SARAH (FORMERLY KNOWN AS SARAI)

> Genesis 17:16 "I will bless her, and more than that, I will give from her, for you, a son. And I will bless her, and she will become nations; rulers of peoples shall come from her."

The names "Sarai" and "Sarah" occur more frequently than the name of any other woman in the Bible, fifty-five times in the First Testament and four in the New Testament. Compare that to twenty-eight citations of Rebekah's name in the Hebrew Scriptures and one in the NT. Sarah bat Terah, Sarah neé Sarai, is introduced along with her sister-in-law Milcah (who is also her niece) in verse 29. Nothing else of her life matters or is disclosed. The discerning reader can ferret out the details of the incestuous unions that characterize this family, though her parentage is not disclosed until Genesis 20:12; she and her husband Abram share their father, Terah. The text withholds the relationship between Sarai and Terah for a dramatic reveal later in the story. There is another glaring omission in the text; it says nothing about the mothers of Sarai and Abram. We do not even know if Nahor and Haran (Abram's brothers) have the same mother as either Sarai or Abram.

In the next verse the text reveals that Sarai is infertile—as the biblical authors understood it, "barren." Barrenness is an agricultural term, implying that the soil—Sarai's womb—is inhospitable to life. In this understanding, men (and only men) produce "seed"; the woman's contribution to conception was unknown until very recently in human history. However, I find it curious that nowhere in the Bible is a man accused of having "bad" seed. The farmers who provided the language for the metaphor certainly knew that poor

Sarah and Abraham, an Incestuous Family

Sarah and Abraham are sister and brother, and they are married. Incestuous, intrafamily unions run in their family. Iscah and Milcah are Abram's nieces, the daughters of his brother Haran. Milcah is also Abram's sister-in-law. Milcah is Abram's niece and sister-in-law because she married her uncle Nahor, Abram's brother. Abram, Nahor, and Haran are brothers, the sons of Terah (and grandsons of another Nahor.) Milcah and Iscah are also Lot's sisters. The normative or at least regular practice of incestuous marriage in Lot's family may have some bearing on his subsequent conduct with his daughters. It is not clear whether the women in these relationships had any say in the matter. Neither is it clear whether the practice represented local culture or was characteristic of this family. The Torah will eventually

ground conditions were not the only cause for a failed crop. Surely they had seen mildewed or otherwise blighted seed stock. At any rate, quite some time must have passed between verse 29 and verse 30 in order for Sarai's infertility to become known.

In Genesis 11:31, Terah functions as a patriarch and moves the clan under his control. Terah takes his unacknowledged daughter Sarai, her brother and husband, Abram, and their nephew Lot on a journey from Mesopotamia to Canaan. It is possible that Terah took one or more women with whom he had children; it is also possible that he left women and progeny behind. Did Terah take Lot's widowed mother, his father Haran having died in 11:28? If not, why take a widow's son? Or had she died by this point as well? Lot appears to be her only son; he has two sisters, Milcah and Iscah. Did Terah take his other son, Nahor, his woman, and their family with them?

More than five hundred miles later they stopped in Haran, which the biblical writers associated with Abram's brother Haran.[21] Sarai and her family stay in Haran long enough for her father to die at a supernaturally ripe old age. Sarai and Abram have spent decades together, more than half a century, and their life together does not rate any discussion in the text.

In Genesis 12:4, Abram has reached the age of seventy-five. We have to read forward to 17:17 to discover that Sarai is a decade younger than Abram. She is sixty-five. Thinking back on the inauguration of their union, a ten-year age difference between partners seems more significant the younger they are. How old were Sarai and Abram when they became conjugal partners? They are on a journey that they have undertaken because God has called Abram to go on a journey, the end of which Abram does not know. In calling Abram, God blesses Abram, but God does not bless Sarai in Genesis 12:1–3. God does promise Abram female and male descendants, since a "nation" cannot be composed of only one gender.

Sarai's age is significant, because in the following stories she will be at risk of kidnapping (and likely worse) because of her great beauty. It is a rare and unprecedented thing in the Scriptures, or in the times in which they have been translated and interpreted, for a sixty-five-year-old woman to be recognized as extraordinarily, maddeningly beautiful, drawing the covetous sexual attentions of monarchs. Yet the Scriptures would have us believe that Sarai is so coveted twice.

These two stories (and their triplicate starring Rebekah and Isaac) undoubtedly come from disparate sources and do not reflect a chronological narrative. Their canonization into a narrative structure that claims coherence is an invitation to read them as separate, repeating events. In the case of the Sarai/

21. Haran the person and Haran the place are spelled differently in Hebrew, Sume-

Sarah iteration, the duplication serves to emphasize her beauty and desirability, along with Sarai's and Abram's vulnerability to powerful "foreigners." The idea of these rulers as "foreigners" in their own principalities is comprehensible only when reading the text through Israelite eyes.

Israel's Iraqi, Babylonian Origins

Sarah and Abraham will become the founding parents of the people who will come to be called Israel, but they are not Israelites. Sarah, Abraham, and their brothers Haran and Nahor are from the Sumerian city of Ur (Gen. 11:28, 31). Ur is described as a "Chaldean" city. Chaldea became interchangeable with Babylon and Mesopotamia (2 Kgs. 25:13–36; Ezra 5:12; Isa. 47:1, etc.). Contemporarily, Ur is in Iraq, so the ancestors of Israel are also the ancestors of Iraq, since the entire family did not migrate.

As a result of a famine in Mesopotamia, Sarai and Abram went to the prosperous Egyptian empire. The text does not tell us if Lot went with them. What the text does say is that Sarai was beautiful and her beauty was a liability to Abram. Abram feared death more than he feared giving Sarai to another man. If she is known as his sister, a more powerful man might take her from him but let him live; if he were known as her man, he might be killed for her (see Gen. 12:12). The deception is for his benefit, not hers. In Genesis 12:15 what Abram feared most happened; Sarai was seized because of her great beauty and taken to the pharaoh. The account in Genesis 12 makes clear that the pharaoh took Sarai as his woman. And the text is clear that they lived together as a conjugal couple long enough for Abram to receive and enjoy sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants and female servants, female donkeys, and camels, and for some sort of plague to break out in the palace.

The *midrashim* reveal that the rabbinic interpreters understood Sarai was available for the pharaoh's sexual use, even when they did not want to admit it. The midrash on Exodus teaches that The-God-of-Sinai personally came down to deliver Sarai from the pharaoh. God tells Moses, "By your life, I will go down and save the Israelites. One woman came into Egypt and on her account I went down, and I saved her." When was this? When Pharaoh took Sarah, as it says, "And the Holy One plagued Pharaoh. . . ."[22]

Abram did not object to Sarai's seizure. He relinquished her to the pharaoh and accepted a rich settlement for his loss. Her brother-husband sold her to

22. *Shemoth Rabbah* 15:14

a man he knew would use her for sex. A hip-hop womanist reading of this text would say that he pimped her out. This behavior on the part of the great patriarch has proved quite vexing to generations of interpreters. Rav Huna minimizes it in *Bereshit Rabbah* 3:1 and 41:1, saying it was only one night and the pharaoh never got any closer to Sarai than her shoe. But I think there is value in honoring Sarah as a survivor of sexual violence and domestic abuse and acknowledging her partner's complicity in that abuse. That is the plain truth for which womanist truth-telling calls. In a later section of the midrash on Genesis, Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai said that to compensate her for her troubles, the pharaoh gave Sarai his daughter Hagar, as reparations.[23]

In Genesis 12:19, the pharaoh admits that he took Sarai for his woman because he did not know that she was Abram's woman. Apparently the pharaoh has scruples about abducting partnered women, but not unattached women. The pharaoh confronts Abram about the deception, but Abram does not respond; he leaves with his woman and all that the pharaoh has given him in exchange for her. In Genesis 13:1 Sarai and Abram have left Egypt; they are very wealthy—the herd animals that Abram received in exchange for Sarai's body have made him a wealthy man. In Genesis 13:18, Sarai and Abram move to Hebron (although the text does not name her.)

Sarai is absent from the narrative when Lot is carried off as a war captive and when he is rescued (Gen. 14:12–16). Sarai is absent from the narrative when Abram gives the mysterious Malki-Tzedek (Melchizedek) one tenth of "everything," including the goods he received in exchange for Sarai from the pharaoh in Genesis 14:18–20. Given that wealth was accrued at her expense, perhaps she should've had a say in what happened to it. Sarai is absent from the narrative when the Holy One promises Abram descendants and makes a covenant with him in Genesis 15.

Sarai returns to the narrative in chapter 16. She is reintroduced along with her barrenness in the first verse. In spite of God's previous reassurance to Abram, he is still "going about childless" as he lamented in 15:2, without daughter or son from which his great nation may spring forth. The text links Sarai's childlessness with her possession of the person and services of an Egyptian slave-girl, *shiphchah* here, called Hagar (see Excursus, "The Torah of Enslaved Women"). The pain of Sarai's infertility transcends time. Every year that Abram and Sarai lived together as husband and wife was a year that passed without a child, with or without miscarried pregnancies or even

23. Giving a sexually exploited woman another woman to exploit sexually is "biblical" justice. I am not reading this as a historical or ethical claim but am acknowledging its Iron Age morality.

the hope of a child. In her desperation, Sarah turned to surrogacy, forcible surrogacy.

The girl—she is young enough to be presumed fertile—is called Hagar, a masculine Hebrew name meaning "foreign thing," from the root *g-w-r* that means "foreigner" or "sojourner." I very much doubt that her Egyptian parents gave her such a name. It is more likely that Hagar is what she was called after she entered a Hebrew-speaking household. I find it noteworthy that her name is not feminine, "foreign woman," even though it is her female body that will be colonized to gestate the hopes of Sarai and Abram.

Sarai gives Hagar to Abram as a surrogate wife, not as a "concubine," as some translate.[24] Concubinage does not exist in biblical Israel, in spite of the deployment of the term "concubine" in the dominant NRSV and JPS translations in a number of narratives. Concubinage generally refers to sexual use of a subordinate woman; if children are produced, they are illegitimate. In the Israelite two-tier conjugal system, the children of primary and secondary (or low-status) women in Israelite households are legitimate. Primary women are *nashot* (the plural of *isshah*, "woman"), regularly translated "wives." Secondary women are *pilegishiym nashot*, "women of secondary status." The terms are used together, and *pilegesh* (*piylegesh*, "secondary woman") also occurs alone.[25] The type of union, not sequence, determines the status of the union; a man's only woman may be of secondary status, or he may have several of primary status.

In Genesis 16, when Sarai gives Hagar to Abram, she gives her, *l'isshah*, "as a woman/wife," using the same term, *isshah*, for Sarai's own relationship with Abram. Secondarily, Sarai intends to use Hagar to produce a child to fulfill the divine promise; the child will be a legitimate heir. The biblical text has compressed ten years into one verse. It has been ten years since Abram has settled in Canaan. This does not include the first leg of his journey or his stay in Egypt. They have waited for God to provide them with a child for more than ten years; they are desperate. Sarah's barrenness seems to be secondarily—and temporarily—ascribed to God.

Sarai and Hagar are cowives. Both are matriarchs; both will entertain the Divine. Both will mother dynasties. But there is hierarchy between them, internal and external.[26] Sarai employs that hierarchy against Hagar; first

24. In Gen. 16:3 Hagar is called an *isshah*, "woman," situationally translated "wife" as in the NRSV and Fox. IB, JPS, and GSJPS use "concubine," which has traditionally indicated low-status marriage signaled by the use of the word *pilegesh* (*piylegesh*), which is not present in this text.

25. See Judg. 19:1; 2 Sam. 15:16; 20:3, where *pilegesh* (*piylegesh*) modifies *isshah*.

26. Renita Weems's powerful articulation of this point in *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988) remains

she offers her man Hagar's body and presumed fertility. Then Sarai claims and ultimately rejects Hagar's child and blames her man for doing what she told him to do in the first place (Gen. 16:5). Sarai invokes divine judgment between herself and Abram for the violence, *chamas*, that she claims has been done to her, then takes matters into her own hands and violently abuses, *t'a'nneha*, Hagar herself. Many translations downplay Sarai's abuse of Hagar in verse 6: NRSV, "dealt harshly"; JPS/GSJPS, "treated harshly"; IB, "treated badly." Fox's "afflicted" is somewhat stronger. Yet Sarai's abuse is described with the same verb, *'-n-h*, that led to God's redemption of Israel from Egypt (cf. IB, NRSV, JPS, and GSJPS "oppress" in Exod. 1:11). When Shechem abuses Dinah using the same verb, he rapes her, as does Amnon, Tamar. Sarai orchestrates Hagar's sexual abuse by Abram and is a party to and beneficiary of it. The biblical text makes plain the unwelcome truth that women participate in the trafficking and sexual abuse of other women. Understandably, Hagar runs away.

