

## THE ROLE OF HAGAR IN GENESIS 16

PHILIP R. DREY  
Mount Mercy College  
Cedar Rapids, Iowa

### *Introduction*

Attempts to discern the role of the OT character Hagar, the maidservant of Sarai, have subjected the biblical text to a wide variety of disparate analytical tools. Historical critics, basing their study on source analysis, have sought to dissect the account into elemental parts that originated or were redacted in the Yahwistic, Elohist, and Priestly schools.<sup>1</sup> Form and motif critics have employed the specialized tools of oral tradition and literary genre.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars have used the tools of literary criticism<sup>3</sup> as well as social, economic, and feminist perspectives.<sup>4</sup> These approaches, however, fail to clarify Hagar's role in the Abrahamic stories. This article will examine the role of Hagar by placing Gen 16 in the context of its surrounding chapters (Gen 15 and 17) as well as analyzing the chapter itself. This twofold approach will provide insight into Hagar's role in the Gen 16 narrative.

<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (New York: Edwin S. Gorham, 1904); S. E. McEvenue, "A Comparison of Narrative Styles in the Hagar Stories," *Semeia* 3 (1975): 64-80; J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975); A. W. Jenks, *The Elohist and North Israelite Traditions*, SBLMS 22 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977); S. J. Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); T. B. Dozeman, "The Wilderness and Salvation History in the Hagar Story," *JBL* 117 (1998): 23-43.

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., H. Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History*, trans. W. H. Carruth (New York: Schocken, 1964); H. C. White, "The Initiation Legend of Ishmael," *ZAW* 87 (1975): 267-305; R. C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); D. Irvin, *Mytharion: The Comparison of Tales from the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East*, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 32 (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1978).

<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); P. Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* 13, ed. W. Brueggeman and J. R. Donahue, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

<sup>4</sup>A. Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns Within the 'Birth of the Hero' Paradigm," *VT* 36 (1986): 257-273; N. Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 35-86; D. S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 15-34; A. O. Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroines: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 74-79.

*Genesis 16 in Its Context*

Hagar's story comprises twenty-nine total verses. Four intervening chapters separate the two parts of the account. The first part (Gen 16:1-16) concerns Sarai, the wife of Abram, and her plan for the conception of an heir, Hagar's resulting "arrogance," and her flight (and return). Sarah's discontent over the rivalry between Ishmael and Isaac, the expulsion of Hagar, and her plight in the wilderness dominate the second part (Gen 21:9-21). Even though the story of Hagar is divided into two chapters, our concern lies in her role as recorded in Gen 16, because Gen 21 functions as a confirmation and affirmation of her role in chapter 16.

Genesis 16 is situated between two covenant episodes. Chapter 15 details the first covenant episode between God and Abram. The chapter begins with Abram's concern over the lack of an heir (15:2-3) as well as God's promise of a son and countless descendants (15:4-6). The chapter ends with the sealing of the covenant. Genesis 17 recounts the second and more explicit covenant. God not only reaffirms Abram's descendants, but also issues a name change (Abram to Abraham). He then binds this new covenant with Abraham and his descendants, adding the promise of the land of Canaan to Abraham's heritage. For Abraham's part, he and his descendants must keep the covenant with the ritual action of circumcision. Chapter 17 ends with the name change of Sarai to Sarah and the circumcision of all the males in Abraham's household, including himself and his son Ishmael.

The main issue that concerns the biblical writer in chapters 15 and 17 is covenant, namely offspring and inheritance (land). In Gen 15, Abram is greatly distressed over the lack of a son. God, however, promises him not only one son but countless descendants. In Gen 17, God tells him that he will be a father of many nations, thus extending the new covenant, which now includes the territory of Canaan, to his descendants. These two covenant episodes are a determining factor for understanding Hagar's role.

Although Gen 15 emphasizes primarily Abraham and his lack of an offspring, from the outset of Gen 16 the emphasis shifts to Sarai and her lack of an offspring. As Gen 16 tells, through her maidservant Hagar, Sarai obtained an offspring. Following Hagar's conception, discord entered the household, leading to Hagar's flight. Following these events, one would expect Hagar to disappear and the biblical text to resume the story of Abram. However, an angel directs Hagar to return to Sarai. The reason for this lengthy account of an Egyptian maidservant (and also the reason for her role) is intimately attached to the pivotal covenant between God and Abram, pronounced in Gen 15 and reaffirmed and amended in Gen 17. The position of chapter 16 between these two covenant chapters is significant. In chapter 16, the biblical writer portrays how serious the covenants between God and

Abram are through the story of Hagar and Ishmael. The recorded events of the life of Hagar transpire due to her being the second wife of Abram, a partner in the covenant, and, more importantly, on Ishmael being Abram's firstborn son. Even though Abram has little dialogue and acts passively throughout the chapter, it is because of his covenant with God and his paternity to Ishmael that Hagar is saved (twice) in the wilderness. Even though Ishmael is not to be the covenantal heir of Abram, God still watches over him because of the covenant and because he is an heir of Abram.

