confirm the prophecy of Israel.

In short, Hannah's reference to the horn is linked to messianic expectations. In addition, the Rabbis connect Hannah's statement to the Davidic monarchy and the coming of the Messiah. and ultimately links the horn in Hannah's prayer to prophecy.

### Resurrection of the Dead:

Hannah's prayer is used to illustrate the rabbinic treatment of resurrection of the dead. Verse six of Hannah's prayer asserts God's ability to create and to destroy life, as it is written, "Adonai deals death and gives life, Casts down into Sheol and rises up." (Sam.I 2:6). The following texts reflect the rabbinic view of resurrection of the dead.

Tractate Rosh Hashanah discusses the rabbinic view of the judgement day of Rosh Hashanah. Bet Shammai uses I Samuel 2:6 text to explain the process of Divine selection after death for those who are neither righteous nor wicked.

Bet Shammai say: there are three groups that are written on judgement day; the first is of the righteous, the second are the wicked, and the third those who are between the two. The righteous will be written and sealed on the spot in the world to come. The wicked ones will be written and sealed on the spot to Gehinnom as it says: "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence"(Dan 12:2). Those who are in between go down to Gehinnom and they will press through and rise as it says: "The third I will put them through fire, I will smelt them as one smelts silver, and test them as one tests gold. They will invoke me by name, and I will respond to them"(Zech.13:9). And about them (those who are neither completely righteous or completely wicked) Hannah said: "God deals death and gives life, God brings down to Sheol

and raises up again"(Sam.I 2:6).31

Bet Shammai explains that at the time of their death those people who are neither completely righteous nor completely wicked, will be sent to Sheol for judgement. Hannah's prayer demonstrates the rabbinic understanding that one's life predetermine one's final judgement, and therefore one's ability to arrive at the world to come.

Sanhedrin draws an analogy between the womb and the grave. While this text treats Hannah's prayer as a thanksgiving blessing for the birth of Samuel, it also articulates the idea of death.

R. Tabi said in R. Josia's name: What is meant by, "The grave: and the barren womb; and the earth that is not filled by water" (Prov. 30:16). Now, what connection has the grave with the womb? But it is to teach you; just as the womb receives and brings forth [the child], so does the grave receive and bring forth [resurrection]. Now, does this not furnish us with an a fortiori argument? If the womb, which receives in silence, yet brings forth amid great cries [of jubilation]; then the grave, which receives the dead amid cries [of grief], will much more so bring them forth amid great cries [of joy]! This refutes those who maintain that resurrection is not intimated in the Torah. [The] Tanna debe Eliyyahu [states]: The righteous, whom the Holy One will resurrect, will not

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31 Talmud Bavli; Rosh Ha-Shanah; 16b/17a;  
The same text is found in Talmud Yerushalmi,  
Sanhedrin parsha 13, halacha 5

revert to dust, for it is said, "And it shall come to pass, that he that is left in Zion and he that remains in Jerusalem, shall be called holy, even every one that is written among the living in Jerusalem" (Is.40:31); just as the Holy One endures forever, so shall they endure forever. [92b] And should you ask, in those years during which the Almighty will renew the world, as it is written "And Adonai alone shall be exalted in that day"(Isa.2:2), what will the righteous do?--Adonai will make them wings like eagles', and they will fly above the water, as it is written, "Therefore we will not fear, when the earth be removed and the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea"(Ps.44:3). And should you imagine that they will suffer pain--therefore Scripture says, "But they that wait upon Adonai shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles', they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint."(Isa.40:31). But should we not deduce [the reverse] from the dead whom Ezekiel resurrected?--He accepts the view that in the truth [the resurrection of the dry bones] was a parable. for it was taught: R. Eliezer said: The dead whom Ezekiel resurrected stood up, uttered song, and [immediately] died. what song did they utter--Adonai slays in righteousness and revives in mercy"(Sam.I 2:6). R. Joshua said: They sang thus, "Adonai kills and makes alive; Adonai brings down to Sheol, and brings up"(ibid). R. Judah said: It was truth; it was a parable. R. Hemiah said to him: If truth, why a parable; and if a parable, why truth?--But: In the truth there was but a parable.<sup>32</sup>

The connection between death and birth reflects the

concern for resurrection of the dead.

In his commentary on tractate Sanhedrin, Rashi interprets resurrection as symbolic of the ultimate renewal of the land of Israel. Rashi comments on a parable from Ezekiel as a way to understand Israel's redemption. The parable focuses on Israel's return from exile at the time of the Messiah.

"It was a parable": That it [the parable] refers to [the Israelites'] move to exile, this is like a dead person. That a [person] returns and lives, so too Israel returns from exile.<sup>33</sup>

Rashi, thus, connects resurrection of the dead with the messianic redemption through the use of Ezekiel's parable. Therefore, Rashi extends the Hannah text to Israel's redemption. Many texts that understand the use of resurrection of the dead in Hannah's prayer to support the notion of God's power. These midrashim use Samuel I. 2:6 to support the notion that God is capable of controlling the Divine creation.

God descended upon Mt. Sinai, as it is written: "Adonai descended upon Mt. Sinai" (Ex.19:20). Who gathers the wind in a handful? The Holy One, as it is written: "In whose hand is the soul of all life and the spirit of every human being." (Job 12:10). Who binds up the waters with a cloak? The Holy One, as is it written in Scripture: "Who binds up the waters in God's thick cloud" (Job 26:8)? Who has raised up the ends of

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33 Rashi on Talmud Sanhedrin 92a,b.



the earth? The Holy One who brings life to the dead, as it says: "The dead one of the people live; My dead body shall arise" (Is.26:19). Also it is written: "God deals death and life" (Sam.I 2:6).<sup>34</sup>

God is the all-powerful being here. Descending upon Mt. Sinai, the symbol for Torah, God gathers the wind and resurrects the dead. Hannah's narrative emphasizes God's ability to control the world.

The Talmud Yerushalmi asserts that God alone is the only one with powers enough to resurrect the dead. The text discusses the generation of the flood and their prospects for a share in the world to come:

The generation of the flood has no share in the world to come, and they shall not stand in the judgment, since it is written, "My spirit shall not judge with man forever" (Gen.6:3). Nor did he believe in the resurrection of the dead: You find that when Elisha came to resurrect the son of the Shunamite, he said to him, [He said to Gehazi,] 'Gird up your loins, and take my staff in your hand, and go. If you meet anyone, do not salute him; and if anyone salutes you do not reply' (KingsII 4:29). But he did not do so, Rather, when someone met him, he said to him, 'Whence and whither, Gehazi?' And he said to him, 'I am going to raise the dead.' And he said to him, 'There is none who raises the dead except for the Holy One, as it is written: "Adonai kills

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34 Tanhuma; Nesa; 24; This text is also found in two

additional texts, they are as follows:

1. Numbers Rabbah; Parshat Nesa; 12:11
2. Pesikta de-Rabbi Kahana; pg.5b

and gives life, God brings down to Sheol and raises up" (Sam.I 2:6).<sup>35</sup>

The rabbis use the prayer of Hannah to solve an internal contradiction in the story of Korah's rebellion in Numbers, thus expounding upon the idea of resurrection of the dead. In Numbers, chapter 16, the story of Korah unfolds. Korah, a Levite, and his followers revolt against Moses and Aaron. Korah and his company vie for power over the priesthood. Therefore, the Divine serves as the arbiter of this situation. God confirms that Moses and Aaron are the true leaders of the Israelite people, not Korah and his followers. As punishment for Korah's attempt to overthrow Moses and Aaron, God opens up the earth and sends them down to Sheol. Yet in Numbers 26, Korah's sons are counted in the census of Israel. It explicitly says that: "The sons of Korah, however, did not die" (Num. 26:11). This contradiction in the biblical text is explained in the rabbinic commentary on Hannah's prayer. The rabbinic authorities resolve this contradiction, asserting that Hannah prayed on behalf of Korah's son. As a result they were lifted out of Sheol.

In Sanhedrin, Rabbi Akiba and Rabbi Eliezer assert different analyses concerning the final destination of the sons of Korah.

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35 Talmud Yerushalmi; Sanhedrin 10:2

The assembly of Korah have no portion in the world to come, as it is said: "And the earth closed upon them" (Num.16:33), [implying] in this world, "and they perished from among the congregation" (ibid), implying in the world to come, this is R. Akiba's view. R. Eliezer said: it is said of them "Adonai kills and makes alive: Adonai brings down to the grave, and brings back up" (Sam.I 2:6).36

Rabbi Eliezer summons Hannah's statement in Samuel I 2:6 to explain how Korah's sons were resurrected from Sheol.

In Avot D'Rabbi Natan, R. Eliezar and R. Joshua differ on matters concerning the destination of Korah's sons. R. Eliezer does not believe that Korah's followers will ever have a part of the world to come. This is a different view than that attributed to R. Eliezer in the Bavli, where R. Eliezer claims that Korah's son has a chance to participate in the world to come. R. Joshua, on the other hand, believes they will be brought before God for judgment. God's court will then decide the fate of Korah's sons:

Korah and his company will neither come to life [in Olam Ha-Ba] nor be brought to judgement, as it is states: "And the earth closed upon them and they perished among the assembly"(Num.16:33), [this is] R. Eliezar's view. R. Joshua said: They will be brought to judgement and concerning them Scripture declares: "Adonai kills and gives life; God

brings down to Sheol and brings up"(Sam.I 2:6).37

In the Talmud Yerushalmi, R. Joshua b. Levi attempts to explain that Korah's sons were resurrected from Sheol because Hannah prayed on their behalf. The text states:

The party of Korah has no portion in the world to come and will not live in the world to come. What is the Scriptural basis for this view? "The earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly" (Num.16:33). "The earth closed over them"--in this world. "And they perished from the midst of the assembly"--in the world to come. It was taught: R. Judah b. Batera says. 'The contrary view is to be derived from the implication of the following verse: "I have gone astray like a lost sheep; seek your servant" (Ps.119:176). "Just as the lost object which is mentioned later on in the end is going to be searched for, so the lost object which is stated herein is destined to be searched for" (T. San. 13:9). Who will pray for them? R. Samuel bar Nahman said, 'Moses will pray for them.', "Let Reuben live, and not die" (Deut.33:6). R. Joshua b. Levi said, 'Hannah prayed for them.' This is the view of R. Joshua b. Levi, for he said: 'Thus did the party of Korah sink ever downward, until Hannah went and prayed for them and said, "Adonai kills and brings to life; God brings down to Sheol and raises up" (Sam.I 2:6).38

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37 Avot R. Natan. Edited by Shlomo Yerushalmi.(Jerusalem: 1966), Perek 36:2

38 Talmud Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 10:4; pgs. 53a-53b; R. Samuel bar Nahman and R. Joshua b. Levi's opinions are also found in Talmud Yerushalmi 10:1.

In Sanhedrin R. Joshua b. Levi acknowledges the power of prayer to overturn the laws of nature. According to the rabbinic opinion of R. Joshua b. Levi, Hannah petitioned God on behalf of Korah's sons, lifting them out of Sheol.

Genesis Rabbah asserts that Hannah prayed for Korah and his sons. As a result of her prayer, the sons of Korah survived God's judgement:

The Rabbis said: Even so did the company of Korah sink and descend ever lower until Hannah arose and prayed for them: "Adonai kills and makes life, God brings down to Sheol, and brings back up again"(Sam.I 2:6).39

The Bereshit Rabbah text, explicitly states that Hannah's prayer revived Korah's son's. In short, the sons of Korah survived because of Hannah's prayer.

In the midrash on Psalm 45, the rabbinic opinion asserts that Hannah reported the events concerning Korah's sons. The midrash attributes the prophecy to Korah's sons rather than Hannah.

"My heart overflows with prophecy"(Ps.45:2). For thee sons of Korah prophesied the future. Thus, when Hannah said: "Adonai kills and makes life; God brings down to sheol, and brings up"(Sam.I 2:6)., she was referring to the sons of Korah who went down until their feet touched the bottom of the pit, and after their feet had touched to bottom of the pit, they came up

forthwith. Hence Hannah said: "God brings down to Sheol, and brings up" (Sam.I 2:6).40

The midrash on Psalm 45 asserts that Hannah's prayer did not resurrect Korah's sons. Rather the prayer reflected Korah's son's experience. Thus, Hannah only reports the experience of Korah's sons.

