Abraham and Sarah in Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20)

Abraham and Sarah in Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20): Sexual Transgressions as Apologetic Interpretations in Post-biblical Jewish Sources

Vered Tohar, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

Abstract

The story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20) is part of the great epics of the three ancestors recounted in the book of Genesis. Despite Abraham’s many positive attributes, such as righteousness and humility, this story raises troubling questions about his character, behavior, and beliefs in relation to both God and Sarah. These questions have given rise, throughout the ages, to many commentaries, interpretations, and adaptations, as well as plot expansions. A comparative analysis of post-biblical commentaries highlights that the storyline expands consistently when describing Sarah’s beauty, sexuality, and attractiveness from the male perspective, especially that of the Egyptians and their king. From the point of view of Jewish exegesis, these elaborations stress the hierarchy of power within the confines of the traditional, patriarchal society. On the surface, the post-biblical versions are meant to defend Abraham’s disturbing behavior in the biblical story; in practice, however, they serve as typical expressions of male sexual discourse.

Introduction

Individuals’ personalities are judged in part by the way in which they deal with crises that befall them. This is most probably true with respect to key figures in religion. Abraham, the biblical Patriarch, is such an exemplary personality. As the founder of the Jewish nation, he is a symbol of fervent monotheistic belief and the self-sacrifice. This article focuses on the legend of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt, which is part of the great epics developed in the book of Genesis around the three patriarchs who founded the ancient Jewish people. The story describes one of the major crises that Abraham undergoes during his lifetime: descending to Egypt in the course of a famine in Canaan and consequently almost losing his wife Sarah to Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10-20).

The predicament transpires right after God commands Abraham, His chosen one, “Lech lecha” (“Get thee out”) (Gen. 12:1-4). God orders Abraham to leave his homeland and depart to Egypt. He also promises to glorify Abraham and turn his descendents into a great nation. Abraham obeys God’s commandment (Gen. 11:31, 12:5), and the family travels south to escape the great famine (Gen. 12:10).
As will be shown below, this biblical story has prompted many commentaries over the last 1,500 years. The article analyzes the manner in which this narrative has been transmitted through the works of post-biblical commentators. These texts will be considered as late versions of the same literary theme, each functioning as a link in a great chain of narratives. The Jewish tradition encompasses forty written versions, each retelling the biblical story in its own way. Yet, the retelling of a biblical story is neither a phenomenon that can be taken for granted, nor an ordinary literary work of art.

The Biblical Text: Intertextual Aspects

The biblical text (Gen. 12:10-20) reads:

10 And there was a famine in the land; and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was sore in the land. 11 And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife: ‘Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon. 12 And it will come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they will say: This is his wife; and they will kill me, but thee they will keep alive. 13 Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister; that it may be well with me for thy sake, and that my soul may live because of thee.’ 14 And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair. 15 And the princes of Pharaoh saw her, and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. 16 And he dealt well with Abram for her sake; and he had sheep, and oxen, and he -asses, and menservants, and maid-servants, and she -asses, and camels. 17 And the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram’s wife. 18 And Pharaoh called Abram, and said: ‘What is this that thou hast done unto me? why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? 19 Why saidst thou: She is my sister? so that I took her to be my wife; now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way.’ 20 And Pharaoh gave men charge concerning him; and they brought him on the way, and his wife, and all that he had.

This story is problematic mainly because it presents Abraham as a person of doubtful moral standing. He is worried that he will be murdered because of Sarah’s beauty; therefore, in order to save himself, he instructs his wife to present herself before the Egyptians as his sister: “Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister; that it may be well with me for thy sake…” In so doing, he reveals lack of confidence in divine supervision over his own person and in the promise he received from God, which is profoundly tied in with the entire book of Genesis. The taking of Sarah by Pharaoh is a serious crisis for Abraham because it threatens his sovereignty and leadership. Still, the biblical text obscures the fact that this was also an extremely traumatic experience for Sarah, as a married woman, who becomes available to strange men in order to save her husband’s life.
It is imperative to note that this narrative has parallel stories in Genesis itself: Abraham and Sarah’s encounter with Abimelech, the king of Gerar (Gen. 20), and Isaac and Rebecca’s meeting with the very same Abimelech (Gen. 26). The similar situation repeats itself in these three stories, with the husband presenting the wife, within the borders of a foreign kingdom, as his sister. Biblical scholars, narratologists, and folklorists, all have discussed and stressed the complexity of these analogous stories, also known as “wife-sister tales.” It is also important to emphasize that these tales have been the focus of theological and philosophical discussions outside the Jewish tradition as well.