### *Genesis 16:1-16*

#### Genesis 16:1

Besides continuing the offspring theme of chapter 15, the biblical writer places the characters of the story in their proper roles through the use of Hebrew syntax. By beginning his narrative with Sarai as the subject, the author emphasizes the significance of Abram's wife. Sarai will continue to act as the main subject throughout the initial episode of this chapter (vv. 1-6). In addition, v. 1 begins with the name of Sarai and ends with the name of Hagar. In this way, the biblical writer polarizes the two women. Sarai, as the subject of this verse and as the main character of this initial episode, symbolizes authority and domination. Hagar, the object of the verb and possession of Sarai, represents subservience and subordination: "Power belongs to Sarai, the subject of action; powerlessness marks Hagar, the object."<sup>5</sup>

In this context, the biblical writer deemphasizes the role of Abram. The patriarch is mentioned only in a genitive clause appended to the name of Sarai ("wife of Abram"). Genesis 16:1 highlights Abram's lack of an heir from Sarai's point of view. The reader is told of her barrenness, not of Abram's lack of an heir. Abram, who had been the main character in the previous chapters, will remain passively in the background throughout this story. In spite of this secondary role, however, Abram will prove to be extremely important to understanding chapter 16 and the role of Hagar. The mere presence of Abram in this story and the association of the women with this mighty patriarch will determine the events which transpire in this chapter.

#### *Hagar's Identity*

Genesis does not disclose much about Hagar's identity. Most of the information is found in v. 1, where she is introduced by name. The name "Hagar" possesses several extrabiblical cognates, primarily originating from ancient Arabia. Female names include *hgr* (Palmyrene and Safaitic) and *hgrw* (Nabataean). A male name, *Hâgir* (Arabic, Minaean, and Nabataean) is also

<sup>5</sup>Trible, 10.

attested, but should not be connected to the female name.<sup>6</sup> Although more modern Arabian languages have *hajara*, “to emigrate,” this fortuitous connection to the biblical figure is doubtful.<sup>7</sup> Another possible connection comes from the Sabean and Ethiopic in the term *hagar*, meaning “town, city,” but originally meaning “the splendid” or “the nourishing.”<sup>8</sup>

Other nonbiblical sources provide further evidence for the use of the name of Hagar. A cuneiform inscription from Bahrain, dating to the latter half of the second millennium B.C., reports about “the palace of Rimum, servant of (the god) Inzak, the one of *A-gar-rum*.”<sup>9</sup> Another mention of the word “Hagar” comes from an Egyptian hieroglyphic inscription found at the Persian city of Susa.<sup>10</sup> This remark by Darius I (521-486 B.C.) may allude to a country and/or a people. *Hgrw*, a probable variant spelling of Hagar, was associated with a hagrean wearing a headpiece distinctive of central Arabian bedouins. The association between *hgrw* and hagrean may hint that the “Hagar” of Darius I should be located in eastern Arabia and not the central portion.<sup>11</sup> From the third century B.C., a king of Hagar issued coinage while concurrently trading with the Minaeans and the Nabataeans. Finally, throughout the Middle Ages, Christian and Muslim writers alike employed “Hagar” to denote eastern Arabia.<sup>12</sup>

The biblical figure of Hagar has additionally been associated with the Hagrtes, who were a small Syrian and north Arabian tribe dating to the Persian and Hellenistic periods (cf. 1 Chron 5:19). This connection, however, is improbable due to the representation of Ishmael as a large north Arabian tribe dating to the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.<sup>13</sup>

Although its cognates point to an Arabic origin, the exact origin and meaning of the name of Hagar is unknown. The biblical text, however, further describes Hagar as an Egyptian (מצרית). Scholars have argued for the

<sup>6</sup>E. A. Knauf, *Ismael: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und Nordarabiens im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr.*, 2d ed. Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästinavereins (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1989), 52, n. 253.

<sup>7</sup>E. A. Knauf, “Hagar,” *ABD* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:19.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>9</sup>K. Butz, “Zwei kleine Inschriften zur Geschichte Dilmuns,” in *Dilmun: New Studies in the Archaeology and Early History of Bahrain*, ed. D. T. Potts (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1983), 117-125.

<sup>10</sup>M. Roaf, “The Subject Peoples on the Base of the Statue of Darius,” in *Cahiers du Délégation archéologique française en Iran*, vol. 4 (Paris: Association Paleorient, 1974), 135.

<sup>11</sup>Knauf, 144-145.

<sup>12</sup>Knauf, 54.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 49-53.

intentional use of this designation by the biblical writer. E. A. Knauf suggests that this allusion to an Egyptian nationality functions as a "literary device to connect the story in Gen 16 with 12:10-20 (cf. Gen 12:16)."<sup>14</sup> M. Görg, however, asserts that providing Hagar with an Egyptian nationality is the biblical writer's attempt to show opposition to the foreign policy of Hezekiah during the eighth century B.C.,<sup>15</sup> which was directed north toward the increasing power of Assyria rather than south to Egypt. This notion assumes that the story was authored or at least edited during the time of Hezekiah.