Sarai's story continues in Genesis 17, when she is eighty-nine years old according to the narrative. In spite of Sarai's violent abuse of Hagar, in spite of her forcible surrogate impregnation of Hagar, God keeps God's promise and Sarai becomes miraculously pregnant. God's fidelity to Sarai exceeds Sarai's fidelity to Hagar. God expresses that fidelity to Abram through a covenant expressed in Genesis 17:1–22; God also changes Abram's name to Abraham. In that same conversation, God speaks to Abraham about his woman. But first Abraham must circumcise himself and the males of his household. The sign that God chooses for the covenant between Godself and Abraham, his household, and his descendants excludes Sarai, the women of their household, and all of the women among their descendants. So is God really the God of the uncircumcised Sarai and her daughter descendants?

God tells Abraham that Sarai's name is also changing. God does not speak to her. God does promise to bless her and bring forth a line of royal rulers from her. This differs from the promise made to Hagar in chapter 16: she will be the mother of nations, but there is no mention of royalty among her descendants.[27] Abraham's response is to fall down laughing, questioning whether Sarah can give birth at her age. He does not consider that God can bring this miracle to pass. Just as Sarah is absent from the conversation about the covenant between God and Abraham, she is absent from the ritual that inscribes it on the flesh of Abraham, Ishmael, and every free and enslaved male in Abraham's household (Gen. 17:23–27). Does the covenant then extend to Sarah and the other women in her household?

27. It is worth noting that Abraham initially resists the idea of another heir, asking God in Gen. 17:18 to bestow these blessings on the child he has, a child God seems to have disregarded: "If only Yishmael existed before your face."

In Genesis 18:9, mysterious visitors ask Abraham about Sarah. One promises that she will indeed conceive and give birth within the year. From within the tent Sarah laughs to herself, as Abraham had previously laughed in God's face. After telling us that the eighty-nine- or ninety-year-old woman is indeed menopausal, God demands that Abraham explain Sarah's laughter, although he is never called to account for his own. Sarah denies laughing, and someone—the lack of an explicit subject makes it impossible to know if God or Abraham is speaking—rebuts her denial.

In 18:12, Sarah asks a fascinating intimate, explicit question: "After I have been completely dried out, will there yet be for me, wetness?"[28] The text offers a surprising acknowledgment and affirmation of women's sexual pleasure even as it supposes that at some age—perhaps with menopause—women are past the age for intimate moisture and its pleasures.

Sarah disappears from the text for several chapters. She reappears in chapter 20, when Abraham (and his unmentioned household) moves to Gerar. Once again Sarah's beauty brings peril. Once again Abraham identifies Sarah as his sister and not as his woman. In 20:13, Abraham explains that he asks that Sarah only identify herself as his sister in every place they travel. On one hand, that level of fear seems completely paranoid; on the other, Sarah is taken from him to be the woman of a wealthy man on two occasions (if we read the narratives sequentially as they appear in a canonical reading). Their deception has apparently saved their lives, although it has not preserved Sarah from abduction and rape or forced marriage.

This time the Scriptures would have us believe King Avimelekh (Abimelech) of Philistia takes Sarah from Abraham for the second time. But the text assures us that she is not violated this time. Now, this sister-wife-surrender story is most likely an alternate version of the one in chapter 12. But combined with that narrative as a second canonical story, it serves to emphasize Sarah's great beauty at her great age, the number and nature of threats to the promises God has made to Abraham, and God's continual intervention to protect Sarah, Abraham, and their progeny—including Hagar and her progeny. In 20:18, the text reveals the lengths to which God is willing to go to protect Sarah: God inflicts infertility on all the women in Abimelech's household—his woman and female slaves, whose duties appear to be sexual and reproductive—until Sarah is released.[29]

28. In his Jewish Publication Society *Commentary on Genesis*, Nahum Sarna offers the translation "abundant moisture" in lieu of the traditional "pleasure."

29. Obviously it would take some time for this infertility to manifest, but the text has specified that there was no sexual contact between Sarah and Abimelech, so the reader

In chapter 21 Sarah conceives at long last; no further mention is made of her intimate pleasure and concomitant wetness. Instead, she celebrates the "laughter" that God has brought into her life through her son (a pun on Isaac's name in Hebrew). She rejoices particularly in the thought of nursing, *y-n-q*, her son. In her barrenness Sarah responded to Hagar's fertility with violence, driving her out in chapter 16. The text does not address Sarah's reception of the returned Hagar. In her fertility Sarah once again turns hostile eyes to Hagar. This time Sarah does not lay a hand on Hagar; instead, she sends her out into the wilderness to die with her now unwanted and superfluous son, Ishmael. In Genesis 21:12 God gives Abraham a command that has vexed and inspired biblical commentators through the ages: "Whatever Sarah says to you, obey her." In the rabbinic exegetical tradition expressed in the *Midrash Rabbah*, *Shemoth* 1:1, Sarah was a prophet whose prophetic abilities surpassed those of Abraham.[30]

Sarah disappears from the text at one of its most crucial junctures, Abraham's decision to sacrifice their son. The reader can only imagine that Abraham did not tell Sarah of his plan, or speculate what might have happened had Sarah been included in the conversation with the Divine, or had she been apprised of Abraham's intent. One can only wonder what she said when the day's events became known, retold, ultimately to be canonized.

Sarah's death at the age of one hundred and twenty-seven is memorialized in Genesis 23:1. The deaths of women in the Scriptures are rarely detailed; accounts of their burials are even more rare. On Sarah's behalf, Abraham negotiates for a burial ground with a Hittite clan that has taken up residence in Canaan. In the moment of her death and in the days and weeks and months following, Sarah is beloved, bewailed, and bemoaned, and Abraham is bereaved and bereft. When the number and complexities of Sarah's lives are measured (23:1 uses the plural), she is woman and wife, mother and matriarch, female patriarch and flawed person, blessed and beloved.

Daughterless, Sarah was the mother of Yitzchaq (Isaac), the mother-in-law of Rivqah (Rebekah), and the grandmother of Israel. Sarah's stature as an ancestor grew with the canonization of each volume of Scripture. Isaiah invokes her name in 51:2; one of the heroines of Tobit is named for her; and she is named in Romans 9:9; Hebrews 11:11; and 1 Peter 3:6—although the author of the Petrine epistle has not based his assertions on the extant First Testament. Sarah also appears in the pseudepigraphal books of *Levi*, *Abraham*, *Asenath* (in which we learn that Sarah was quite tall), *Lives of the Patriarchs*, and the *Prayer of Levi*.

30. Abraham was called a prophet by Abimelech in Gen. 20:7. Most commentators regard this an indication of regard for Abraham, given he does not actually function as a prophet.

The biblical Sarah is a complex character who exercises privilege and experiences peril. In her complexity she can be iconic for contemporary religious readers who may not find themselves on a single side of a contrived privilege-peril binary scale. Women of color who are imperiled in the United States and the wider Western world because of race and ethnicity can also exercise privilege if they are Christian and/or cisgender[31] and/or heterosexual. Women who exercise white privilege can be imperiled through Muslim identity or sexual minority status. Male privilege—even white male privilege—can be eclipsed in part by sexual orientation or broader gender nonconformity.

Sarah's economic and social privilege and national origin separate her from Hagar, even though they share gender peril. Their biological privilege-peril spectrum is inverted: Hagar's fertility offers little privilege, while Sarah's barrenness poses significant peril. Sarah chooses the role of female patriarch and enforces the patriarchal hierarchy on Hagar, even when Abraham does not require her to do so. She has another option, as Renita Weems demonstrates in *Just a Sister Away*:[32] solidarity and sisterhood. In this reading Sarah serves as a cautionary tale bearing witness to the temptation to exercise whatever privilege we may have over someone else, rather than stand with them in shared peril, thereby extending and transforming privilege.

HAGAR

> Genesis 21:17 God heard the voice of the boy, and the messenger of God called to Hagar from the heavens, and said to her, "What is with you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy there where he is."

The biblical portrayal of Hagar has served as the launching point for contemporary womanist discourse and premodern protowomanist analyses, and continues to fire the exegetical imaginations of readers/hearers of African descent in multiple religious traditions. The biblical account of Hagar intersects with and diverges from the traditional Islamic accounts of the Hajar narrative; it should be noted that Hajar's story is not told in the Qur'an.[33] Muslim readers

31. "Cisgender" refers to having one's gender identity perceived as corresponding with one's biological sex.

32. Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego, CA: LuraMedia, 1988), 9–10, 14, 16.

33. Hadiths are reports of the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad. I have used the collection of classical Islamic scholar Sahih Bukhari (810–870 CE) in the public domain and the *tafsir* (commentary) of Al Tabari, widely considered to be

Messenger/Angels

English speaking hearers and readers are used to encountering "angels" in the biblical text, but the images that are invoked by the term were virtually unknown to those who crafted and those who first encountered the Hebrew Scriptures. The word *mal'ak* (*mal'akiym*, plural) means "messenger," not necessarily a supernatural being. The human messengers of Genesis 32:3; Numbers 20:14; Deuteronomy 2:26, and so on are *mal'akiym*, as are the supernatural messengers that Jacob saw on the ladder in Genesis 28:16, the messenger in the burning bush in Exodus 3:2, and the messenger Balaam and his donkey encounter in the road in Numbers 22:31. (The messengers in Gen. 19:1 cannot be clearly identified as supernatural or human, in spite of the translation "angels" in NRSV and JPS; Fox, the GSJPS, and IB use "messenger" exclusively.) These messengers do not have wings—hence Jacob's ladder—and they do not play musical instruments. There are supernatural beings with wings: the cherubs (Hebrew *cheruviym*) have two; the fiery seraphim have six. Neither the cheruviym nor seraphiym are ever called "messengers" (*mal'akiym*) in the text. The practice of calling the messengers "angels" stems from the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. The Greek word *angelos*, "angel," was used to translate *mal'ak* for human and divine messengers. However, the primary meaning of *angelos*, a human messenger, has been lost in contemporary popular usage.

and hearers of the tradition that identifies Hajar as the mother of Ibrahim's promised heir affirm Hajar's status as a matriarch and that Hajar was a servant in Sarah's household. Christian womanist readers/hearers have reevaluated the biblical Hagar narrative for its affirmation of her place in the divine narrative and that of her descendants, in spite of her enslavement and use as a surrogate. Among these, the reading of Delores Williams has had the most significant impact on my scholarship.[34]

Perhaps more than any other scriptural (in the broadest sense) narrative, the Hajar/Hagar story emphasizes the import of naming and of names. Muslim feminist scholar Amina Wadud taught me that the name we use for Hajar/Hagar immediately privileges one tradition over the other. This volume is

of al-Ṭabarī. The Children of Israel, vol. 3 [Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1991]).

34. Delores S. Williams was the first scholar to highlight for me (and many of my peers in seminary and graduate school) the significance of Hagar as the only person in the canon to name God (*Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*

exegesis of and commentary on the shared Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity, yet the expansive nature of womanism that is deeply entrenched in the lived reality of black women and all whom they (we) love in the world includes women and men from a broad range of religious traditions and those from none. In this discussion the biblical Hagar will share space on the page with Hajar from our sister tradition Islam and its sister-texts, the hadiths, given the silence on Hajar in the Holy Qur'an. The account that follows is a conversation between the stories of the matriarch who has come to be called Hagar in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and Hajar in Islamic sacred texts.

In all of the stories, Hajar's/Hagar's story begins not with transcendence but with subjugation. In the hadith, Hajar is given to Sarah by a tyrant.[35] Genesis 16 does not reveal under what circumstances Hagar initially entered servitude; Hagar's previous life is of no interest to the authors and editors of Genesis—or, they may have supposed, to their readers and hearers. To be fair, they may not have imagined a generation of readers/hearers who would call themselves "Hagar's children," even as they identify with the God of Abraham.[36] There is a rabbinic midrash that Hagar's subordination was compensation for Sarah's subordination to the pharaoh who bought her from Abraham; in this reading Hagar was the pharaoh's daughter. This midrash answers questions I have as well: Who and where were her parents? How did she come to be enslaved? Was she born into servitude? These questions have particular resonance in the Americas for readers and hearers of African descent, whose ancestors were enslaved and whose foremothers were regularly subjected to the theft of their bodies, inside and out.