Nonetheless, these three stories are interconnected, and have developed their own unique tradition of literary transmission. But, the discussion here will focus only on the first story about Abraham, Sarah, and the Egyptian Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10-20), and treat it as a separate and distinct episode.

In addition to the two other parallel stories in Genesis, this narrative is related to other biblical stories. The situation, in which Pharaoh suffers afflictions visited upon him by God and consequently tells the Hebrews to leave his kingdom, is repeated in Exodus 9:8-12. A certain similarity can also be detected between this narrative and the book of Esther, which conveys the tale of a secret familial relationship where the woman becomes the king’s wife.

This paper examines the written versions of the theme diachronically, from the earliest to the most recent. Then, the versions are compared based on their key narrative outlines. Not only does this comparison shed light on the unchanging components, but it also highlights the major changes that commentators made to the same plot.

A systematic analysis of the biblical story’s evolution and the changes the plot undergoes reveal that the post-biblical treatment of the narrative began as an attempt to expand on the implied problems of the biblical text. It becomes apparent that consistent epic elaboration occurs at specific points of the narrative. Put differently, the story does not undergo a systematic expansion of all of its plot elements; instead, events at specific turning points of the narrative are given selective elaboration. In this case, the midrashic expansion focuses on Abraham’s flawed behavior: his anxieties; the instructions he gives Sarah, i.e., to lie about their marital status; and handing her
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over to the Egyptians.¹⁰ These elaborations serve certain interests, but they are mainly aimed at justifying Abraham’s overall position.

Any literary theme that elicits multiple versions illustrates the dynamic nature of particular points in the plot. Here, certain plot elements generate adaptations, while others remain unchanged. The dialectic between the constant and non-constant aspects of the plot is what gives the post-biblical versions their strength and distinctiveness. The impact of this literary phenomenon is the evolution of the literary tradition, as every version reacts to its precursor.

The use of literary and comparative analysis is not an attempt to determine the verity of the biblical version, or any later version. Each traditional narrative transmits a specific way of thinking, which evidently changes slightly as the narrative evolves.

The following sections of the article discuss three plot expansions, which contain erotic characteristics.

Post-Biblical Jewish Versions of the Abraham-Sarah-Pharaoh Tale

Over the centuries, dozens of adaptations of the original biblical story were created, and they can even be found in modern literary anthologies and children’s literature in Hebrew.¹¹ A partial list of works that contain later versions of this biblical story includes: Josephus Flavius’s Antiquities of the Jews (first century),¹² the Midrash Genesis Rabbah (fifth century),¹³ Midrash Tanhuma (seventh century),¹⁴ Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer (eighth century),¹⁵ Yalkut Shimonî (thirteenth century),¹⁶ Midrash Hagadol (fourteenth century),¹⁷ Midrash Hahefez (fifteenth century),¹⁸ Sefer Hayashar (sixteenth century),¹⁹ Kol Aggadot Yisrael (nineteenth century),²⁰ and Aggadot HaYehudim (twentieth century).²¹

These exegeses and anthologies include versions of the entire story rewritten in different words and styles. Although based on the biblical narrative, they are driven by artistic freedom and creative imagination, which in some cases lead to major changes and adaptations of the original plot. Importantly, as one thematic unit, all these versions – including later plot changes – depict their reception in Jewish culture. Therefore, when analyzing a traditional literary theme, it is essential to consider its overall evolution and development, since plot changes in traditional tales are not accidental or incidental; yet, they tend to disregard the reasons behind the changes.