In Numbers Rabbah, the midrash asserts that Korah's sons did not die, but rather rose out of the depths of the earth. This midrash posits Hannah's prayer as a response to the resurrection, rather than a catalyst for the redemption of Korah's company. The Numbers Rabbah midrash creates a story to explain how Korah's sons escaped the wrath of God.

"The sons of Korah did not die"(Num.26:9). It was taught in the name of our master; a place was set up for them in Gehenna. Rabba bar Hannah related: 'I was once walking on the way when a certain Arab merchant said to me: Come and I will show you the spot where the men of Korah were swallowed up; I went and saw two cracks from which smoke was coming. The Arab took a ball of clipped wool and stepped it in water. He then set it upon the top of a spear and inserted it into that place. The wool was singed and dropped off. He said to me: Listen if you can hear something. I heard them say: Moses and his Torah are true and they [Korah] are liars. He said to me: Every thirty days Gehenna whirls them back to this spot like meat in a pot and they thus exclaim--Moses and his Torah

are true. In the time to come God will take them back. Of them Hannah said: "God kills and gives life, God brings down to Sheol and brings up again" (Sam.I 2:6).<sup>41</sup>

This Numbers Rabbah text asserts that some of Korah's followers repented through an agreement confirming the truth of Moses and Torah. The Numbers Rabbah rejected the assertions Korah made in Numbers chapter sixteen. Therefore, God hears their repentance and resurrects Korah to return. Hannah confirms the episode through a reference in her prayer dealing with God's power to resurrect the dead.

Citing I Samuel 2:6, the Rabbis come to understand the rabbinic concept of resurrection of the dead. The merit system provides the bases for one's destination at death. Sheol, according to the biblical authors is a place from which one may return. The Rabbis understand it as a place where those who stand in neither the righteous nor wicked category go to await judgement after death. Hannah's prayer provides a proof text for a rabbinic discussion of Sheol.

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<sup>41</sup> Numbers Rabbah. M.A. Mirkin. (Tel-Aviv: 1956-64), 18:20

### Righteous People:

In Sanhedrin 26b Hannah's prayer is used to support the belief that the world is sustained by the righteous people. It states:

When the foundations [ha-shathoth] are destroyed, what has the righteous one accomplished" (Ps. 11:3)? Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Ena [both explained this verse]. One interpreted it thus: If Hezekiah and his followers had been destroyed [by the plot of Shebna], what would the Righteous One [God] have achieved? The other holds: If the Temple had been destroyed, what would the Righteous One have achieved? Ulla interpreted it: Had the designs of that wicked man [Shebna] not been frustrated, how would the righteous [Hezekiah] have been rewarded? Now, according to the last explanation, Had the designs of the wicked man [etc], it is well; hence it is written, When ha-shathoth are destroyed. The explanation which refers it to the Temple is likewise [acceptable]. For we learn: A stone lay there [beneath the Ark] ever since the time of the Early Prophets and it was called 'shethiyah' [destroyed]. But as for its interpretation as referring to Hezekiah and his party: where do we find the righteous designated as foundation? In the verse, "For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's and God has set [va-yasheth] the world upon them" (Sam. I 2:8). Alternatively [it may be deduced] from the following, "Wonderful is God's counsel and great his wisdom [Tushiyah] (Isa. 28:29).<sup>42</sup>

In Yoma 38b R. Hiyya b. Abba in the name of R.



Johanan asserts that the righteous are put on earth to perform acts of God.

R. Hiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Johanan: "No righteous person dies out of this world, before another [righteous person] is created" (Kid. 72b), as it is said: "The sun also rises, and the sun goes down" (Eccl. 1:5)--before the sun of Eli set, the sun of Samuel of Ramathaim rose. R. Hiyya b. Abba also said in the name of R. Johanan: The Holy One saw that the righteous are but few, therefore God planted them throughout all generations, as it is said: "For the pillars of the earth are Adonai's, and God has set the world upon them" (Sam. I 2:8).<sup>43</sup>

The Yoma text cited above asserts that each generation has only a certain number of righteous people on whom to rely. The narrative affirms that every generation contains righteous people.

In the Talmud Yerushalmi, the righteous and the evil ones are compared:

R. Jeremiah said R. Samuel bar R. Isaac asked about the following: "Righteousness guards those whose ways are upright, but sin overthrows the wicked" (Prov. 3:6). "Misfortune pursues sinners, but prosperity rewards the righteous" (Prov. 13:21). "Toward the scorner God is scornful, but to the humble God shows favor" (Prov. 3:34). God will guard the feet of the faithful; but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness" (Sam. I 2:9). "The wise will inherit honor, but fools get

disgrace" (Prov. 3:35).<sup>44</sup>

R. Jeremiah concurs that the righteous are stronger than the wicked. He uses the Hannah text to support the view that God sustains the believers over the wicked. The rabbis use the Hannah passage to articulate their understanding of a just world, where the righteous are rewarded and evil persons punished.

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<sup>44</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi; Sanhedrin 10:1

### Halacha:

An overview of the Halachic system reveals the rabbis' use of Hannah as a paradigm for the recitation of the Tefillah. However, the rabbis do not refer to Hannah in their discussion of a woman's obligation to pray.

In Berakot 31a/31b, the rabbis use Hannah as the model for how one recites the Tefillah. R. Hamnuna explicitly asks what one can learn from Hannah:

R. Hamnuna said: How many most important laws can be learnt from the verses relating to Hannah? "Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart" (I Sam. 1:10): from this we learn that one who prays must direct his heart. "Only her lips moved" (ibid): from this we learn that he who prays must frame the words distinctly with his lips. "But her voice could not be heard" (ibid): from this, it is forbidden to raise one's voice in the Tefillah. 45

The rule of speaking softly yet articulating each word during the silent Amidah is based on Hannah's own petition to God. This is an important law concerning the Amidah; the central rabbinic prayer. R. Hamnuna portrays a passive, silent model for the Tefillah. The rabbinic hierarchy dictates that women are to remain passive to men, and men submissive to God.

The rabbis use Hannah as the criterion for the recitation of the Tefillah. In addition, Hannah's

prayer provides guidelines for worship:

"I am the woman that stood by you here"(I Sam. 1:26). R. Joshua b. Levi said: From this we learn that it is forbidden to sit within four cubits of one saying Tefillah.<sup>46</sup>

R. Joshua b. Levi points to Hannah when affirming that one should respect a person reciting the Amidah by not disturbing the individual while he or she prays.

Although the examples cited from Berakot confirm that Hannah is the paradigmatic example of how to recite the Amidah, Hannah is not used as a criterion during the rabbis discussion of women's obligation to pray.

Kiddushin 33b is often used in conjunction with discussions concerning women's obligation to pray:

All positive commandments which are time-bound [mitzvot aseh she-ha-zeman graman]: men are obligated and women are exempt. But all positive commandments which are not time-bound are binding upon both men and women. All negative commandments [mitzvot lo'ta'aseh], whether time bound or not time-bound, are binding upon both men and women.<sup>47</sup>

The Mishnah in Kiddushin requires women to abide by three out of four categories of mitzvot. Women are exempt from positive, time bound mitzvot.

The Mishnah in Kiddushin is the basis for discussions concerning women's obligation to pray. For

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46 Berakot 31b

47 Kiddushin 33b

the position quoted in Berakot, Tefillah is a positive time-bound mitzvah which women are obligated to do because of its supreme importance.

Mishnah: "Women, slaves, and minors are exempt from the recitation of the Shema and from wearing tefillin, and are obligated in prayer, mezuzah, and grace after meals.

Gemara: They are subject to the obligation of prayer; because it is [supplication for] mercy. You might think that because it is written in connection with it: "Evening and morning and at noonday" (Ps. 55:18) it is like a time bound positive mitzvah.<sup>48</sup> Therefore the Mishnah informs us that because of the aforementioned reason women are obligated anyway.<sup>49</sup>

The conclusion affirms that women, like men, are obligated to pray daily. The gemara obligates women to pray despite the legal basis to exempt them from this requirement. This obligation is based on the need for both women and men to come before the Divine for mercy.

Hannah is not cited as a reference in the texts' discussion concerning women's obligation to pray. Yet, Hannah is the paradigm for prayer in general. In short, the rabbis failed to perceive Hannah as authority for women's obligation to pray.

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<sup>48</sup> This is in reference to Kiddushin 33a, that contends that women are exempt from those mitzvot that are quoted in the positive and are time bound.

<sup>49</sup> Berakot 20a,b

Other authorities assume a woman is obligated to pray, yet they do not define Tefillah as a positive time bound mitzvah. R. Yitzhak Alfasi contends that:

Women are obligated in prayer, mezuzah, and grace after meals, for these are positive commandments which are not time bound. Women are obligated in all positive commandments which are not time-bound.<sup>50</sup>

Rif's failure to define prayer as a positive time-bound mitzvah ensures that the general rule expressed in Kiddushin 33b, that women are exempt from positive time-bound mitzvot, does not conflict with the specific law of Berachot 20a,b, that women are required to pray.

Maimonides, in Mishnah Torah, agrees with Rif's definition of prayer. He adds that the fixed time of prayer is of rabbinic origin and therefore prayer becomes an optional commandment.

The number of prayers that one recites every day is not of Torah origin. The text of prayer is not of Torah origin. The setting of a definite time for prayer is not of Torah origin. Therefore women are obligated in prayer, for it is a positive commandment which is not time-bound.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore Rif and Maimonides assert that prayer does not fall into conflict with the general rule of Kiddushin 33b, for it is not a positive time-bound

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<sup>50</sup> Rif to Ber. 20b.

<sup>51</sup> Mishneh Torah. Moses Maimonides, (Jerusalem: Seferim Pardes, 1956), Hil. Tefillah 1:1-2.

mitzvah.

Maimonides does not refer to Hannah, since he affirms that the time set for prayer and the text of prayer is not contained in the Torah. Therefore, using Hannah as a proof text would weaken Maimonides' argument.

The assumption of the above mentioned texts assume women are obligated to pray. Yet Magen Avraham recorded an observation that women did not pray in a set consistent manner, and then, after the fact, resorts to Maimonides' perspective to authorize this tradition.<sup>52</sup> As a result, a distinction was drawn between the obligations of men and of women in reference to prayer.

It would have been logical for the rabbis to focus on Hannah's sex in conjunction with her act of prayer. This obvious omission reflects the categories the rabbis applied in interpreting the Hannah passage. The rabbis positively view Hannah in the role of wife and mother. Yet, they do not want to utilize Hannah's narrative to support women's activities, for fear that women will be given too much autonomy under the law.

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52 Magen Avraham to Orach Hayim 106:2

### Chapter Conclusion:

The rabbis used Hannah's narrative frequently throughout rabbinic interpretations. The rabbinic texts measure other women against the paradigm set up by Hannah, for she identifies with the rabbinic categorization of women as wife and mother. The female biblical characters who are similar to Hannah such as Rachel, reinforce Hannah as the rabbinic model for women.

In addition, Hannah's prayer offers confirmation for a number of rabbinic concepts and ideals. The rabbis use Hannah's narrative as proof text for the resurrection of the dead, God's supreme power, and messianism. Therefore, Hannah's prayer receives a great deal of exposure in the rabbinic literature.

The rabbis use Hannah's prayer frequently for proof texts, yet they limit the use of her narrative concerning the issue of prayer. They do not cite Hannah as proof text in conjunction with the discussion of women's obligation to pray. The absence of Hannah in this discussion, reveals a tendency to minimize Hannah's autonomy.



III. REBEKAH

# Rebekah:

Isaac entreated God for his wife, for she was barren. And God was entreated by him, and Rebekah, his wife, conceived. The children struggled together within her and she said: 'If it be so, why am I thus?' She went to inquire of God. God said to her: 'Two nations are in your womb and two peoples shall be separated from your body. The one shall be stronger than the other and the elder shall serve the younger.' When her days were fulfilled, behold there were twins in her womb. (Genesis 25:21-24)

In this chapter, I will examine Genesis 25:21-24 in rabbinic literature. Throughout the rabbinic interpretation, the rabbis' focus on the issues of Isaac's petition to God, Rebekah's prayer, barren women in the Bible, and Jacob and Esau's birth. Through this survey of rabbinic source material, I believe that the rabbis characterized Rebekah by comparing her to their paradigmatic model. The traditional rabbinic expectation asserts women's roles as exclusively wife and mother.