Hagar's *otherness* is at the heart of her portrayal in the Torah, Tanakh[37] and New Testament. Her name, I have contended, is not *her* name: *HaGar* means "the foreigner," "alien," or "sojourner" in Biblical Hebrew. The alien is one who resides in a land that is not their own, as in Abraham's family residing in Canaan as aliens, and the familiar protections in the Torah for the aliens in the midst or gates of the Israelites.[38] It strains credulity to imagine an Egyptian mother naming her child "alien" in the language of the people to whom she will be subjected in servitude, and not just because *HaGar* is masculine in Hebrew.

35. *Sahih Bukhari*, narrated by Abu Huraira, vol. 7, book 62, number 21.

36. I grew up hearing African Americans refer to themselves as "Hagar's children" in black churches, because Hagar is African, and unlike the broader culture as demonstrated through media portrayals, we knew Egypt was in Africa.

37. Tanakh, sometimes rendered as TaNaKh, is a vocalized acronym for the tripartite Hebrew Scriptures in Jewish tradition; the three parts are the Torah, Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings).

There is another way of understanding Hagar's name. In the Islamic tradition, Hajar does not derive from "alienation." Rather, the range of potential meanings for Hajar's name includes "splendid" and "nourishing" in the wider cognate Semitic language system.[39] There is an established history of the name Hajar being given to women on the Arabian Peninsula and elsewhere in ancient Semitic languages, for example, Ethiopic and Nabatene, some two millennia before the Common Era. It is, I think, a supreme irony that the names Hajar and Hagar evoke such different semantic ranges and that they overlap and intersect in the body of a woman who transcends scriptural canons and traditions.

The Hebrew text beginning with Genesis 16 makes it clear that Hagar has no say over her body being given to Abram or her child being given to Sarai. Hagar is on the underside of all of the power curves in operation at that time, as noted by Renita Weems,[40] Delores Williams,[41] and many, many others: she is female, foreign, enslaved. She has one source of power: she is fertile; but she lacks autonomy over her own fertility. Sarai is infertile, and the text suggests that, as a result, Hagar held Sarai "in low esteem." Hagar's disposition towards Sarai is framed with the word *q-l-l*, "to curse" or to "hold worthless," that is, "light," "little," or "nothing." It may not be that Hagar views Sarai as nothing because Sarai is infertile and Hagar is fertile. Rather, it may be that Hagar regards Sarai as nothing and/or curses her because Sarai uses Hagar's body for her own reproductive purposes. Why should a sex-slave, forced into gestating someone else's child, think highly of or bless her enslaver? Perhaps the text singles out Hagar's feelings toward Sarai because Sarai is primarily responsible for Hagar's sexual subjugation. Abram's complicity is secondary. Sarai is free; she has some societal privilege as Abram's woman and Hagar's mistress. But she is still an infertile woman in a male-dominated world, both of which imperil her status; she seeks to attain/restore her status on and in Hagar's body.

Sarai inscribes the hierarchy between herself and Hagar on Hagar's body. In the hadith, Sarah is jealous of Hajar.[42] First Sarah perpetuates patriarchal values deliberately and intimately, seizing Hagar's sexuality and fertility. Then she continues her domination of Hagar in anger. Sarai initially takes her anger out on Abram, within limits; no actions accompany her words to him. She calls on God-of-the-Holy-Name to do justice on her behalf in 16:5. God

39. See Ernst Knauf's entry on Hagar in the *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (*AYBD*), 3:19. The ancient Egyptian language is a sibling Afro-Asiatic language along with Semitic languages.

40. Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 12–15.

41. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 3–6.

42. Narrated by Ibn Abbas, *Sahih Bukhari*, vol. 4, book 55, number 584.

remains silent. The silence of God offers a fecund space for midrash, which frequently addresses silence in the text. As a contemporary womanist midrash, I offer the reading that God's silence is a response to Sarai's charge that God judge between her and Abram. Abram has not wronged Sarai. Abram and Sarai both wrong Hagar, and God does not permit them to compound that wrongdoing by destroying her and her child.

When Abram removes himself from the fray, Sarai takes her anger out on Hagar. Sarai brutalizes Hagar. The standard translations do not capture the physical violence that is represented by this verb, *'-n-h*.[43] In fact, Sarai's oppression of Hagar in Genesis 16:6 is the same as Egypt's oppression of Israel in Exodus 1:11, ultimately leading to God's liberating intervention. This is one of a series of inverted parallels between the stories of Hagar's sojourn with Sarai and Abram and Israel's sojourn in Egypt.

But Hagar liberates herself; she runs away.[44] A messenger of God-of-the-Holy-Name finds Hagar in the wilderness. This messenger of God is a super-natural being. But there is more to this messenger; in 16:7, the messenger of God-of-the-Holy-Name functions as God in disguise, or perhaps better, God in (human) drag.[45] The holy messenger uses the first person in 16:10, speaking as God, and in 16:13 Hagar realizes that she has seen God. This is extraordinary, for Exodus 33:20 will insist that no one can see God and live; perhaps those verses ought to be translated as "no *man*."

God's message to Hagar is disturbing. She must return to Sarai and submit to her violent and vicious abuse. It does not appear that she will be subject to Abram's sexual use again, but that is entirely up to him—or perhaps Sarai in that family. The biblical text reifies her enslavement. God's words are unwelcome, but there is hope. Sarai will not destroy her; Hagar will survive. In 16:10 Hagar receives the first divine annunciation to a woman in the canon of a promised child and promise of a dynasty. Hagar will become the Mother of Many Peoples.[46] Beyond the biblical narrative, *Hagar* functioned as an ethnic signifier for peoples on the Arabian Peninsula from 2000 BCE to the Middle Ages, including Darius I in hieroglyphics (*AYBD*, 3:19).

43. Cf. "dealt harshly" (NRSV), "treated harshly" (JPS and GSJPS), and "treated badly" (IB). "Afflicted," Fox's translation, is somewhat closer.

44. She will run again in chapter 21; there is a parallel text for that episode in the hadith, but not for the journey in chapter 16.

45. "Drag" initially referred to women's clothes worn by men in live theater. It now functions more generally as wearable markers of identity that transform one person—or, in the case of God, being—into another.

46. Early readers of the Scriptures may well have connected Hagar to the "Hagrites" mentioned in Ps. 83:7, who also appear several times in 2 Chronicles, although some modern scholarship discounts a link between them; Baruch 3:23 mentions "the

This portion of Hagar's story contains an episode without peer in all of Scripture. In Genesis 16:13, Hagar names God: *El Ro'i*, "God of seeing," meaning, "Have I seen the One who sees me and lived to tell of it?" She is the only person in the canon to give God a name. There is no parallel for this part of Hagar's story in Hajar's story in the hadith. Hagar's story continues in Genesis 21. But where was she during the stories that took place between chapters 16 and 21? Where was Hagar when God changed Sarai's and Abram's names to Sarah and Abraham? Where was Hagar when Ishmael was circumcised? Where was Hagar when the mysterious visitors predicted a miraculous pregnancy for Sarah? Where was Hagar when Sarah was taken into Abimelech's household?

Without answering these questions, Hagar reappears in Genesis 21. Sarah has given birth to Isaac. One day she sees Ishmael playing and demands that Abraham put him and his mother out. She does not want Ishmael to inherit anything along with Isaac, even though God had made promises to Hagar for her son and to Abraham for all of his descendants. Genesis 21:11 says that Abraham was greatly troubled by Sarah's demand on account of his son; he expresses no feelings for Hagar. God comforts Abraham on account of Hagar *and* Ishmael, although the text does not name Hagar and refers to her repeatedly as Abraham's (not Sarah's) woman-servant in verse 12. The text also confirms Isaac's status as the primary heir. God also affirms (v. 13) the promise that God has made to Hagar and Abraham, that Ishmael will be a great nation of his own.

Abraham provides some provisions, bread, and water for his family and sends them on their way, into the wilderness. In the hadith, Ibrahim goes with Hajar and their child.[47] In both the Bible and the hadith, Hajar/Hagar weeps, and heaven hears her cry. In the hadith,[48] the angel Jibril (Gabriel) hears Hajar and responds to her cry. In the Bible God hears her cry and the boy's, and an unnamed messenger responds to Hagar. This is her second supernatural encounter. As in Genesis 16, the messenger is more than a messenger; the messenger is God, who speaks in the first person in verse 18, repeating the promise to make Ishmael a great nation.

In both accounts Hajar/Hagar receives life-sustaining water. The hadith specifies that the water replenishes Hajar's breast milk. In the Bible Hagar discovers a well. The stories diverge at this point, and the characters go in separate journeys. In the hadith Ishmael grows into a hunter, marries, and divorces. Ibrahim and Ishmael go to Mecca to build the Kaaba.

47. Ibn Abbas, *Sahih Bukhari*, vol. 4, book 55, number 584.

48. Ibid.

In the Bible, Hagar and Ishmael live first in the wilderness of Paran, where he develops as a martial artist, specializing in the bow. Eventually Hagar and Ishmael go home to Egypt. Hagar finds a wife for Ishmael. Were they reunited with Hagar's family? To what city did they go? Into what family or community did Ishmael marry? Hagar's journey to Egypt, where she procures a wife for Ishmael (as does Hajar in the hadith), creates a final inverse parallel with the Israelite sojourn in Egypt: Hagar the Egyptian is abused by Sarah the proto-Israelite; Israel is abused by Egypt. Hagar escapes into the wilderness; Israel escapes into the wilderness. Hagar heads toward Egypt; Israel heads away from Egypt. Hagar's name is never called again in the Hebrew Scriptures, though she is named in Baruch 3:23. Her name may live on in the Hagrites of the First Testament;[49] she is reinterpreted in the Second Testament (see Gal. 4:22–25), and midrashed and exegeted in the sacred literatures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

I read Hagar's story through the prism of the wholesale enslavement of black peoples in the Americas and elsewhere; Hagar is the mother of Harriet Tubman and the women and men who freed themselves from slavery. I see Hagar as an abused woman. I see God's return of Hagar to her servitude and abuse as the tendency of some religious communities to side with the abuser at the expense of abused women and their children. Frequently that advice is couched as "God's will." Ultimately Hagar escapes her slaveholders and abusers and receives her inheritance from God, and God fulfills all of God's promises to her. Sarah's complicated relationships with Abraham can be read as exemplars of the complicated relationships between women and men across lines of privilege and hierarchy. Abraham's sexual use of Hagar has resonances in the sexual and reproductive uses of women's bodies in the American slavocracy and in countless other global contexts across time, including the present day and every context in which this volume will be read. Sarah's actions evoke both complicity with dominant male abuse of subordinated women and the independent abusive actions of dominant-culture women against subordinated women. The legacies of the relationship tropes among Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham survive them and transcend their cultures of origin.

The deaths and burials of Sarah and Abraham are preserved in the text. Hagar's are not. I will borrow from Ishmael's depiction at his father's funeral (Gen. 25:7–18) and the death of Sarah (Gen. 23:1–2, 19–20) to construct a midrash for Ishmael's burial of his mother and fill in the blanks with my sanctified womanist imagination.

49. Their linkage of the Hagrites with Ishmael and Edom (see Ps. 83:6) suggests ancient readers indeed recognized them as or associated them with Hagar's descendants. See 1 Chr. 5:10, 19–20; 27:30.

And Hagar lived one hundred seventy-seven years; this was the length of Hagar's life. Hagar breathed her last and died in a good old age, an old woman and full of years, and was gathered to her people. Hagar died at Heliopolis[50] *in the land of Egypt; and Yishmael her son went in to mourn for Hagar and to weep for her. And Hagar's daughters and sons from the man she chose for herself mourned with Yishmael and his daughter Mahalat.*[51] *After this, Yishmael had his mother embalmed and mummified and placed Hagar his mother in a sarcophagus in a tomb in Heliopolis in the land of the Nile. The tomb and the land that is around it passed through the generations of the Hagrites as a burying place. There Hagar was buried, with her man.*

These are the descendants of Yishmael, the son of Hagar who God promised would become the Mother of Many Nations. These are the names of the grandchildren of Hagar, the children of Yishmael, his daughter Mahalat and these, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Yishmael; and Qedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Qedemah. These are of the grandchildren of Hagar, the children of Yishmael, and these are their names, by their villages and by their encampments, twelve princes according to their tribes.

This is the length of the life of Yishmael the son of Hagar, one hundred thirty-seven years; he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people. He was buried with his mother Hagar in her tomb.

