

SARAH'S TREATMENT OF HAGAR (GENESIS 16): MORALS, MESSAGES, AND MESOPOTAMIA

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INTRODUCTION

From a *peshat* perspective, the biblical text stands at the center of our inquiry as we attempt to determine values from within the Bible. With thousands of years separating our cultural context from that of the Bible, however, it is often hard to distinguish textual messages from our own sensitivities and moral preferences.

Consider the behavior of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis chapter 16. Although Hagar was insensitive toward Sarah, Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar and Abraham's passive acquiescence create a painful tension. Does the narrative give any clues to its moral judgment of Abraham and Sarah?

In this essay we consider the opinions of the classical commentators, who relied on the biblical text and early rabbinic traditions. We then turn to ancient Near Eastern parallels to gain insight into the historical-social setting of the Torah. At all times, the biblical text must remain the anchor for interpretation.

TEXT AND MEDIEVAL COMMENTARY

Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, 'Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her.' And Abram heeded Sarai's request (Gen. 16:1-2).

In offering Hagar to Abraham, Sarah suggests that *perhaps I shall have a son through her*. It appears that Sarah would be responsible for Hagar's child and consider it her own. However, once Hagar became pregnant, tensions arose in the household:

So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian – after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan– and gave her to her husband Abram as his concubine. He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mis-

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tress was lowered in her esteem. And Sarai said to Abram, 'The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Lord decide between you and me!' (16:3-5).

Radak and Hizkuni suggest that Hagar claimed that since she would bear Abraham's child, she would become his main wife. This tormented Sarah. Following *Genesis Rabbah* (45:4), Rashi surmises that Hagar concluded that since Sarah was barren, she must have been wicked and rejected by God.

Sarah speaks angrily to Abraham and demands justice. *Genesis Rabbah* (45:5), followed by a number of commentators including Rashi and R. Joseph Bekhor Shor, understands Sarah's criticism of Abraham as responding to his silence despite Hagar's taunts. R. Joseph Ibn Kaspi submits that Abraham showed additional affection toward Hagar after she became pregnant because of their bond over their shared future child. This emotional connection led Hagar to despise Sarah and made Sarah lash out at Abraham.

At any rate, Hagar behaved insensitively toward Sarah, who had no doubt been tormented by her barrenness and who may now have perceived a threat to her marriage with Abraham. Abraham allowed Sarah to do what she felt necessary: *Abram said to Sarai, 'Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.' Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her* (16:6).

Unlike the aforementioned commentators, Radak believes that Sarah was wrong to scold Abraham, who had simply followed her advice. Radak criticizes Sarah for her harsh treatment of Hagar, but justifies Abraham's acquiescence, since he needed to maintain peace with Sarah:

She tormented her and worked her harder than necessary. Perhaps she also struck and cursed her until she could no longer tolerate it and fled. In this, Sarah did not act ethically or piously . . . God did not approve of Sarah's action, as evidenced from the angel's telling Hagar, *for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering* (16:11), and blessed her for her endurance. Abraham did not prevent Sarah from oppressing Hagar, even though he disapproved, for the sake of domestic harmony. This story was written to teach people to acquire good character traits and avoid negative ones (Radak on 16:6).

In contrast to Radak, Ramban insists that both Abraham and Sarah transgressed: "Our Matriarch sinned through this oppression, and so did Abraham by allowing her to do so. God paid heed to Hagar's suffering and gave her a son who would be *a wild ass of a man* (Gen. 16:12) to oppress the descendants of Abraham and Sarah with all forms of harsh treatment" (Ramban on 16:6).

At first blush, one might conclude that the disagreement between Radak and Ramban over their judgment of Abraham is based on their moral sensibilities as to what a husband should do in this very difficult family conflict. However, much of their debate is textually grounded in the angel's subsequent message to Hagar:

An angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, and said, 'Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' And she replied, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.' And the angel of the Lord said to her, 'Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment.' And the angel of the Lord said to her, 'I will greatly increase your offspring, and they shall be too many to count.' The angel of the Lord said to her further, 'Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering. He shall be a wild ass of a man: his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him; he shall dwell alongside all of his kinsmen' (Gen. 16:7-12).

Radak and Ramban derive their moral lessons from different elements of the angel's response. Radak cites God's expression of sympathy, *the Lord has paid heed to your suffering* (*onyekh*, v. 11). Since Sarah oppressed (*vate'anneha*) Hagar, the blame lies squarely on her shoulders. In contrast, Ramban believes that the key manifestation of the Torah's moral judgment is when the angel informs Hagar that Ishmael *shall be a wild ass of a man* (v. 12). Ramban interprets this statement to mean that the descendants of Ishmael will oppress the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Since this punishment affects both Abraham and Sarah, Ramban projects the sin onto both of them.

As opposed to their analysis of chapter 16, Radak and Ramban remain silent about the parallel narrative in chapter 21, when Abraham and Sarah ban-

ished Hagar and Ishmael. In that instance, God explicitly ordered Abraham to do so: *But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him too, for he is your seed'* (Gen. 21:12-13).

