Seeing and Hearing: The Interrelated Lives of Sarah and Hagar

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ABSTRACT

For about three decades, the lives of biblical Sarah and Hagar overlap (Genesis, 12, 16, 18, and 21). In that time, as women they form a relationship, they contend for the affection of Abraham, and each bears him a child. On occasions, their interactions are fraught with emotional issues as they compete for power or status within the Abrahamic family. The focus of this article suggests that a close reading of the biblical texts involved shows many parallels in language between the narratives that deal with Sarah and Hagar, as well as parallel language describing events in Abraham’s life. This article centers on the crucial words “see,” “hear,” and “eyes/sight” in their various forms as they are found in the four relevant chapters. The repetition of these words is a purposeful literary device and connects Sarah to Hagar, and both women to Abraham.

Introduction

The relationship between Sarah and Hagar is of interest to biblical students, biblical scholars, feminist scholars, and clearly to feminist biblical scholars. Their analyses discuss the relationships between these women, often focusing on disparities of power; or they consider Abraham and his relationship with Sarah and/or with Hagar (see below for example, Trible, Exum, Levine, Pinker, Zucker). There are scholarly assumptions about the origins of these women, and a consideration if each woman, in her own way represented a religious figure (Teubah). While these sources acknowledge the tension between Sarah and Hagar in chapter 16, there are multiple views as to what prompted Sarah’s demand to Abraham, in chapter 21, that he expel Hagar and Ishmael.

The Sarah and Hagar relationship is most evident in Genesis 16 and 21. In terms of their interaction in Genesis 16, Sharon Pace Jeansonne notes:

The narrator does not make unnuanced judgments about the behavior of the women in this narrative. The choice of words and the actions of the characters themselves indicate that their motives are complex . . . The narrator is sensitive to Sarai’s frustration, yet the poignancy of Hagar’s plight is recognized as well."
Yet, more specifically in relation to the Sarah-Hagar interaction in Genesis 21: “From a feminist perspective, the call for the expulsion of Hagar raises troubling questions. The story portrays the oppression of one woman by another.”

When it comes to Sarah and Hagar, at certain points each behaved inadequately toward the other, and thus brought grief upon herself as well. “Hagar is a complex character: not simply victim and not simply heroine. The same diversity of interpretation, of course, holds for Sarah.” For close to thirty years, their lives, both literally and literarily are interrelated. The focus of this article suggests that a close reading of the biblical texts involved shows many parallels in language between the narratives that deal with these women, as well as parallel language describing events in Abraham’s life.

This article centers on such crucial words as “see,” “hear,” and “eyes/sight” in their various forms as they are found in the relevant chapters in Genesis 12, 16, 18, and 21. It is the contention of this article that the repetition of these words is a conscious link, which connects the lives of Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham. Although each person in these narratives might have reason to reflect on their behaviors in relation to the others (Sarah to Hagar, Hagar to Sarah, Sarah to Abraham, Abraham to Sarah, Abraham to Hagar, and so forth), that is not the focus of this article.

Seeing and Hearing

The lives of Sarah and Hagar overlap in four chapters in Genesis, 12, 16, 18, and 21. Hagar is often termed Hagar-the-Egyptian. The text explains that Abraham had acquired female slaves while in Egypt (Gen. 12:16), so it is likely that Hagar was one of these women. Sarah and Hagar interact most directly in chapter 16. Although Hagar is not mentioned by name in chapter 18, the occasion where Abraham and Sarah are informed that in a year’s time Sarah will bear a son, her presence, as that of Ishmael is strongly felt. Chapter 21 features the expulsion of Hagar and
Ishmael from the Abrahamic compound at Sarah’s express request, and then their plight in the desert wilderness.

In Genesis 12, 16, 18, and 21, there are ten references to words which contain the root letters that refer to “hearing” – shin-mem-ayin (sh-m-’) and nineteen references which contain the root letters to “seeing” – resh-aleph-he (r-’h). Supplementary to the “seeing” words are eight words that refer to “eyes/sight”. 7

In these chapters, much of the description and acts of the central characters, Sarah, Hagar, and naturally Abraham, moves forward by using these key words.