RIVQAH (REBEKAH)

Genesis 24:60 Our sister, may you become a thousand, ten-thousand-fold.

Rivqah (Rebekah) is one of the most dominant matriarchs in the Israelite story; she has agency and she uses her voice. A close reading of her story indicates that she is portrayed as one of the most active women in the canon. The sixty-seven verses that comprise Genesis 24 are full of her comings and goings, words and deeds; there are at least twenty verbs devoted to her actions in chapters 24–27. Rebekah's voice and agency are located in a matrilineal household, identified as her mother's household in Genesis 24:28. Her father identifies himself with a matronymic (maternal name) in Genesis 24:15 and 24

50. Inspired by Joseph's marriage to Asenath of Heliopolis, then called On, by Isaiah's reimagining of the relationship between Israel, Egypt, and Assyria in 19:19–25, and by the construction of a Jewish temple there about 160 BCE.

51. See Gen. 28:9 for Mahalat(h), Ishmael's daughter.

Matronyms

Jacob identifies himself as the son of Rebekah (*ben Rivqah*) but does not mention Isaac or even Abraham in Genesis 29:12. Other persons in the Scriptures identified by their mother's names include David's chief warriors—and nephews—Joab, Abner, and Abishai, the sons of Zeruiah, who is David's sister, more than two dozen times in Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, for example, 2 Samuel 19:21–22; 1 Chronicles 2:16. In the case of Rebekah, the use of the matronym is associated with matrilineality; her home is a *beyt 'em*, "a mother's household" (Gen. 24:28), not the more common *beyt 'av*, "a father's household." Other matrilineal households in the Scriptures include the families of origin of Ruth and Orpah in Ruth 1:8 and the bride in the Song of Solomon 3:4 and 8:2.

as Bethuel ben Milcah, Bethuel the son of Milcah, his mother, the niece and sister-in-law of Sarah and Abraham.

Rebekah is introduced in Genesis 24 as the key to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Even though Abraham has Ishmael and Isaac, and Ishmael has likely become a father by this time, Abraham does not want to go to his death without seeing Isaac's children, the next step in the fulfillment of God's promise. Abraham seeks a marriage for his son in accordance with his family practice of incestuous unions. Rebekah's grandmother Milcah is also Isaac's first cousin as the daughter of his uncle Haran, and she is also his aunt, since Milcah is married to another of his uncles, Nahor. This makes Rebekah and Isaac second and third cousins.

Abraham sends a servant to acquire a bride for Isaac from his family. It is not clear if he consults with Sarah. The servant works out a plan whereby he will know that the girl he encounters will be divinely chosen. Rebekah appears in the text with a disclosure of her ancestry, emphasizing that this will be an intrafamily union in Genesis 24:15. Yet Rebekah, more specifically her brother Lavan (Laban), will come to be called Aramean (Gen. 25:20). Indeed, Israel will be said to have been descended from "a wandering Aramean" in Deuteronomy 25:9. In Genesis 24:16 there is a description of her qualifications, physical attractiveness, and sexual inexperience. Each description is compounded; she is "extremely good [or pleasing] to look at" (*tovat mar'eh m''od*) and "unpenetrated, no man had known her" (*b'tulah ve'ish lo y'da'ah*). Yet the rest of her story will make it clear that she is not reduced to the sum of her parts. There is no way of determining her age; we can only conclude that she is marriageable and of childbearing age.

When Rebekah provides the emissary with potentially life-saving water, he knows that she is the one "designated" by God (although the verb *y-k-ch* has this sense only here in 24:14). When the servant drapes her with gold, Rebekah appears to take it in stride or as her due. She does not in any way object to his largesse. The servant asks who she is and if he might go with her to her *father's* house (24:23); he does not know that she lives in her *mother's* house (24:28). Rebekah identifies her father as the son of her grandmother in verse 24 and extends the offer of hospitality herself (24:25); she does not need to check with anyone. Rebekah's brother Laban does the necessary housework to prepare their mother's house for their guest (see 24:31).

In verse 50, patriarchy appears and attempts to raise its head. Bethuel, Rebekah's father, and Laban, her brother, tell the servant to take her and go. However, Bethuel and Laban do not have the final word and may not have the authority to issue the command. At the end of the chapter, during the family conversations Rebekah agrees to marry Isaac. When Rebekah's mother is consulted, she and Laban in verse 55 first ask the servant to delay his return for ten days. Then in verse 58 Milcah makes sure that Rebekah's wishes are consulted and honored.[52]

When asked whether she will return with the servant and marry Isaac, Rebekah answers, "I will." Rebekah rides off into the sunset in a narrative in which she will continue to be active. She is not alone when she journeys to meet her new husband; she takes with her women-servants from her mother's household, including her nurse from her infancy, Devorah (Deborah).[53] As she departs, her household blesses her, marking a canonical first[54] in the preservation of the words of blessing in verse 60: "Our sister, may you become a thousand, ten-thousand-fold; may your seed inherit the gates of those-who-hate-him."

52. Laban is with her, and the text frames the dialogue as a joint undertaking. However, Laban is also listed as speaking with his father, telling the servant to take his sister. It seems that he agrees with whatever parent is speaking.

53. Deborah's name is given in Gen. 35:8.

54. There are very few blessings spoken to women and preserved in the Scriptures. In Gen. 17:16 God speaks to Abraham of blessing Sarah, but the text does not record divine words of blessing spoken to Sarah. Deborah blesses Jael in Judg. 5:24. Boaz blesses Ruth, and the women of their community bless Naomi in Ruth 3:10 and 4:14. In Tob. 11:17, Tobit blesses his new daughter-in-law Sarah. Judith is thrice blessed: First in Jdt. 13:18–20 she is blessed by her town elder, Uzziah. Then in 15:9–10 the high priest and Israelite elders in Jerusalem bless her. Last, the women of Israel bless Judith in the next verse, but their words of blessing are not preserved in the text. Elizabeth reprises Deborah's blessing of Jael and Uzziah's blessing of Judith when she blesses her pregnant virgin cousin, Mary, in Luke 1:42.

On her journey with her promised husband's servant, Rebekah notices a man and asks who he is (24:64–65). It turns out that he is her intended, but she did not know that when she made her inquiry. Rebekah's status as a promised woman does not keep her from looking at men or inquiring about them. She is a bold matriarch in every sense of the word. In verse 64 Rebekah's veil may indicate her status as a bride; in general, women in ancient Israel are not described as wearing veils in the Bible. There is no description of a ceremony to mark their union; the Scriptures do not indicate that there were any formalities beyond gift-giving, consent, and the occasional celebratory meal.

With her union to Isaac, Rebekah moves from a matrilineal family—where her father is known only by the name of his mother—to a patrilocal one, in which she as a new bride moves into her husband's mother's home (24:67). In verse 67, for the first time in the canon, the relationship between a woman and her man is characterized by love. Abraham has "played" with Sarah and been fearful of losing her to another man, but the only love ascribed to him is for Isaac (Gen. 22:2). Indeed, Isaac's love for Rebekah introduces the verb *'-h-v*, "love" (including romantic love) into the text. No previous character in the Scriptures is described as loving or being loved.[55] Love and the quest for love will be a hallmark of the next portion of Rebekah's story and that of her daughters-in-law, Leah and Rachel.

Rebekah's story continues in Genesis 25:19 after a break in the text. Purporting to list the descendants of Isaac, verse 19 instead provides Isaac's parentage; his age at his union with Rebekah follows—her age is never disclosed—and then the text announces her infertility. However, since the text has already promised offspring, the reader/hearer knows Rebekah's barrenness will be short lived. Rebekah seems to be reduced to object status for a while. The narrator speaks about her, Isaac prays for her, God acts on her, and her children move within her. She is not the subject of any of these verbs.

In verse 22 Rebekah's agency returns; her unborn children pitch so violently in her womb that it feels like one is "crushing [the life out of]" the other.[56] Rebekah gives voice to her feelings in a difficult-to-translate expression.[57] A generous translation might be "If this is to be so, then why am I here?" Rebekah seems to be questioning why she is pregnant with twins, only to lose one in an internal struggle. She takes her question directly to God, using the verb *d-r-sh*, "seek." When the object of the verb *d-r-sh* is God, the one from whom knowledge is being sought, the inquiry is prophetic.

55. God's steadfast, faithful love, is expressed with another root, *ch-s-d*.
56. *Vayitrotzatzu*, (*r-tz-tz*, "crush," "suppress," or "oppress") is used reflexively in the Hitpael here.

God speaks directly to Rebekah, without an intermediary, prophet, or messenger. God promises that both children will become great nations, but they will be divided in an inverted hierarchy, based on their age. God does not promise Rebekah that she will survive their birth or live to see them fulfill their destinies. Rebekah gives birth to the first set of twins mentioned in the Scriptures.[58] Genesis 25:26 states that Isaac is sixty when the twins are born; he was forty when he married Rebekah. That means that Rebekah lived with her infertility for twenty years. The text credits Isaac with one successful prayer on Rebekah's behalf. Did he really pray only once? Did God wait twenty years to answer his prayer, or did he wait twenty years to pray? It defies credulity to believe that the most active matriarch in the canon never offers a prayer on her own behalf during each of the twenty years in which the reader must imagine that she and Isaac looked and hoped for a child. Yet the text never mentions Isaac taking another woman or fathering children with anyone else. That is exceptional among the patriarchs of Israel.

Rebekah's story hurtles forward to the adulthood of her children. The only reference to their childhood is that somewhere along the way Esau becomes a hunter, to the pleasure of his father, who loves him. Rebekah loves her younger son, Ya'aqov (Jacob), the one God said would dominate his older brother, Esav (Esau). Rebekah is absent from the story in which Esau sells his birthright though she is implicated in it. Even if she was absent from the scene, what did she have to say when she found out?

Genesis 26 is a triplicate version of the matriarch-desired-by-a-foreign-monarch theme, previously deployed in Genesis 12:10–20 and 20:1–18 featuring Sarai/Sarah. A canonical reading treats them as separate stories, in spite of the textual evidence arguing that they are merely duplicates. Indeed, the pat villain in Genesis 20 and 26 is King Abimelech of the Philistines; the reader is to imagine that he has failed twice, in two successive generations, to commandeer a woman. Perhaps an additional intent of this story is to ridicule the Philistines. In any case, the cumulative effects of these stories is to reinforce the desirability of the matriarchs, the threat of the surrounding peoples, and the fidelity of God in perpetually delivering the members of this family from danger throughout the generations. Rebekah fades from the text again, but in truth she is just under the surface, between the lines, in the most fertile space for midrash, which frequently begins with questions.

Rebekah appears to move with Isaac several times as he feuds with the Philistines over wells producing life-giving water in the valley of Gerar.[59] When

58. She will be followed shortly by Tamar in Gen. 38:27; the only other canonical mention of twins is Thomas, the disciple of Jesus known as "the Twin," John 11:16.
59. The text does not mention anyone other than Isaac relocating.

Isaac "pitches his tent" (Gen. 26:25) in Beer-sheba, it seems that he has settled in with his family, in spite of their absence from the text. When Isaac builds an altar to the God of his ancestors, does Rebekah participate? When Isaac sacrifices to the God-of-ancestors, does Rebekah participate? When God/the text/God-in-the-text self-identifies as "the God of Abraham" (Gen. 26:24), does God/the text mean that God is not the God of Sarah, Hagar, and/or Keturah? When the Philistines and Isaac feast together in reconciliation (Gen. 26:30), is Rebekah there? Does she eat with them, or even cook for them? Even this most active of matriarchs is a literary character to be shelved in the imagination of the biblical writers and editors when she is of no use or interest to them.

Rebekah reappears from the shadows when her son Esau marries not one, but two Hittite women, Yehudit bat (Judith, the daughter of) Beeri and Basemath bat Elon. Rebekah and Isaac are made bitter by their Hittite daughters-in-law. Here Rebekah and Isaac provide a united front against these marriages. Why are they opposed to the marriages? Textually speaking, anti-Hittite bias as a form of general Israelite xenophobia is a later development than the setting of the narrative. The only contact between the Hittites and the kinfolk of Sarah has been the purchase of a burial plot from a Hittite landowner. At the time of Sarah's death Abraham purchased it from Ephron ben Zoar in Genesis 23:20, and Abraham is buried there in turn by Ishmael and Isaac. It will become the family burying place.