Viewed in the contextual flow of the Genesis stories, assigning Hagar an Egyptian nationality may not be unexpected. According to the Genesis narrative, Abram and Sarai had recently returned from a brief stay in Egypt (Gen 12:10-20). Genesis 12:16 claims that Abram received gifts from Pharaoh on his departure from Egypt. If Sarai held the social status of a priestess,<sup>16</sup> then her reception of gifts (including female assistants such as Hagar) from Pharaoh is also very plausible.<sup>17</sup> In addition, Abram and Sarai lived in Canaan for ten years (Gen 16:3), but Hagar is not mentioned until this point in the narrative. She was not mentioned in the report of objects brought from Ur to Haran by Terah, Sarai's father (Gen 11:31), nor was she given as a present to Sarai at Sarai's wedding (as Zilpah and Bilhah were presented to Leah and Rachel by Laban).<sup>18</sup> Finally, to further strengthen Hagar's Egyptian ties, according to Jewish legend, Hagar is even given the elite social status of being a daughter of Pharaoh<sup>19</sup>—a supposition not supported in the biblical record.

Hagar, then, may be assigned an Egyptian heritage with some certainty, even possibly a level of royalty. The biblical writer in Gen 16:1 also provides evidence of Hagar's social standing. Not only is she Egyptian, but she is also termed a *šifhab* (שפחה). To help understand Hagar's role in this story, we must ascertain the social characteristics of a *šifhab*.

### The Meaning of the Term *šifhab*

The Hebrew language possesses two words similar to *šifhab*, both denoting a human possession. The word *ʿābuddab* (עבדה) means "female slave, servant"

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>15</sup>M. Görg, "Hagar die Ägypterin," *Biblische Notizen* 33 (1986): 17-20.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. S. J. Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch of Genesis* (Athens, OH: Swallow, 1984).

<sup>17</sup>L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. H. Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909), 108.

<sup>18</sup>Teubal, 61, 62.

<sup>19</sup>Ginzberg, 108.

in a collective sense. It is used only in Gen 26:14 and Job 1:3, referring respectively to the specific property of Isaac and Job. In Gen 16:1, Hagar is not referred to as an *ʿābuddah*, so to understand her social status only as another's piece of property or as a slave is erroneous.

The other type of servant, *ʿamah* (אמה), is similar to *šifḥah* in that it may be translated as "maidservant." But *ʿamah* may also possess a more sexual connotation and be rendered as "concubine." To denote specifically the social status and function of a concubine, Hebrew writers had employed the word *pilegeš* (פלגש). *Pilegeš* usually appears in a theme of sexual service or with reference to the male owner of the concubine, as in Gen 22:24 with the relationship between Milcah and Nahor.<sup>20</sup> In Gen 16:1, Hagar is not designated as a *pilegeš* and is not introduced in a sexual situation (although she will function as a surrogate wife). In addition, Hagar is not the property of Abram but of Sarai.<sup>21</sup> Besides these differences, Hagar is termed an *ʿamah* later in Gen 21:10 after her return from the wilderness. Just as she is not simply a slave, Hagar should not be understood as simply a concubine.

The etymology of *šifḥah* (cf. Gen 16:5, 6, 8) has been a source of mild contention. It has been associated with the verb *š-fḥ*, "to pour out, shed blood," or understood as the maidservant of the mistress.<sup>22</sup> In later times, *šifḥah* took on a meaning similar to *ʿamah* and referred to a person who is subservient.<sup>23</sup> A better understanding may come from the Ugaritic verb *s-fḥ*, which means "being together" and is related to the Hebrew *mišpaḥah* ("clan").<sup>24</sup> This connection between *s-fḥ* and *mišpaḥah* has been questioned, resulting in the translation of *s-fḥ* as "to join" or "attach oneself to."<sup>25</sup> "In other words, *šifḥah* could mean 'someone who joins or is attached to' a person or a clan."<sup>26</sup> If Hagar was a gift to Sarai from Pharaoh, this interpretation would be the best fit.

The term *šifḥah* is used sixty-two times in the OT. It is usually found

<sup>20</sup>See also Gen 25:6; 35:22; 36:12; Jude 8:31; 19:1, 2, 9, 10, 24, 25, 27, 29; 20:4-6; 2 Sam 3:7; 5:13; 15:16; 16:21, 22; 19:5(6); 20:3; 21:11; 1 Kgs 11:3; 1 Chron 1:32; 2:46, 48; 3:9; 7:14; 2 Chron 11:21; Est 2:14; and Ezek 23:20.

<sup>21</sup>See Gen 16:2, 3, 8.

<sup>22</sup>F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951): 1046.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>24</sup>*Ben Yehudah Dictionary and Thesaurus of the Hebrew Language: Complete International Centennial Edition* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), 3:7380.

<sup>25</sup>C. U. Wolf, "The Terminology of Israel's Tribal Organization," *JBL* 65 (1946): 47.

<sup>26</sup>Teubal, 58.

in two situations. First, *šifhab* may be coupled with *ʿebed* (עֶבֶד, “man-servant”). In this case, the pair of words is part of a longer list of property, goods, or gifts that may include, for instance, cattle, oxen, donkeys, or camels. Such items were prized possessions of the owner and worth money as well as prestige.

