READING THE WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

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Hagar, My Other, My Self

THE STORIES of Israel at Ba'al-Pe'or and of Cozbi and Phineas bear the same message about foreign women: Danger! Keep away! The story of Hagar, Sarai, and Abram is far more benevolent. It deals with a different kind of ethnic arithmetic. Rather than the addition of foreign women or their radical subtraction, this story concerns the multiplication of Abraham and the divisions this requires. But it too urges separation.

The Abraham–Sarah cycle is all about multiplication, and the story of Hagar and Sarai that dramatizes it is at the exact center of the sequence. The structure of the cycle emphasizes its importance, for it moves in concentric rings from the *lekh lekha* ("Go!") of the call to Abraham to leave home (Gen. 12) to the *lekh lekha* ("Go!") of the call to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22). The beginning of Genesis, chapter 12, is about letting go of the past by cutting ties to Abram's father; chapters 22 and 21 are about letting the future go, cutting ties to the sons, and their near death. Moving inward toward the center we find the two disposable-wife stories, chapters 12, Sarai in Egypt, and 20, Sarah in Gerar, in which Abraham cuts his ties to his wife but gets her back. The next ring concerns Lot and Sodom; in Genesis, chapters 13 and 14, Abram separates from Lot, who goes to Sodom; in chapters 18 and 19 Abraham intervenes on Lot's behalf to save Lot and Sodom, and Abraham's son Isaac and Lot's sons Moab and Ben-Ammi are born, separate branches of Terah's family. The innermost ring is about covenants: chapter 15, the covenant among the carcasses, and chapter 17, the covenant of circumcision. And in the middle, between the two covenants, is the story of Sarai and Hagar.

The content of the story has a similar ring structure: two women who revolve around a man, head of the household, who has all the authority. As always in these biblical stories, names count. The man is *'abram*, "exalted father," the wife is *sarai*, "the princess," and the other

woman is *hagar,* which sounds like *haggēr,* "the outsider." The two women are dependent on the man's will, but their shared situation does not bind them together. On the contrary, far from uniting them, oppression turns them against each other. Hagar and Sarai are not allies; they vie for status in the household. Biblical co-wives, even blood sisters like Rachel and Leah, are such rivals that the Hebrew word for "co-wife," *ṣarah,* is also the word for "trouble." The rivalry between Sarai and Hagar is particularly acute and dramatic because all the advantage seems to be Sarai's. Sarai is the full, free wife; Hagar is a slave.

In Islamic tradition, Hagar was not a slave but a princess wed to Abram in a dynastic marriage. So too a Jewish midrash relates that Hagar was a princess in the house of Pharaoh. When Pharaoh saw the wonders that God had performed for Sarai and Abram, he said, "Better for my daughter to be a servant in this house than a princess in any other," and sent her off. But even if she was born a princess, Hagar is a slave in Sarai's household. Justice would demand that Sarai treat Hagar well. When she does not, we are bothered. Several midrashim try to resolve this ethical issue by finding fault with Hagar, by assuming that she must have done something wrong. They explain that Hagar let everybody see the contempt in which she held her mistress, saying, "You think my mistress is righteous? She puts on a righteous face, but clearly God knows that she is not righteous: she has been barren all these years and I got pregnant the first night!" In contrast, readers today tend to be angry at Sarai, to castigate her for being insensitive to the plight of someone for whom she should have felt both compassion and solidarity.

◈ *Act I. The Coming of Ishmael*

Scene 1. A problem and a plan (Gen. 16:1–3)

> Sarai, Abram's wife, had not borne him a child.
> She had an Egyptian slave-woman named Hagar.
> Sarai said to Abram, "Look, please: God has stopped me from giving birth. Come, please, into my slave-woman; perhaps I will be built up through her."
> Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

Sarai conceives a plan to use her slave as her surrogate. These opening lines emphasize Sarai's initiative. She, the active agent, thinks up the plan, proposes Hagar, and gives her to Abram. Not long ago, readers of this story were shocked and astonished by her plan; now, in an age of surrogate motherhood, it seems like an ordinary, nontechnological ver-

sion of surrogacy. Evidence from ancient texts show that this arrangement, although not common, was once a regular feature of family relations. Three ancient Near Eastern marriage contracts stipulate that should the bride be barren after a specified number of years, she will give her husband her slave. How she acquired the slave doesn't matter: the slave could be part of the wife's dowry or purchased for this purpose; as long as she is the owner of the slave at the time she gives him to her husband, the slave could be her surrogate. These contracts show that this arrangement was not confined to one place or time within the Mesopotamian legal tradition: one is from 1900 B.C.E. and the Assyrian mining and merchant colonies in central Anatolia (now Turkey), one from Nuzi (in Syria) around 1600 B.C.E., and one from southern Babylonia about 500 B.C.