The Hittites are a dominant force in the ancient Near East. Their wealth and power made it possible for them to move into Canaan and buy up desirable land before there was a people called Israel. They will be added to the list of inhabitants with whom Israel will struggle for dominance in the land. While the memory (or imagination) of interethnic hostilities affects the authors and editors of the text, the characters have yet to experience any hostility at the hands of the Hittites. So why do Esau's unions make his parents so unhappy? Are they disappointed that he has broken the generations-old tradition of marrying within his family? Do Rebekah and Isaac just dislike these women as individuals? Is the author simply attributing a later ethnic bias in the belief that such bias was timeless and required no further explanation? Rebekah will come to fear that Jacob will also marry a Hittite woman (Gen. 27:26).

Perhaps it is because of the Hittite women that Rebekah decides to defraud him of his rightful blessing as Isaac's firstborn. It is not clear if her decision is based on opportunity—the overheard conversation in Genesis 27:5—or if it is premeditated. Is she spying on Esau and/or Isaac, looking for an opportunity to discredit or disinherit Esau? The text has previously revealed that Rebekah loves Jacob, saying nothing of her feelings for Esau. Now it appears that she

and not Jacob defrauds Esau because it is her plan, and she works her plan, including working her son. Rebekah overcomes Jacob's fear of receiving a curse instead of a blessing by taking ownership of the consequences; she will take the curse if Jacob will take the risk. Her plan works, and Jacob receives the blessing of the firstborn. Rebekah is silent during and after the blessing; she is not even present in the narrative. How did she respond to the fruit of her handiwork? Did she celebrate or gloat? Did she congratulate Jacob? Did she say anything to Esau? Did they have any kind of relationship left?

The blessing itself may provide a glimpse into an aspect of Rebekah's life that is not further detailed in the text; it seems that she has given birth to more than two children. Genesis 27:29 says in part, "Be mighty over your kinfolk and may your mother's children[60] bow down to you." *Acheyka* can mean "kinfolk," "siblings," or "brothers." The second phrase, *baniym emeka*, "children of your mother," makes it clear that Isaac is referring to Rebekah's children and not more distant relatives. The plural suggests that there is at least one other child:[61] whether the blessing is directed toward Esau or Isaac, his siblings are to bow to him. Isaac confirms that he has indeed given Esau the service of his siblings, using the plural again in verse 37. Yet the text discusses only these two brothers. Who were Rebekah's other children? How many were there? Are the unmentioned children daughters?

Esau's disappointment becomes hatred directed solely toward Jacob (Gen. 27:41). I wonder if that means he did not know his mother's role in the loss of his inheritance or if he simply could not bring himself to hate her. Later Esau will marry more women from outside the family, because he knows it will displease his father, but the text does not mention any feelings for his mother as part of his motivation. Esau plans on killing Jacob as soon as the mourning period for his father has passed; however, Isaac is not yet in his grave. Someone tells Rebekah of his plans—but not Isaac. How widely were Esau's plans known? How often did people in the household go to Rebekah and not Isaac with news or problems? Did Isaac know the extent of Rebekah's actions? Jacob is unaware until their mother tells him. Did anyone else know? Rebekah arranges for Jacob to leave town for his own safety. But Rebekah does not want Jacob to marry a Hittite woman like his brother when he is out of her immediate control. She arranges for Isaac to direct Jacob to return to the practice of intrafamily marriage and marry one of his mother's nieces, his first cousins. In so doing, she limits his ability to choose a partner for himself.

60. *Baniym* are "children," "sons," "daughters-and-sons," and occasionally "descendants."

61. The expression could refer to her grandchildren, but grammatically it supports a reading referring to her own children.

This is the last time that Rebekah appears alive in the text. Jacob will tell his prospective in-laws that he is her son—and never name his father—in Genesis 29:12, but the reader/hearer has no way of knowing if Rebekah is alive or dead. We will discover in Genesis 49:31 that she has been buried with Isaac and Sarah and Abraham when Joseph asks to be interred with them. The death of Rebekah is not recorded, yet the death of her childhood servant Deborah is. It is surprising that the most prominent matriarch is not laid to rest in the text. To correct this omission, I offer the following epitaph:

Rivqah bat Bethuel ben Milcah
was the mother of Esav from whom she withdrew her mother love
and Rivqah the daughter-in-law-of Sarah
was the mother of Ya'aqov the Heel-Grabbing-Sneak who became Israel
the God-Wrestler.

QETURAH (KETURAH)

Genesis 25:1 Avraham (Abraham) did it again; he took a woman, her name was Qeturah (Keturah).

Genesis 25 describes Abraham's third intimate union, with a woman named Keturah (Qeturah). It is not clear whether the announcement is concurrent with the union or if the text is reporting a previous union. The latter is more likely; the names of their six children follow immediately and likely represent at least a decade, if not more. In Genesis, Keturah is described as a primary woman, an *isshah*; in 1 Chronicles 1:32 she is described as a secondary woman, a *piylegesh* (*piylegseh*).

The timing of her presentation leads me to ask when and where did Abraham meet Keturah? Under what circumstances did they become a couple? That she is not mentioned until after Isaac reaches sexual maturity could suggest a late-in-life union. But Abraham is one hundred (Gen. 17:17) when Isaac is born, and Isaac is forty when he marries (Gen. 25:19). The text will grant him 175 years; perhaps we are to understand that he was still potent past the century mark, at 140 years of age.[62]

Whatever one thinks about the years ascribed to Abraham, Keturah and the peoples she mothered with him are an enduring part of the Israelite story. Keturah and Abraham are the ancestors of nations with whom Israel will have complicated relationships: Zimran, Yoqshan (Jokshan), Medan, Midian, Yishbaq (Ishbak), and Shuah. Their storied offspring will include Dedan and Sheba. Keturah, who is Qantura bint Yaqtan in Islamic tradition, does not appear in the Qur'an and hadiths; she is in the influential al-Ṭabarī commentary, where she is also recorded as giving birth to six children.[63]

Because the biblical text discloses this union after the death of Sarah, and Isaac is described as being comforted after the death of his mother through his new relationship with Rebekah, the rabbis understand Abraham's union with Keturah to be his source of comfort in his bereavement (*b. Bava Qamma* 92b).

In my midrashic imagination, I see Keturah as the one woman Abraham chose for himself. His family practiced incestuous unions; he may not have had a choice in marrying his sister Sarah, or he may have been prevented from marrying outside of his family. Sarah insisted that he marry Hagar; he may not have felt that he had a choice, in that he was desperate for the heir God promised. But Keturah he chose for himself. He had done all that God had required of him, moved halfway around the world (as he knew it), and ensured that his primary heir was well on his way to becoming a patriarch in his own right. And he chose something, someone, for himself, Keturah. Perhaps he wanted more children; perhaps he was not satisfied with Isaac and Ishmael, a mere two sons. He and Keturah had six children; it is not possible to gender these children based on their presentation as a list of names, with the exception of Yoqshan (Jokshan), who appears in Genesis 25:3 with a masculine singular verb. In 1 Chronicles 1:32 they are listed as the children, *beney*, of Keturah. The common plural is used for all-male groups, mixed-gender groups, and occasionally all-female groups.[64]

The number of children that Keturah and Abraham shared invokes potential relational paradigms. Was their relationship more than childbearing? Did they share a home, meals, and laughter, in addition to a bed? Was there love between them? And how did Keturah feel about Abraham's other women and children? Abraham's polygyny transcends text and culture. The phenomenon of male access to multiple sexual partners, while limiting women to a single partner, is among the most common historical social-sexual configurations and endures to a lesser degree to the present age. What does it mean that this paradigm is enshrined in Scripture, tolerated or even sanctioned by God?

ABRAHAM'S LESSER WIVES

Genesis 25:5–6 Avraham (Abraham) gave all that was his to Yitzchaq (Isaac). And to the children of his lesser women Avraham (Abraham) gave gifts, while he was still living, and he sent them away.

63. Al-Ṭabarī in al-Ṭabarī and Brinner; *History*, 129.
64. Naomi uses other common plural forms to address Ruth and Orpah (Ruth

Who are Abraham's lesser or low-status wives? Are there women in addition to Hagar and Keturah? If so, then neither they nor their children are identified. I read them as other wives because Hagar and Keturah are never called lesser wives in the Torah. While Keturah is called a lesser wife in Chronicles, Hagar is never called a lesser wife anywhere in the Scriptures. So even if Keturah is included in the lesser wives of Genesis 25:6, there is at least one and possibly more to account for the plural.

What is clear from the text is that the children from these unions do not receive a sizable inheritance; this is standard for children born of such unions. It is not clear what sorts of gifts he gives them; the inference of the text is that these gifts pale beside the inheritance of Isaac. As a modern reader/hearer, I am troubled that Abraham continued to produce children who would not be provided for after his death. The text does not suggest that the women who gave birth to these children received even gifts. It is sad to contemplate Keturah, and possibly other nameless women, in their later years with nothing but their children, on whom they have to depend for everything. The traditions around primary and secondary unions in ancient Israel neither required nor prevented Abraham from providing an inheritance for all of his children. He could have been more generous than customary. After all, God had both enriched him and extended his life, virility, and potency. The favoring of one child over others seems inherently unfair. Yet if I am honest, I do not always have control over whom I like more than another person. Why then would I expect parents—biblical, literary, or contemporary—to control their affections?

RACHEL

> Genesis 29:9 While Ya'aqov (Jacob) was still speaking with them, Rachel came with the sheep of her father, for she was a shepherd.

Rachel, the future daughter-in-law of Rebekah, was as active a matriarch as her mother-in-law, who was also her aunt. Rachel is busy shepherding her father's sheep when Jacob encounters her. This introduction is striking for many reasons. Shepherding in the Bible is a powerful and dominant metaphor for leading the people of Israel as a civil (monarch) and religious (prophet) leader and for God's own care of God's people.[65] Civil and religious shepherding are combined in descriptions of messianic leaders in the biblical text. The term has come to be virtually synonymous with clergy vocation, particularly

in Christianity. Yet most readers/hearers whom I have asked cannot identify any women shepherds in the Scriptures.[66]

The presence of female shepherds in the Scriptures seems not to have contributed to the dominant image of the clergyperson/shepherd as a male person. I note with curiosity that the NRSV translation of *ro'ah hiw'* in Genesis 29:9 reduces Rachel to merely "keeping" sheep, without naming her as a shepherd, as do the JPS, GSJPS, and Everett Fox (Jewish) translations.[67] This means that readers/hearers in many Christian contexts will not encounter Rachel as she is presented in the text, as a shepherd. What did Rachel shepherd? Rachel's flocks may well have included sheep and goats together (see Gen. 30:25); the word *tz'on*, "flock," in Biblical Hebrew does not distinguish between sheep and goats.[68]

The second aspect of Rachel's presentation that invites notice is that she is near or with men who are not introduced. It is not clear if they are relatives, servants, or neighboring shepherds. There is no apparent concern about Rachel working in close proximity with these men as a woman in general or because she is both marriageable and not yet married. Rachel is not described as being in the company of other women (shepherds, servants, or sisters). The stereotype of biblical women being confined to the home, to women's company, avoiding the public sphere and the company of (unrelated) men, falls on its face with the introduction of Rachel in the Bible. Jacob kisses Rachel before telling her (or the men with her) that he is related to her, and no one is disturbed by this intimate contact. There is no other narrative in the Hebrew Bible in which a man kisses a woman who is not related to him.[69]

The third noteworthy aspect in Rachel's story is the absence of her mother. That she is never named or mentioned makes it impossible to know if she is

66. There are others: Zipporah and her seven sisters in Exod. 2:26 and the poet-woman in Song 1:8; there is no reason to believe all of the shepherds in plural constructions are male.

67. Literally, *ro'ah hiw'* is "she was/is a shepherd," or "she-who-shepherds, she," (the feminine singular Qal participle followed by the feminine singular-subject pronoun). Cf. "which she tended" in the IB.

68. The bias against goats, with which many Christian readers/hearers are familiar, seems to be a New Testament issue and ought not be imported into the First Testament. Hebrew "flocks," *tz'on*, which can be either sheep or goats, become *probaton*, sheep, in the Greek Scriptures of both Testaments, even though there is no way of determining the composition of the herd. In the Septuagint, Rachel is not described as a shepherd.

69. Primarily men kiss men, usually in their family (e.g., Gen. 27:26–27; Exod. 4:27). There are theoretical kisses of unacceptable women (Prov. 7:17), and Orpah kisses Ruth (Ruth 1:14). Laban does kiss his daughters good-bye (Gen. 31:55). Though not a narrative account, the Song of Solomon is significant for the full range of sensual and sexual intimacy between the woman and her man.

living or dead. I am inclined to read her as dead because of the number of characters who do appear in Rachel's story. It is also possible that she is alive and no longer a part of the family. Divorce is not unknown in the canon, although it is rarely described in narrative texts.

