

The Story of Abraham and Models of Human Identity

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Abstract

This paper explores the profiles of the women characters Sarah and Hagar as models of human identity. The two characters can only be explored through reading the over-arching narrative of the story of Abraham. Their profiles and narrated personalities have to be extracted from that narrative, but there is a two-sided nature of this necessity. If Sarah and Hagar cannot be separated from the biblical narrator's engagement with father Abraham, neither can Abraham function as father of the nations except through his interaction with these two women. The reader is thus led towards an understanding of how the stories of Genesis 12–24 deal with the issue of parenthood.

The body of the paper consists in a close reading of the biblical material following a method of reading which is rooted in the use of imagination as an exegetical tool – a style adopted by Paul in his allegorical approach to Sarah and Hagar in Galatians 4. This approach opens into narrative criticism with a focus on characterisation and on the interactions of Sarah, Hagar and Abraham, caught up in a Domestic Comedy. The women's characters are explored through the themes of parenthood as other, the other woman and woman as other. A final section explores some of the points of narrative ethics to be extracted from the close textual readings of the paper, with reference to the writings of Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas. It is suggested that female as well as male characters may offer fruitful models for human identity.

Keywords

Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Narrative, Identity

The purpose of this paper is to explore the profiles of the women characters Sarah and Hagar as models of human identity. It is, of course, the case that the two characters can only be explored through reading the over-arching narrative of the story of Abraham. Their profiles and narrated personalities have to be extracted from that narrative, but it

is interesting to note the two-sided nature of this necessity. If Sarah and Hagar cannot be separated from the biblical narrator's engagement with father Abraham neither can Abraham function as father of the nations except through his interaction with these two women. The reader is thus led towards an understanding of how the stories of Genesis 12–24 deal with the issue of parenthood – a topic which places the stress on progeny rather than on parents and in which both male and female characters are in a relationship of mutuality to the 'citizens' of the future. In this context it is fitting to suggest that female as well as male characters may offer fruitful models for human identity.

Biblical imagination

Basic to the task of textual reading is the use of imagination as an exegetical tool. It is in entering into the stories and engaging with the characters found there that the reader can find possible models of human identity. The reader is thus invited to reflect on the complexity of [in]appropriate human behaviour as this is manifested by a person's reaction to life events and the resultant shifting behaviour patterns. Use of the imagination requires a reading of text as 'poetic', as constructed through symbolism and metaphor. This is in line with the thought of Timothy Luke Johnson, who argues that the "world constructed by Scripture . . . provides an opening to new perceptions of the here and now"¹ and that "people act on the basis of the imagined worlds in which they dwell and by acting on what they imagine, they help establish their world as real".² Thus, an imaginative engagement with a biblical text is not an avoidance of reality but a means of approaching reality from an alternative perspective.³ Paul Avis expands this view with regard to Christian theology as a whole. His thesis is, "that Christianity lives supremely from the imagination".⁴ St Augustine, he suggests, "saw God [as] a poet [who] speaks to the world in metaphors, symbols and parables".⁵

Reading the story of Abraham for its possible theological symbolism was, indeed, the work carried out by earliest Christian treatment, in the letters of St Paul. For Paul, Abraham was eminently the 'man of faith' whose loyalty to divine command led to great reward and to the founding of a nation. In Romans 4 Paul makes a link between

¹ Timothy Luke Johnson, "Imagining the World Scripture Imagines" in L. Gregory Jones and James Buckley (eds.), *Theology and Scriptural Imagination*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, p.4

² *Ibid*, p.4

³ *Ibid*, p.10

⁴ Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination*, New York/ London: Routledge, 1999, p.3

⁵ *Ibid*, p.3

'old' and 'new' Israel by asserting that Abraham is the ancestor of messianic Judaism as well as of pharisaic Judaism. Paul focuses not on Abraham as a person of observant practice (as in the carrying out of a rite of circumcision) but on the parts of Abraham's story which show him as someone who trusts in God, prior to any actual observance. It is not his works that make Abraham a model, then, but his faith (verses 2–3). By this interpretation Paul offers the follower of Christ a model of Torah identity in which the inner qualities of patience and perseverance are required of the believer.

In this particular midrashic exercise the focus is on the dominant male of the story cycle, but in Galatians 4 Paul turns to the female characters of the story. Sarah and her son stand for true religion while Hagar and Ishmael represent the false strand. Paul reads with the main grain of Genesis 16 and 21 in which Hagar is twice relegated to the wilderness as Sarah's primacy is upheld as mother of the chosen child. The stress here is really on the status of the progeny, on the question of who is the legitimate son and heir to divine promises of nationhood. Ishmael is rejected because he is the son of a slave woman (verses 22–23). Paul turns the women, slave and free, into spiritual symbols of covenant. The higher covenant is attached to the heavenly Jerusalem (verses 25–26) and this in turn is aligned with those who are 'in Christ' since they are adopted by God as truly members of Israel and placed at the heart of God's family. As Paul argues in Romans 11, the Gentiles who have a messianic appropriation of Jewish tradition are grafted in to share the rich fruit of the olive tree (verse 17). Here again Paul makes his theological case by appeal to symbolic language, using the agricultural theme of arboriculture, a theme which already had a long history of usage in the Hebrew Bible.⁶