In terms of the repetition of certain words, Michael Fishbane explains that in the biblical text, one “particular recurrent and transparent technique is the theme-word. Because Hebrew words are essentially built around triliteral stems, the same stem may recur in the same text in different nominal, verbal, and adjectival forms. Such repetition, where it occurs, gives a text special texture; and it also serves to highlight major and minor features of context. A reader may thus be guided or provoked towards certain interpretations on the basis of theme-words recurrent in one or several texts which are thereby brought into association.” 8

The Call, Egypt – Genesis 12

In terms of Abraham/Sarah, the “seeing” words begin in Genesis 12. 9 Suddenly, and seemingly without warning one day the Deity communicates a message to Abraham (at that point called Abram) telling him, and by inference his wife Sarah (at that point called Sarai), to leave the place where they are living, and to go to a land that “I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). God tells Abraham that the number of his descendants will increase greatly. He will have a great name, and be a blessing to others (Gen. 12:2-3). Once they are in the land, the Deity appears a second time bringing a message of connection to the land that will extend to his offspring. Abraham builds an altar honoring the Deity who had appeared to him (Gen. 12:7). 10
Due to a regional famine, Abraham and Sarah need to travel south to Egypt. There Abraham turns to Sarah and tells her that they need to misrepresent their true relationship as husband and wife. Abraham says that he knows that she is physically attractive (literally, her appearance is pleasing, Gen. 12:11) and that when the Egyptians see her (Gen. 12:12) they would likely murder Abraham so that she would become an eligible widow. Consequently, he asks her to pretend that they are only siblings, not spouses. Abraham does this knowing that Sarah will be taken into the Pharaoh’s harem, to be regarded as part of his (sexual) property. Sarah does not respond. She neither consents nor protests. “Throughout it all, Sarai has neither voice nor choice.”

As Abraham had suggested, when they entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw how beautiful she was (Gen. 12:14). Subsequently when Pharaoh’s courtiers saw her (Gen. 12:15) and praised her to Pharaoh, it resulted in Sarah being taken to the Pharaoh’s palace.

The text explains that because of these events Abraham prospers significantly. “And because of her [Sarah], it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels” (Gen. 12:16). As noted before, whether Hagar was among the female slaves that were acquired is not specifically stated in the Bible. Yet that is likely as later when she first appears as a discrete person she is termed Hagar-the-Egyptian (Gen. 16:3). God then plagues Pharaoh because of Sarah, and the ruler realizes that he has been deceived. He returns Sarah to Abraham and sends them on their way. They return to the land of Canaan, settling in the area around Bethel (Gen. 13:4).

Hagar Enters – Genesis 16

A decade or more passes. Although promised that his progeny would be beyond count (cf. Gen. 15:5), Abraham and Sarah lack heirs. The Bible notes that she was barren and without child (Gen. 11:30), and Sarah takes matters into hand. Following established Near Eastern custom, she
offers Abraham her Egyptian servant Hagar to serve as a surrogate mother. “Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a child through her” (Gen. 16:2).

Hagar is Sarah’s property. She simply presents her to Abraham. Hagar does not respond. She neither consents nor protests. “Throughout it all,” in this instance it is Hagar who “has neither voice nor choice.”

It is notable in chapter 12 that while in Egypt Abraham acted unilaterally concerning Sarah’s immediate future; he did not seek Sarah’s views. In like manner, here in chapter 16 Sarah acts unilaterally; she does not seek Hagar’s views. In both instances, neither “Abraham nor Sarah is concerned with what this intimate encounter might mean for the other parties involved [Sarah with Pharaoh, Hagar with Abraham], but only with what he or she stands to gain.” The biblical text offers no inkling as to how these respective women felt about this change of their status. Were they appalled? Were they jubilant? Were they frightened? Did they groan, grieve, or grumble? The Bible is silent, although traditional rabbinic midrashim offer various answers.

Hagar’s reaction to this new state of affairs where she is to become Abraham’s wife is unrecorded. Likewise, we learn nothing of Abraham’s views on this subject. Although undoubtedly he understood Sarah’s thinking on this matter, the text does not address his thoughts about cohabitating with Hagar. Perhaps he was reticent, reluctant, and reserved. In an age of high infant mortality, that Abraham was content to have only one child by Hagar may say something about his lack of enthusiasm for this project.