The rabbis hold that God only speaks directly to men in the Bible. Consequently, when the Divine speaks directly to a woman, the rabbis are unable to categorize her. Therefore, Rebekah does not fit into the rabbinic category of a woman. She is a complex character for the

rabbis. She is both a barren woman yearning to have children, as well as a woman who God speaks to. Rebekah's mediate status reflects an ambivalent rabbinic portrait of the biblical narrative, Genesis 25:21-24.

### Isaac's Role:

In the rabbinic commentaries, on Parshat Toledot, the rabbis focus on Isaac's function in the narrative. The rabbinic interpretations assert a variety of explanations for Isaac's need to petition God.

The Talmud Bavli records the opinion of Rabbi Isaac on the subject of Isaac's reason for offering his prayer to God. Rabbi Isaac suggests that in addition to Rebekah, Isaac prayed because he too was barren:

Isaac, our father was barren. As it is written: "Isaac entreated God on behalf of his wife" (Gen 25:21); Not for, (al), his wife but across (lanuach), from his wife. Thus we learn that the two of them were barren.<sup>1</sup>

According to Rabbi Isaac's opinion, Isaac prays on behalf of his own condition, as well as praying for Rebekah. The Talmud creates a personal reason for Isaac's prayer. According to the text, Isaac also asks God to reverse his barren state.

In Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, R. Jehudah asserts that only Rebekah is barren. Rabbi Jehudah accepts the premise of a mishnaic passage from Yevamot that states: "If a man is married to a woman for twenty years and she does not give birth, it is permitted to void (the

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<sup>1</sup> Talmud Bavli--Yevamot 64a

marriage contract) and divorce her, in order to marry another."<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Jehudah explains Rebekah and Isaac's situation through the assertion found in Yevamot 64a:

Rabbi Jehudah said: Rebekah was barren for twenty years. After twenty years (Isaac) took Rebekah and went (with her) to Mount Moriah, to the place where he had been bound, and he prayed on her behalf concerning the conception of the womb; and the Holy One, was entreated by him as it is said, "And Isaac entreated God" (Gen. 25:21).<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Jehudah expounds on Isaac's petition to God by turning to the Yevamot passage for reference. R. Jehudah asserts that Isaac and Rebekah were married for twenty years and remained childless. According to the halachic discussion in Yevamot, Isaac had the option to divorce Rebekah. Instead he prays to God to open her womb, thereby interceding on Rebekah's behalf. Rabbi Jehudah's opinion clarifies Isaac's role in the narrative.

Rabbi Jehudah's commentary also focuses on the location of Isaac's prayer. Mount Moriah reflects previous narratives in the Bible. It is the place where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son, Isaac. Therefore, Rabbi Jehudah's use of this location proves to

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<sup>2</sup> Talmud Bavli--Yevamot; 64a

<sup>3</sup> Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer. Translated by Gerald Friedlander. (new York: Sephen-Hermon Press, 1981), Parsha 32

reemphasize Isaac's relationship with the Israelite God. Isaac reaffirms his need for prayer through a recollection of God's promise to Abraham. God promises to make Abraham a great and mighty nation. As a result, Isaac inherits his father's blessing from God. Therefore, he offers a personal petition, because of his ancestral link to Abraham. Isaac's inheritance reaffirms the patriarchal lineage.

In a Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah, the rabbis explicitly denounce Rebekah's idolatrous roots. Upon her departure, Rebekah receives a blessing from her family. Laban, Rebekah's brother, and her mother pray that she will be the mother of a great nation: "And they blessed Rebekah and said to her : 'Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of ten thousands, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them.'"<sup>4</sup>

Rebekah's family creates this benediction out of an idolatrous milieu. Therefore, Rabbi Baruch and Rabbi Levi in the name of Rabbi Hema b. Haninah fear that Laban and his people will take credit for Rebekah's offsprings, which would bring into question the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Consequently, Isaac's prayer affirms the God of his ancestors as the Divine Being solely responsible for Rebekah's children:

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4 Genesis 24:60

Rabbi Baruch and Rabbi Levi in the name of Rabbi Hema b. Haninah say: Why could not Rivka be remembered until Isaac prayed on her behalf? So that idol worshippers could not say it was our prayer that made her fruitful, therefore, "Isaac entreated God on behalf of his wife" (Gen 25:21).<sup>5</sup>

Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah adequately answers the need for Isaac's prayer. Isaac had to prove that the other nations of the world were not responsible for the continuation of the Israelite nation. Isaac counteracts Rebekah's family's blessing when he entreats God. Therefore, he was obligated to offer his own petition to his ancestral God.<sup>6</sup>

In a similar response, Rashi focuses on Rebekah's background. He contends that Rebekah's prayer alone would not properly entreat God. Therefore, the focus on Rebekah ends up being a negative one that disinherits her from praying for a child. Rashi's claim centers on Rebekah's family's idolatrous acts:

And God was entreated by him (Isaac); by him not by her for a prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a righteous person is not equal to the prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a wicked person, therefore by him not by her.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Shir HaShirim Rabbah. M. A. Mirkin. (Tel-Aviv: 1956-64), Parsah 2:8

<sup>6</sup> This exact text is quoted in Genesis Rabbah; Chaye Sarah, 60:13.

Rashi affirms Rebekah as a righteous person, yet her ancestral past is idolatrous. On the other hand, Isaac stands as a righteous person from a righteous family. Consequently, Rebekah's prayer is not sufficient, due to her ancestry. The significance of familial lineage explains the need for Isaac's prayer in order to affect God's actions.

Rashi explains the biblical commentary through an interpretation in the Babylonian Talmud:

His prayer resembled a prayer of a righteous person who is the son of a righteous person, but she was a righteous person who is the daughter of an evil person. Therefore, the biblical verse was ascribed to him.  
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Rashi contends that a person's family history affects the power of one's prayer. Therefore, regardless of whether or not Rebekah prayed, her worship is ignored because of her family's identification with idolatry.

The Midrash on Psalms also focuses on Isaac rather than on Rebekah. Shohar Tov credits Isaac with the power to turn Rebekah's status from a barren women to a women bearing a child. The text, Shohar Tov, reads as follows:

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7 Rashi Gen. 25:21;

8 Talmud Bavli--Yevamot 64a; Rashi



"His seed shall be mighty upon the earth" (Ps.112:2). 'His seed' referring to Isaac, for it is said: "In Isaac shall seed be called to thee" (Gen 21:12). And wherein was Isaac's might? "Isaac entreated God for his wife, because she was barren" (Ibid, 25:21), and is he whose entreaty results in a barren woman's bearing a child, not mighty?<sup>9</sup>

In the Midrash on Psalms, Genesis 25:21 substantiates Isaac's inheritance of the Israelite covenant. Isaac's covenant gives him the power to entreat God on behalf of his wife, Rebekah. This midrash depends on Isaac to continue God's promise to the Israelite nation.

In another section of text, Rebekah participates in Isaac's prayer to God. Bereshit Rabbah's interpretation of the term, Lenuach ishto includes Rebekah in Isaac's prayer:

What is the meaning of (lenuach ishto) 'opposite his wife'? It teaches that Isaac prostrated himself in one corner, and Rebekah in the other, and he said, 'Lord of the Universe, may all the children which You destined to grant me be of this righteous woman. Then she said: 'All of the children that you are destined to give me let them be from this righteous man. 10

Midrash Rabbah asserts that both Isaac and Rebekah

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<sup>9</sup> Shohar Tov; Midrash Tehillim. (New York: Tzom, 1948), psalm 112

<sup>10</sup> Bereshit Rabbah--Toledot; 63:5

prayed for children. Rebekah repeats Isaac's words, thereby assisting him in prayer. The midrash text gives Rebekah a voice she did not have in the biblical citation.

Ruth Rabbah quotes in part the Bereshit Rabbah text cited above. Yet in Ruth Rabbah, Rebekah's words are not documented. It simply states:

"And Isaac entreated God for his wife, because she was barren." (Gen. 25:21) What is the meaning of 'opposite his wife'? It teaches that Isaac prostrated himself in one corner, and Rebekah in the other, and he said, 'God of the Universe, may all the children which You destined to grant me be of this righteous woman.' 11

The text found in Ruth Rabbah does not cite Rebekah's words, but only expounds upon the words recited by Isaac.

Rashi retains the physical explanation regarding the positioning of Rebekah and Isaac during prayer. He comments: "Isaac stood in one corner to pray while, Rebekah stood in the other and prayed. 12 Rashi confirms that it was not Isaac alone praying, but that Rebekah joined him.

In Yevamot, Rashi's commentary provides another impression of the biblical scene. The talmudic text

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11 Ruth Rabbah--Parsha 7:14

12 Rashi; Gen. 25:21;

asks the following: "If the two of them were barren, [the text] should read: 'God was entreated by them' not 'God was entreated by him.'<sup>13</sup> Rashi comments on the question posed in Yevamot:

The prayer of Isaac did not say for his wife, but it is identical with what is written: "God was entreated by him." (Gen. 25:21) Also the prayer was for Rebekah, his wife, but it does not say 'upon himself', the prayer was across from his wife. It implies that the two of them were crying one across from the other. Thus [the talmud's question] that it should say 'God was entreated by them.' <sup>14</sup>

Rashi disagrees with Rabbi Isaac's opinion that Isaac was barren. He acknowledges, however, that both Rebekah and Isaac prayed together, one across from the other. He affirms the Talmud's question based on the assertion that both Rebekah and Isaac pray. In addition to the question of why Isaac prayed in this Genesis passage, Mishnat de-Rabbi Eliezer, a minor midrashic compilation, questions Isaac's intent. The text explains:

From where does the leader of prayer not hear anything but if there is peace between them. As it is written "I will reveal to them the abundance of peace and truth" (Jer. 33:6). Entreatment, this is prayer, as it is says; "Isaac entreated God" (Gen. 25:21). During the time that

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<sup>13</sup> Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 64a

<sup>14</sup> Rashi commentary on Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 64a

there is entreatment there exist  
 peace. If this is so it [prayer] is  
 true, if this is not so, it [prayer]  
 is not true.<sup>15</sup>

Mishnat de-Rabbi Eliezer asserts that prayer demands peace between God and the praying person. Therefore, Isaac must have been at peace with the Holy One, for his prayer was entreated. Isaac serves as a paradigm for offering prayer.

In short, many explanations are given in the rabbinic literature to explain Isaac's prayer at the outset of the Rebekah narrative. The Talmud Bavli creates a personal reason for Isaac to pray. Rabbi Isaac believes that Isaac was barren as well as Rebekah. Another set of literature posits that Isaac was imbued with the power to change God's decree because of his role as the guarantor of the covenant. Conversely, other texts focus on Rebekah by questioning her qualifications to pray, because of her family's idolatrous background. Therefore, Isaac's prayer assured that the God of Israel was the sole power behind the continuation of the Israelite nation. Finally, the literature asserts that both Isaac and Rebekah praying, one standing across from the other. The texts depict a variety of answers explaining Isaac's role in the biblical narrative.

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<sup>15</sup> Mishnat de-Rabbi Eliezer. (New York: H.G. Enelow, 1934), page 85

### Rebekah's Prayer:

In Parshat Toledot, Rebekah inquires of God, and in return God speaks directly to her, relying a prophecy concerning the destination of Jacob and Esau's future. This apparent meeting between God and Rebekah poses questions within the rabbinic literature. Rebekah's ability to pray directly to God contradicts the rabbinic model of women as the passive recipients of God's command. Therefore, the fact that God speaks to Rebekah, threatens the rabbis, for they assume God only speaks directly to men. In the rabbinic literature, there are two basic rabbinic explanations of Rebekah's encounter with God. The majority of the texts assert that Rebekah had an emissary to speak to God on her behalf. Conversely, a small strain of text assume direct communication between Rebekah and God. Consequently, the source material often contradicts one another. These contradictions reflect the ambivalence of the rabbis concerning God speaking directly to a woman.

In Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, the midrash expounds on the scene of Rebekah's prayer, thereby assuming that Rebekah converses with God:

And she went to pray in the place whither she and Isaac had gone (Mt. Moriah), as it is said: "And she went to inquire of the Lord." (Gen

25:21)16

Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer contends that Rebekah prayed to God directly, upon Mt. Moriah, the place where Isaac also prayed on her behalf. This explanation answers the question concerning the location of Rebekah's prayer. This commentary does not address concerns regarding Rebekah's ability to speak directly to God. Unlike the opinion presented in Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, Bereshit Rabbah and Rashi's biblical commentary assume the presence of an intermediary between Rebekah and God. This attitude settles the concern of a woman having direct access to the Holy One:

"And she went to inquire of God."  
(Gen 25:22) Were there then  
synagogues and houses of study in  
those days? Surely she went only to  
the college of Shem and Eber? Hence  
this teaches you that to visit a  
Sage is like visiting the Divine  
Presence.<sup>17</sup>

The Bereshit Rabbah text interprets Rebekah's journey to inquire of God as a visit to the study houses of Shem and Eber. This midrash asserts that Rebekah does not speak directly with God.

In his commentary on the Torah, Rashi reiterates Rebekah's need for an external force to communicate to God: "She went to inquire; Where? To the Bet-midrash of

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16 Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer; Parsha 32

17 Bereshit Rabbah--Toledot; 63:5

Shem."<sup>18</sup> Rashi reemphasizes Rebekah's need for an intermediary when he repeats the theme of the Bereshit Rabbah text.

In another commentary by Rashi "She went to inquire of God" (Gen. 25:22), he suggests that God spoke directly to Rebekah: "God told her what her end would be."<sup>19</sup>

The following explanation by Rashi contradicts his assessment that God explains Rebekah's future to her: "God said to her" (Gen 25:23). Through a messenger--to Shem it was told by the Divine Spirit and he told her."<sup>20</sup>

In Rashi's commentary alone there exist contradictions of text interpretation. Rashi underscores the need for Shem to act as an interpreter between God and Rebekah, yet he also explains the content of God's direct words to Rebekah. These contradictions reflect the rabbis' confusion directed at Rebekah, for she does not easily fit into the rabbinic category of women.

A Bereshit Rabbah text explicitly illustrates the negative rabbinic view concerning women's direct access to God. The opinions in the midrash rewrite women's experiences with God in the Bible:

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18 Rashi on Genesis 25:22.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid. Genesis 25:23.

"And God said unto her" (Gen 25:23) R. Judah and R. Simon and R. Johanan, in the name of R. Eleazar B. R. Simeon, said: The Holy One never engaged in speech with a woman save with that righteous woman [Sarah] and that too was due to a special cause. R. Abba b. Kahana said in R. Biryi's name: And what a roundabout manner God sought in order to speak with her, as it is written, "And God said: Nay, but you did laugh." (Gen. 18:15). But it is written, "And she (Hagar) called the name of God that spoke unto her, etc. (Ib. 16:13)? R. Levi and Joshua b. R. Nehemiah answered in R. Idi's name: That was through an angel. But it is written, "And God said unto her--Rebekah (Ib. 25:23)? R. Levi said in the name of R. Hama b. R. Hanina: That was through an angel. R. Leazar said in the name of R. Jose b. Zimra: That was through the medium of Shem.21

The Bereshit Rabbah text discourages women from speaking directly with God. This midrash reinterprets the biblical narratives concerning women who have direct communication with the Divine Spirit. The Bereshit Rabbah text discredits these encounters with the Divine. According to the Bereshit Rabbah text, Sarah indirectly communicates with God through laughter. Hagar, like Rebekah, spoke to God through a mediator. In short, the rabbis reinterpret the biblical text to assert that the Holy One does not speak directly to women.

A Bereshit Rabbati text reinterprets the biblical words attributed to God in the Bible, by transforming



them to the words of Shem. This solves the problem of God speaking to Rebekah. The rabbis assert that God speaks to Shem, who in turn tells Rebekah God's message:

Since Rebekah saw herself in such pain, she went to the school of Shem so that he would pray that the Divine Presence would not move from inside his house that is written: "And let him dwell 22 in the tents of Shem"(Gen. 9:27). She said to him, Rabbi I am very sorry. He said to her: 'There is a righteous one and a wicked one in your womb. The wicked one will attempt to kill the righteous one. As it is written: "Thus says God: 'For three transgressions of Edom, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment" (Amos 1:11).23

The Bereshit Rabbati text posits that Shem acts as an emissary of God's message. Rebekah went to the school of Shem rather than to speak directly to God. The midrash reassigns God's words, in the biblical text, to the words of Shem in the rabbinic midrash.

When one examines the texts concerning Rebekah's prayer, it is clear that there are two understandings of the text. While the midrash of Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer and the Rashi commentary assume direct communication between God and Rebekah, the majority of texts, two Bereshit Rabbah texts, the Bereshit Rabbati text, and a

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22 A word play between yishcon, he will dwell, and Shechinah, the Divine Presence. They both have the same root.

23 Bereshit Rabbati. (Jerusalem: Mosad Rav Kook, 1800), page 103,104

number of Rashi commentaries, contend that Rebekah needed an external agent to communicate directly with God. In short, the contradictions further reflect the rabbi's discomfort with a woman receiving God's prophecy.

### Barren Women:

The rabbis freely compare Rebekah's experience with other biblical barren women. As a barren woman who wants to bear children, Rebekah confirms the rabbinic categorization of women. Therefore the rabbis focus on Rebekah's role as wife and mother throughout the interpretations that follow.

In Bereshit Rabbati, the reference to seven barren women substantiates God's role as reflected in Psalm 113:9: "God gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children." (Psalm 113:9). The Psalm text confirms God as the supreme being who makes barren women fertile. The midrash compares female biblical characters, all of whom become fertile due to God's intervention:

These are the seven barren women, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, the wife of Manuach, Hannah, and Zion. "God gives the barren woman a home." (Ps. 113:9) this is Zion. "Sing, O barren one, who did not bear." (Isaiah 54:1). "Making her the joyous mother of children." (Psalm 113:9) "Who has born me these? I was bereaved and barren, exiled and put away." (Isaiah 49:21). "God gives the barren woman a home." (Ps. 113:5), this is Hannah. "And Hannah had no children" (Sam. I. 1:2). Making her the joyous mother of children." (Ps. 113:9), God visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters." (Sam. I. 2:21). God gives the barren woman a home." (Ps. 113:5) this is the wife of Manuach. "Making her the joyous

mother of children." (Ibid) "And the angel of God appeared to the woman and said to her: 'Behold you are barren ;and have no children; but you shall conceive and bear a son." (Jud. 13:3). God gives the barren woman a home." (Ps. 113:5), this refers to Rebekah, "Making her the joyous mother of children." (Ibid) "And Rebekah his wife conceived" (Gen. 25:21). "God gives the barren woman a home." (Ps. 113:5), this refers to Sarah, "Now Sarai was barren, she had no children." (Gen. 11:30), "Making her the joyous mother of children" (Ps. 113:5), And God visited Sarah as promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son." (Gen. 21:1,2). "God gives the barren woman a home. (Ps. 113:5) this refers to Rachel, "Making her the joyous mother of children." (Ps. 113:5), "The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin" (Gen. 35:24). "God gives the barren woman a home." (Ps. 113:5) This refers to Leah.<sup>24</sup>

Bereshit Rabbati discusses the stories of each of the barren women in the biblical text in reference to Psalm 113:5. The rabbis connect the common experiences among women in the Bible. These experiences reflect women in the role of wife and mother. Specifically, Rebekah's identification remains primarily that of a barren woman who eventually conceives.

Aggadat Bereshit also refers to the seven barren women in the Bible. This text connects each barren woman to a day of creation. Rebekah is compared to the second day of creation because she bears twins who are

separated when brought forth from the womb. This parallels the separation between the sky and waters on the second day:

These seven barren women stand against the seven days of creation: The first is Sarah that it is written, "Now Sarai was barren, she had no child." (Gen.11:30). She is for the first day of creation. What was created on the first day? The heavens and the earth came up

on the first day. The Holy One created them, as it is written : "Abram said to the king of Sodom, 'I swear to God, God most high, Creator of heaven and earth" (Gen.14:22). Rebekah is second, for it is written: "Isaac entreated God for his wife, for she was barren." (Gen. 25:21). She is set against the second day of creation. What was created on the second day? The firmament in the midst of the waters. (Gen 1:6). Thus Rebekah gave birth to twins, Jacob and Esau, that it is written: "I will set you apart from other peoples to be mine." (Lev. 20:26). The third is Leah, that it is written: "And when God saw that Leah was hated, God opened her womb." (Gen. 29:31). Leah is set against the third say of creation, for it is written: "Let the earth bring forth grass." (Gen 1:11). For Reuben, the son of Leah, was, as it is written: "Reuben went in the days of the wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah." (Gen. 30:14). Rachel is fourth against day four of creation. What was created on day four? The sun, the moon, stars and planets. as it is written: "And God said: 'Let there be lights in the firmament." (Gen 1:14). Joseph, son of Rachel stood and they bowed down to him. As it is written: "Behold the sun and the moon and the eleven stars bowed down to me." (Gen 33:9). The fifth is Hannah who stands against the fifth day of creation. What was created on the fifth day? And every winged bird upon the earth." (Gen

1:20). Thus Samuel, the son of Hannah, is like the bird that (flies) from one place to another, from one state to another, and in the end he returns to his nest. This is like Samuel who busies himself with the business of Israel, for he went to all the places, as it is written: "And he went year to year in circuit to Bet-El, and Gilgal, and Mitzpa and judged Israel in all those places. But his return was to Rama, for there was his home." (Sam. I 7:17). The sixth is Hazzelelponi, the mother of Shimshon. As it is written: "And the name of their sister was Hazzelelponi." (Chron. I 4:3). She stands for the sixth day of creation. What was created on the sixth day? Adam. What became of Adam? Death by the hand of his wife, as it is written: "And to the man God said: 'Because you listened to the voice of your wife, and you have eaten of the tree, etc.'" (Gen. 3:17). Shimshon, her son, also died at the hand of his wife. As it is written: "It came to pass, that he loved a woman in the wadi of Soreq, whose name was Delila. And the lords of the Pellishtin came up to her, and said to her: 'Entice him, and see in what his great strength lies, and by what means we may prevail against him, and we may bind him and torture him.'" (Judges 16:4,5). "And the Phillistin took him and bore out his eyes." (Ibid 16:21). Zion is the seventh for she is set against the seventh day of creation. What was created on the seventh day? "In six days God made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day." (Ex. 20:11). And Zion, "For God has chosen Zion: God has desired it for God's habitation. This is my resting place forever." (Ps. 132: 13,14). Thus Isaiah said: "Sing O'barren one, you that did not bear." (Isaiah 54:1).25

Aggadat Bereshit focuses on the seven barren women

and their relationship with the six days of creation and the seventh day of rest. Like the Bereshit Rabbah text, the biblical reference for Rebekah centers around her offsprings, Jacob and Esau which affirm her role as mother. Aggadat Bereshit utilizes the biblical citation in Parshat Toledot to compare the separation of Jacob and Esau at birth, to the separation of the waters in the Genesis story.