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN SETTING

With the discovery of ancient Near Eastern documents during the nineteenth- twentieth centuries, scholars found a wealth of information relevant to understanding the setting of the Bible. However, scholars debate how much to apply the various findings to the biblical text.

In his analysis of Genesis 16, Rabbi Elhanan Samet quotes several Near Eastern documents to vindicate the behavior of Abraham and Sarah. They were acting within the moral and legal conventions of their day¹:

Laqipum has married Hatala, daughter of Enishru . . . If within two years she does not provide him with offspring, she herself will purchase a slave woman, and later on, after she has produced a child by him, he may then dispose of her by sale wheresoever he pleases . . . (Mesopotamian Marriage Contract, c. 19th century BCE).²

Hagar functioned legally as a surrogate who could be disposed of once she had borne a child. After she became pregnant, however, Hagar asserted her freedom.³

Responding to Hagar's efforts to break free, Sarah reasserted her mastery over Hagar – something perfectly acceptable according to the Code of Hammurabi:

When a seignior married a hierodule and she gave a female slave to her husband and she has then borne children, if later that female slave has claimed equality with her mistress because she bore children, her mistress may not sell her; she may mark her with the slave-mark and count her among the slaves (Code of Hammurabi, 18th century BCE, #146).⁴

R. Samet cites other examples in the Torah where *innu'i* refers to enslavement rather than physical torture.⁵ Hagar chose to flee rather than accept her original legal standing as a slave.⁶ Supporting Sarah's behavior, the angel referred to Hagar as *slave of Sarai* and ordered Hagar to return and submit to [Sarah's] *harsh treatment (hitani; 16:8-9)*. Hizkuni further observes

that Hagar herself refers to Sarah as *my mistress* (v. 8), acknowledging her continued legal status as Sarah's slave. With God supporting the reenslavement (*innu'i*) of Hagar, the criticisms of Radak and Ramban fall away. This verse demonstrates that the Torah does not criticize Abraham or Sarah.

R. Samet turns to the angel's prediction that Ishmael *shall be a wild ass of a man* (v. 12). Several commentators, including Ramban cited above, interpret this expression as a negative forecast regarding Ishmael's descendants. They would become wild, uncivilized criminals who would oppress the people of Israel (see, for example, Rashi and Ramban). However, R. Samet correctly observes that the angel's prediction appears in the context of several divine blessings. He therefore adopts the interpretation of Ibn Ezra and S. D. Luzzatto, who insist that *a wild ass of a man* is also a blessing – Ishmael and his descendants would be free. Thus, the angel ordered Hagar to resume her rightful legal status as Sarah's slave, but promised her that her descendants would be free and become a great nation.

Although R. Samet's arguments appear well-supported by the text and ancient Near Eastern codes,⁷ Professor Nehama Leibowitz strenuously objects to his line of interpretation. She insists that the Torah distinguishes itself from the Code of Hammurabi: "The Torah is not interested in noting Abraham's conformity to contemporary custom. On the contrary, it is concerned with drawing attention to the unique contribution and character of the Patriarch. Were merely a contemporary local usage involved, why should the Torah dwell at such length on it?" (p. 154).

Prof. Leibowitz favors Radak and Ramban as having the proper textual and moral reading of the narrative. The Torah is being critical of Sarah and Abraham, based on the sympathetic treatment of Hagar for her oppression (*innu'i*; v. 11). It is noteworthy that Prof. Leibowitz generally avoided the use of ancient Near Eastern sources in her *Studies*. She was evidently concerned that benefits derived from such inquiry could be neutralized by the religious dangers inherent in considering a divine text against human-authored parallels.⁸ In this instance, she cited the Code of Hammurabi precisely to insist that the Torah's morality is superior to that of its historical-legal setting.

Prof. Leibowitz levels a powerful question against R. Samet's thesis, since God is sympathetic to Hagar's *innu'i* (v. 11). R. Samet responds that God's

sympathy toward Hagar's *innu'i* does not refer to Sarah's harsh treatment of Hagar but rather to Hagar's suffering in the wilderness. However, the use of a form of the word *innu'i* in both instances points to a fundamental shortcoming in R. Samet's analysis.

On the other hand, R. Samet's argument that the angel supported the legal status of Hagar as a slave is a powerful blow to Prof. Leibowitz's analysis. Each side has a compelling textual argument against the other.

CONCLUSION: RESOLVING THE TENSION

One can offer an interpretation that combines the best elements of both readings. The ancient codes are relevant to explain the conventions that Sarah and Hagar followed. Since there were clear legal standards, Hagar breached them by asserting freedom, and Sarah acted within her rights to reassert Hagar's servitude. Therefore, the angel ordered Hagar to return to her legal servitude and called her *slave of Sarai*. In this regard, R. Samet's analysis is textually sound, and the Torah appears to vindicate the behavior of Abraham and Sarah.