Second, *šifhab* may be used alone in the verse. A better understanding of what a *šifhab* is may be obtained from some of these verses, specifically from Gen 30, 32, and 33. First, in Gen 30 both Rachel and Leah give Jacob their respective *šifhab* in order to obtain offspring. The sexual service of the *šifhab* is controlled by the mistress, as with Sarai and Hagar. As J. Skinner points out: “Hagar is not an ordinary household slave, but the peculiar property of Sarai, and therefore not at the free disposal of her master.”<sup>27</sup> Second, when each *šifhab* is taken by the husband of her mistress, she is then called an *ʿiššab* (אִשָּׁה, “wife”; Gen 30:4, 9). A change in title may hint at some form of contract between husband and wife, as well as a change in the social status of the *šifhab*. This status change happened with Hagar as it did with Bilhah and Zilpah. Third, the union between the *šifhab* and Jacob was perceived as acceptable to God (Gen 30:5, 6, 18). God’s tacit approval of the arrangement provides a certain level of moral legality.

From Gen 32 and 33, several occurrences of the word may add to the understanding of how the *šifhab* fits into the family structure. First, in Gen 32:22, Jacob crossed the Jabbok river with his family. The text mentions that he took Rachel and Leah, as well as Bilhah and Zilpah and his eleven children, with the rest of his possessions following behind. Bilhah and Zilpah must have had a higher status in the family, since they crossed the river with Jacob’s wives and children before the rest of the household possessions. Second, in Gen 33:1-2 the text describes the manner by which Jacob met Esau. Jacob divided his children among the four women, putting Bilhah and Zilpah and their respective children before Rachel, Leah, and their children. When Jacob meets Esau for the first time (Gen 33:6), each *šifhab* and her children were brought up before Esau prior to the two wives and their children. This arrangement surely indicates a unique familial status for the *šifhab*.

Thus at the beginning of her story, we know two personal characteristics of Hagar. First, she more than likely possessed an Egyptian nationality. Second, to understand her social standing at the beginning of the narrative solely as a slave or a concubine is incorrect. Had she held either of these social positions, the biblical writer had at his disposal the appropriate term. However, Hagar is consistently called a *šifhab* until later in her story. Other

<sup>27</sup>J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), 258.

instances of the title in the book of Genesis indicate a special family and social status that was held by the *šifḥah*. The better way to understand Hagar's social status and her relationship with Sarai in Gen 16:1 is to translate the word as "maidservant," understanding that a sexual component is inherent in the word. As Sarai's *šifḥah*, Hagar's sexual services are controlled by her mistress. We may safely assume that Hagar had borne no children until this command by Sarai. Only through Sarai's machination does Hagar conceive.

#### Genesis 16:2-6

In v. 1, the biblical writer portrays the polarity between Sarai and Hagar. Sarai is from the family of Abram, while Hagar is from Egypt. Sarai is the wife of Abram, while Hagar is the maidservant of Sarai. The biblical writer inserts Abram between these two women. Following this introduction, Sarai immediately commands action from both Hagar and Abram. She says: "Behold, God has kept me from bearing. Go to my maidservant. Perhaps I can be built up from her" (Gen 16:2a).<sup>28</sup> Similar to Gen 16:1, Sarai is the subject and, for the first time, the speaker. These are Sarai's first words in the Abrahamic narrative.

Two issues regarding Sarai's words must be understood. First, the biblical writer implies that Sarai's concern for an heir is selfish. Sarai, not Abram, worries over her own barrenness. On the surface, her distress seems to echo Abram's worry over a lack of a son in Gen 15:2. The childlessness in chapter 16, however, does not pertain to her husband or to God and the newly sealed covenant. Sarai says: "God has kept *me* from bearing." Indeed, Sarai's want of an heir is self-motivated. Her desire for an heir is juxtaposed against God's covenant promise to Abram of countless heirs.

Sarai's selfishness is further extended to the result of the union. She gives the reason for her plan as "so *I* can be built up from her." Thus, the union between Hagar and Abram and the intent of Sarai's words are not to provide an heir for her husband, thereby fulfilling the covenant in chapter 15. Instead, it is to provide herself with an heir. She intends to fulfill her needs regardless of God's plan.

The second issue is the gender of the child. The only fact mentioned in the story is that Sarai wanted an offspring. In the covenantal-context of chapters 15 and 17, one would suspect that a child should be mentioned and that the said child would be a male to fulfill the covenant. However, only Sarai's concern for a descendant is voiced and that it be resolved through Hagar. The word "child" is not even mentioned. By these two issues, the biblical writer hints that this child conceived through the union of Hagar and Abram will have nothing to do with the covenants

<sup>28</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all verses of the Hebrew Bible are translations of the author.

mentioned in chapters 15 and 17. The child is planned by Sarai (not God) and will be conceived through Hagar (not Sarai).