The Egyptians

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Abraham’s behavior is motivated primarily by fear. The long series of literary tradition attempts to elucidate the reason for his apprehension concerning the Egyptians. As the family approaches Egypt, it is obvious that Abraham faces mortal danger when the Egyptians notice Sarah: “And it will come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee…” (Gen. 12:12). Abraham and Sarah have been married for many years, traveling as nomads on the route from Aram-Naharaim (Mesopotamia) to Canaan via Haran, and now on the road to Egypt. Why then does Egypt terrify him?

Post-biblical exegetes, as an explanation, describe the sexual passions of the Egyptians as their major flaw, maintaining that Abraham thought that even a married woman would be in danger among these lustful and licentious people. Josephus Flavius (first century C.E.) describes them as: “So full of desire for women that they become wild with passion.”

Rabbi David ben Joseph Kimchi, also known as RaDaK (1160-1235), clarifies: “The Egyptians are not as comely as those who dwell in Canaan, but they are ugly because they are southerners. And they are lustful.”

The Midrash Hagadol (fourteenth century) states: “He said to her, I know that the women of Egypt are ugly and despised, and you are more beautiful than they, and fairness among the uncomely adds beauty.”

Regarding the same issue, Isaac ben Judah Abarbanel (1437-1508) comments:

Abraham was not familiar with Egypt since he had never been there before. When he was in Canaan with his wife, he had no doubt that her beauty, and qualities were like those of other women, therefore, he was not afraid that they would take her. When he considered going to Egypt, he thought that the men and women there would be as they were in Canaan […] because if he had known about how the Egyptians really behaved, he would not have gone there; He would have chosen the danger of famine over the life of sorrow there […] When he saw that the Egyptian men and women were ugly and black as ravens, he said to Sarah his wife, ‘Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon.’ What he meant was that he knew and felt that she is a beautiful woman in comparison to the woman of Egypt […] because of the appearance of her fair [white] skin.

It seems that post-biblical commentators tend to explain Abraham’s fears as arising from a well-known fact, i.e., that the Egyptians were ugly, black, and lustful. The authors relate to an unattractive appearance, black skin, and prominent sexuality as a fear-provoking combination of human features. This attitude, especially the connection between dark skin and wicked nature, is well rooted in biblical and rabbinical thought, as demonstrated by David Goldenberg.
These examples, along many others, underscore the fact that later authors, who dealt with the story, felt a need to explain why Abraham suddenly sees Sarah in a new light, as a beautiful woman, and why this fact becomes relevant. However, Abraham’s fear manifests at the Egyptian border, where Sarah is unable to confront him. Why, for example, didn’t he return to Canaan? None of the commentators addresses this issue.

It should also be emphasized that every exegete refers to the Egyptians as lustful people, a fact that increases the erotic aspect of the story and the danger for Sarah as a helpless, unprotected woman.

**The Egyptians Notice Sarah**

Genesis 20:14 describes the moment when the Egyptians notice Sarah, but no details about the circumstances are provided: “And it came to pass, that, when Abraham was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair.” The adaptation in *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* (fifth century C.E.) elaborates:

And it came to pass, that, when Abraham was coming into Egypt, etc.: And where was Sarah? He had put her into a box and locked her in it. When he came to the customs-house, he [the custom officer] demanded, ‘Pay the custom dues.’ ‘I will pay,’ he replied. ‘You carry garments in the box,’ said he, ‘I will pay the dues on garments.’ ‘You are carrying silks,’ he asserted. ‘I will pay on silks.’ ‘You are carrying precious stones.’ ‘I will pay on precious stones.’ ‘It is imperative that you open it and we see what it contains,’ he insisted. As soon as he opened it the land of Egypt was irradiated with her luster.27

This version omits the biblical account of “Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister” and emphasizes that the Egyptians discovered Sarah accidentally.