Simultaneously, Prof. Leibowitz is correct when she maintains that the Torah offers a sympathetic treatment of Hagar, including the poignant comment of the angel that God responded to Hagar's *innu'i* and blessed her that that her descendants would be free and a great nation. However, the Torah is not criticizing Sarah, who had acted legally in her context. It is critical of *the entire social context* of the Mesopotamians. While Sarah was legally correct and therefore acted morally in her context, the story remains painful at the human level. God expresses sympathy toward Hagar, indicating that the moral-legal system of that era would necessarily lead to tragic results, such as what occurred with Sarah and Hagar.

This thesis is corroborated by the later Torah legislation to help a runaway slave escape: *You shall not turn over to his master a slave who seeks refuge with you from his master. He shall live with you in any place he may choose among the settlements in your midst, wherever he pleases; you must not ill-treat him* (Deut. 23:16-17).

Contrast this law with the Code of Hammurabi (#15-16), which prescribed death for anyone who helped a slave escape or who harbored a runaway slave. The Torah shifts its moral focus to the humanity of a slave, who is ul-

timately endowed with rights as well.⁹ The Torah's radical departure from the prevailing laws of slavery would push humanity toward a morality that would finally abolish slavery altogether.¹⁰

In highlighting Hagar's suffering and God's sympathy for her, the Torah illustrates its dissatisfaction with the morality of the ancient Near East. Through its narratives and laws, the Torah paved a moral path that would prevent the recurrence of these painful stories in the future.¹¹

NOTES

1. E. Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parashot ha-Shavu'a*, vol. 1 (first series), ed. Ayal Fishler (Ma'aleh Adummim: Ma'aliyot Press, 2002) pp. 31-40.
2. Translation from J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969) p. 543.
3. Radak similarly suggests that Hagar began to consider herself as a full wife rather than a slave/concubine.
4. Translation from Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 172. It is worth noting that some ancient legal codes also allowed physical punishment for a slave who behaved insolently: "If a man's slave-woman, comparing herself to her mistress, speaks insolently to her, her mouth shall be scoured with one quart of salt" (Laws of Ur-Nammu #22, Sumer, c. 22nd century BCE), translation from Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 525.
5. See, for example, Exodus 1:11: *So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor (le-ma'an annoto be-sivlotam)*.
6. Rabbenu Hananel had suggested this interpretation in the eleventh century.
7. N. Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis)*, trans. A. Newman (Jerusalem: WZO Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora, fourth revised ed., 1981) pp. 153-157.
8. See M. Ahrend, "From My Work with Nehama a'h," in *Pirkei Neḥama: Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume*, ed. M. Ahrend, R. Ben-Meir, & G. H. Cohen (Jerusalem: Eliner Library, The Joint Authority for Jewish Zionist Education, Department for Torah and Culture in the Diaspora, 2001), p. 47; Y. Rozenon, "The Exegete, the Interpretation, and History: An Observation on Nehama Leibowitz's Exegetical Approach" (Hebrew), in *Al Derekh ha-Avot: Thirty Years of Herzog College*, ed. A. Bazak, S. Wygoda, & M. Monitz (Alon Shevut: Tevunot Press, 2001) pp. 448-449. For further discussion, see H. Angel, "The Paradox of Parshanut: Are Our Eyes on the Text, or on the Commentators?", review essay on *Pirkei Neḥama: Nehama Leibowitz Memorial Volume, Tradition* 38:4 (Winter 2004) pp. 112-128; reprinted in Angel, *Through an Opaque Lens* (New York: Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2006) pp. 56-76.
9. See further discussion in M. Shamah, *Recalling the Covenant: A Contemporary Commentary on the Five Books of the Torah* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 2011) pp. 385-398.
10. On this point, see E. Samet, *Iyyunim be-Parashot ha-Shavu'a*, vol. 1 (second series), ed. A. Fishler (Ma'aleh Adummim: Ma'aliyot Press, 2004) pp. 327-347.
11. For related studies of how the Torah improved on the morality of earlier Near Eastern legal codes, see, for example, M. Greenberg, "Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law," and "The Biblical Concept of Asylum," in *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish

Publication Society, 1995) pp. 25-50; C. Navon, *Genesis and Jewish Thought*, trans. D. Strauss (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2008) pp. 59-77; N. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986-1996) pp. 158-189; M. Shamah, *Recalling the Covenant*, pp. 953-962.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

October	Song of Songs	7 – 8
	Ruth	1 – 4
	Lamentations	1 – 12
	Ecclesiastes	1 – 10
November	Ecclesiastes	11 – 12
	Esther	1 – 10
	Daniel	1 – 12
	Ezra	1 – 4
December	Ezra	5 – 10
	Nehemiah	1 – 13
	I Chronicles	1 – 9
January	I Chronicles	10 – 29
	II Chronicles	1 – 8
February	II Chronicles	9 – 36