In her proposal twice, Sarah uses the word “na” / please. “Look” [lit. “behold please”], God has kept me from bearing, “Consort” [“lit. consort please”] with my maid.” There is a sense of desperation in Sarah’s voice that suggests she is not at all sure that Abraham is going to comply, much less that he is eager to do so.

There is an additional layer of meaning to the words that Sarah speaks.
Sarah’s plea to Abraham “Hinneh na . . . bo na, look-consort now” [Gen. 16:2] recalls the syntactic construction used by Abraham in his short speech to Sarah as they approached the Egyptian border: “Hinneh na . . . imri na I know that you are a beautiful woman . . . please say you are my sister” [Gen. 12:11, 13]. In what is perhaps a belated reaction to her silent compliance until now, Sarah replicates Abraham’s speaking style for her own very divergent purposes.¹⁴

Does Sarah, consciously or subconsciously mimic Abraham’s speech pattern in the hope that he will agree to this request, thereby at least technically assigning to her the role of mother? Any child born of Abraham and Hagar’s union would be adopted by Sarah, as clearly was the case once Ishmael was born. At this point Sarah thought that through making this arrangement, she could avoid the stigma of barrenness.

Alternatively, does Sarah, consciously or subconsciously mock Abraham’s speech pattern from the embarrassing moment a decade and more earlier, where she in effect was pimped out to Pharaoh?¹⁶ One can imagine Sarah thinking to herself, “Then and at that time, you forced me into an excruciatingly difficult situation. You said to me that in order to insure the family’s future, I would have to pretend to be what I am not, your sibling, not your spouse. Now Abraham, you will have to do something that is difficult for you. The issue again is to insure the family’s future, but now you will be doing it on my terms.”

What Genesis does indicate is that in response to Sarah’s appeal – or was it her demand? – “Abram heeded Sarai’s request” (verse 2). In this instance, Abraham heeds Sarah’s request to bring Hagar into his life in a significant fashion. Ironically, nearly two decades later, Genesis will specify that Abraham again heeds Sarah’s request, but this time it will be to banish Hagar (cf. Gen. 21:12).

Whether Abraham reluctantly or eagerly took Hagar into his bed, he did so because he heeded Sarah’s voice. One can only wonder whether it was sardonic humor, purposeful punning,
or mere chance that that the result of this union will be Ishmael, a name that can translate as God 
heeds, or possibly as one who heeds God.

In the next few verses, “seeing” will be a dominant word, and refers to both Hagar and Sarah. Hagar becomes pregnant and when “she saw” that she was bearing a child (Gen. 16:4) she 
thinks less of Sarah. Sarah quickly notices this lack of respect and berates Abraham, saying, “The 
wrong done me is your fault! . . . now that [Hagar] sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her 
esteem” (Gen. 16:5).

Mixed in with all these “seeing” words are the additional phrases “in her eyes/in your 
eyes.”

. . . her mistress was lowered in her esteem” [lit. “in her eyes”] . . . “I am lowered in her 
esteem” [lit. “in her eyes”] (Gen. 16:4-5). When Abraham capitulates to this angry 
response, he says to Sarah, “Deal with her as you think right” [lit. “in your eyes”] (Gen. 16:6).

Sarah treats Hagar harshly; and Hagar then runs off into the desert wilderness. There a 
divine emissary finds her by a spring on the road to Shur. The Hebrew word for spring (eyn – ayin 
yod nun), which appears twice (Gen. 16:7) contains the same letters as the Hebrew word for eye 
(ayin – ayin yod nun), a wonderful example of purposeful editing with an ear –and dare one say an 
eye – to literary connections.

It is at this spring, which shortly Hagar shall name Beer Lehai Ro-i – the Well of the 
Living One who sees me – that the divine emissary tells Hagar that she is “pregnant / And shall 
bear a son; / You shall call him Ishmael [God heeds], for [YHWH] has paid heed to your 
suffering” (Gen. 16:11).