Both in relation to Abraham and to his wives, Paul utilises Genesis material by treating the text symbolically, as prototype (Abraham) and allegory (Sarah and Hagar). In this he uses his imagination to flesh out a creative Christ-focused interpretation of Jewish Torah, moving the meaning to be imparted to the text from its relevance to the founding of an ancient kingdom and people, and giving it fresh energy in the contemporary frame of an emerging community network. As Avis points out, the Hebrew Bible is not concerned with

⁶ Paul's image is that of tending of olive trees but it fits within a wider imagery of the OT which uses images drawn from husbandry relating to viticulture. Isaiah 5, for instance, likens the people to a vine which fails to produce good fruit. God is the vinedresser who has spent much energy on his work only to have it fail. Paul imagines Israel as a tree whose fruits will be enhanced by having a new stock integrated into it. In his image divine purpose is achieved as opposed to the vineyard imagery which is generally negative; he does, however, consider the original tree to be resistant to having new stock attached to it. For an exploration of Pauline uses in Galatians see, Phyllis Trible and Letty Russell (eds.) *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children. Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, Louisville: WJK, 2006, chapter 3.

doctrinal propositions but with “an imaginative vision of God”⁷ and this is the line taken by Pauline exegesis.⁸

Narratives and character

Whereas Pauline exegesis contextualised biblical characters through typology and allegory this present paper will take a wider approach to the topic of biblical imagination. Specifically it will operate from a basis in modern narrative criticism to explore the way in which the plot of Genesis 12–24 is tied into the characterisation of Sarah and Hagar. It can be argued that the main plot of the story cycle is to address the question of the origins and identity of a people.⁹ In this perspective the characters are actants whose function is to perform the plot sequence concerning the founding of a people.¹⁰ Once readers engage with the narrative, however, they also engage with the characters as individual persons and are drawn to reflect on the development of characters across the scenes of the plot.¹¹ This leads to a richer and fuller grasp of the characterisation present in the narrative, a process which is further aided by the ambiguity of the narrative itself. Biblical narrative tells some parts of a story in

⁷ Avis, *Creative Imagination*, p.65. Here he uses the work of biblical scholar J.L. Gibson as a resource for an exploration of the biblical foundations for Christian theology.

⁸ Pauline exegesis set the tone for most later Christian interpretation of Abraham and Hagar. For a study of Abraham as a ‘man of faith’ see Karl-Joseph Kuschel, *Abraham. A Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, London: SCM Press, 1995. Hagar is presented by Paul as base, a view followed by early Christian tradition, but at odds with more modern interpretation which focuses on an empathetic link between Hagar and the experience of Afro-American slaves. Cf. here Trible and Russell (eds.) *Hagar*, 129, which treats of the imagery of Sarah as Church and Hagar as Synagogue. The same work treats a range of broad questions such as the function of partiality and exclusivity in the narrative (pp.24–25), as well as exploring the theme of God accompanying the slave (chapter 7). It can be noted that 16th century exegetes held a nuanced attitude to Hagar, in which Hagar did sin but equally her plight is extreme. See here John Thompson “Hagar, Victim and Villain” in CBQ 59/2.

⁹ This is the line picked up by J. Berquist, *Controlling Corporeality. The Body and the Household in Ancient Israel*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002. The argument here is that the whole nation of Israel can be traced back to its roots in human procreation (p.53). See here Trible and Russell (eds.) *Hagar*, pp.34–5, which highlights the way in which barrenness operates as a social threat.

¹⁰ ‘Actant’ is the term used in semiotics to denote characters as stereotypes whose function is to fulfil the plot. See Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca; New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, pp.113–4, where Chatman quotes Todorov’s definition of the two categories of characterisation, plot-centred and character-centred. The later approach involves a psychological aspect which Chatman develops in discussing how characters in sophisticated narratives remain open constructs, just as people in the real world remain mysterious, even to those who know them well.