The best-known example of surrogacy is in the laws of Hammurabi. Paragraph 146 concerns the *nāditu,* a priestess belonging to an order of women who lived together and generally pooled their economic resources. They did not take vows of chastity, and could leave the group life and get married, but they were not supposed to have children. So, say the laws of Hammurabi, if a man marries a *nāditu,* she will give her husband a slave girl to have his child; if she does not, he can take a second wife. Since any second wife would quite likely be a rival to the first wife and even displace her, a woman would prefer to give her husband her own slave as a concubine to forestall such a marriage.

Neither Sarai, who proposes Hagar, nor Abram, who agrees, mentions obtaining the consent of the slave girl. To contemporary readers, such consent seems necessary for the arrangement to be moral. But none of the ancient texts sees any ethical problem with this arrangement. Ancient societies accepted slavery as a regular part of social life. Using another person's body as a surrogate for one's own is part of the fabric of slavery. Just as a slave's muscles can be utilized for the good of the master, so can a slave woman's womb. Sarai plans that Hagar's womb will be the way that Sarai herself will be **built up.** Abram agrees, and Hagar must comply.

So far, everything is according to plan.

Scene 2. The plot thickens (Gen. 15:3–6)

Sarai the wife of Abram took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-woman, at the end of ten years that Abram had lived in the land of Canaan.

She gave her to Abram her husband for him as a wife.

He came into Hagar and she conceived.
She saw that she had become pregnant, and her mistress was diminished in her eyes.
Sarai said to Abram, "My wrong is on account of you. I gave my slave-woman into your lap. She sees that she is pregnant and I am diminished in her eyes. Let YHWH judge between me and you."
Abram said to Sarai, "Here: your slave-woman is in your hands. Do to her what is good in your eyes."
Sarai abused her.
She fled from her presence.

Something unanticipated happens. Hagar, who was supposed to be a neutral body being passed from Sarai to Abram, reacts. This "womb with legs" is a person with her own viewpoint, and her mistress is **diminished in her eyes.** Hagar knows that she has something Sarai doesn't have, a child in her womb, and this knowledge makes her cease to consider Sarai's status high above her own. Ancient documents anticipate such a development. The laws of Hammurabi and the contracts know that once a slave becomes a slave wife, she may not keep acting like a slave. They differ about what the mistress should do if that happens, and the laws provide that if the slave wife has not yet borne children, her mistress can sell her; if she has, her mistress can demote her to an ordinary slave (¶147).

Sarai's reaction to her loss of authority is sharp. She indicts Abram, **"My wrong is on account of you. . . . May YHWH judge between me and you."** Sarai has a version of what feminists call a "click moment." She realizes that her own hands are tied. She is wife no. 1, but the pregnant wife no. 2 is gaining on her and there is nothing she can do about it: when she gave the slave girl to her husband, she relinquished her authority over her. She has lost all leverage. Sarai sees herself at risk, and attacks Abram because he holds all authority in the household.

Sarai's attack has a purpose. She wants something from Abram: the restoration of her authority over Hagar. Abram understands this, understands that power is the issue, and he restores it to Sarai by giving control of Hagar back to her, in effect turning Hagar back into a simple slave, **"your slave-woman is in your hands."** Hagar is once again passed from person to person. Neither Abram nor Sarai ever calls her by her name. They treat her as a slave, not a person, and to recognize that she is also a person would get in the way of their plans. So Abram de-

clares, **"your slave-woman is in your hands."** He further adds, with perhaps unconscious irony, **"do to her what is good in your eyes."** The phrase is the verbal equivalent of washing one's hands. The Ephraimite in Gibeah said, "Do to them whatever is good in your eyes" as he offered his daughter and the Levite's concubine to the threatening mob ("The Bad Old Days," page 123). In the face of their certain evil, the phrase sounds evil and immoral. Here too, Abram knows Sarai does not intend kindness to Hagar. She will certainly assert her regained power by dominating Hagar in some way. But Abram indicates that he will not oversee Sarai's actions, will not control them, will not judge them or react to them. She is free to **do to her what is good in your eyes.**

And so it happens. Sarai does what is good for her. Rescued from her own personal abyss, she is going to make sure that Hagar doesn't threaten her again. And so, in her last act in the story, she abuses her, *watteʿannehā*. As we have seen, *ʿinnah* is a key word in biblical language, fraught with allusions we will consider in a moment. But first, we ask: since a slave is oppressed by definition, how do you abuse a slave? What did Sarai do? The story never says. We could spin midrashim of Sarai's beating Hagar or sending her out in freezing rain. But perhaps she simply starts treating her like an ordinary slave. Commanding her to draw water from the well, for example (as suggested by a classic rabbinic midrash), would be a denial of the status that Hagar had achieved by being pregnant, and thus would be considered abuse, oppression, or degradation. Hagar knows that dominance is the issue. She does not want to be under Sarai's authority, and as Sarai acts to protect her turf, Hagar once again reacts. She flees. She leaves Sarai and Abram behind, and the story goes with her to the wilderness.