The Egyptian border is the place where Abraham’s plans go awry. According to Victor Turner (1920-1983), borders symbolize a turning point in a person’s life, from which a change, once undergone, cannot be reversed. Following Arnold Van Gennep (1873-1957), Turner considers the liminal phase of transition – when the individual has left his former sociological status, but is not yet accepted into his new one – as the most delicate stage.28 This observation might explain Abraham’s unclear legal situation, as well as his fragile sense of strength, which affects his judgment. The attempt to smuggle Sarah into the new land in a locked container renders her passive from the outset. Moreover, the acts of hiding her in the box and then exposing her could be interpreted as transforming her status from that of a spouse to an available woman.
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This extension of the plot highlights the ingenuousness of Abraham, who is unable to effectively handle negotiations with the incisive customs officials and consequently loses his wife. It also contrasts with the tone of the biblical narrative, where Abraham is the one portrayed as a calculating and shrewd person who succeeds in deceiving the Egyptians and ends up benefiting from their encounter. This extension was adopted by many commentaries and appears in other late versions of the story, such as Midrash Tanhuma (seventh century), Midrash Aggadah al Hamisha Humshei Torah (tenth century), and Midrash Rabbi David Ha’nagid (1212-1300).

This later addition sheds a more complimentary light on Abraham and portrays him as a husband who protects his wife. On the other hand, its treatment of Sarah disregards her vulnerability. It seems that many post-biblical authors thought that this expanded version would resolve the dissonance surrounding Abraham’s behavior as described in the biblical text.

Sarah in Pharaoh’s Palace

The biblical narrative hints vaguely about what happened to Sarah in Pharaoh’s palace, therefore further elaboration is required, mainly due to the ambiguity of verse 17: “And the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram’s wife.” The book of Genesis does not go into detail about what transpired between Pharaoh and Sarah in the palace. However, it alludes to the fact that something very serious took place there, which ostensibly justified the plagues visited upon Pharaoh.29 Later versions expand on this issue. They suggest that if the Egyptians were so lascivious, it stands to reason that their king would also exhibit the same behavior. On this basis, it is not difficult to assume how Pharaoh treated Sarah.

In his historiographical work, Josephus Flavius (first century C.E.) describes how: “He [Pharaoh] desired to see her and wanted to put his hands on her; however, God inhibited his immoral lust …and wanted to enter into the covenant of marriage with her; however, he did not trouble her by abusing her out of lust.”

Midrash Yelammedenu (ninth century) states: “Pharaoh comes to take off her shoe […] wants to touch her garments […].” In Yalkut Shimony by Shimeon HaDarshan (thirteenth century) it is argued that Pharaoh committed incest with Sarah. Midrash Hagadol (fourteenth century) states that God made Pharaoh ill so that he...
would not be able to perform in bed, and *Yalkut Reuveni* by Reuben Hoshke Ha'Cohen (d. 1673) states: “Pharaoh was hit when he came to touch Sarah.”

The striking pattern here is the explicit language (lust, crime, abuse, touching, removing) these commentators use to describe Pharaoh’s behavior toward Sarah. Although Sarah is not technically violated, these erotic descriptions of the events in Pharaoh’s house, in addition to the above plot expansions, must have served a specific purpose.

**The Use of Erotic Expansions**

In light of the three focal points in the narrative and their literary expansions, it is vital to stress that the effort to explain Abraham’s behavior, as well as his motives, actually demonstrates how disturbing the biblical text was. Paradoxically, excessive discourse is occasionally the result of an attempt to obscure, hide, or repress ideas. In this case, the sexual descriptions are manifestations of a long-standing tradition of defending Abraham and explaining the reason for his helplessness in the hostile environment. Later versions attempt to make it clear that not only Sarah experiences a breach of her autonomy, but Abraham, too, is helpless and loses control over the situation. He reacts hastily and egocentrically in face of the threat against him. This way, he represents “the people of Israel” at one of its low historical periods and the traumatic experience of exile.

Fortunately, the complicated situation is resolved, but only by God’s *deus ex machina* intervention. Otherwise stated, out of Abraham’s fears and Sarah’s silent acquiescence, a “comedy of errors” develops. Opportunely, the series of misunderstandings is settled with the mutual agreement of all parties and without further complications. Nevertheless, the question still remains: why was it necessary to bring in detailed erotic descriptions that range between the explicit and the implied? The reason for the erotic discourse offered by the post-biblical interpretations still needs clarification.