There is a gap in Rachel's story. What sort of relationship do she and Jacob have during his first-month stay? Does she know that his mother, her aunt Rebekah, has commanded him to choose her or her sister as his wife? How much time do they spend together? What do they talk about? Do they talk about making a life together? Are they in love? Do they share the work of shepherding her father's flocks? Does she know that he plans to talk to her father about marrying her? Did Jacob tell her that the reason he has journeyed to meet her family is to find a woman who will be acceptable to his mother? In Genesis 29:20, the text reveals that Jacob loves Rachel so much that seven years of service to her father pass in the twinkling of an eye for him. What sort of relationship do they have during the seven years of their betrothal? What sort of relationship does Jacob have with Leah? What sort of relationship does Rachel have with Leah? What is known about Rachel is that she is "beautiful in body and face," according to Genesis 29:17.

How does the deception go forward? Is Rachel in on it? Is she waiting to be brought to her new mate? Does she not get suspicious as time passes? Does she not notice her sister is nowhere to be found? Do none of the servants tell her what is going on? It seems incredible that Rachel does not know what was going on around her. Even when the deception becomes known, Rachel says nothing in the text. The spaces in this story are fertile ground for midrash. I offer the following from Rachel's perspective:

> *Rachel and Leah were ordinary sisters. They had largely separate lives. Leah preferred indoor life, and Rachel preferred outdoor life. Neither was much interested in marriage. Following the rules of the household established by Milcah, their great-grandmother, whose name their grandfather Bethuel ben Milcah bore, they were asked if they would marry each time a suitor came forward, as their aunt Rivqah had been asked. And each time they said no. They said no to their brothers and cousins. They said no to intrafamily unions. They said no to the neighbors and to strangers. They said no to unions outside of their family.*
>
> *Then one day their cousin Ya'aqov came to town looking for a woman from their family, his family. Their father said one of them would have to marry him. Auntie Rivqah would not take no for an answer. Ya'aqov asked for Rachel and offered seven years of his labor in exchange for her. She spent the seven years getting to know him, but she never came to love him. He*

> *interested she became. The more time he spent with Leah, the more she came to love him.*
>
> *When the time for the wedding feast and consummation came, Leah and Rachel agreed to switch places and told their father what they had decided. They waited until deepest night and put out all the lamps in the wedding tent. Leah hoped that Ya'aqov would realize that is was she whom he truly loved. Ya'aqov was angry and disappointed. He demanded Rachel. Lavan tried to dissuade him. Rachel hoped he would give up, but he stayed another seven years. Ya'aqov's pursuit of Rachel broke Leah's heart. The love she held for him and for her sister soured. When Rachel finally consented to marry Ya'aqov, she was at the end of her childbearing years. He did not care. He wanted her, and finally he had her. That Rachel still did not want him and that he never wanted Leah wounded Leah deeply. Leah carried that hurt to her grave. She held on to and acted out of her deep hurt. She was never reconciled to her sister.*

This midrash gives Rachel an agency with regard to her marriage that the text does not. As the story progresses in the canon, it will appear that Laban used his daughters to secure Jacob's labor.

Genesis 29:30 suggests that Jacob loves Leah; he just loves Rachel more. Rachel's story continues with a common literary device in the literature of the ancient Near East: the barren woman. Like their neighbors, biblical authors used this theme to illustrate both the power of God and the prominence of the one conceived against all odds. In desperation, Rachel in Genesis 30:1 demands that Jacob provide her with children, or she will die. In my midrashic reading she succumbs to the societal pressure to bear children. And Leah taunts her. Rachel feels shame that her elder sister is so fertile while she is not. Jacob "becomes furious" in Genesis 30:2 (the expression denotes a snorting bull). Jacob correctly blames God for Rachel's infertility. Like her mother-in-law before her, and many women of means in her culture, she chooses the option of surrogacy. Like the women before her, she does not consider her slave a person with the right to grant or deny access to her body. Rachel gives Jacob her slave Bilhah (formerly her father's slave, see Gen. 29:29) as a surrogate and tells him to "come in(to) her." Bilhah is first Laban's slave and then Rachel's; the only service she performs in the text is reproductive. The traditional translation "enter her" unnecessarily softens the explicit nature of the expression; the double entendre works in Hebrew as it does in English. The biblical authors were not as prudish as some of their translators and interpreters.

Jacob obeys Rachel as he obeyed his mother. He takes Bilhah as an *isshah* (a primary woman, the same category as Rachel and Leah and Leah's slave

Slave or Servant?

I choose the translation "slave" rather than "servant" for *shiphchah* and *amah* (both feminine) and *'eved* (masculine singular; plural *'avadiym*, inclusive) to emphasize that these persons were bought and sold, used for sex, impregnated, and completely subjugated to the power of those called their mistresses and masters. "Servitude" suggests employment, which is not the case for slaves in the biblical corpus. See the essay "The Torah of Enslaved Women," at the end of this chapter, for a detailed discussion.

Zilpah) and fathers two sons whom Rachel names with reference to her sister, Dan (Judge) and Naphtali (Struggle) in Genesis 30:6–8. At one point (Gen. 30:14ff.) Rachel attempts to heal her own infertility using "love-fruit," *duda'ei*, generally identified with mandrakes, a tuber relative of the potato. Rachel's root-work is not censured by the text; it may well have been regarded as within the bounds of legitimate healthcare, given how widely mandrakes were used in the Mediterranean to treat infertility. Leah's son Reuben finds the mandrakes, and Leah will let Rachel have some only if she, Leah, gets to have sex with Jacob. (Jacob goes where he is told and does what he is told, to whom he is told.) The text does not say that Rachel gets to complete the mandrake ritual by having sex with Jacob.

Unlike Rebekah, Rachel does not seek the God who promised offspring to Hagar, Sarah, and Rebekah—either personally or through a professional intermediator, a prophet. Even in her desperation, Rachel does not turn to the God of Jacob. In Genesis 30:1 she demands that Jacob give her children, much to his consternation. He asserts that conception is a divine prerogative, that he is not God, and that God has closed her womb. Neither of them prays for her fertility. When naming her surrogate son Dan, born for her by her womb-slave Bilhah, Rachel says, "God has judged me [*danani elohiym*]." The sense is that God has found in her favor over her sister by granting her a surrogate son, but the text does not indicate that Rachel sought out this verdict. This is one of three times Rachel speaks any name for the God with whom her family would come to be so closely identified.

Finally, in Genesis 30:22–24 God remembers Rachel. Has God forgotten her because she does not worship or seek God? Jacob returns to her bed—which is not mentioned in the text—and God opens her womb, and she has a son whom she names Joseph (Yosef, "Addition") in hopes that she will have another child. She says that God has taken away her reproach and immedi-

son" (Gen. 30:24), is spoken about, not to, God. I do not think that we can say Rachel ever prayed to (or praised) the God of the text. Further, crediting Jacob's god with providing her children would not necessarily mean rejecting her own gods (Gen. 31:19).

This is a touching story with many familiar overtones. While most Western Christians do not practice polygamy, there are many blended families as a result of widowhood and divorce, and many people enter into marriage with children from previous relationships. The elements of sibling rivalry, jealousy, infertility, and desperation transcend time and location. Yet God loves this family and has promised fidelity to them throughout all their generations. Does this fidelity extend to all of the branches of this twisted family tree? Is Rachel the recipient of divine favor? In the world of the text, yes; she has a child, and she has the love of the father of her child, and very few men in the biblical text are described as loving their partners. Is the divine favor that Rachel receives for *her*, or is she the instrumental beneficiary of patriarchal divine favor? What about the enslaved women whose bodies they use as livestock? Are they blessed?

Eventually, Jacob desires to head his own household and seeks the permission of his father-in-law to take his women and children and leave. Laban divines—divination was a rarely sanctioned magical practice in the Scriptures—that God has blessed him through Jacob and desires to reward his son-in-law before sending him off. Jacob practices a form of magic that is not sanctioned in the Scriptures and takes the bulk of Laban's herds as his wages. Jacob's use of magic is comparable to Sarah's sibling marriage; both will be proscribed later in the Torah, but the ancestors are not held accountable to those standards. Jacob's magic strikes me as retributive; I believe he is punishing Laban for saddling him with Leah. He has negotiated all of the striped and speckled goats (and possibly sheep). But rather than take them and leave, he uses magic wands to affect their breeding and produces a larger, stronger flock for himself and a weaker, smaller flock for his father-in-law. When Laban and his other children become hostile, Jacob shows his handiwork to his women and tries to convince them that he is justified because he has been cheated.

Jacob credits God for his wealth but does not quite credit God with the magical mechanics, just the result. In Genesis 31:15 Rachel answers that their father has sold them and is running through the wealth he received for them; they want to leave with Jacob. (The verb is singular *ta'an*, "she answered," indicating that the first person in the double subject, Rachel, is the most active.) Rachel's words mark the complete breakdown of the family bonds across the generations; Laban has lost the love and respect of his daughters and son-in-law. This development allows the reader/hearer to reinterpret the

his free labor as long as possible. In Genesis 31:16 Rachel stakes a claim to the property that Jacob has taken from her father; it is not just for her children. In other texts, women will inherit when they have no male siblings, but this is apparently not the case for Rachel and Leah (see Gen. 31:1).

Rachel decides that they have not taken enough from her father and takes their household deities. I say "their" and not "his," as does the text, because there is no reason to believe that Rachel does not share her father's religion. Rachel has told Jacob to do what God tells him; I believe she means *his* god, and she will take care of *her* gods. While the text (Gen. 31:20) credits only Jacob with deceiving Laban by running away, Rachel and Leah support him, keep the secret, and escape with him, their children, and their flocks, camels, and donkeys.

I think that the lengths Rachel goes to in order to keep the gods—her gods—indicate that Rachel did not worship Jacob's god, or at least not exclusively. Jacob has pronounced death on whoever stole the gods; in spite of his earlier magic prowess, these words have no power over Rachel. Laban searches each tent, and we learn that Rachel and Leah each have their own tent (Gen. 31:32). Rachel keeps her gods. I believe the text continues to avoid calling them Rachel's in order to avoid acknowledging her non-Yahwistic religious commitment. In Genesis 35:4, when members of Jacob's household surrender "foreign" deities, it is not clear if Rachel is in their number.

Only in his leave-taking does Laban show any paternal tenderness to Rachel or Leah or their children. He lays claim to them and their wealth (Gen. 31:43) and in verse 50 adjures Jacob not to take any other women or have any children with any other women, presumably to protect their inheritance. This is a rare demand in an androcentric society. In the same verse Laban enjoins Jacob not to mistreat his daughters, for God will watch him and hold him accountable to this covenant. The text does not explain Laban's newfound relationship with Jacob's god. It may be that he enjoins Jacob in the name of his god because of the power the Name held for Jacob. It should be remembered that these characters reflect the ancient world in which multiple, even conflicting, religious claims were easily tolerated in polytheism and henotheism (elevating one god above others).

The covenant of Mitzpah, which many know as "May the Lord watch between me and thee while we are absent one from the other," is actually a covenant about the treatment of women as the neglected portion indicates: "If you abuse my daughters or if you take women above my daughters, though no person is with us, look—God is a witness between you and me" (Gen. 31:49–50). The "May the Lord watch . . ." is really "May the Lord watch to see if you mistreat my daughters." It is unfortunate that the context of the Mitzpah covenant has been all but forgotten, particularly in the industry that

has sprung up around selling it engraved on jewelry and other memorabilia. Using my sanctified imagination, I can hear this covenant as part of a wedding ceremony and wonder that it is not part of the regular wedding liturgies of religious communities—notwithstanding how it may be used by individuals.

Neither Rachel nor Leah is present when Jacob has two encounters with supernatural beings, the first in Genesis 32:1, with messengers of God in what Jacob names Mahanayim, "God's Camp," and the second in Genesis 32:24, the bruising, blessing wrestling match between Jacob and his unnamed assailant. Their absence may be because the text has established that God of the Holy Name is Jacob's god and not Rachel's or Leah's. In addition, while Jacob is wrestling by the Jabbok, Rachel, Leah, and their children have been sent ahead.