Sarai's concern about her lack of an heir and her use of Hagar as a surrogate mother are not unique in Genesis or elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Rachel possesses a similar concern and solution in Gen 30:3. Rachel voices her distress to Jacob: "Give me children or I shall die!" To avert this crisis, she provides Bilhah, her *šifḥah*, to Jacob so that, in Rachel's words, "I can be built up from her." Not to be outdone, Leah grants Zilpah, her *šifḥah*, to Jacob in order to obtain more offspring. Outside of the OT, the introductory clause of law 146 from the Code of Hammurabi (1728-1686 B.C.) provides for such behavior.<sup>29</sup>

The reason why a wife would be so concerned about bearing children lies in the inheritance of the wife's possessions: "In biblical times children were heirs of their (social) mother's estate apart from that of their father's."<sup>30</sup> Genesis 21:10 hints at this familial structure when Sarah states: "The son of this slave will never inherit together with my son Isaac." Similarly, Rachel and Leah say to Jacob: "Are we still likely to inherit anything from our father's estate? . . . All the wealth that God has reclaimed from our father belonged to us and our children in any case" (Gen 31:14, 16).

The inheritance and wealth mentioned in these verses relate to the dowry of the wife. In the ancient Near East, a father must either find a husband for his daughters or give them away as slaves.<sup>31</sup> Upon finding a suitable mate for his daughter, the father provides her with a dowry (her inheritance) when she leaves his house. The daughter-now-wife brings this property into the household of her husband, but it remains her own, separate from the other property owned by the household. Laws 138, 142, and 149 of the Hammurabi Code suggest this separation:

(138) If a seignior wishes to divorce his wife who did not bear him children, he shall give her money to the full amount of her marriage-price and he shall also make good to her *the dowry which she brought from her father's house* and then he may divorce her (emphasis supplied).

(142) If a woman so hated her husband that she has declared, 'You may not have me,' her record shall be investigated at her city council, and if she was careful and was not at fault, even though her husband has been going out and disparaging her greatly, that woman, without incurring any blame at all, *may take her dowry* and go off to her father's house (emphasis supplied).

(149) If that woman has refused to live in her husband's house, he shall

<sup>29</sup>T. J. Meek, "The Code of Hammurabi," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 172.

<sup>30</sup>Teubal, 115.

<sup>31</sup>T. Frymer-Kensky, "Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchal Family," *BA* 44 (1981): 210.

make good her dowry to her which she brought from her father's house and then she may leave (emphasis supplied).<sup>32</sup>

Because Sarai was originally from Mesopotamia, we may assume that this was also the case for her. When Sarai had left the house of her father to join Abram, she probably brought with her a dowry. This dowry became the inheritance which she would pass on to her offspring and which formed the basis of her distress in chapter 16. What the inheritance consists of is not reported in the biblical text.

Passing her inheritance on to her children posed a major problem for a barren woman such as Sarai. Rachel echoes Sarai's concern about the lack of an heir for the same reason. According to Gen 30:1, Rachel tells Jacob: "Give me children, or I will die!" Without any children to accept her inheritance, Rachel's lineage was in jeopardy: "To Rachel, 'I will die' meant 'my house will die out.'"<sup>33</sup> A law from the Code of Hammurabi uses the same wording in the idea of "building a house" for passing on inheritance ("if a man has taken an infant, has brought him up, *made his house* [emphasis supplied]").<sup>34</sup>

To further understand a wife's need to pass her inheritance to her offspring, we must briefly examine the family of the ancient Near East. The Hebrew word *mišpahaḥ* stands for both family and household: "These, however, need not be blood-related; nor, in fact, do they necessarily contain husband and wife."<sup>35</sup> In the patriarchal-dominated world of the OT, a woman could become a leader of her own household. The offspring "of the women in each unit became the legitimate heirs of the matriarchs."<sup>36</sup> To support this, a law from the Hammurabi Code hints at the passing of the wife's inheritance to her children:

(162) If, when a seignior acquired a wife, she bore him children and that woman has then gone to (her) fate, her father may not lay claim to her dowry, since her dowry *belongs to her children* (emphasis supplied).<sup>37</sup>

According to the Code of Hammurabi, the dowry of the wife remained separate from the property of her husband even in her death.

(167) If, when a seignior acquired a wife and she bore him children, that woman has gone to (her) fate (and) after her (death) he has then married another woman and she has borne children, when later the father has gone

<sup>32</sup>Meek, 172.

<sup>33</sup>Teubal, 60.

<sup>34</sup>G. R. Driver and J. C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 2:75.

<sup>35</sup>Teubal, 59.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>37</sup>Meek, 173.

to (his) fate, the children shall not divide according to mothers; they shall take the dowries of their (respective) mothers and then divide equally the goods of the paternal estate.<sup>38</sup>

Thus with the beginning of Gen 16, there is a reversal of sorts. Chapter 15 dealt with Abram's concern over a lack of an heir and God's promise in the covenant to remedy the situation. In chapter 16, however, we have Sarai's concern at her lack of motherhood and her plan to resolve it. Her self-motivated and self-centered interests concerning her inheritance led her to decide that through Hagar she will become a mother. On account of this decision, Hagar plays an important role in this story, for she is the *šifhab*, the maidservant, of Sarai. Her life and her sexual service are controlled by Sarai. The biblical writer has Hagar play the surrogate mother. Indeed, all of Hagar's actions and reactions are initiated and dominated by Sarai, the main character in Gen 16. As has been shown, the reason for the use of Hagar as a surrogate mother is not to fulfill the covenant between God and Abram sealed in Gen 15. Rather, Sarai's reason is "so I may be built up from her." Thus, Hagar's initial role is to provide an heir *for* Sarai and not *for* Abram. The character of Hagar takes on a more significant religious role in the following verses.