Scene 3. Angel in the desert (Gen. 16:7–14)

> An angel of YHWH found her by the water spring in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.
> It said, "Hagar, slave-woman of Sarai, where are you coming from and to where are you going?"
> She said, "From the presence of Sarai my mistress I am fleeing."
> The angel of YHWH said to her, "Return to your mistress and be oppressed under her hand."
> The angel of YHWH said to her, "Greatly will I multiply your seed so that it cannot be counted in its multitude."
> The angel of YHWH said to her, "Look, you are pregnant, you are going to give birth to a son and you will call his name

Ishmael, for YHWH has seen your oppression. He will be a wild onager of a man, his hand against all, and all hands against him, and he will live in the face of his brothers."

She called the name of YHWH who spoke to her, "You are El Roi (the God of my seeing)," for she said, "have I also come here looking after the one who sees me.

"Therefore one calls the well, 'well of the living one who sees me.' Look! It is between Kadesh and Barad."

The wilderness in the south of Israel is a place fraught with angels: here Elijah meets an angel as he goes to Horeb, and Hagar meets one, too. Their dialogue begins with an almost ritual question: **"Hagar, slave-woman of Sarai, where are you coming from and to where are you going?"** The angel addresses her by name, for he knows who she is. She answers simply, **"From the presence of Sarai my mistress I am fleeing."** It doesn't matter where she is going: the essential fact is that she is fleeing Sarai. The reader feels the pathos of the oppressed slave, but the angel says, **"Return to your mistress and be oppressed under her hand."** Is this the proper way to treat a runaway slave? The angel is acting in accord with ancient Near Eastern laws that, like the laws in this country before the Civil War, respected the slaveowner's property rights and required the person who found a runaway slave to return the slave to his or her owner. But biblical law is different: biblical law requires one to help a runaway slave escape and not give him or her back to the owner (Deut. 23:16–17). True, the events took place long before Deuteronomy, but the angel's actions must have shocked an Israelite reader: why should an angel place the laws of property over the freedom of persons?

Hagar's angel is not finished. Angels usually have threefold messages, and this one does, too. The first part, **Return . . . and be oppressed;** the second part, **"Greatly will I multiply your seed so that it cannot be counted"**; the third, **"you are pregnant, and you are going to give birth to a son and you will call his name Ishmael ('God hears'), for God has heard your oppression. He will be a wild onager of a man."** The second address makes Hagar the only woman to receive a divine promise of seed, not through a man but as her own destiny. And the third statement puts Hagar in the company of those few women—Samson's mother, Hannah, and Mary in the New Testament, who receive a divine annunciation of the coming birth. And what a birth! Hagar will have a glorious progeny who can never be exploited or sub-

jected—if she voluntarily goes back to be exploited. And so Hagar goes back. Recognizing the divine power, she neither argues nor avoids the request. But before she gives up her autonomy, she exercises it by naming God according to her own experience. God called Hagar by name, the only character in the story to do so, and Hagar responds, naming God **El Roi, "God of my seeing,"** which can mean both "the God I have seen" and "the God who sees me." Seeing is important to Hagar and to the narrator. When she saw that she was pregnant, her mistress was diminished in her eyes, but Abram told Sarai, **"Do to her what is good in your eyes."** Hagar's vision and Sarai's vision have brought her to this spring, itself a play on the word for "eye." Now the mutual "seeing" between God and Hagar points to a solution. Her own explanation is enigmatic and difficult to understand, but it seems to mean **"Have I also to this place (come) looking after (or seeing the traces) of the one who sees me?"** The name itself is clear: El Roi, "the God of my seeing." The once and future slave leaves her mark upon how people remember God.

Scene 4. The birth (Gen. 16:15–16)

> She gave birth for Abram to a son.
> Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar had borne, Ishmael.
> Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar gave birth to Ishmael for Abram.

When Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, Abram names him, giving him the name that the divine messenger has already pronounced: "God listens." El Roi, the God who sees, also listens. Listening, like seeing, is very important in this story: Abram listened to Sarai's voice (Gen. 16:2), the angel told Sarai that God listened to her affliction (16:11), God will tell Abraham (as renamed by God in 17:4), "I have listened to you about Ishmael" (17:20), God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah (21:12), and finally, God will listen to Ishmael's cry (21:17). Ishmael's name emphasizes the God who listens even when we are not aware of God's activity.