Hagar addresses the emissary – or perhaps God – and says, “You are El-roi, by which she 
meant, ‘Have I not gone on seeing after my being seen!’ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-
roi” [the Well of the Living One who sees me] (Gen. 16:13-14).
In the Bible, an essential ingredient in asserting a character’s [and a place’s] individuality is the assigning of a name. In fact, the Bible begins with God defining [God’s] inanimate creations by naming them. The heavens, the earth, the seas, the day, and the night are all given distinction through their names. Later, emulating God, Adam affirms the particular nature of individual species of animals and fowl by naming them . . . The Bible uses names to preserve the memory and accomplishments of outstanding, and often godly, individuals.\(^1\)

To round out Genesis 16, the text underscores this special name, for it mentions the name of Hagar’s son not once, but twice. The text relates, “Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave . . . him the name Ishmael . . . Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram” (Gen. 16:15-16).

**Announcements – Chapter 18**

As Genesis 18 begins, God appears to Abraham (vs. 1, the literal opening word). In the next verse Abraham looks up [lit. he lifts up his eyes] and “he saw three [divine] envoys standing near him. Perceiving [lit. seeing] this” he runs to greet them (Gen. 18:2). He offers them refreshment, saying, “If it please you” [lit. “If I have found favor in your eyes’”] (Gen. 18:3).

The messengers bring news that in a year’s time Sarah will have a child. “Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent” (Gen. 18:10) but was incredulous at this announcement.

**Hagar Exits – Chapter 21**

Genesis 21 begins about a year later when Sarah successfully gives birth. In her amazement, she says, “everyone who hears will laugh with me” (Gen. 21:6).

Laughter after several years apparently turns bitter, for by verse nine Sarah demands that the slave woman and her son be sent away from the Abrahamic encampment. Many standard commentaries, ancient, medieval, and modern offer analyses about the motivation for Sarah’s demand. Most traditional commentaries place the blame for Sarah’s response on Ishmael’s supposed misbehavior, but this view has been challenged.\(^2\) Instead of an example of Sarah behaving unjustly at this point, she may have a very different agenda.\(^3\) The text says simply...
“Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing” although the Septuagint adds the words “with her son Isaac” (Gen. 21:9). Sarah’s call to expel Hagar and Ishmael from the encampment “distressed Abraham greatly” [lit. “in his eyes”] (Gen. 21:11).

God, however, intervenes and tells Abraham “Do not be distressed” [lit. “Do not let this be distressing in your eyes”].” In the same verse (Gen. 21:12), God tells Abraham to follow Sarah’s advice. “Whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says” [lit. listen to her voice] for God will watch over Ishmael, and presumably over Hagar as well. As noted earlier in this article, Abraham listens well to Sarah, once to take in Hagar, and now, to send her away.

In this long relationship between Sarah and Hagar, when it comes to “seeing” or “being seen” and “hearing” or “being heard,” it is Hagar (and by extension, Ishmael) who has the last word. Sent off into the inhospitable wilderness, Hagar and Ishmael apparently lose their way, and run out of water. Desperately Hagar places Ishmael (although he is not named by name here, or anywhere in the chapter) under some bushes. She then says, “Let me not look” as the child dies (Gen. 21:16). The next verse states that relief is at hand: “God heard the cry of the boy” (Gen. 21:17). Yet, even earlier in that verse a Divine emissary tells Hagar “Fear not.” The word “fear” in Hebrew is tir’i – taw yod resh aleph yod – a word based on different root letters, but sounds like the feminine second person future tense “you will see.” God speaks to Hagar and offers words of encouragement, followed by the resolution to her immediate problem, a search for water. “Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water” (Gen. 21:19). Although it is not stated definitively, it is possible that this “well” (beer) was the same well she had seen when she ran away from Sarah those many years ago, Beer Lehai Ro-i.

Conclusions

Sarah and Hagar each in her own right becomes the matriarch of a nation. These are powerful and resourceful women. In terms of words credited to them, their biblical voices are...
limited; nonetheless, their influence reaches to this day. Ishmael and Hagar are Islam’s connection to Abraham; Isaac and Sarah are Judaism’s connection to Abraham. Hagar’s Ishmael will father “twelve chieftains of as many tribes” (Gen. 25:16), and although Sarah’s heritage will need to wait one generation more, her grandson Jacob sires thirteen children, twelve who are the titular heads of the tribes of Israel. For close to three decades – and perhaps longer – their lives overlap. Sarah and Hagar have a complex relationship. At various points, they are interdependent upon each other, and at times, they are in conflict. They share a husband who is prone to strange visions and encounters, who hears what he believes to be the Divine voice. Abraham often seems indifferent to his wives’ personal welfare, and to the welfare of their respective children. Sarah and Hagar each has a child and a stepchild, and each acts to protect the interests of her birth child.