Linguistically, three families of words play a dominant role in moving the plot forward: (1) verbs and nouns derived from the semantic field of vision, for example: “thou art a fair woman to look upon”; and “when the Egyptians shall see thee”. (2) verbs derived from the semantic field of speech, for example: “he said unto Sarai his wife”; “they will say This is his wife”; “Say, I pray thee”; “why saidst
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thou.” (3) nouns designating family relations, which emphasize the dialectics between “achot” (sister) and “isha” (woman or wife). The large concentration of these linguistic components in the framework of a short narrative story, a mere ten verses long, indicates that its meaning derives from what these words allude to—sight, speech, and social status.

With reference to sight, some biblical stories connect sight and forbidden intercourse, while others link forbidden sight with death: God strikes the people of Sodom with temporarily blindness (Gen. 19:11, where blindness and emasculation are interrelated.) Lot’s wife dies because she looks backward (Gen. 19:26). Samson is blinded by the Philistines as a punishment for taking three of their women (Judges 17). Post-biblical Jewish texts coupled sexual intercourse with forbidden thoughts and desires, and linked between the “evil inclination” (yetzer ha-ra) and sight. In most versions of the story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt, sight plays a major role in the plot, since complications start when the Egyptians and their king see Sarah. This narrative follows the forbidden sight/forbidden intercourse/punishment formula.

With respect to speech, the story suggests that not only sight, but also an inappropriate verbal communication might lead to death. Proverbs 18:21 states that “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” Similarly, Abraham’s life depends on the way in which Sarah defines their familial relationship.

As for the issue of social status, the plot describes a situation in which marriage gives the man control over his wife. A married woman is prohibited to all men except her husband. Consequently, other men who attempt to breach this exclusivity will be severely punished. In nearly all versions, Pharaoh suffers plagues because of his desire for Sarah. Similarly, in Greek mythology, a plague breaks out in the city of Thebes as a result of Oedipus’ sin.

The plot variations of the biblical story exhibit elements of fear, danger, and punishment for sexual transgression, which establish the social interaction in the narrative. Not just the plot, but also the language and its symbolic connotation, suggest cultural references to sexuality, especially concerning Sarah.
According to Michel Foucault (1926-1984) engaging publicly in the subject of sex is, to some extent, the violation of a taboo; thus, in traditional societies texts tend to contain “deviant” or at least “coarse” eroticism.

It seems that the detailed description of the sexual assault and exploitation of Sarah in Pharaoh’s palace, as manifested in post-biblical adaptations, can be seen as reinforcing Foucault’s theory of sexuality. Even though the declared intention of the literary, post-biblical renderings is to defend the character of Abraham, in reality, they serve as a means of communicating coarse sexual dialogue. Giving open expression to secret, prohibited, deviant content emphasizes that the practical aspects of sexual intercourse are primarily a manifestation of social power structures.

In the absence of an emotional dialogue, the aggressive discourse surrounding Sarah’s body is highlighted even more: in practice, Sarah belongs to Abraham and therefore he could make her available to Pharaoh. The king then understands that he violated a social rule, i.e., he took ownership of married woman.

It is nevertheless interesting to note that the story conveys the idea that a man has the right to impose his power over an unmarried woman or a widow, but is forbidden to take control or ownership of a married woman. According to the post-biblical commentaries, this story reestablishes the norms of the traditional patriarchal society, and both Abraham and Pharaoh, as two men in the ancient world, adhere to the same social order.

Sarah is an object that changes hands between two patriarchal leaders who Jewish authors perceive as enjoying equal status in their respective cultures (there is no doubt that, in view of Pharaoh’s reactions, he has a great deal of respect for Abraham and even fears him). Interestingly, Pharaoh, the evil king, comes across as having a superior value system. In the biblical story, Pharaoh justifies his actions: “And Pharaoh called Abram, and said: What is this that thou hast done unto me? why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? Why saidst thou: She is my sister? so that I took her to be my wife; now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way.”