#### Genesis 16:2b-4a

The story of Hagar continues with Abram's approval of his wife's plan and the conception of an heir for Sarai (Gen 16:2b-4a). These verses again hint at Sarai's dominance in chapter 16. Just as before, the biblical writer portrays Sarai as the instigator of the main action—she brings Hagar to Abram. Abram, the great patriarch, acquiesces silently and obeys her demand. Hagar, the obedient servant, similarly complies to the command and wish of her mistress. Thus, Abram and Hagar conceived.

Sarai's usage of Hagar is not unusual in the context of the ancient Near East. The Code of Hammurabi (146) provided for such a possibility.

#### Genesis 16:4b-6

Throughout vv. 2b-4a, Hagar continues to be controlled by Sarai's desire for an offspring and to play the submissive maidservant. But this role of subservience quickly changes in vv. 4b-6.

For the first time in the story, the biblical writer allows Hagar to react to the situation. Her attitude toward Sarai is altered when she realizes her pregnancy. Instead of maintaining proper social respect for her mistress, Hagar now possesses a disparate view of Sarai and acts

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

differently. The opposite of what Sarai had intended happened.<sup>39</sup> Instead of obtaining an heir for her personal household property, Sarai brought strife, anguish, and competition into her household.

The text is silent as to why Hagar changed her attitude. A law from the Lipit-Ishtar Code may provide some insight:

[I]f the secon[d wife] whom [he had] married bore him [chil]dren, the dowry which she brought from her father's house belongs to her children, (but) the children of (his) first wife and the children of (his) second wife shall divide equally the property of their father.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, with her pregnancy Hagar may have realized her improved situation in that her son would now have not only her dowry (of which we know nothing), but would also have a claim to Abram's property. In addition to this, Hagar's son would be Abram's first biological son. This position allowed Ishmael to take Eliezar's place in the household.<sup>41</sup>

The text does not tell how Hagar's actions changed nor how she slighted Sarai.<sup>42</sup> In Sarai's eyes, however, whatever the change was, it was sufficient for her to become distressed and upset. Sarai's reaction to Hagar's slight may not be rooted in hatred or contempt toward her maidservant. The problem affecting Sarai may be understood as a reordering of the family structure.<sup>43</sup>

Adding a certain amount of confusion to this situation, Sarai blamed Abram for the tension between Hagar and herself. Apparently, there was no tension between Abram and Sarai before Hagar's pregnancy, which was Sarai's idea. One may assume that Abram was personally involved in changing Hagar's attitude toward Sarai and Sarai found out.<sup>44</sup> By going to Abram with her complaint, Sarai may have wanted Abram to grant Hagar her freedom. A law from the Lipit-Ishtar Code states:

If a man married a wife (and) she bore him children and those children are living, and a slave also bore children for her master (but) the father granted freedom to the slave and her children, the children of the slave shall not divide the estate with the children of their (former) master.<sup>45</sup>

In accordance with this law, which would protect herself and her children

<sup>39</sup>Tribble, 12.

<sup>40</sup>S. N. Kramer, "Lipit-Ishtar Lawcode," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 160.

<sup>41</sup>J. Baker, *Women's Rights in Old Testament Times* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1992), 89.

<sup>42</sup>Teubal, 77.

<sup>43</sup>Tribble, 12.

<sup>44</sup>Teubal, 77, 78.

<sup>45</sup>Kramer, 160.

from the children of Hagar, Sarai may have found the solution to her dilemma. As this law requires the father (Abram) to grant freedom to the slave, Sarai asks Abram to do so. But Abram seems to refuse by turning the decision back to Sarai, telling her to do with Hagar as she saw fit. Sarai's hands were tied, and thus she mistreated Hagar.

Finally, we do not know from the biblical text how Hagar was mistreated by Sarai. A law of the Ur-Nammu Code (2112-2095 B.C.) may provide for a similar situation:

If a man's slave-woman, comparing herself to her mistress, speaks insolently to her (or him), her mouth shall be scoured with 1 quart of salt.<sup>46</sup>

Although Hagar is not the possession of Abram, this law does illustrate verbal contention between the slave woman and her mistress and its result. Law 146 of the Code of Hammurabi is also consistent with biblical data:

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.<sup>47</sup>

This law provides a precedent for Sarai's action. Thus, Sarai possibly removed Hagar from the role of maidservant with all the benefits of that position and reduced her social standing to the status of a female slave. This may not have been immediately implemented, as the biblical writer still described Hagar as "maidservant" in v. 8. In Gen 21, however, Hagar is called *ʿamah* after her return from the wilderness. Although there are several instances in which *šifhal* and *ʿamah* are interchangeable, this change in title may hint at a familial, social-status change.