On the surface of the text, these two women are cast as rivals both for the attention of Abraham, and for the right to bear an heir for Abraham. Their lives – and the language to describe their actions – contain significant similarities. A close reading of the relevant biblical texts, Genesis 12, 16, 18, 21, where Sarah and Hagar (and Abraham) appear – or where their presence is felt – feature many parallels in language in the narratives dealing with these characters. Of special note is the repetition of the words “seeing” and “hearing” in one form or another. In particular, Sarah and Hagar each see and are seen, hear and are heard in significant ways that move along their narrative, together and separately.

Supplement

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Grateful thanks to my son Ian Michael Zucker for his critique of an earlier version of this article and his offering excellent stylistic changes.


The Torah text itself “remembers” Sarah’s words when, hundreds of years later the Israelites are “banished/expelled” from Egypt. The same verb used in Genesis 21:10 [*garash*] “Cast out that slave-woman and her son,,” appears in Exodus 12:39 [*gorshu*] “. . . they had been driven out of Egypt.”


4 Presumably, Hagar is one of the Egyptian female slaves that Abraham acquires. Following the Egyptian episode, the family is in the land of Canaan for at least ten years (Gen. 16:3) before Sarah invites Abraham to marry Hagar. Ishmael is about seventeen or older when he and Hagar are sent away. Ishmael is thirteen when circumcised, a full year before Sarah gives birth, and Isaac is about three or so when weaned.


6 According to rabbinic tradition, Hagar was none other than Pharaoh’s daughter. “When Pharaoh saw what was done on Sarah’s behalf in his own house [the intervention of the angel, and the consequent plagues] he took his daughter and gave her to Sarah. He said, Better let my daughter be a handmaid in [Sarah’s] house than a mistress in another house.” *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 45.1.

7 “Hearing” / *sh-m-‘* words: Genesis 16:2, 11 (two examples), 15, 16; 18:10; 21:6,12, 17 (two examples). “Seeing” / *r-’-h* words: Genesis 12:1, 7 (two examples), 11, 12, 14, 15; 16:4, 5, 13 (three examples), 14; 18:1, 2 (two examples), 21:9, 16, 19 “Eyes/sight” / ‘*-n* words: Genesis 16:4, 5, 6; 18:2, 3; 21:11, 12, 19.
Michael Fishbane. *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979), xii. See also Everett Fox, who explains that Martin Buber called this idea the ‘‘‘leading-word’ (Leitwort) principle. Key (‘leading’) words are repeated within a text to signify major themes and concerns, like recurring themes in a piece of music . . . A leading-word operates on the basis of sound: the repetition of a word or word root encourages the listener to make connections between diverse parts of a story (or even of a book), and to trace a particular theme throughout.” Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 1995), xvi


Although in different verb forms, the root of the word *appeared* is featured twice in Genesis 12:7.


Although the rabbis suggest that Pharaoh only approached Sarah and did not have intercourse with her (see note 13 above) the matter is not so clear-cut. “And there seems to be little doubt that sexual intercourse occurred since Pharaoh states directly, ‘I took her to me as wife’ (Gen 12:19). The same phrase was used in reference to Abraham taking Hagar, and that action resulted in the birth of Ishmael.” Ilona N. Rashkow, *The Phallacy of Genesis: A Feminist-Psychoanalytical Approach*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 43.

Teubal raises interesting issues on these points. She notes, “the biblical account does not actually tell us how Hagar expressed her contempt for Sarah, or even if she addressed it to Sarah, nor does Sarah reprimand Hagar. Instead, the matriarch turns to Abraham and voices her” concerns to him. Teubal suggests that Abraham had overridden Sarah’s authority and instigated Hagar’s rebellion, “thus attempting to deprive Sarah of her legal right to

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18 The Hebrew word “harshly” (va-t’aneha) in verse 6, like the words “harsh treatment (v’hitani) in verse 9, and “your suffering” (onyek) in verse 11 all derive from the root ayin nun hey, which although a different word, contain similar letters and sounds to the Hebrew words for eye and well.

19 Klitsner, 46, 47.