Pesikta de-Rabbi Kahana, applies Isaiah 54:1: "Sing O'barren one, you that did not bear.", to the seven biblical barren women. The entire midrash focuses on God's intervention to open each woman's womb:

"Sing, O'barren one" (Isa. 54:1). God gives the barren woman a home, then to be a joyful mother of children (Ps. 113:9). There were seven such barren women: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, Manoah's wife, Hannah and Zion. Hence the words, God gives the barren woman a home. (ibid) this refers to our mother, Sarah: "Sarai was barren" (Gen. 11:30); and the words then to be a joyful mother of children (Ps. 113:9). also apply to our mother Sarah; "Sarah gave children suck" (Gen. 21:7). Or the words God gives the barren woman a home (Ps. 113:9) applies to Rebekah: "Isaac entreated God for his wife, because she was barren" (Gen. 25:21); the words then to be a joyful mother of children (Ps. 113:9) also applies to Rebekah: "God was entreated of him, and Rebekah, his wife, conceived" (Gen. 25:21). "The words "God gives the barren woman a home (Ps. 113:9) applies to Leah: "When God saw that Leah was hated, God opened her womb." (Gen. 29:31), this statement

implying that she had previously been barren; the words then to be a joyful mother of children (Ps. 113:9) also apply to Leah: "I have borne him six sons" (Gen. 30:20). The words God gives the barren woman a home (Ps. 113:9) apply to Rachel: "Rachel was barren" (Gen. 29:31); so do the words then to be a joyful mother of children: "The sons of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin" (Gen. 35:24). Or the words God gives the barren woman a home apply to Manoah's wife: "The angel of God appeared unto the woman and said to her: "Behold now, thou art barren and hast not borne" (Judges 13:3); the words then to be a joyful mother of children also apply to Manoah's wife: "but you shall conceive and bear a son" (ibid). The words "God gives the barren woman a home" (Ps. 113:9) apply to Hannah: "Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children" (Sam. I 1:2); so do the words "then to be a joyful mother of children" (Ps. 113:9): "Hannah conceived, and bore three sons and two daughters" (Sam. I 2:21). Finally, the words "God gives the barren woman a home" (Ps. 113:9) apply to Zion: "Sing o barren, you that does not bear" (Isa. 54:1); so do the words "then to be a joyful mother of children" (Ps. 113:9): "Thou, O Zion, shall say in your heart, Who has begotten me these?" (Isa. 49:21).<sup>26</sup>

In Pesikta de-Rabbi Kahanah, God is the artful master of each women's destiny. Similarly to her portrayal in Bereshit Rabbah and Aggadat Bereshit, Rebekah conceives because Isaac petitions God. It is only through Isaac's relationship with God that Rebekah



conceives and bears twins. As a result, the rabbis condone Rebekah as a passive character in her relationships to both God and Isaac.

The Pesikta Rabbati text again refers to the seven barren women identified in both the Bereshit Rabbati text and the Aggadat Bereshit midrashic compilation. In all three midrashim God is the primary actor that allows these barren women to conceive. The Pesikta Rabbati and the Bereshit Rabbati text both refer to the Psalm 113:9 biblical citation. On the other hand, the Pesikta Rabbati text differs from the Aggadat Bereshit in its order and analysis of the narrative. The Aggadat Bereshit focuses on the creation story, and on how each barren figure corresponds to each day of creation. All three compilations of midrashim, compare the seven biblical barren figures and credit God with their change of status.

In addition to the references to seven barren women, there are additional text that utilize the story of Rebekah's barrenness to substantiate other women's experiences in the Bible. In Buber's Tanhuma, Rachel points to Rebekah and Isaac's situation as proof of the power of prayer against barrenness. Rachel attempts to convince Jacob that he can petition God on her behalf:

"God remembered Rachel" (Gen. 30:22)  
 What is written above this idea?  
 "When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob  
 no children, Rachel envied her

sister, and said: 'Give me children or else I die.' (ibid 30:1). Our teacher said: from this you learn that all who do not have children, it is as serious as death. As it is written with Hannah. "God kills and gives life" (Sam. I 2:6), thus Hannah said: When I did not have a son it was like I was dead, but now that a son has been given to me I am with life. Rachel said to Jacob: "Give me children or else I die" (Gen. 30:1). "And Jacob's anger burned against Rachel" (Gen. 30:2). The Holy Spirit said: "Should a wise man utter windy knowledge" the place of God" (Gen. 30:2)? The Holy One said to him: With the language of your life you said "Am I in the place of God?" (ibid) with this land her son stood and said: "And Joseph said: 'fear not for I am in the place of God.'" (Gen 50:19). She said to him: 'Isaac, your father, did this for you mother, Rebekah. Was it not?? the two of them who stood and prayed one opposite the other. As it is written "Isaac entreated God on behalf of his wife." (Gen. 25:21). Thus you can pray for me to God.<sup>27</sup>

Buber's Tanhuma, refers to Rebekah and Isaac's as a part of Rachel's appeals to Jacob's sensibilities. The midrash also cites Rebekah's experience as support for Rachel's desire to bear children.

In addition to the rabbinic comparison of Rebekah to other barren women, Rashi compares Rebekah's pregnancy and birth to Tamar's experience:

"And her days were full" (Gen. 25:24). As compared to Tamar, as it

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<sup>27</sup> Midrash Tanhuma. Edited by Buber. (Vilna: Romm, 1885), Vayetze: page 78b

is written: "And it came to pass in the time of her travail, that, behold, twins were in her womb." (Gen. 38:27). Who did not fill her days. She gave birth at seven months.<sup>28</sup>

"And there were twins" (Gen. 25:24). The hebrew word "tomim" , twins is written shortened. But in reference to Tamar the term "teomim" is written complete. Therefore the two of them were righteous, but here (Gen 25:24) one was righteous and the other evil.<sup>29</sup>

Rashi contrasts the two biblical stories of Rebekah and Tamar. According to Rashi's commentary, both Rebekah and Tamar give birth to twins, yet their individual experiences differ. Like Tamar, Rebekah does not carry her pregnancy to term. In contrast to Tamar, Rebekah's offsprings have opposite dispositions; one is just, while the other is wicked.<sup>30</sup> Rashi's comparison between Tamar and Rebekah concentrates solely on their pregnancy and children. Thus, Rashi perpetuates the rabbinic definition of women as childbearer and childrearer.

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28 Rashi on Genesis 25:24.

29 Ibid.

30 Rashi refers to the Hebrew word for "twins" found in the Rebekah and in the Tamar passages. In the Rebekah passage the Hebrew term "tomim" is spelled in a short form. While, in the Tamar passage the Hebrew term "teomim" is spelled in the long form. Thereby, Rashi comments that Tamar had two righteous children. Rebekah, on the other hand, had one righteous son and one wicked son. This is a linguistic explanation.

The rabbinic texts concentrate on Rebekah's barren state and compare her experience to other biblical women. Similarly, rabbinic texts reenforce traditional women's roles by comparing the experiences of barrenness and pregnancy. Rabbinic literature emphasizes women's experiences when those experiences validate the rabbinic categories of women -- distinctive from men's roles.

In addition to comparing women's experiences, Rebekah's pain of childbirth stands as a metaphor for the pain of the birth of a nation in a Sifre text. Rebekah's travail of childbirth mirrors the trials and tribulations of the birth of a nation:

"Of the rock that begot you, you were unmindful" (Deut.32:18). The Holy One said to them: You caused me to feel like a male trying to give birth. If a woman about to give birth is sitting on the birth stool, is she not anxious, as it is said: "For the children are come to the birth and there is not strength to bring forth?" (Kings II 19:3). If she is in travail and giving birth for the first time would she not be anxious? As it is written: "For I have heard a voice as of a woman in travail the anguish as of her that brings forth her first child." (Jer. 4:31). If there are twins in her womb, would she not be anxious? As it is written: "And the children struggled together within her (Gen. 25:22). If it is a male, who does not ordinarily give birth but is trying to give birth, would not the pain be doubled and redoubled? As it is written: "Ask and see whether a man does travail with child." (Jer

30:6).31

The use of Gen. 25:22 for proof text confirms the pain of childbirth as it compares to the birth of a nation. Unlike the previous rabbinic texts that compare women's experiences, the Sifre midrash compares a woman's experience of childbirth to Israel's relationship to God. The metaphor affirms the rabbinic hierarchy: Israel is to God as women are to men.

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31 Sifre. translated by Reuven Hanner. (new Haven and London:Yale University Press,1986), Heezinu; Parsha 19

### Jacob and Esau:

Throughout the rabbinic commentary, the rabbis concentrate on Jacob and Esau's distinctions and destinies. Jacob symbolizes Israel, while Esau refers to Rome. The rabbis refer to the Rebekah narrative as the source for the pre-ordained hatred between the two brothers, for they struggled in the womb.

The rabbinic interpretation of Genesis 25:22 focuses on Jacob and Esau giving little attention to Rebekah. For in this same verse Rebekah communicates directly with God. The rabbinic literature emphasizes Jacob and Esau's struggle. Thus the rabbis define Rebekah as the mother of two competing nations:

"And the children struggled together within her" (Gen. 25:22). R. Johanan and Resh Lakish discussed this. R. Johanan said: Each ran to slay the other. Resh Lakish said: Each annulled the laws of the other. R. Berekiah observed in R. Levi's name: Do not think that only after issuing into the light of the world was he (Esau) antagonistic to him, but even while still in his mother's womb his fist was stretched out against him. thus it is written "The wicked stretch out their fists from the womb" (Ps. 58:4).<sup>32</sup>

In Bereshit Rabbah, the rabbinic authorities dwell on the hostility between Jacob and Esau. R. Johanan discusses the physical hatred, while Resh Lakish focuses on the legal disagreements between the two brothers.

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<sup>32</sup> Bereshit Rabbah; Toledot: 63:5

Conversely, R. Berekiah observes the intensity of the hatred, he substantiates it by the fact they were fighting in their mother's womb.

In a Bereshit Rabbah text, the rabbinic opinion focuses on Jacob and Esau's separate religious affiliations. The distinction between the two brothers is traced back to their mother's womb.

And the children struggled together within her. They sought to run within her. When she stood near synagogues or schools, Jacob struggled to come out; hence it is written, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee (Jer 1:5). While when she passed idolatrous temples, Esau eagerly struggled to come out; hence it is written, The wicked are estranged from the womb. (Ps. 58:4).(33)

The midrash in Bereshit Rabbah connects the two words with similar sounding Hebrew roots, "לָבַח' ", struggled, and the word "רָץ ", to run. This serves to interpret the biblical text more elaborately. Jacob and Esau were running within Rebekah's womb, therefore causing her great pain. The analysis illustrates that the two were inherently opposed to one another, and confirms that Esau, the symbol of Rome, was Israel's pre-ordained enemy.

Rashi, in his biblical commentary refers to the above Bereshit Rabbah text:

"And the children struggled"; This text says against its will interpret me, for it concealed what this struggle was about and wrote: "If it be so wherefore am I thus?" Our Rabbis interpreted; "And they struggled as denoting running. When she passed by the doors of the Torah of Shem and Eber, Jacob ran and struggled to leave. And when she passed by idol worshippers Esau ran and struggled to leave. Another interpretation "And they struggled: they struggled and quarrelled over the inheritance of the two worlds.<sup>34</sup>

Rashi reiterates his contention in the Midrash Rabbah text. He attributes the struggle within Rebekah's womb to Jacob and Esau's excitement to meet their individual life challenges. Rashi presents a clearer vision of the Rebekah narrative through an elaboration on the categories in Bereshit Rabbah.

In Midrash Tanhuma, the Buber edition, Genesis 25:22, focuses exclusively on Jacob's hardships. The interpretation of the Toledot biblical text pictures Jacob as a man in turmoil. Jacob's traumatic relationship with Esau is particularly significant. According to the Tanhuma text, these experiences served to strengthen the future patriarch of the Israelite people:

"And El Shaddai will give you mercy"  
 What did Jacob see to bless them  
 with El Shaddai? to learn that much  
 affliction was upon him, even in his  
 mother's womb Esau quarreled with



him, As it is written; "And the children struggled in her womb." (Gen. 25:22). And " For the transgressions of .Edom...he did pursue his brother with the sword, and did not cast off all pity." (Amos 1:11). It is written "his pity", Jacob had to flee to Laban because of Esau, He saw a few problems "Thus I was; in the day the drought consumed me and the frost by night." (Gen 31:40). And Laban pursued him to kill him (Jacob) as it is written: "He took his brethren with him and pursued after him for seven days' journey." (Gen. 31:23). When he escaped from him Esau came to request to kill him and caused him a loss of all his gifts "two hundred she goats..."(Gen. 32:16). When he left Esau the anguish of Dinah came upon him, and after that the pain of Rachel, and after that the anguish of Hallelu, and he requested to rest a little, until the anguish of Joseph came and afterward the pain of Isaac, his father excommunicated for twelve years after the sale of Joseph As it is written; He cried "I had no reprise, nor had I rest, nor was I quiet, yet trouble came. " (Amos 3:26). Afterwards the anguish of Shimon came upon him, the anguish of Benjamin. Therefore he prayed to El Shaddai He said: He who said to the heavens and to the earth, enough, he will say enough to my troubles. Thus, when the Holy One created the heavens and the earth they extended and continued until God said to them enough, therefore it is written: "El Shaddai gives you mercy.35

The Tanhuma text establishes Jacob as a pre-ordained leader of the Jewish people. His struggle with Esau in the womb was just the beginning of a life filled

with problems and misfortune. This text also validates Jacob's acceptance of Esau's birth rite.