Sarai is not involved in Ishmael's birth. Three times the text mentions that Hagar bore the child. Sarai has been displaced, and the son never becomes hers. This is very different from what will happen when Bilhah acts as a surrogate for the barren Rachel. There the surrogacy plan works, the child is considered Rachel's, and Rachel names him Dan, saying "God has vindicated me (*dananni*) and listened to my voice" (Gen. 30:6). But Sarai's treatment of Hagar broke the connection; God listened

to Hagar, and promised Hagar that her child would be hers. Ishmael belongs to Abram and Hagar, promised to each of them in separate annunciations.

This story resonates with other ancestral stories. The narrative gives one detail in a story generally lacking in specifics: Hagar is an Egyptian slave. Mention of Egypt takes the reader back to Genesis 12, in which Sarai is brought into the house of Pharaoh to be a slave concubine and has to be rescued by God. The reader realizes that Sarai herself is a just-freed slave. Sarai in Egypt and Hagar in the house of Sarai have similar histories, and Sarai's oppression of Hagar highlights a disturbing aspect of human behavior. We like to believe that the experience of suffering makes us more sympathetic to the suffering of others. It does not. Sarai's own experience as a slave does not make her more empathic to the slave in her own home. On the contrary, it makes her want to assert her dominance and authority so she won't lose it again. As usual, the biblical narrator does not comment on the actions. It is left to the reader to note how easily the oppressed can become oppressors. When God raises high the lowly, how will the newly empowered behave toward those who lack power and autonomy?

The mention of Egypt also harkens to the future, to the Exodus story that lies at the basis of Israel's self-understanding. The two words "slave" and "Egypt" together form the mantra of ancient Israel: "We were slaves in Egypt and God took us out from there." It is reinforced today by its recitation at the Passover celebration; it was reinforced in biblical times at the Feast of the First Fruits described in Deuteronomy 26. At that time, everybody appeared before God to recite the credo "A starving Aramean was my father and he went down to Egypt just to stay for a little while, few in number, but we multiplied, and the Egyptians made us into slaves. And they oppressed us and gave us harsh exploitation and we cried unto God and God heard our affliction and brought us out of there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and with signs and wonders and brought us to this place and gave us this land, flowing with milk and honey (Deut. 26:5–9)." Recitation of this narrative impressed slavery and redemption on the consciousness of every Israelite and later, every Jew. Law, too, remembers slavery, invoking the memory of their ancestors' slavery and liberation as justification for laws that demand that Israelites act against their own economic interest. The redemption from bondage in Egypt is the paradigm for a key tenet of biblical theology: God is the overturner of the powerful, and at God's will, the low become high. That theme became even more important as Israel fell on hard times,

and it took on a new valence, a vector toward the future: as God brought Israel out from Egypt, God will redeem Israel from exile. The narrator does not innocently identify Hagar as an "Egyptian": no coincidence, it is a direct allusion to the central myth of Israel's origins.

Other details of the Hagar story also correspond to Israel's sacred history. Sarai abused and degraded Hagar, *watte 'annehā*, in the same language by which the old credo in Deuteronomy 26 describes the Egyptian treatment of Israel, *waye 'annûnû*. Like Hagar, the people of Israel were exploited, oppressed, and degraded in addition to being slaves. And like Hagar, Israel went into slavery knowing that this would be so. The angel's demand that Hagar return and be oppressed, **hit 'anî**, also echoes the Covenant among the Carcasses in Genesis, chapter 15. There, God intensified the promises to Abram by going through a solemn oath-swearing covenant ceremony. While reciting the promise of progeny and future, God announced that Abram's descendants would be strangers in a land that was not theirs, and that people would enslave and degrade them for four hundred years before God would redeem them. The fulfillment of God's promises will be delayed: all Abram can expect is to die peacefully before the troubles begin.

The parallels between Genesis chapters 15 and 16 are striking. In chapter 15, God tells Abram that God will multiply his progeny, but that his descendants will be degraded slaves and that God will bring them out and give them the land. In chapter 16, God's angel tells Hagar to return to be exploited; afterward she will have a child who cannot be exploited, and God will multiply her progeny. The story of Hagar parallels the story of Israel: she is the archetype.