#### Genesis 16:7-14

The account of Hagar continues in Gen 16:7-14 with her flight into the wilderness. Several of these verses, along with Gen 21:14-18, have been assigned to a number of sources, including the so-called story of the Desert Matriarch.<sup>48</sup> This may not be the case for two reasons. First, there is no consensus for crediting these verses to the different authors.<sup>49</sup> Second, Gen 16:7-14 logically follows the action of the previous verses, just as Gen 21:14-18 logically fits into that respective plot. Thus, we will

<sup>46</sup>J. J. Finkelstein, "The Laws of Ur-Nammu," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 525.

<sup>47</sup>Meek, 172.

<sup>48</sup>Cf. Teubal, 141-176.

<sup>49</sup>See, e.g., Dozeman; and Teubal, 142, 143.

assume that the Hagar narrative belongs intact as presented in Gen 16.

Genesis 16:7-14 describe Hagar's visit by the angel of God:

And the angel of God found her near a spring of water in the wilderness near the spring beside the road of Shur. And he said, "Hagar, maidservant of Sarai, from where did you come and where are you going?" And she answered, "From the face of Sarai my mistress I am fleeing." And the angel of God said to her, "Go back to your mistress and submit under her hands." And the angel of God said to her, "I will greatly increase your descendant so he will not be counted because of the size." And the angel of God said to her, "Behold, you (are) with child and you will bear a son and you will call his name Ishmael, for God heard of your affliction. And he will be a wild donkey of man and his hand against everyone and the hand of everyone against him, and against the faces of all of his brothers he will dwell." And she called the name of God who had spoken to her "You are God of sight," for she said, "Have I now seen the one who sees me?" For this the well is called Beer Lahai Roi, behold, between Kadesh and Bered.

With Hagar's flight from Sarai, the wilderness portion of Hagar's story opens. The biblical text informs us that Hagar arrived at a water spring near another spring on the road to Shur. The exact location of Shur is unknown. Hagar probably rested by a spring located in the eastern part of the wilderness.<sup>50</sup>

After Hagar fled into the wilderness to escape her affliction, the angel of God immediately found and addressed her. The angel, without identifying himself, asked her two questions regarding where she came from and where she was going. Through these two questions, the angel challenged Hagar's past and future—her very existence. Hagar answered the first query by telling him that she was fleeing from her mistress. Without giving Hagar a chance to answer the second question, the angel provided an answer for her. The angel of God commanded Hagar to "go back" and "submit" to her mistress. Hagar, attempting to free herself from bondage, must return not only to the cause of her affliction, but submit to it. While Sarai acted out of self-pity, God overturned the actions of Sarai and Abram without dishonoring either of them.

<sup>50</sup>The wilderness of Shur is also mentioned in Gen 20:1; 25:18; Exod 15:22; and 1 Sam 15:7; 27:8. Gen 20:1 states that Abraham settled between Kadesh and Shur after leaving the Negeb. Gen 25:18 says that Ishmael lived in a territory which stretched from Havilah-by-Shur, just outside of Egypt on the way to Assyria. 1 Sam 15:7 reports that Saul began his conquest of the Amalekites at Havilah in the direction of Shur, locating the wilderness east of Egypt. 1 Sam 27:8 has David raiding the Geshurites, Girzites, and Amalekites in the direction of Shur as far as Egypt. These verses suggest that the wilderness of Shur should be located just east of Egypt in the northern Sinai Peninsula. The location of Hagar's destination in the wilderness may also be gleaned from later verses. Gen 16:14 says that the spring is situated between Kadesh and Bered. Although the location of Bered is still unknown, Kadesh is identified with the site of Kadesh-Barnea.

Not all hope was lost for Hagar after listening to the angel of God. Compensation followed submission. The angel foretold to Hagar that her descendants would be greatly increased. His words (Gen 16:10) echo the covenant in Gen 15:5. Here, God promises Abram innumerable descendants, countless as the stars. Ironically, what Sarai had attempted to do for herself through Hagar (ensure her own progeny) happens to Hagar.

This promise of descendants seems to be slightly out of place with Hagar in the wilderness sitting by a well. Why does the angel promise such descendants to this Egyptian maidservant? Because this child's father is Abram. In Gen 15, God promises Abram countless descendants. As Hagar is the (second) wife of Abram (Gen 16:3) and Ishmael will be his son, God will uphold his covenant with Abram by making Ishmael into a great nation. The biblical writer, in the words of the angel to Hagar, is showing how ardently God is heeding this covenant. No matter that he did not instigate Hagar's conception (Sarai did). No matter that Hagar is not even Hebrew (but Egyptian). A son of Abram is, nevertheless, a son of Abram, and, therefore, part of the covenant. The biblical writer is illustrating that by the covenant of Gen 15 God is willing to bless *any* descendant of Abram.

The importance of Abram's bearing on this episode is further enhanced by the fact that Hagar is the only woman in the Hebrew Bible to receive such a promise of descendants.<sup>51</sup> But this promise must not be viewed in terms of Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant of Sarai, but in terms of Hagar, the wife of Abram. It is only because of this association with Abram that this promise is necessary. The biblical writer makes this clear in the second covenant episode where, in Gen 17:20, God reaffirms Ishmael's heritage only because Abram requested it. Although this promise lacks the ritual sealing action of a covenant, it is immediately followed by a birth announcement.