Foucault shows that in the ancient world, sexual behavior and morality were patently asymmetrical. Women were considered objects, property under the
authority of men, and their actions were subject to many restrictions and prohibitions. Men, on the other hand, may have adhered to moral codes that restrained their behaviour toward women, yet the laws of morality were determined by men in order to serve men.33

Throughout the post-biblical versions, Abraham is presented as a person who could have protected his wife. Nevertheless, if he knew that having sexual relations with another man’s wife was a universal social code, why was he so afraid of the Egyptians and their Pharaoh? Shula Keshet’s psychoanalytical interpretation of the biblical story asserts that the narrative reflects the male’s ultimate fantasy of watching his wife having intercourse with another man, which is also, paradoxically, his greatest fear about a woman who had other sexual experiences.34 On the other hand, following Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis,” Sarah can be seen as the victim of both Abraham and Pharaoh.35

Conclusion

Post-biblical commentaries on the theme of “Abraham and Sarah in Egypt” expanded the original version, and realized its erotic potential, which was already embedded in the linguistic and symbolic aspects of the biblical text. The fact that many commentaries adopted this approach implies that they were apparently familiar with each other’s works, and were troubled by the gaps in the biblical narrative, particularly concerning the disposition and moral behavior of Abraham, the founder of the Jewish nation.

The biblical text contains sexual intonations, whereas the post-biblical versions are unambiguous expressions of sexual transgressions intending to defend Abraham’s character and clarify the perception that Sarah’s innocence was not violated in Pharaoh’s palace. Being part of a long narrative tradition, the post-biblical Jewish versions, with some additions and omissions, rest on the biblical plot, but do not necessarily represent its worldview.
Notes

1 At this stage, they were still called Abram and Sarai. Since they are also referred to as Abraham and Sarah in some of the versions discussed below, and for reasons of consistency, we will be referring to them as “Abraham and Sarah” in this article.

2 This story is considered one of the ten trials Abraham underwent before becoming designated as the founder of the nation: “Ten trials were inflicted upon Abraham, our father, may he rest in peace, and he withstood all of them” (Mishnah, Abot 5:3, The Mishnah: A New Translation, trans. Jacob Neusner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 685. Since the Mishnah does not enumerate these tests, various commentators have compiled their own lists; see, for example, Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, chap. 26, the commentary of Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura on Tractate Avoth, and Maimonides’ commentary on the same tractate, referred to as “Eight Chapters.” The lists differ because certain exegetes, like Maimonides, based their commentaries only on what was explicitly stated in Genesis, whereas others, like the author of Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, relied on other sources. Thus, some consider the story of Abraham in the Fiery Furnace as one of these tests, while others do not. As far as the present article is concerned, it should be noted that the Jewish tradition considers the story about Abraham and Sarah in Egypt as two consecutive tests: the famine in Canaan is counted as one test and Sarah’s encounter with Pharaoh is another, separate test.

3 The variations of the these versions will be in part examined using Michel Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis.” See his The History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978).


5 The concept refers to stories that have mainly an implied connection of conflicting analogies between them. See Yair Zakovitch, “Mirror-Image Story — An Additional Criterion for the Evaluation of Characters in Biblical Narrative,” Tarbiz 54 (2) (1985): 165-76 [in Hebrew]. He also notes that the purpose of the three stories about Abraham and Sarah is to interpret the previous narratives and to explicate them in a more favorable light; see ibid., 165, n. 5. See also, Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981). In Chapter 3, Alter discusses biblical-type scenes as an expression of a critical junction in the life of the main character; see ibid., 55-78. Meir Sternberg defines the structural principle of analogy as an important characteristic of biblical poetics; however, the excess created within the structure of repetition is a kind of poetic waste whose motives need to be explored; see Meir Sternberg, “The Structure of Repetition in Biblical Narrative: Strategies of Information Excess,” Ha’Sifrut 7 (1977/8): 109-150 [in Hebrew]. According to the documentary hypothesis school, each of the stories is attributed to a different source; see Reuven Ahroni, “On Three Similar Stories in Genesis,” Bet Mikra 77 (1979): 213-23 [in Hebrew].