The next morning, Jacob will fear for their safety from Esau and the four hundred men he is bringing with him. Jacob exposes them to the risk of armed conflict based on his love for them: he exposes Bilhah and Zilpah and their children to the most danger by placing them at the front of the column; next come Leah and her children, and finally Rachel and Joseph in Genesis 32:1–2. He takes the most risk by riding to meet Esau, who has previously pledged to kill him. The text does not reveal what conversation passes between Rachel, Leah, and Jacob about Esau. When they meet him, they bow down before him, perhaps a polite greeting, perhaps a conciliatory one. Esau and Jacob are reconciled, and Esau's people escort Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, Zilpah, Jacob, and their children on their way.

Rachel becomes an unnecessary character in Jacob's story. Rachel is absent from the story in Genesis 34 of the rape of Dinah, Jacob's daughter with Leah. She is not mentioned by name in chapter 35, when the household relocates to Bethel, but may be referenced in Jacob's instruction for everyone to surrender their deities. He seems to have forgotten his previous promise to kill whoever has Laban's gods. Rachel is absent or silent when God changes Jacob's name to Yisrael (Israel) in Genesis 35:10. God does not change Rachel's name, as God changed Sarai's name.

In Genesis 35:16 Rachel dies in childbirth. The name Rachel chooses for her second son, Ben-oni, "son of my sorrow," is not honored by Jacob-turned-Israel. He renames the boy Ben-yamin, Benjamin, "right-hand son." Rachel is buried, and her grave marked in the text, unlike that of Rebekah. In Genesis 48:7 Israel recounts Rachel's death to Joseph. Jeremiah invokes Rachel in the Scriptures with a lament in 31:15 (quoted in Matt. 2:18), and the people of Bethlehem invoke her along with Leah in a blessing (Ruth 4:11). Lament and blessing characterize the portrayal of Rachel in the Scriptures: a pawn of her father, in conflict with her sister, loved by a man she does not say she loves, ashamed of her infertility, and finally a mother granted fertility

by God, dead before seeing her children grown and married, her deathbed wishes disregarded.

Rachel's story (like that of her aunt and mother-in-law Rebekah) claims a great volume of text in comparison with the stories of other individual women in the canon. She is canonized as the beloved of Israel. Her love is not considered. Rachel has difficult relationships with her father, sister, and husband. Rachel's mother is mysteriously missing from her story, raising unanswered questions. Where was her mother? Did her absence contribute to these difficult relationships? There is someone else with whom Rachel is in some sort of relationship. God is involved in Rachel's life in the most intimate way, granting her the desire of her heart, even though she does not turn to God for help and may not have subscribed to the worship of this God as she worshiped the gods of her ancestors.

Rachel offers many tropes for womanist midrash. She is for all intents and purposes, in the words of the Negro spiritual, a motherless child, a long way from home. She is a root-worker in a Bible that many would use in order to burn women for their knowledge of herbal remedies under the label "witchcraft." Many in the African diaspora have been taught that their ancestral medicinal practices are incompatible with the Scriptures and the God of the Scriptures, but Rachel teaches us that this is not so. Neither God nor the text proscribe her root-work (or her husband's use of magic wands). Rachel's life is full of drama. Her family of origin is complicated and dysfunctional, and even when the word "love" is spoken, it has virtually no meaning. Willingly or unwillingly, Rachel gives up her life for her child, begetting another generation of motherless children.

LEAH

> Genesis 29:31 When the Giver of Life saw that Leah was unloved, God opened her womb.

There was something about Leah, the way she looked (or perhaps the way she *saw*) that defies description: "Leah had peculiar eyes." In Genesis 29:17 the word that describes Leah's eyes, *rakkoth*, is inscrutable. She was literally "tender-eyed," whatever that means. In any case Leah was overlooked. From the beginning of her story it is clear that the story is not her story but her sister's story—itself a subplot in Israel's (person and people) story. Leah is older than Rachel, and whatever we are to understand about her eyes, how she is seen is clear: she is not "beautiful of form and face." That description is reserved for her younger sister, Rachel.

But how did Leah and Rachel come to be? Who was their mother? And what happened to her? Was she alive and well, erased and silenced by the text, its authors and editors? Was she dead and gone? Did she die in childbirth? Who mothered Leah and Rachel? Did they have an "other mother" to nurture them into womanhood, as is frequently the case in the African and other diasporas?

By design neither Leah nor Rachel married in the womanish midrash I composed for the entry on Rachel; Leah and Rachel rejected their would-be suitors. There was another possibility. Perhaps their father, Laban, rejected their suitors, not wanting to pay a dowry, let alone two. Laban's attachment to his material wealth lies beneath all of these stories. Leah is not described as ugly, deformed, or blind, which may have impacted her ability to marry. As the daughter of a relatively wealthy man, Leah was a desirable bride. Nothing in the canon to this point suggests that women were chosen as potential mates based on their looks alone—however much female beauty might occasionally be celebrated in the text. And Leah was from a family that practices internal marriage: Her aunt Rebekah married her cousin Isaac. Her great-grandmother Milcah married her own uncle, Nahor. Her great-grandaunt Sarah married her own brother, Abraham. And her great-granduncle Lot fathered children with his own daughters. I submit that in the tangled branches of this family tree there were certainly viable candidates, but for some reason they were all rejected. In this reading, I choose to place that responsibility squarely on Laban.

It is clear that Laban is the primary actor in the wedding deception. He takes Leah to Jacob. And in an odd note in Genesis 29:24, he gives her his slave-woman Zilpah, seemingly as a consolation prize, on the way to the marriage bed. The text does not offer a conversation between Laban and Leah. It does seem to suggest that Leah does not have a choice to marry. This is very much at odds with her aunt Rebekah's choice whether or not to go with Isaac. Surely she had heard the story. Laban's excuse that tradition required the deception in Genesis 29:26 does not hold water. The so-called tradition was not previously voiced in the text or in the canon, and if it were so, then why not tell Jacob when he asks for Rachel?

Leah is in a horrible position. She has heard her whole life how beautiful her sister is. But she has never been called beautiful. Perhaps she's been told by well-meaning folk that her eyes aren't *that* noticeable. She is unmothered. Her father has used her for his own devices. She is married to a man who does not love her as much as he loves her sister, if he loves her at all. For whatever reason, she enters into competition with her sister for Jacob's love. There is no competition. She is eclipsed the moment Jacob sees Rachel. But she tries and finds that he has a weakness; he cannot stay away from her bed, even

when he has a male heir and a spare (and another, and another); Jacob returns over and over again to her bed. What is that about?

The All-Seeing One takes note of Leah in Genesis 29:31, that she was hated (*s'nu'ah*) and grants her children. God knows that Leah is not (merely) loved less by Jacob than Rachel, as in Genesis 29:30, or that she is not only "unloved," as the IB, NRSV, JPS, and GSJPS translate verse 31; in truth, she is *hated* (so Fox). The text does not say that she is hated by Jacob, leaving open the possibility that she is hated by her husband, sister, and/or father, and perhaps others. What is compelling here is that God-of-the-Holy-Name cares about Leah when no one else does, and gives her the one thing that will grant her status and standing in her androcentric society and now-patriarchal household.[70] Moreover, God withholds children from Rachel for Leah's sake. This begs the question, was God punishing Rachel for being loved, or was she guilty of something else? And what does it say that God afflicts one woman with infertility in that culture to assuage the betrayed broken heart of her sister? The text does not say God made Rachel infertile or did so because of the hatred for Leah. However, in the text the link between Rachel's love, Leah's hatred, and their wombs is not incidental. Another possibility is that Leah was simply God's favorite, as God would prefer David over Saul.

Leah's childbearing, and, more, child naming reveal her desperation for Jacob's love:

> When the God of Love saw that Leah was hated, God opened her womb; yet Rachel was barren. [32]Leah conceived and gave birth to a son, and she proclaimed his name "Re'uven" (Reuben, meaning "Look! A son!"); for she said, "Because the God Who Sees All has looked on my affliction; now my man will love me." [33]She conceived again and gave birth to a son, and said, "Because the God Who Heard My Cry has heard how hated am I, God has given me this one also," and she proclaimed his name "Shim'on" (Simeon, meaning "Hearing"). [34]She conceived again and gave birth to a son, and said, "Now, this time my man will be joined to me, because I have given birth to three sons for him"; therefore his name was proclaimed "Levi" (Joining). [35]She conceived again and gave birth to a son, and said, "This time I will give-thanks-and-praise God Whose Name is Holy"; therefore she proclaimed his name "Yehudah" (Judah, meaning "giving-thanks-and praise"); then she stood-and-stopped giving birth. (Gen. 29:31–35)

70. Laban is from a matrilineal family; he is the grandson of the matriarch Milcah, whose name was preserved when her male partner's was forgotten. The absence of Leah's and Rachel's mother enabled Laban to shift the power paradigm in his matrilineal home. Now and only now is it patriarchal.

Perhaps by the time she gives birth to Yehudah (Judah), Leah has ceased to hope that Jacob will love her and is resting in God's love for her. But then, in Genesis 30:9–13, the now infertile and most likely menopausal Leah competes again with Rachel for Jacob's love by ordering him to take her womanservant turned womb-slave Zilpah as her surrogate—which he does. He has just fathered two children with Rachel's slave, Bilhah. Zilpah gives birth to sons whom Leah names Gad (Fortune) saying "*B'Gad*" (the origin of "By Gad," meaning "What fortune") and Asher (Blessed). This time Leah is hoping to be vindicated by her peers, other women; when naming Asher she says, "In this I am blessed! Women-born-of-women[71] will call me blessed!" These verses account for years, anywhere from a year to conceive and birth each baby to six or more, allowing for five years in which the previous child was being nursed before the next child was conceived.

In Genesis 30:14–18, Leah reveals her deep pain—Rachel has taken from her everything that matters and seeks to take even more: Reuben, Leah's son, found "love-fruit" (*duda'ei*),[72] a plant used medicinally, believed to treat infertility. In exchange for some of the love-fruit Rachel barters a night with Jacob to Leah. Leah says in verse 15, "Was it not a small thing for you to take my man? Must you now take my son's love-fruit?" Rachel is desperate for children of her own; she is not satisfied with her surrogate children. Rachel's promise to permit Jacob to sleep with Leah this one night must have sounded condescending to Leah. The conversation raises the question, how often did Jacob sleep with Leah? It seems that he was with her on a regular basis in order to father four children with her; they will also produce a daughter later. It also seems that Rachel is his gatekeeper.

Without comment or complaint Jacob complies with the arrangements his women have made for his sexual favors. Leah's infertility is reversed, and she gives birth to Issachar (Payment). In vêrses 19–20, in spite of his professed preference for Rachel and in spite of having several male heirs, Jacob continues to have sex with Leah, who does not have to buy his time or services. Jacob fathers another son, whom Leah names Zebulun (Cohabitation). They continue in conjugal intimacy. Finally, in verse 21 Leah gives birth to a daughter whom she names Dinah (Judgment), without explaining her name, as was done for each of Jacob's sons. However, Jacob returns to Rachel's bed and finally impregnates Rachel.

71. Literally "daughters."

72. Traditionally identified with *atropa mandragora* or *mandragora officinarum*, mandrakes, *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (*DCH*).

Leah and Rachel are absent from the narrative when Jacob performs what might be called root-work or juju[73] on the flocks to increase his wealth at their father's expense. They reappear and agree with him that they should leave because they no longer have any inheritance with their father. What they do not say is that Jacob has taken it. They assert a claim on their own behalf and on behalf of their children; they share the wealth with Jacob. After their flight Laban pursues them but is more interested in his missing gods. When he enters Leah's tent in 31:33, he does not speak to her. Yet Laban initiates the lovely covenant at Mitzpah to hold Jacob accountable for his treatment of his daughters and grandchildren. Laban pauses to kiss his daughters and grandchildren before he leaves.

Leah endures one final insult from Jacob before she exits the narrative; when Jacob fears retribution from Esau, he separates his women and children and positions them according to their value to him (Gen. 33:2). Leah and her children are more important to him than Bilhah or Zilpah and their children, but not as important as Rachel and Joseph.

In Genesis 34, Leah's daughter Dinah is raped, and Leah is conspicuously absent from the narrative. Leah is also absent from Rachel's death scene and its aftermath. In Genesis 49:31, Leah's death is reported. She, not Rachel, is buried with Sarah, Abraham, Rebekah, and Isaac. In death, if not in life, Leah is finally accorded the dignity of a matriarch. Her name will be linked with Rachel's in the townswomen's blessing in Ruth 4:11; then Leah fades from the Scriptures. She is not invoked in the Prophets, Writings, or New Testament. It is Jacob's deathbed request to be buried with Leah and not Rachel (Gen. 49:29–33).