Another Tanhuma text reviews Jacob in light of previous patriarchs and their life experiences. The midrash sets out to prove that this statement is true for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The text reads:

"It shall come to pass in the last days that the mountain of God's house shall be established on the top of the mountains." (Is. 2:2). That which the verse says "The beginning was small, yet the end will be very great" (Job 8:7). You learn that all who are pardoned in the beginning are calm in the end. There has not been a pardon more than from Abraham. that he cast off in the kiln of fire, he was sent from his father, and sixteen kings sought after him. He was tried with ten trials, he buried Sarah and to the end he followed. "And Abraham was old, advanced in years and God blessed him (Gen 24:1). Isaac was pardoned in his youth. The Philistines were envious of him as it is written. "Avimelech said to Isaac: Go from us, for you are mightier than we (Gen. 26:17). And to the end they requested of him as it says; "Isaac said to them; Why do you come to me seeing you hate me, and have sent me away?" (Gen. 26:27) And Jacob was pardoned in his youth. As it says; "May a time have they afflicted me from my youth yet they have not prevailed against me. (Ps. 129:2) Even with in his mother' womb Esau wanted to kill him As it is written " And the children struggled in her womb. "(Gen. 25:22) and he accepted the blessings Esau held a grudge against Jacob. "And Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his father blessed him (Gen. 22:41) So he fled

to Laban and was pardoned in his house. Afterwards, Laban wanted to kill him As it is written "An Aramian nomad was my father" (Deut. 26:5). He went out from him and met Esau As it is written "Jacob lifted his eyes and looked and, behold, Esau came with four hundred men (Gen. 33:1) And she came to him the anguish of Dinah and the anguish of Jacob to the end he followed. As it is written "And Joseph nourished his father and his brethren." (Gen. 47:12). Therefore the beginning was small but the end was great.<sup>36</sup>

This midrash focuses on the first three patriarchs, Abraham Isaac, and Jacob. The Genesis 25:22 text is used to prove Jacob's life of unrest. Despite Jacob's manifold trials he confirmed his ancestors believed in God.

The rabbis also focus on the analysis of a pre-ordained conflict between the two different philosophies of religion symbolized by the Jacob and Esau story. The rabbinic texts read "גוים", "nations" to mean "מלכות" kingdom". Edom, was stronger than Israel in the political reality of the rabbis. Yet the literature reflects the belief that Israel will overcome the Roman Empire with the help of God. A talmudic passage from Pesachim discusses this concept in light of the laws of Passover:

(Mishnah) The Following things must be removed on Passover: Babylonian

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<sup>36</sup> Tanhuma; Buber akev; pg. 9b; This midrash is also found in Tanhuma; akev; pg. 6a

Kutah, Median beer Idumean vinegar.....

(Gemara) Idumean Vinegar: Because barley is cast into it R. Nahman [b. Isaac] said: in former times, when they used to bring [wine] libations from Judah, the wine of Judah did not turn vinegar unless barley was put into it, and they used to call it simply vinegar. But now the wine of Idumeans does not turn vinegar until barley is put into it, and it is called, 'Idumean vinegar' in fulfillment of what is said: [Tyre hath said against Jerusalem] I shall be replenished, now that she is laid waste." (Ex. 26:2) If one is full [flourishing] the other is desolate, and if the other is full the first is desolate. R. Nahman b. Isaac quoted this a: "The one people shall be stronger than the other people." (Gen. 25:23).<sup>37</sup>

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The struggle between Jacob and Esau confirms the rabbinic view that Israel will lose control of its destiny.

Rashi posits the same analysis from the Talmud text in his commentary on Genesis:

"One shall be stronger than the other people", They will not be equal in greatness. When one rises the other will fall. As it is said: "I shall be filled with her that is laid waste (Ez. 26:2). Tyre will be filled only with the destruction of Jerusalem."<sup>38</sup>

A second Talmud Bavli use of Gen. 25:23 also redefines the term, nation, to mean kingdom. The

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<sup>37</sup> Talmud Bavli; Peshachim pg. 42b

<sup>38</sup> Rashi Genesis 25:23.

opinion expresses the Torah as the guarantee that Israel will be the stronger nation:

R. Hanina b. Papa, some say R. Simlai, expounded on the foregoing verse thus: In times to come, the Holy One will take a scroll of the law in God's embrace and proclaim: 'Let him who has occupied himself herewith, come and take his reward.' Thereupon all the nations will crowd together in confusion, as it is said: "All the nations are gathered together." (Is. 43:9) The Holy One will then say to them 'Come not before Me in confusion, but let each nation come in [2b] with its scribes; as it is said "Let the peoples be gathered together" (Ibid) and the word le'on means a kingdom as it is written 'And one Kingdom (uleon) shall be stronger than the other kingdom. (Gen. 25:23).39

The talmud text interprets the term for nations to mean kingdom. Thus making Jacob and Esau symbols for the kingdoms of Israel and Rome. The rabbis assert that one day Israel will rule over Rome, just as Jacob won Esau's birthright.

### Chapter Conclusion:

A survey of the rabbinic literature of Genesis 25:21-24, reveals an ambivalent perception of Rebekah. The rabbis openly connect Rebekah with other barren women in the Bible; use the narrative to support linguistic concepts<sup>40</sup>; and discuss the rivalry between Jacob and Esau when she is portrayed in the traditional role as wife and mother.

The rabbis response to God's direct approach to Rebekah reveals contradictions in the literature. The majority of rabbinic literature reinterprets God's direct words to Rebekah as communication spoken through an intermediary. A Bereshit Rabbah text goes as far as to say that God never speaks directly to women. On the other hand, some of Rashi's biblical commentary on Genesis 25:22,23 assumes direct interaction between God and Rebekah. These contradictions reflect the mediate status Rebekah holds in the rabbinic literature. The rabbis assert that speaking directly to God is reserved for male prophets in the Bible.

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40 For an extensive look at the linguistic use of Genesis 25:21-24, see the following rabbinic texts:

1. For an explanation of the connection between the Hebrew word for "entreat" and the word for "pitchfork" see: Talmud Bavli; Succah 14a; Rashi's commentary on Succah 14a; and Bereshit Rabbah, Toledot 63:5.
2. For citations connecting the Hebrew term for "entreat" with other Hebrew words denoting the act of prayer see: Sifre, Peska 26 and Rashi on 25:21.

IV. TZIPPORAH

Tzipporah:

And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place He met him and sought to kill him. Then Tzipporah took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at his feet and she said: "You are a bridegroom of blood to me." So He let him go. Then she said: "You are a bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision." (Exodus 4:24-26)

Exodus 4:24-26 is the source for extensive rabbinic commentary. This Tzipporah narrative presents a number of unanswered questions based on the language, the style and the content of the biblical passage. The narrative's cryptic linguistic form demands explanation, since the entire story is contained in three verses. A series of questions are raised through rabbinic discussion of the Exodus text, including:

Who does God pursue?

Why does the act of circumcision curtail the Divine death threat?

Why does Tzipporah perform the circumcision?

What does Tzipporah's participation say about women's role in ritual activity?

The rabbinic questions stem from a cultural milieu. In addition to the issues raised in the rabbinic literature, the omitted questions reveal significant rabbinic concerns. This chapter will investigate these questions to provide a full accounting of the rabbinic view of Exodus 4:24-26.



Moses' Role:

The central concern of the rabbinic literature centers on Moses failure to participate in his son's circumcision. Rabbinic response presents a variety of explanations for Moses' role in Exodus 4:24-26. The first genre of text focuses on the power of the initiation rite of circumcision. According to this view, the Divine hostility focuses on Moses because he neglected to fulfill an obligation to circumcise his son. The Talmud Bavli and the Talmud Yerushalmi acknowledge that Moses sinned and was punished by the threat of death. In the Babylonian Talmud this opinion is cited in a baraita attributed to Rabbi Yehoshuah b. Karka. The text states as follows:

It is learned that Rabbi Yehoshuah b. Karka said: 'Great is circumcision for it did not stand against all the deeds of Moses, our teacher, when he neglected the [precept] of circumcision.' As it is written: "He met him and sought to kill him" (Exodus 4:24).<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Yehoshuah b. Karka asserts that even Moses, with his leadership status, was not exempt from the obligation of circumcision. The fact that Moses, the quintessential Israelite leader, was not excused for his failure to circumcise his son provides testimony to the power of this ritual.

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud; Berachot 31b

In two separate versions, the Yerushalmi expresses amazement that Moses neglected his obligation of performing a brit ceremony. Furthermore, it substantiates these opinions differently than the position in the Babylonian text. The first source, which is closer to the Babylonian text, states:

"And so it came to pass on the way at the lodging place" (Ex. 4:24); So beloved is circumcision that Moses' punishment for the neglect was not delayed one hour. Therefore when he was on his way and failed to circumcise, Eleazer, his son, immediately: "The Lord met him and sought to kill him" (Ex. 4:24).<sup>2</sup>

The Yerushalmi focuses on the punishment of death instead of Moses' leadership record. The threat of death, therefore, demonstrates the power of a father's responsibility to circumcise his son. Tzipporah is absent from both texts, for they focus on Moses alone as if Tzipporah had not been present.

In a second Yerushalmi text, however, Tzipporah is given a voice:

Then she said "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision." (Ex. 4:26) She said: 'Great is the precept of circumcision for my husband was deserving of death for he delayed to fulfill the precept of circumcision. If not for it, he would not be saved.'<sup>3</sup>

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2 Talmud Yerushalmi, Berachot, Parsha 5:8

3 Ibid

This Talmud Yerushalmi passage emphasizes the importance of circumcision in a positive restatement of the negative conclusion above. Not only does the failure to circumcise one's own son result in death to the father, but one's own circumcision may, as it does here, save such a father from death. Tzipporah acknowledges that the act of circumcision saved Moses from mortal danger.

In an Exodus Rabbah text, God reprimands Moses for neglecting to circumcise his son. In this midrash from Exodus Rabbah, God explains to Moses the implications of his failure to circumcise Eleazer:

God said to him: 'How can you think to bring Israel out of Egypt and to humble a great king, when you have forgotten my covenant, and did not circumcise your son?'<sup>4</sup>

This Midrash Rabbah text accents the expectations of Moses as the future leader of the Israelite nation. He is required to remember the covenant made between God and the Israelites through the act of circumcision. Even Moses, the Israelite prophet, must validate this covenant by circumcising his son.

Another category of rabbinic response denies that Moses neglects the rite of circumcision. Rabbi Yosi and Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi (Rabbi) venture to excuse Moses

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus Rabbah. M. A. Mirkin, (Tel-Aviv:1956-64), page. 93b.

from this major sin by accusing him of a lesser transgression--that of postponing Eleazer's circumcision. In short, R. Yosi and Rabbi [Jehudah ha-Nasi] protect Moses' character by minimizing his violation of law.

Two basic texts emerge out of the Tannaitic period in the Babylonian Talmud. These two variations are continually recirculated in later texts.<sup>5</sup> The extensive exposure of the Rabbi Yosi and Rabbi [Jehudah ha-Nasi] opinions prove the popularity of excusing Moses from the transgression of not circumcising his son:

R. Yosi said: God forbid that Moses would not tarry to do the act of circumcision. Rather he wondered about the law and said: 'If I circumcise [my son] and then go out [to continue my journey], it will be dangerous [for my son]. But [if I] tarry, [I will not obey God's order when] God said to me "Go and return to Egypt" (Ex. 4:19). Thus [Moses was punished] because he was slow with the lodging before the circumcision. As it is written: "It came to pass on the way to the lodging place" (Ex. 4:24).<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi [Jehudah ha-Nasi] said: God

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<sup>5</sup>This Rabbi Yosi and Rabbi Jehudah ha-Nasi texts that refer to Moses' failure to circumcise his son are found in the following rabbinic literature.

1) Mekilta D'Rabbi Ishmael. Translated by Jacob Z. Lauterbach. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1949), Parshat Yetro pages 191, 192.