6 Zakovitch and Shenan understand these three stories as three versions of an ancient literary tradition about the physical relationships that existed between Sarah and Pharaoh, which the biblical editor and post-biblical sources sought to obscure. Avigdor Shinan and Yair Zakovitch, That's Not What the Good Book Says (Tel Aviv: Miskal – Yediot Ahironoth Books and Chemed Books, 2004), 205-211 [in Hebrew]. In contrast, Yassif perceives these stories as three formulations derived from one literary prototype, stories which were transferred to the Bible and express a gradual process of tempering the super-natural motif from the demonological to the rational phase. Eli Yassif, The Hebrew Folktales: History, Genre, Meaning (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), 23-25 [in Hebrew]; see also his references to other studies about the story, 573, n. 7.

7 A partial list from a variety of disciplines and critical approaches: Nidith reads these tales as trickster tales (Susan Niditch, Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore [San Francisco: Harper and Row 1987], 23-69; Exum reads the tales as an expression of male fears about the dangers women might pose (Cheryl J. Exum, Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narrative [Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press 1993], 148-69.
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9 Zakovitch and Shenan also note the similarity between the story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt and that of David and Bathsheba; see Zakovitch and Shenan, That’s Not What the Good Book Says, 209.

10 On this matter, it is worthwhile mentioning Israel Cohen’s essay on Sarah in which he reviews her life history on the basis of the *aggadot* (legends) about her. Cohen interprets this story as an expression of Sarah’s frivolousness – a beautiful woman who is aware of her effect on powerful men – and considers the fact that she exaggerated (!) and lied twice, saying that she was Abraham’s sister to two different kings, as proof of her desire for adventure and danger. We cannot but disagree with this interpretation, because it is inconsistent with the social and cultural norms in which the story was written, as well as the limitations on a woman’s freedom of action in a traditional, tribal society; Israel Cohen, “Sarah Imenu,” in Women in the Bible and their Reflection in Legends, Poetry, Literature, Essays and Scholarship, ed. Israel Zemora (Tel Aviv: Davar, 1964), 617-622 [in Hebrew].

11 It is not unreasonable to make a connection between the character of Pharaoh as “the bad guy” from the story of the exodus from Egypt, and the Pharaoh in this narrative, thus feeding into the halo effect surrounding Abraham as the purported hero, “the good guy,” of the story.


13 Lech Lecha 40, no. 5; 4, no. 2 [in Hebrew].

14 The ancient *Midrash Tanhumah* on the Pentateuch is attributed to Rabbi Tanhumah ben R. Abba; ed. Shlomo Baber, Lech Lecha (Jerusalem: Orzel, 1964), no. 8.


19 Sefer Hayashar, ed. and intro., Joseph Dan (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1986), 90-92 [in Hebrew].


22 See Josephus Flavius, note 10 above.

23 Rabbi David Kimchi (Radak) for Genesis, Lech Lecha [in Hebrew].

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25 See Abarbanel for Genesis, Lech Lecha [in Hebrew].


29 Two interpretive approaches developed in reference to this verse. Most of the commentators and storytellers held that the plagues were the consequences of what Pharaoh had attempted to do to Sarah; in other words, “because of Sarai” is “because of what he did to Sarah.” The minority opinion maintained that they were the result of Sarah’s prayer, that is, “dvar Sarai,” literally, what she said. See Ofra Meir, “The Homiletical Story in Early and Late Midrash,” Sinai 44 (1980): 256-66, especially 252-53 [in Hebrew].


32 The Babylonian Talmud, Yomah 69 b, talks about blinding the eyes of the evil inclination so that he will not lust after the women around him, and in collections from Midrash Abkir, no. 30, (ed. Shlomo Buber), the legend about Matteya ben Heresh describes how he sees the devil before him in the guise of a beautiful woman and plucks out his eyes so that he will not be tempted by her.

33 Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, 22-23.

34 Shula Keshet, Say I Pray Thee, Thou Art My Sister: Intertextual Narrative in Jewish Culture (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2003), 47-60 [in Hebrew].

35 In this regard, it is worthwhile mentioning Kawashima’s article, which deals with the status of women in the Bible, especially regarding sexual offenses perpetrated against them; see Robert Kawashima, “Could a Woman Say ‘No’ in Biblical Israel? On the Genealogy of Legal Status in Biblical Law and Literature,” AJR Review 35 (2011): 1-22.