The exploitation offered both Abram and Hagar points to a disturbing aspect of God's behavior: why does God insist that suffering come before reward? This scenario repeated itself many times in Israel's experience, but nowhere is an explanation given as to why Israel—and Hagar too—have to suffer. The only explanation Abram is given is that the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. This makes sense—Israel cannot inherit the land until the Amorites have polluted it so much that (in the words of Leviticus 18) "it will vomit them out" and Israel can come in. But the "iniquity of the Amorites" explains only why Israel has to wait for the land; it says nothing about why they have to be slaves while they wait. The pattern of Hagar and Abram and of later Israel shows that the way to God's reward is through the margins of society and the depths of degradation. Only then, it seems, does God redeem. This pattern offers

hope to the oppressed, but it remains as an unexplained aspect of God's behavior in the world.

The close correspondence between Hagar and Israel continues in the denouement of her story, after the birth of Isaac.

◇ *Act II. The Leaving of Ishmael (Gen. 21)*

Scene 1. At the weaning of Isaac (Gen. 21:8–13)

> The boy grew and was weaned, and Abraham held a huge banquet on the day he weaned Isaac.
> Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian that she had borne for Abraham playing.
> She said to Abraham, "Send away this slave-woman with her son, for the son of this servant-woman will not inherit together with my son, with Isaac."
> The matter seemed wrong in the eyes of Abraham because it concerned his son.
> God said to Abraham, "Let it not seem wrong in your eyes concerning the boy and your servant-woman. Whatever Sarah tells you to do, listen to her, because through Isaac will your seed be called. And the son of this servant-woman, him too I will make into a nation, for he is your seed."

Sarai is central to God's plan and God renames her Sarah, announcing that it was through her that God's covenant with Abraham would be fulfilled (Gen. 17:16–21). But at the weaning ceremony, Sarah sees Ishmael "playing." What the lad was doing, the story doesn't say. The verb for his behavior, *ṣḥq*, can mean "to play," "to laugh," or "to sport," and can cover a wide range of activity. The Septuagint adds that Ishmael was playing "with her son Isaac," but it also doesn't tell us exactly what he was doing. Whatever it was, in Sarah's eyes it was a threat: her son, after all, is supposed to be the "player," for Isaac, *yiṣḥaq*, meaning "he plays," is from the same root. So, once again, Sarah takes the initiative. Acting to ensure that Isaac will truly inherit the promise that God made to her and Abraham, she asks Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham is reluctant. Until God informed him that God's covenant would be with Sarah's child, he had been satisfied to have Ishmael as his heir to the covenant (Gen. 17:15–17, 19). Once again, God intervenes to instruct Abraham to listen to Sarah, reminding him that Isaac will carry on Abraham's promised line, and reassuring him that Ishmael will also have an Abrahamic lineage. As a result, Hagar and Ishmael are sent away.

Scene 2. The redemption of Ishmael (Gen. 21:14–21)

Abraham arose early in the morning.
He took a bread and a skein of water.
He gave (them) to Hagar, placed (them) on her shoulder with the child.
And he sent her away.
She walked wandering in the wilderness of Beersheba.
The water in the skein was finished.
She sent the boy away under one of the bushes.
She went and sat facing the boy, as far away as a bow shot, for she said, "Let me not see the boy's death."
She sat facing the boy and lifted her voice and wept.
God heard the voice of the boy.
The angel of God called to Hagar from the sky and said, "What is it, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy as he is there.
"Arise, lift up the boy, and hold your hand on him, for I will make him a great nation."
God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.
She went and filled the skein of water and gave drink to the boy.
God was with the boy and he grew up.
He lived in the wilderness, and became a bow (and arrow) hunter.
He lived in the wilderness of Paran and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Some readers are horrified at Abraham's cavalier treatment of human beings, and horrified that God orders him to do this. But we should note that in a world in which slavery is accepted, Hagar and Ishmael are not sold: they are freed. Hagar and Ishmael leave Abraham's household as emancipated slaves. Of course, emancipation is not without its problems. Hagar, who found Beer-lahai-roi quite easily when she ran away from Sarai, now wanders in the desert until their water runs out. Ishmael would have died had God not intervened. But God, hearing the boy's voice, gives them water in the wilderness, and once again pronounces a great future that will come from Ishmael. This part of their story is also a forerunner of Israel's story, when the emancipated Israelite slaves wander thirsty in the desert until God provides water (Exo. 15–18). And God awards Ishmael the promise that Israel will be given in

the wilderness of Sinai: each is to be a nation with a special destiny. In slavery and in freedom, Hagar is Israel.

The final note in the story reminds us that Ishmael's future is shaped by Hagar's understanding. A single mother, she is both father and mother, completing her parental duties by arranging for his marriage. Abraham has no role in shaping the future of Hagar and her descendants. He has relinquished that right by emancipating them; God has given Hagar that right by treating her as the head of her own family and lineage.