2) Yalkut Shimoni. Edited by Dov Hyman. (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1973), Akav tet; remez 853

3) Rashi, Ex. 4:24:

forbid that Moses would neglect the [precept] of circumcision rather he said: If I circumcise [my son] and then I leave he will be in danger. As it is written: "And it came to pass on the third day when they were sore" (Gen. 34:25). If I circumcise [him] and then (I will) tarry after three days. But God said to me "Go return to Egypt" (Ex. 4:19). Then why was Moses punished? Because he busied himself first with the inn. As it is written: "And it came to pass by the way of the inn" (Ex. 4:24).<sup>7</sup>

Rabbi Yosi and Rabbi's [Jehudah ha-Nasi] deliberations serve to protect Moses from criticism. Both views affirm that the safety of Eleazer remains Moses' primary concern. Moses concern for safety forces the postponement of circumcision due to the danger of a trip on newly circumcised infant. R. Yosi and Rabbi [Jehudah ha-Nasi] confirm that Moses would not neglect circumcising his son. According to this opinion, Moses can only be accused of postponing the circumcision until after lodging was attained. The explanation in the Talmud does not expiate Moses, but protects his character from the major transgression of neglecting the circumcision of his son.

An additional rabbinic commentary on this biblical text expounds on the reasons for Moses' behavior. The Yalkut Shimoni offers another interpretation for Moses' actions. It adds that:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid 31b-32a

"Since Moses was content to dwell with the man"(Ex. 2:21). In the hour that Moses said to Jethro: Give me Tzipporah, your daughter, as a wife. Jethro said to him: Accept one thing which I will state to you, then I will give her to you as your wife. Moses asked: What is it? Jethro responded: The first son you have will worship idols and the second may belong to God. Moses accepted this upon himself. Jethro said: Swear it to me. Moses did. As it is written: "Moses was content"(Ex. 2:21).<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, Moses' failure to perform the obligation is understood through a previous agreement between Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro. Moses did not neglect his obligation to circumcise his son. On the contrary, Moses was bound to a verbal contract with Jethro.

Ibn Ezra's offers another explanation for Moses' inability to act. He contends that Moses did not perform the circumcision due fear. Moses, according to Ibn Ezra's commentary, was trembling because of the Divine threat on his life.<sup>9</sup> Moses reacts to the threat on his life and therefore, was unable to perform the circumcision himself. Consequently, the responsibility to circumcise Eleazer was left up to Tzipporah.

The central question in all of the above rabbinic texts concerns Moses' negligence to fulfill the

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<sup>8</sup> Yalkut Shimoni. Edited by Dov Hyman. (Jerusalem: Mosad Rav Kook, 1973), remez 169; page 45

<sup>9</sup> Ibn Ezra; Exodus 4:24.

obligation to Eleazer. The rabbinic questions concerning Exodus 4:24-26, all share a common premise, focusing on Moses' neglect to circumcise his son. It is inconceivable to the rabbinic authorities that Moses, a distinctive leader of the Israelite nation, would neglect a covenantal ritual. There are two different categories of rabbinic explanations concerning Moses' role in this biblical passage. The first genre of text holds Moses responsible for his failure to circumcise Eleazer. The second set of opinions excuse Moses from the accusation of neglecting the act of circumcision.

### Tzipporah:

The rabbinic discussion of Tzipporah concerns her role in the Exodus passage. Two major questions emerge from this text. How did she know to circumcise her son? How did she know that the circumcision would halt the Divine wrath? The rabbinic texts substantiate Tzipporah's act through outside sources. In a Talmud Bavli aggadic text, Tzipporah is informed of her obligation to circumcise her son by the actions of two characters, Af and Hemah. Af represents anger personified, and Hemah personifies wrath. The Talmud text reads:

During the hour that Moses neglected  
(the precept of) circumcision Af  
and Hemah came and swallowed him up  
leaving nothing but his legs.  
Immediately Tzipporah took a flint  
and cut the foreskin of her son.  
Immediately, God left him alone.<sup>10</sup>

The characters, Af and Hemah, serve an important role in the talmudic explanation of the Tzipporah narrative. They instruct Tzipporah to circumcise her son. This interpretation suggests that Tzipporah needed guidance from external forces. Consequently, in the rabbinic literature, Tzipporah is not given credit for her act. It is assumed that Tzipporah's response in the biblical passage to the Divine threat of death proves not to be of her own initiative. Other versions

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10 Talmud Bavli; Nedarim; 32a



suggest a similar theme. The Talmud Yerushalmi identifies an Angel as the agent that informs Tzipporah of her duty to circumcise her son. In the Yerushalmi it states:

"Tzipporah took the flint and cut the foreskin of her son." (Ex. 4:25) How did Tzipporah know that it [the death threat] was because of Moses' delay in performing [the precept] of circumcision? For the angel came and swallowed Moses from his head until his circumcision. Since she saw that the angel did not swallow him up to his circumcision she recognized that it was because of the precept of circumcision that he was in danger. And then she knew how great is the power of circumcision because the angel did not consume him anymore up to the circumcision. "She cut the foreskin of her son and threw it upon his leg" (Ex. 4:25).<sup>11</sup>

The basic premise in this Yerushalmi text supports Tzipporah's need for external guidance. The angel informs Tzipporah of the proper action to take. The assumption remains--Tzipporah would not know to circumcise her son without direction from an external informant.

Rashi paints a more elaborate picture of this scene. He states:

The angel was made into a serpent and swallowed him from his head to his thighs, and he swallowed him again from his feet to that place. Then Tzipporah understood it (the

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<sup>11</sup> Talmud Yerushalmi--Parsha 5:8

death threat) was because of the  
circumcision.<sup>12</sup>

Rashi's commentary agrees in principle with the other variant explanations of this text, yet he elaborates on the details. He borrows the symbol of a serpent from an Exodus Rabbah<sup>13</sup> passage, and creates the picture of the angel transforming into a serpent to instruct Tzipporah on the methods of circumcision.

The rabbinic literature's discussion of Tzipporah focuses on the external force that informs her to circumcise her son. The commentaries differ in the identity of this force. They are in agreement, however, that Tzipporah could not of known to circumcise Eleazer independently.

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<sup>12</sup> Rashi; Ex. 4:24-26.

<sup>13</sup> Exodus Rabbah; page 93b

### Style:

The linguistic style of the biblical narrative creates conceptual problems for the rabbis. The Tzipporah narrative demands explanation because its Hebrew is cryptic. The most pervasive linguistic problem is that the text says "he" several times without identifying the person referred to in the narrative.

The first example of the linguistic complexities in the biblical narrative, centers around identifying who posed the threat of death to whom. This confusion derives from the Hebrew that begins the Exodus passage, "God encountered him, and he sought to kill him." It is clear from the biblical narrative that God met up with Moses and his family, yet who was seeking after whom remains unclear. All of the rabbinic authorities assume that a Divine being of some sort posed the threat of death. The Yerushalmi addresses this issue by stating: "Although he was an Angel of mercy he still sought out to kill him."<sup>14</sup> The Talmud Yerushalmi identifies the angel of mercy as the one who delivers the Divine death threat. This rabbinic text does not offer an explanation of why the angel carried out the Divine orders, it simply states the interpretation as fact.

Exodus Rabbah names Gabriel as the pursuer.

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<sup>14</sup>Talmud Yerushalmi--Parsha 5:8

"He sought to kill him" (Ex. 4:24). That is as we have learned: Gabriel came down in a flame of fire to destroy him, having the appearance of a serpent. [The serpent] was chosen as emblematical of the King of Egypt who is compared to a serpent.<sup>15</sup>

The Exodus Rabbah passage identifies the angel, Gabriel, as the one who presents the threat of death as a Divine warning. The midrash differs from the Yerushalmi text by naming Gabriel as the angel who seeks to kill, instead of the angel of mercy.

In the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel posits that it is none other than Satan himself who is prepared to kill due to the presence of an uncircumcised infant.<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel's opinion detaches Satan, the source of the death threat from God's appearance at the beginning of the narrative. As it says: "God encountered him and he sought to kill him"(Gen. 25:21).

All of the above rabbinic texts, the Talmud Yerushalmi, Exodus Rabbah, and the Babylonian Talmud, attempt to disengage the messenger of death from God. All three passages acknowledge the pursuer to be a Divine Being, yet none of them confirm it could of been God, the Holy One.

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<sup>15</sup> Exodus Rabbah; 93b.

<sup>16</sup> Babylonian Talmud--Nedarim; 32a

The rabbis debate whose life was pursued in the introduction of this biblical passage. In the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Shimon son of Gamliel imagines that the infant's life is in danger. The text states:

Satan did not seek to kill Moses but the child for it is written, "Then Tzipporah took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet and said, 'Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me'" (Ex. 4:25).<sup>17</sup>

The above talmudic passage focuses on the infant as the object of the Divine wrath. Objectification of the infant remains consistent with a rather unusual definition of the term, chatan damim, the talmudic citation continues:

"Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me" (Ex. 4:25). Go and see who is called a 'bridegroom' it is surely the infant.<sup>18</sup>

Focusing on the infant as the central figure of this text obscures the roles of both Moses and Tzipporah. Yet according to Rabbi Shimon son of Gamliel, the infant is the one in danger for he is not circumcised. This confirms that the removal of an infant's foreskin protects that infant from evil and

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid: This identical text is quoted in the halachic midrash on Exodus, Mekilta D'Rabbi Ishmael, Translated by Jacob Z. Lauterbach. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America), Yitro; parsha 1; pp. 191-192

Divine anger.

The Yerushalmi reasons that the infant's blood serves as the ultimate protector against the Divine death threat. Expounding on Tzipporah's words, the Talmud Yerushalmi elucidates upon the meaning of the narrative.

She said: "You are a bridegroom of blood to me"(Ex. 4:25). She said: You will be my connection for with your blood, you have given me the merit of circumcision. [Therefore] I fulfilled the commandment. "And He left him alone"(Ex. 4:26).<sup>19</sup>

The interpretation that the infant's blood averts the Divine wrath in the Talmud Yerushalmi, agrees with the Targumic interpretation on this biblical narrative. Onkelos translates the term damim as the blood of the circumcision,<sup>(20)</sup> assuming that it was the blood of Eleazer's circumcision that detoured the Divine death threat.

Exodus Rabbah diverts the reader's attention away from Eleazer. While not denying that it was Eleazer who was circumcised, the midrash declares that Moses was the object of Divine wrath. Exodus Rabbah states:

"And it came to pass on the way to the lodging place that God met him and sought to kill him"(Ex 4:24). This is in reference to Moses. God said to him: How can you think to

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19 Talmud Yerushalmi; Parsha 5; Halacha 8

20 Onkelos--Exodus 4:25

bring Israel out of Egypt and to humble a great king when you have forgotten my covenant, and did not circumcise him.<sup>21</sup>

This elucidation of the text blames Moses for not fulfilling his obligation and therefore sees him as the one deserving of Divine punishment. Rashi confirms the Exodus Rabbah approach:

Then she (Tzipporah) understood that because of the circumcision He had come to kill him (Moses).<sup>22</sup>

Rashi's confirmation that Moses was the object of the Divine wrath is consistent with his treatment of the term chatan damim, which is understood by him to refer to Moses:

My bridegroom who would have been killed because of the circumcision.<sup>23</sup>

You [the infant] are the cause that my bridegroom [Moses] was going to be slain.<sup>24</sup>

The commentaries of Exodus Rabbah and Rashi conclude that Moses was negligent for not fulfilling his obligation. The commentaries agree that Moses' punishment stems from the failure to circumcise Eleazer.

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<sup>21</sup> Exodus Rabbah; 93b.

<sup>22</sup> Rashi; Ex. 4:24

<sup>23</sup> Ibid; Ex. 4:25

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

Another need for linguistic clarification centers around the possessive pronoun in the phrase, raqlav, "at his feet," in the sentence: "Then Tzipporah took a flint, and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast it at his feet"(Ex. 4:25). The text remains unclear to whose feet the text refers. Three opinions emerge in the following Talmud text:

R. Judah, R. Nehemiah, and the Rabbis; one said: It was the feet of Moses, Another said: It was the feet of the Angel, The third said: It was the feet of the infant. He who said Moses: that which is a sin for you has been cut off. He who said the Angel: You have done your duty. And he who said the infant maintains: She touched the body of the infant. So He let him alone. Thus she said: "You are a bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision"(Ex. 4:26).<sup>25</sup>

These three options illustrate the complexity of this particular biblical passage. In each opinion Moses, the Angel, or the infant present a different understanding of the Tzipporah narrative. The analysis have strong implications concerning the act of circumcision. If the feet are to be identified as Moses', then Moses must be the object of the Divine wrath. Consequently, Moses is held responsible for neglecting his duty to circumcise Eleazer. If it is the angel's feet, the ritual of circumcision wards off



Divine anger. If, on the other hand Tzipporah casts the foreskin at the infant's feet, the infant acts as the object of the Divine death threat. The latter confirms circumcision protects the infant from Divine anger. In short the remedy is applied to either the sinner (Moses), the agent of punishment (the angel) or the victim of the crime (the child).