Hagar is the first female of the Bible to receive such an announcement. Why? The answer may be twofold. On one hand, this announcement seems to add legitimacy to the promise of countless descendants. As has been pointed out, the content of the promise is similar to covenants between God and the patriarchs.<sup>52</sup> This promise, however, "lacks the covenant context that is so crucial to the founding fathers."<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, the announcement of Ishmael's birth through the messenger's declaration may serve as a sealing of this promise.<sup>54</sup> Although Hagar already knows that she is pregnant, the announcement affirms it. In her new son, however, Hagar sees both joy and

<sup>51</sup>Trible, 16.

<sup>52</sup>See, e.g., Gen 12:1, 2; 17:4-7; 26:23, 24; 28:13, 14.

<sup>53</sup>Trible, 16.

<sup>54</sup>Other announcements include Gen 17:19; Judg 13:5, 7; and Isa 7:14-17. R. W. Neff, "The Annunciation in the Birth Narrative of Ishmael," *BR* 17 (1972): 51-60.

sorrow. Although she now possesses a future heritage through her son (she is “built up”)—by returning to Sarai, her son will be against his brothers: “Suffering undercuts hope. A sword pierces Hagar’s own soul.”<sup>55</sup> Her anticipated joy is cut short by a certain future of suffering.

This bleak forecast of Ishmael’s future may be anticipatory of Gen 17:19-21, which foretells the future of both Ishmael and Isaac:

But God replied, “Yes, your wife Sarah will bear you a son whom you must name Isaac. And I shall maintain my covenant with him, a covenant in perpetuity, to be his God and the God of his descendants after him. For Ishmael too I grant you your request. I hereby bless him and will make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous. He will be the father of twelve princes, and I shall make him into a great nation. But my covenant I shall make with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear you at this time next year.”

Isaac, not Ishmael, will be the recipient of the covenant of Gen 15 and 17. Not only does the covenant include numerous descendants, but now also the land of Canaan. Ishmael, for his part, will be blessed with descendants only because he is the son of Abram and because Abram requested it.

Hagar does not respond directly to these angelic promises. As an apparent positive response to the angel’s message, Hagar names the being who spoke to her. The angel had not provided a name for himself or the deity he represents. Hagar, thus, identified the deity which she encountered at the well with a name.<sup>56</sup>

#### Genesis 16:15-16

Genesis 16 closes abruptly: “And Hagar bore to Abram a son and Abram called the name of his son whom Hagar bore Ishmael. And Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.”

This conclusion continues to undermine the character and person of Hagar,<sup>57</sup> as well as to build up the patriarch. First, in keeping with the story, the author silences Hagar in these verses and mentions her by name without an epithet. Second, the biblical writer removes the focus from Hagar and her child (and from Sarai too) by stressing the fatherhood of Abram. This is not strange seeing that Abram is the reason for the importance of Ishmael. Third, Abram names the child. According to the birth announcement, this privilege rested with Hagar, but the biblical

<sup>55</sup>Trible, 17.

<sup>56</sup>The name given by Hagar to the supernatural being is difficult to translate from the Hebrew and thus has several interpretations. T. Boon, “Hagar’s Words in Gen 16:13b,” *VT* 30 (1980): 1-7; M. Tsevat, *The Meaning of the Book of Job and Other Biblical Studies: Essays on the Literature and Religion of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: KTAV, 1980), 73-76.

<sup>57</sup>Trible, 18, 19.

writer has shifted it to Abram. The right of naming is given to Abram, the real main character of the story. This shift of focus to Abram in regard to the parentage of Ishmael is further supported in Gen 17 and 21. In Gen 17:20, Ishmael is blessed by God because God heard Abraham's request.

In Gen 21:9, Ishmael is described as the son born to Abram, while Hagar is referred to as the Egyptian. In Gen 21:11, Sarai's demand for the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael distressed Abraham on account of Ishmael's being his son, not on account of Hagar. In Gen 21:13, God states that Ishmael will become a nation because he is Abraham's offspring. In Gen 21:17-18, God hears Ishmael's cries and saves both Hagar and him on account of his link to Abram. The biblical text then goes on to describe Ishmael's life (Gen 21:20, 21) and his descendants (Gen 25:12-18). In Gen 25:12, Ishmael is the son of Abraham, while Hagar is described as the woman with whom Abraham conceived him and as Sarah's Egyptian slave-girl, but not as Ishmael's mother. Thus, the role of Hagar in the story depends on the actions of Sarai and Abram. Through Hagar's life, the biblical writer illustrates the greatness of Abram and the seriousness of the covenant between himself and God.

### *Conclusion*

Genesis 16 functions as an example of the far-reaching effect of the covenant between God and Abram in chapter 15. The covenant episode in Gen 15 states that Abram will have countless descendants. This covenant is fulfilled in Gen 16 through Hagar. Although Hagar is a lowly Egyptian maidservant and Ishmael was originally conceived to be the heir of Sarai, Ishmael is still a son of Abram and, therefore, part of the covenant. Thus, the biblical writer used Hagar's role to demonstrate that God seriously upheld the covenant of Gen 15 regardless of who the mother of the child was or why the child was conceived. Abram is the father and, by virtue of the covenant, he will be blessed with countless descendants—including those of Ishmael.