The Hagar story is not the only episode in Genesis that foreshadows the sacred history of Israel. Many of the ancestor tales contain such intimations. The great commentator Nahmanides had a maxim, *ma'aśeh 'abôt sîman labbanîm*, "the deed of the ancestors is a sign for the children." The Rabbis understand the adventures of patriarchs in this way, and we may note that some of the experiences of the women in Genesis share this same paradigmatic, archetypal nature. Abraham's descent to Egypt because of famine in Genesis 12 foreshadows the famine-induced descent of Jacob and his family to Egypt at the end of Genesis. However, it is Sarai who most anticipates the fortunes of Israel as she becomes a forced concubine in Pharaoh's harem and then is rescued by God's miraculous intervention. And Hagar anticipates Israel as she lives out the life of an oppressed, covenanted, and eventually emancipated slave in Abraham's household.

The story of Sarai and Hagar is not a story of the conflict between "us" and "other," but between "us" and "another us." Hagar is the type of Israel, she is the redeemed slave, she is "us." And Sarai is both type and mother of Israel, she is both "us" and the one from whom Israel is born. Pitting part of Israel's consciousness against another part, the story creates tension in the mind of the readers. At the heart of the Abraham–Sarah cycle is a story demonstrating that the destiny of the people around Israel is not utterly different from Israel's. Readers often follow the line of Abraham–Isaac–Jacob, viewing the other peoples as branches off the trunk. But the stories themselves show a more complicated sense of history. In their view, the other nations formed in these stories—Moab, Ammon, Ishmael, Edom—have destinies that are closely intertwined with Israel's. By God's grant, Esau and the Edomites inhabit Mount Seir, and the Moabites and Ammonites are settled in their lands. And by God's grant, the Ishmaelites are in everybody's face, untamable and not subservient to the laws of the states in which they live. The ancestral stories of Genesis understand the extreme complexity of history

and the difficult nature of covenants with God. They reflect the reality of a world with refugees, political oppression, and famine. They understand the intricacy of a special destiny and the need to maintain the destiny and the specialness of Israel without alienating or demonizing the other peoples. Instead of seeing the Ishmaelites as an unsocialized element within its boundaries or as demonic opponents of God's will or even as people who have to be expelled or tamed, Genesis integrates Ishmael into Israel's self-understanding as its God-approved alter ego. For Ishmael is in many respects the polar opposite of Israel, and a nation that often found itself marginal, exploited, and on the brink of destruction may have appreciated Ishmael's destiny of utter freedom.

The story of Hagar as the archetype of Israel and of the coming and leaving of her son Ishmael depicts the destinies of Israel and Ishmael as parallel and presents a model of separation without denigration. But separation, nonetheless.

Women of Metaphor, Metaphors of Women

THE WOMEN who appear in biblical stories are often striking characters, distinct personalities who have gone beyond the confines of the tales in which they appear to become important figures in our cultural memory. At the same time, these women are not fleshed-out individuals. Many of them appear in only one story, and that story tells us only those facts that serve the writer's agenda. The Bible tells us nothing of their backgrounds, nothing of their future, nothing of their thoughts; solely their actions in a particular context. The striking incompleteness of these portraits has sometimes proved frustrating and infuriating. Many contemporary women feel that this fragmentary presentation exploits and abuses the characters; they want the narrators to care about the lives and thoughts of the women about whom they write. But these partial images have also been a spur to literary and poetic imagination. Readers of the Bible, millennia past and present, have brought these characters out of the confines of the narrative, adding personality traits and personal history in an ongoing process of midrash and story.

The Bible's lack of interest in the individuality of its characters is not limited to the women. Only a few males—Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Elisha—have anything resembling a biography in the Bible. Most men, like the women, appear at a given moment and then disappear, sometimes to reappear in a later episode, but in some cases never to appear again. Incomplete portrayals do in fact serve the purpose of the narrators, whose concern is the destiny of the people of Israel, and who choose and shape their stories for national political reasons. Plot and character are all subordinate to the larger concerns. Their stories are important for what they indicate about Israel's society, history, and destiny, the individuals for what they contribute to an understanding of these issues.

The narrators understand a profound lesson that we keep rediscovering anew: *the personal is political*. The events of a person's life are not de-

termined solely by his or her personal characteristics and motives. People may choose how they act from their own perspective and for their own purposes, but their intentions do not assure results. "Life is not fair," as we say. The intersection of an individual with the structures and institutions of his or her society often determines the outcome of that person's acts as much as his or her desires or personal agenda do. Biblical authors tell us about individual women and men precisely at the moment when their stories illuminate the social structure, political events, and cultural patterns of the day. To these authors, their characters (apart, perhaps, from the grand "historical" figures) are as much archetypes as they are individuals, and the specific plots of their stories are simultaneously unique to their lives and paradigms for all the similar events that could have taken place in the history of Israel. The stories are about individuals, and yet when they are read with reference to one another, they do not seem to be about their characters at all.