Leah the loveless matriarch is a heartbreaking character. The sage in Proverbs 30:21–23 writes that the earth cannot bear the weight of an unloved woman when she finally gets a husband; perhaps the sage had Leah in mind. Leah's story is a reminder that marriage and love do not go together any more than do love and sex. Leah's relationship with Jacob indicates that loveless marriages, man sharing, jealousy, and competition are not just contemporary issues. There is no happy ending for Leah; she is not fulfilled as a person or as a woman in motherhood. She is not the last woman to go to her grave longing for the love of a man who does not love her but is willing to sleep with her. Pious women readers/hearers may not choose to be Leah, but I suspect that

73. "Juju" covers a broad swath of traditional religious practices dispersed by the trans-Atlantic slave trade, pejoratively called witchcraft or magic on both sides of the Atlantic. "Root-work" is a related category of traditional practice involving plant matter, often (if not most often) performed by women in the African diaspora, similar to Jacob's use of "rods" to affect the fertility of flocks and enrich himself at his father-in-

Leah's story canonized her lovelessness as well as her fruitfulness because it rang true to human experience. Leah offers a cautionary tale to women looking for fulfillment in someone else's love: you cannot make someone love you.

BILHAH

> Genesis 30:3 Rachel said, "Look! My womb-slave Bilhah—come in her, and she will give birth on my knees that I may also build babies, through her."

Bilhah is one of two slave-women whose bodies were used to produce a full third of the twelve tribes of Israel. Bilhah and Zilpah are often overlooked—in prayers naming the matriarchs in Judaism and Christianity—and sometimes combined, and in my experience as a congregant and student they are conjoined as a footnote to Israel's story. For that reason, I treat them separately. Bilhah is first enslaved to Laban, the father of Leah and Rachel, before being passed on to his daughter Rachel. While she is enslaved to Laban, Bilhah is initially referred to as a *shiphchah*, a type of female slave; later, she is called an *amah*, another type of female slave. Both terms connote sexual servitude by means of their literary contexts in the Bible.[74] Bilhah figures more prominently in the Scriptures than does her sister in slavery, Zilpah.[75] There are eleven references to Bilhah; there are only seven for Zilpah.

The text is not interested in how a girl (or woman young enough to be presumed fertile) came into Laban's household. Was Bilhah the bond-woman of Laban's mysteriously missing wife? Was Bilhah born in captivity or captured as a spoil of war? How long was she in Laban's service before he gave her to Rachel? What sorts of services did she provide Laban? Given the absence of Laban's wife from the narrative, it is entirely possible that Laban used Bilhah sexually.

Bilhah's sexual subordination to Rachel (with or without the possibility that Laban used her sexually) evokes the sexual abuse of enslaved Africans in the United States, the Caribbean, and other places. Religious readings that valorize Rachel place the descendants of those held as chattel in the American slavocracy in the position of identifying with slave-holding values and against the interests and experiences of their foremothers. Rachel, like her foremother Sarah, does not hesitate to use the body, womb, and sexuality

74. The two terms are used nearly interchangeably in the Hebrew Scriptures, although there was likely once a distinction between them.

75. Bilhah and Zilpah are not necessarily biological sisters or even relatives. The text is uninterested in their identity or heritage.

of another woman for her own purposes. There is no pretense that Rachel does not know about her husband's sexual use of her slaves; there is nothing differentiating her from the white women who benefited from slavery in and around their homes, often meting out punishment to pregnant slaves and their children who looked like their children. When Rachel gives Bilhah to Jacob, she gives her as a primary wife, an *isshah*. Yet Bilhah remains Rachel's slave; she is regularly referred to as a slave, a *shiphchah* (but preferentially translated as a "maid" or "servant").[76] Rachel initiates Bilhah's sexual subordination. Bilhah proves fertile and gives birth to Dan and Naphtali.

In each slave-surrogate story, the text portrays a singular accounting of the sexual contact between Abraham and Hagar, Jacob and Bilhah, and Jacob and Zilpah. The reader must imagine how many times the slave-women were forced/required to have sex with these men in order to provide their mistresses with the children they craved. Rachel, like other women who use their slaves as child-bearing surrogates, claims the children; this is not comparable to the vast experience of enslaved women of African descent forced to bear children at the whim of their enslavers, whose children were sold off or abused to punish them for a sin that was not theirs.

A modern, and admittedly imperfect, parallel to Rachel's use of Bilhah's body might be the women of privilege who travel to the two-thirds world, India in particular, to pay a surrogate to bear their children at a tenth of the cost of an American surrogate. While the women do consent to the practice, the financial disparities and cultural consequences of carrying someone else's child in traditional societies complicate that consent. It becomes more complicated when racial disparity parallels the economic disparity.

Bilhah's body is used again in Genesis 35:22. Reuben ben Leah, Jacob's firstborn son, rapes Bilhah. That Bilhah does not consent is indicated by the Hebrew, *vayishcav et-bilhah*, "he lay Bilhah." There is no "with" indicating consent, in spite of the misleading NRSV, JPS, GSJPS, and Everett Fox translations. Bilhah is the grammatical and sexual object of Reuben's actions. Reuben is young enough to be her son. He may have been like a son or nephew to her. But he uses her nevertheless, whether for his own sexual pleasure or as a pawn in a battle with his father. The pain, anguish, rage, and shame that Bilhah must have felt are difficult to imagine. In the text no punishment is meted out to Reuben. No comfort is offered to Bilhah in the text. Was she supported by other slave women, by Zilpah, who shared her lot in life? It seems unlikely that Rachel or Leah came to her aid. Bilhah's body has belonged to Laban,

76. NRSV, IB, JPS, GSJPS, and Fox use "maid" and "maidservant" preferentially in Gen. 30:3 and other texts. See Gen. 29:29; 30:3, 4, 7; 35:25; and 46:25, where she is

Rachel, Jacob, and now Reuben. In this narrative Bilhah is described as a secondary wife, a *pilegesh* (*piylegesh*). She has been degraded in body and status.

Yet something of Bilhah endures and transcends the abuse heaped on her body. In 1 Chronicles 4:29 there is a town named Bilhah, settled by the descendants of Simeon. Textually speaking, the town is likely the same town called Ba'alah in Joshua 15:29. Since Ba'alah and Bilhah are more than one letter apart, scribal error does not seem to be responsible for the discrepancy. There are very likely two different traditions or sources about the ancient city list. The space between the two traditions provides a midrashic space. Perhaps Bilhah is the Ba'alah ("lady" or "mistress") for whom the town is named, regaining the dignity that had been stripped from her. Finally, in Genesis 46:23–25, Bilhah takes her place in the genealogy of Israel as a matriarch, credited with seven children and grandchildren; this is largely repeated in 1 Chronicles 7:13.

Bilhah represents the woman who has had more than one abusive relationship, the woman who has been raped by more than one perpetrator, the woman who has been betrayed by women and men, the woman who has never known anyone to value her for more than what they think about her body, in part or the whole. And Bilhah represents the woman who survives her abuse.

In Eucharistic Prayer C in the Holy Eucharist, Rite Two, in the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Episcopal Church, the celebrant invokes "Lord God of our Fathers; God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." I always add Bilhah (and Zilpah) to this prayer when I celebrate, not because the text indicates that the God of Israel and these dysfunctional family dynamics claimed or even accepted Bilhah, but because she is one of the mothers of Israel. After all that she has been through, after all that was done to her, to erase her name from the chronicle of her descendants and their people is to do further violence to her. Likewise, when I pray the *Amidah* in a Jewish congregation, when the *siddur* (prayerbook) blesses "the God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" in many liturgies and "the God of our mothers and fathers" in Reconstructionist settings, naming Sarah, Rivqah, Rachel, and Leah, I add Bilhah and Zilpah for the same reason.[77]

Lastly, calling the names of familial and spiritual ancestors is a womanist practice with roots in a number of African societies.[78] In ritual practice, the

77. After sharing an early version of this material with the Dorshei Derekh Minyan (prayer congregation) of the Germantown Jewish Centre in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where I was a member at the time, the congregation decided to do a study of the use of the names of Bilhah and Zilpah in the liturgy and ultimately made space for individuals to add them if they so chose.

78. James Evans traces out some of these practices in the American context in his discussion "History and Hope in the African American Experience" (James H. Evans,

affirmation "Ashé!" from the Yoruba tradition concludes the name-calling of the ancestors. *Mother Bilhah, womb-slave of Israel, we call your name. Ashé!*

ZILPAH

> Genesis 30:9 When Leah saw that she had ceased giving birth, she took her womb-slave Zilpah and gave her to Ya'aqov as a wife-woman.

Zilpah is the second womb-slave whom Jacob impregnates. Her story parallels Bilhah's in many respects, yet there was one significant difference. Her predecessor, Bilhah, was given to Jacob because Bilhah's mistress, Rachel, was infertile. Zilpah was given to Jacob because her mistress, Leah, was not satisfied with four children (Gen. 30:9). As Bilhah gave birth to new children for Rachel and Jacob, Leah, desperate for his love, ordered Jacob to use Zilpah, who had been given to her by her father Laban, to make more children for her. And as with Bilhah on Rachel's command, Jacob complied with Leah's demand.

The text tells us nothing about Zilpah before Laban gives her to Leah on the occasion of her wedding. How did she come to be enslaved in their household? Where was her family? Did Laban use her sexually before giving her to Leah (given his wife's complete absence from the narrative)? Zilpah was passed from Laban to Leah to Jacob. Zilpah gave birth to Gad and Asher for Leah and Jacob. The text does not record any further abuse of Zilpah. She is mentioned only seven times. In the genealogy in Genesis 46:16–17, Zilpah is the mother and grandmother of fourteen. She even has a granddaughter who will figure prominently in classical rabbinic midrash, Serach.

Zilpah is presented as another pawn in the war for Jacob's attention and affection. The battlefield for that war was the bodies of Bilhah and Zilpah. Through the sexual and reproductive occupation of their bodies, people who would be known as Israel came into being. Through the wombs of Rachel, Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah, Israel's people were birthed by choice and by force. The text says nothing to suggest that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God of Bilhah and Zilpah. They are casualties of nation building. But their children, their grandchildren, and their descendants will claim and be claimed by the God of their patriarchs, and some of us who claim the God of Israel, including through the life and teachings of Yeshua ben Miryam, Mary's child, Jesus, also claim Zilpah, Bilhah, Hagar, and all of the unnamed

We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992], 143–44).

womb-slaves in what has become our spiritual ancestry. *Mother Zilpah, womb-slave of Israel, we call your name. Ashé!*

ASENATH

> Genesis 41:45 Pharaoh gave Yosef (Joseph) the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphera, priest of On, as his woman. Then Yosef went out over the land of Egypt.

The story of Asenath the African matriarch of Israel is a treasure in the shared canon, a treasure that has scarcely been mined in feminist and womanist scholarship, teaching, and preaching—even, and particularly, in African diasporic and African American Christian contexts. Asenath is a woman of status in her native culture and in the Israelite narrative; she is among the treasures of Egypt with which Joseph is rewarded for his service and his loyalty. Her city On, also known as Heliopolis, was the primary site of the worship of Ra, the sun god. Her father was a priest in the god's service, likely a high-ranking priest, since marriage to Asenath is an indication of how high Joseph has risen in the pharaoh's estimation. In Genesis 41 Joseph has integrated so well into Egyptian society that he has been given an Egyptian name, clothing, and jewelry, including the pharaoh's own ring, in addition to a new family.

The people of Israel, from Sarai and Abram of Ur to Ephraim and Manasseh *beney*[79] Asenath are a product of a multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual mélange. Asenath is the only African matriarch credited with producing tribes in Israel. Since Joseph was never counted as a tribe, and the tribe Levi didn't get an inheritance in the promised land, Asenath's two sons with Joseph, Manasseh and Ephraim, were counted to round the number of tribes back up to twelve. Asenath becomes an Israelite matriarch without ever setting foot in Israel or Canaan. She and Joseph die in Egypt. Joseph's body is preserved, and his bones are eventually carried into Canaan (Gen. 50:25; Exod. 13:19; Josh. 24:32), but no mention is made of Asenath's remains. Were her bones (or her mummy) carried out of Egypt with Joseph's? Was she given a traditional Egyptian burial?

The Hebrew Bible regularly shows strong connections between mothers and their children, which gives rise to questions in Asenath's story. When Zaphenath-paneah/Yosef reunites with his family of origin in Genesis 48:3–6, his father Jacob-turned-Israel asserts a claim to her children, perhaps because they are more Egyptian than Israelite. How does Asenath feel about Joseph's

79. "Sons of."