Rashi's commentary confirms R. Judah's opinion. Rashi affirms that Tzipporah casts Eleazer's foreskin at Moses' feet. He comments: "Whose feet did she cast it before? Moses' feet." 26 Rashi's view remains consistent throughout his commentary on Exodus 4:24-26. Rashi contends that Moses is responsible to circumcise Eleazer. Therefore, in keeping with this basic premise, the Divine Being pursued Moses. Moses was called the chatam damim, and Tzipporah caste the foreskin at Moses' feet to protect him from the Divine threat.

In addition to the commentaries that clarify the participants in this passage the rabbinic commentaries also focus on grammatical points of interest.

The Talmud Bavli the commentary focuses on the plural form of circumcision in Exodus chapter four, verse twenty six. The passage contains an explanation for this strange grammatical form. The quotation serves to elucidate the actual circumcision procedure. The

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26 Rashi; Exodus 4:25.

text asserts:

Lemulot is in the plural form for we know there are two acts of circumcision--1. the actual circumcision, 2. and the other for uncovering the corona.<sup>27</sup>

The twofold method for removing the foreskin during a ritual circumcision explains the unusual plural form found in the Exodus passage. The narrative focuses on the procedure for ritual circumcision which was stressed in the Tannaitic period.<sup>28</sup>

The midrashic compilation, Yalkut Shimoni provides a commentary on another grammatical point in this Exodus passage. The midrash interprets the use of the term az, which introduces Tzipporah's statement: "You are a bridegroom of blood to me." (Ex. 4:25) The text states:

"Then (az) she said: You are a bridegroom of blood to me" (Ex. 4:25). All of Moses' business is introduced with az. In what respect is Moses' life saved, introduced with az?

Moses' remonstrance is introduced with az. That it is written: "Since (ma-az) I have come to Pharaoh he has dealt ill with this people" (Ex. 5:23). His song is introduced with az: "Then (az) Moses

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27 Babylonian Talmud--Nedarim 38a

28 Mishnah Shabbat 19:6 stresses the shedding of blood in circumcision.

sang"(Ex.15:1). And the portion of the cities was introduced with az. "Then (az) Moses set apart these cities"(Deut. 4:41).<sup>29</sup>

This midrashic text converges a multitude of other biblical narratives that center on Moses activities and that begin with the hebrew term, az. The midrashic text substantiates the use of az in this Exodus narrative through the use of proof texts from other biblical passages.

In addition to explaining grammatical points within this biblical text, the rabbinic commentaries also make a point to define the term, negea, to touch. The commentaries attempt to clarify the act of touching the feet with the foreskin. The text compares:

To approach (karov), to touch (negea), and to come near (nagash): These three terms sometime signify to draw near and approach in space. Elsewhere they signify the union of cognition. similar to proximity of one body to another... The first signification of touching is drawing near of one body to another: "And she caused it to touch his feet"(Ex. 4:25).<sup>30</sup>

Maimonides in The Guide to the Perplexed, connects different Hebrew words that have similar definitions. The Tzipporah text uses the Hebrew word, nagash,

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29 Yalkut Shimoni-- remez 174; page 63

30 Guide to the Perplexed; Rabbenu Moses ben Maimon, (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook), Chapter 1:18, pg. 23b-24a.

meaning to draw near. This Hebrew term is used when Tzipporah touches the foot with Eleazer's foreskin to stop the Divine death threat.

The grammatical difficulties in Exodus 4:24-26 are numerous. The rabbinic literature attempts to solve the linguistic questions, yet adds another dimension of possible textual readings.

**Halacha:**

The Talmud begins by questioning the people responsible to circumcise a child if the father is unable to perform his obligation, by asking:

How do we know it [that a father is obligated to circumcise his son]? Because it is written, "And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac"(Gen.21:4). And if his father did not circumcise him, Beth din is bound to circumcise him, for it is written, "Every male among you shall be circumcised"(Ibid 17:10). And if Beth din did not circumcise him, he is bound to circumcise himself, for it is written, "And the uncircumcised male who will not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off"(Ibid 17:14).<sup>31</sup>

The explanation concerning a father's inability to circumcise his son presupposes the Moses-Tzipporah narrative. One would derive from an objective reading of the Tzipporah passage that the mother is obligated to circumcise her son if the father is unable. Yet the gemara above places the responsibility on a Beth Din and men only. Throughout the halachic discussion of why it is not the mother's responsibility to circumcise her son, the text does not even mention Tzipporah's actions.

How do we know that she [the mother] has no such obligation? Because it is written [And Abraham circumcised his son...] as God had commanded

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<sup>31</sup> Talmud Bavli; Kiddushin 29a.

him" (Gen.21:4): him not her [the mother]. Now, we find this was so at that time; how do we know it for generations [all time]? The School of R. Ishmael taught: whenever 'commanded' is stated, its only purpose is to denote exhortation for then and all time. Exhortation, as it is written. "But charge Joshua, and encourage him and strengthen him" (Deut.3:28). Then and for all time, as it is written, "from the day that Adonai gave commandment, and onward throughout your generations." (Num.15:23).<sup>32</sup>

The discussion of the mother's obligation concerning the circumcision of her son, does not mention the Tzipporah narrative. One would assume the rabbis would denounce Tzipporah's act of circumcising her son as support for their halachic decision. Yet the biblical text of Exodus 4:24-26 is absent. Clearly, the rabbis would rather ignore the Tzipporah passage than confront and denounce her actions, thereby keeping this biblical passage obscure.

During the Geonic time women reemerge as participants in the circumcision ritual. In Seder Rav Amram (c.860) the mother has a prayer recited on behalf of her own recovery and of the infant's health. Immediately following the benediction, she takes a sip of wine.<sup>33</sup> Again there is no reference to Tzipporah,

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Seder Rav Amram. Goldschmidt edition. (Jerusalem: Mosad Rav Kook, 1971), pg.180.

yet upon the father's recitation of the circumcision blessing, he cites a biblical reference to Abraham. Through the Geonic time the Tzipporah narrative remained obscure in order to perpetuate the clear categories concerning women and men's roles in the rabbinic period.

The absence of the Tzipporah passage in halachic works confirms that Tzipporah's act of circumcising her son was a threat to the rabbinic understanding of women. The rabbis choose to conceal this biblical passage from halachic sources since the act of circumcision is defined solely as a man's responsibility during rabbinic period.

### Chapter Conclusion:

In Exodus 4:24-26, Tzipporah performs the rite of circumcision on her son, in order to block the Divine death threat. During the rabbinic period, circumcision was completely relegated to a man's responsibility. Therefore, the rabbis view Tzipporah with skepticism and scorn, and obscure this Exodus narrative in the rabbinic commentary. One approach to obscure Tzipporah's story is by limiting the rabbinic use of this particular biblical text.

Investigating the Tzipporah passage through rabbinic material provides insight into the rabbinic world. The rabbis approach the Exodus 4:21-24 text as commentary, rather than proof text. Rabbinic commentary attempts to explain the meaning of the text beyond the simple peshat level; proof texts apply a reference source to substantiate a linguistic, conceptual, or legal point. A combination of the two demonstrate the fullest use of a biblical text in rabbinic literature. Therefore the Tzipporah passage does not substantiate other biblical or talmudic references. As a result, the Tzipporah text does not receive much exposure in the rabbinic material. One must already know the biblical text, in order to learn about the rabbinic response to this passage.



## V. CONCLUSION

Emerging from this survey of the rabbinic interpretation of three biblical narratives: Hannah (I Samuel 2:1-10), Rebekah (Genesis 25:21-23), and Tzipporah (Exodus 4:24-26) is a portrayal of women from the rabbis' perspective. What is this portrayal? And How does it reflect the rabbinic world view?

The rabbinic portrait values women as wife and mother. Hannah confirms the traditional role of women in the Bible. She prays to God for a child because she is barren. Once she becomes pregnant Hannah offers a prayer of thanksgiving, and uses prayer to communicate to God using a third party, rather than speaking directly with the Holy One. Therefore the rabbis accept Hannah as the rabbinic model for women. They intentionally connect other female biblical characters to Hannah. Rabbinic literature uses Hannah's narrative to support other barren women. Even biblical characters, such as Miriam, who do not display the same characteristics as Hannah, are nonetheless compared to her paradigm.

The rabbis esteem Hannah by referring to her acts in numerous proof texts that deal with the issues of prayer, resurrection of the dead, the proper way to recite the Tefillah, and God as the all-powerful Creator. On the other hand, Hannah is not referred to

Therefore, the rabbis learn nothing regarding a woman's responsibility to pray from her, for fear that women be granted too much autonomy before God.

Rebekah is a complex character according to the rabbinic interpretation. The rabbinic picture of Rebekah is that of wife and mother, yet God speaks directly to her when the Divine One informs her of her children's destiny.

The rabbis do not hesitate to use Rebekah's role as childbearer as source material for other barren women in the Bible. As a result, the Genesis narrative is used freely to support rabbinic concepts that portray women as wife and mother.

On the other hand, because the biblical norm is for male prophets to speak to God, the rabbis obscure the fact that God speaks directly to Rebekah. Whereas, the rabbinic literature esteems a man's relationship with God, when God speaks to a woman, as in the case of Rebekah, the rabbis treat that narrative to their own end. Therefore the rabbis are more apt to focus on her barrenness and other issues of childbirth rather than create Aggadot around God's prophecy to Rebekah. The rabbinic picture, therefore, promotes and demotes Rebekah at the same time for she does not fit firmly into or out of their categorization of women.

steps away from the traditional role as wife or mother, neither she nor her story gain visibility in our tradition. The rabbis do not esteem Tzipporah because she participates in the ritual act of circumcision -- a rite that was relegated to men by the rabbinic period. The postulate of references reflects the rabbis opinion that circumcision should be performed by men. As a result, this text does not receive significant exposure in the rabbinic source material. The rabbis do not use the Tzipporah narrative support linguistic halachic, or aggadic concepts. Instead the rabbis limit the use of this Exodus passage merely to rabbinic exegesis.

An investigation of legal aspects of women and circumcision verifies Tzipporah's narrative's obscurity. When the Talmud discusses a woman's role in the act of circumcision, Tzipporah's story is conspicuously omitted. This editing process continues to keep Tzipporah's experience of circumcising her son obscure.

Consistent with Mary Douglas' theory that society controls its members' actions and beliefs through cultural categories, the rabbis treat Hannah, Rebekah, and Tzipporah according to where each woman fits into the rabbinic societal categories. Thus, the rabbis emphasize women whose actions fit into the rabbinic categorization of the sexes. Therefore, the rabbis

esteemed by the rabbis, and obscure women who cross the social boundaries by participating in actions defined as men's obligations.

In short the rabbis attempt to limit women's roles through biblical interpretation and exegesis. Through the use of rabbinic interpretation, the rabbis denounce certain activities and support others. The rabbinic use of biblical texts reflect the categorization and world view of the rabbis.

Just as the rabbis categorized the biblical texts through their perspective, it is important for us to reinterpret our ancient texts from a modern perspective. As a woman, when I turn to the Jewish legacy of our past, I do not find my voice. Yet as a Jew, this ancient heritage is full of the journey, ethics and morals of my people. Therefore, it is my task to infuse my tradition with the struggle to know God that also speaks to women. My hope is that through further scholarship regarding the women in our tradition, we will give the silent women a voice, as well as reaffirm those female characters who model the traditional role of wife and mother. It is only by embracing all of these role models that our tradition can gain a harmony inclusive enough for all Jews, for both women and men who come to their past carrying different melodies, to

Jewish legacy.

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