The paradigmatic nature of the ancestor stories of Genesis has long been recognized. The development of the family of Abraham into the nation of Israel is both history and parable. The stories shape Israel's memory, creating and reinforcing a sense of family central to Israel's sense of who it is and how it operates in the world. But they also serve as archetypes of Israel's destiny. The deeds of the ancestors and the events of their lives contain intimations of Israel's future. Rabbinic writers understood this, particularly in regard to the tales in which the forefathers had to leave the land. The medieval commentator Nahmanides coined a maxim, *Ma'asê abot Sîmān labbānîm*, "the deeds of the fathers are signs for the children"; thus the temporary descents of the patriarchs to Egypt as seen as foreshadowings of Israel's enslavement and emancipation from Egypt. The stories of the matriarchs share this paradigmatic quality, though the rabbis took no note of it. Hagar's slavery, emancipation, and annunciation manifest the pattern of Israel's own slavery, emancipation, and covenant. Sarah's sojourn as a slave in Pharaoh's house and later in Gerar foreshadows Israel's slavery in Egypt and her second captivity in Babylon. Rivka's captivity in Gerar reinforces the hint that there will be more than one captivity for Israel. And the Dinah story demonstrates the intricate difficulties of Israel's destiny among the nations, focusing on the essential question of how Israel should form alliances and how it should grow. The family of the ancestors is Israel in embryo.

The many stories about marriage to outsiders dramatize the boundary issues that marriage presents. Marriage is always a threshold action. Its liminal nature is evident when we consider that a girl entering a mar-

riage had to transform herself in two ways: from a girl to a woman and from a subordinate member of one family to a still subordinate member of another. The change was so radical that it could be described symbolically as the "death" of the child.

Marriage was also a crisis for both families. The girl's birth family formed an alliance with another family, a relationship that could be instrumental in determining its future destiny. The boy's family, for its part, opened its boundaries to an "Other," to someone who was coming from outside the family into its very heart as the bearer and caretaker of its future children. What ideas would this outsider import? What customs? What beliefs? Marriage is fraught with the danger of change, and this danger is at the heart of the dispute over non-Israelite women. Incest laws demand that women come from outside the family, defining all who might be living within the extended family as forbidden. But how far outside is too far? Where does difference become too great to tolerate? Ancient Israel's reality was that it lived amid other peoples, and that other peoples lived in its midst. Crucial national issues of survival and self-definition were raised every time a woman was "taken in marriage." The biblical stories about marriages to outside women and their consequences were the natural vehicle with which Israel expressed and explored the dimensions of this perennial issue.

The paradigmatic nature of the stories about victors and victims is not as self-evident, until we realize that the victor stories follow the paradigm of Israel's central sacred story: the lowly are raised, the marginal come to the center, the poor boy makes good. Little Israel, like its heroes and heroines, triumphs by the will of God, and the heroines demonstrate Israel's faithful action. The God-fearing defiant women of the Exodus, and also Rahab, are models of how Israel should behave in adversity and the reward they can expect. Yael the apparently powerless tent-dweller is the archetype of those who conquer their powerful adversaries by faith and determination. Later, when once again there was no king, Esther became the model for the behavior and salvation of Jews in the diaspora, and Judith, like the much earlier Yael, rose to destroy the enemy of Israel. The women who were saviors of Israel, like the boy David who slew Goliath, all demonstrate the ability of the small and marginal to win by their will and the power of God.

The victims are also images of the Israel that is small and vulnerable, a potential and actual victim of more powerful nations. The Bible often portrays Israel as a woman. In the famous "marital metaphor," the prophets refer to Israel, or Jerusalem, as the wife of God, receiving Is-

rael's relationship to God on the model of hierarchical marriage, with unequal partners, that was familiar to them. Husbands provided for their wives, but they also controlled them, scrutinizing, judging, and punishing their behavior. The prophets show us a patriarchal marriage gone awry. Once, Jeremiah tells us, this was a wonderful romance, and Israel was supremely faithful to God. And in the future, Deutero-Isaiah predicts, the marriage will be glorious. But in the present, things are not so good: Israel is first a wayward, then a punished and rejected, wife. Hosea indicted Israel for infidelity to God with her "lovers," which included the empires that surrounded her: Egypt, Babylonia, and Assyria. Hosea saw Israel as a woman in a world of men, looking to great nations (her "lovers") for help and protection. Thus did he and other prophets use the metaphor of marriage to express their view of Israel as dependent and vulnerable, yet valued.

The image of Israel as a woman also lies at the heart of the poetry of lament, in the metaphor of *bat* or *betûlat yisrael,* "Daughter" or "Young Maiden Israel," or *bat ṣiyyôn,* "Daughter Jerusalem (or Jerusalem-girl)." *Bat yisrael* first appears in the eighth century, in the writings of Amos, the first of the literary prophets. In the midst of a serious castigation of Israel, Amos foretells the utter destruction of the country. As soon as he mentions the coming ruination, he changes tone and begins to mourn. At the moment of destruction, his anger is dissipated and he grieves for the victim. He switches to the classic rhythm of lament (*qînah*) and evokes a mournful image, *naflah lōʾ tôsîf qûm betûlat yisrael,* "Maiden Israel has fallen and rises no more" (Amos 5:2). The essence of pathos is conveyed by a devastated young woman. Two centuries later, Jeremiah returned to this image. Maiden Zion "sighs and spreads out her hands—'Woe is me, for my soul is weary before those who slay' " (Jer. 4:31)—in one of the many passages of enormous sorrow over the ruin of *bat ṣiyyôn* and *bat ʿammi,* "my maiden-people." The book of Lamentations also uses this image of a mourning woman in its distress over the destruction of Jerusalem: "My eyes have filled with tears, my innards are in turmoil, my liver has flowed to the ground because of the destruction of my maiden-people" (Lam. 2:11).

The stories about women who are victims and the metaphors of "maid Zion" both build on the same fundamental image of woman as victim, a type of narrative symbolism in which the fate of the daughter of Jephthah, the concubine in Gibeah, and Tamar, the daughter of David, represent the fate of all young women victimized by the men of

their families. The narrator underscores the paradigmatic nature of the stories of Jephthah's daughter and the Levite's concubine by not preserving the women's names. Their fate is the fate of others.

Woman as victim is an enduring image in Western civilization, able to capture both female vulnerability and the response of readers and viewers to tales of tragedy. On the one hand, a young woman is a figure of intimacy and attraction. Men and women both love the image of a young woman, innocent and yet full of the promise of life and fertility. At the same time, the young woman is vulnerable and powerless, kept that way by the very society that feels so sorry about her victimization. The combination creates a powerful emotional stew that makes the ruined young woman an enduring symbol of pathos, the most tragic victim figure the biblical poet can image.

Israel's understanding of herself as potentially small and marginal also provided the metaphorical context for the stories about women who were oracles. Of these, only Deborah and Huldah had official positions, and only Deborah had any power in the politico-judicial sphere. Their marginality made it possible for God to speak to them, for they were not tied up in the power struggles of their day, not blinded by an interest in the status quo. The Bible also considered Israel as a whole the medium of God's will and message to the world.

As victor, as victim, as vulnerable, and as vehicle for the divine, Israel saw herself as the "woman" of the world. Ironically, it was the nation's own patriarchal social system and the Bible's unusual approach to it that created this metaphorical self-understanding. Men were the only participants in the public hierarchies of politics, law, and cult, and only they held economic power. The Bible did not question these inequities or justify them by positing an inherent inferiority or weakness of women. The Bible understands the role of women in society and history, but its anthropology is gender-neutral, or at the very least gender-blind. There is no essential difference between men and women. Men are not more assertive, more intellectual, more rational, or more strong-willed. Women are positioned differently because that is the way things are, not because their weakness or passivity requires their subordination. The social inferiority of women may be "explained" by the myth of the Garden of Eden, but it is never justified by gynophobic or misogynist stereotypes. Being a woman put one in a powerless class (a class to which most men also belonged) and made one dependent on the men in her family. Gender matters, but neither humanity nor Israel revolves essentially or onto-

logically on a sexual axis. The dualisms that really count are between the Divine and the human (male *and* female) and between Israel and the other nations.

The disjunction between women's social inferiority and their ontological parity with men formed a creative tension that enabled biblical thinkers to see the similarity between the social situation of women within Israel and the social situation of Israel in the world. Weaker than the empires, vulnerable to them and ultimately their victim, Israel never considered herself inferior to the nations. Knowing that weakness and even subordination do not imply inferiority, Israel could see herself in the savior-victors who can rise to victory, in the daughter-victims in their texts of terror, and in the oracle-women in their knowledge of God. Israel can glory in the stories of women victors and empathize with the victims. And Israel can present God speaking through marginal women oracles as God speaks through Israel. The stories about women in the Bible are a powerful vehicle by which Israel can understand its own place in the universe.