¹¹ See here Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp.107–8, where Bal debates whether characters exist beyond the narrative or are semiotically defined. She asks whether a character as fully-formed exists from the start of the narrative or only by the end.

detail but leaves other aspects undeveloped. Biblical commentators frequently note this phenomenon. Kathryn Tanner, in *Scripture as Popular Text*, for instance, states that “biblical stories seem full of holes”.¹² She views this not as a negative, but as in fact offering a great bonus for those who would seek to re-use scriptural material in their own contexts. “Texts that speak to every time and place are able to do so because of their indeterminacies, irreconciled pluralities, their ambiguities and absences . . . such texts are always reaching out to new readers by their failure to give a definitive account of themselves”.¹³

Meir Sternberg has made a major study of the role of gaps and ambiguities in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, in which he argues that the presence of gaps allows for deeper engagement with the characterisation in these stories.¹⁴ Sternberg denies that the narrative focuses on stereotypical patterns of behaviour.¹⁵ Instead, individual characters have experiences which allow the reader to explore ethical and religious matters through particular events. With regard to the Abraham story Sternberg identifies the subject of old age as one such interest. What is the value of old age? Sternberg suggests that this question is addressed by the aligning of old age with the theme of blessing.¹⁶ In Genesis 12–24, in the characterisation of both father and mother as aged people whose years of potency and fertility are behind them, the narrator highlights the unlikelihood of new life appearing. Both Abraham and Sarah speak of this problem. Abraham responds to the continuing promise of a son by Sarah by pointing out that Ishmael already exists and Sarah laughs at the idea that she might now take ‘pleasure’ from her husband. But the story moves continuously, through the tensions of the plot, towards the time when these aged persons will produce a son of ‘their old age’. The reader is led to reflect on the paradox of age as both death and life. This reflection can take to itself the lack of conviction that age can provide blessing evidenced by the characters as well as their growth in understanding of the possibilities of life at the edge of time. The several turns and reverses of the plot and the ways in which Abraham and Sarah engage with their own experience serve as a mirror for readerly evaluations of ageing.¹⁷

¹² Kathryn Tanner, “Scripture as Popular Text” in Jones and Buckley (eds.), *Scriptural Imagination*, p.126.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.124

¹⁴ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative. Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985. Chapter 10 of this work moves from narrative ambiguities to how these create sophisticated character patterns in Hebrew Bible narratives.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.247

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.349ff

¹⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, p.348, where Sternberg argues that just as readers begin to generalise characters, OT narratives overturn their suppositions.

Irony and comedy

Focus on the ambiguity of biblical narrative brings the reader back to a consideration of the ways in which text does not offer a univocal meaning. For Paul the only significant profile for Abraham is as a sober, steady and resilient character. But reading the Genesis story again it is possible to pick out undercurrents within the narrative which challenge that profile. If Abraham fully trusts God's promise concerning Sarah why does he give her away to the kings of Egypt and Gerar, for instance? In chapters 16 and 21 both Sarah and Abraham engage at a very human level with circumstances in the household and it remains for the deity to enter the story to resolve the dangers to other characters created by these human responses. Instances such as these have led to the view that Abraham can possibly be called a 'trickster' character, one who succeeds by guile.¹⁸ Thus in the Sarah in Egypt scenario, Abraham not only preserves his life but also becomes a wealthy man, as well as getting back his wife, as a result of his taking thought for his own situation.¹⁹

These narrative patterns allow for the emergence of dramatic irony as a narrative tool within the Abraham story. The characters are viewed in a more nuanced light by virtue of the use of irony.²⁰ Sarah's connection with the term 'laughter' is an example of this usage. Sarah fears to be laughed at by others for her sterility and so takes preventative action which results in the very result which she feared, as Hagar turns against her in chapter 16. As Edwin Good notes, the whole subplot which is established via Sarah's fears provides an ironic counterpoint to the main plot-line of the promise of descendants from Sarah's own body.²¹ Later, Sarah doubts that she can bear a child²² and laughs

¹⁸ For a radical critique of the view that Abraham is a one-dimensional character see Philip Davies, *Whose Bible is it Anyway*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, chapter 5. Davies points out how often Abraham takes independent action to secure his interests and how this acts as a challenge to the divine promises which still await fulfilment. See also Mary Mills, *Biblical Morality. Moral Perspectives in OT Narratives*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2001, chapter 2.

¹⁹ Abraham uses his human discretion, but is later shamed by Pharaoh's reproach of dishonesty, before which he stands silent; yet Abraham is still the victor in the narrative frame, becoming a wealthy man. See also Judith McKinley, *Reframing Her. Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus*, Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2004, p.8, where she addresses the issue of irony in that such prosperity can come from a barren woman.

²⁰ Cf. Edwin Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, London: SPCK, 1965, p.95. Good notes the irony in Abraham's remark that he asked Sarah to describe him as brother 'out of loyalty'. But the loyalty in question is really that of a wife to a husband. See also William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp.68–9, where he suggests that the entire section Genesis 12–50 can be usefully read through the motif of ironic reversal. See also Sternberg, *Poetics*, pp.386–7.

²¹ Good, *Irony*, p.92

²² Robert Sacks, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, Queenstown: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990, p.156, where Sacks reflects on the wordplay concerning laughter words in

to herself at this thought – only for the laughter to be reversed as she bears a son whom she calls ‘Laughter’, for now she wants people to laugh with her. Finally, her son ‘laughter’ is threatened by the ‘playing’ which Ishmael engages in.²³ By the use of repetition the narrator provides a means by which the reader can look back across the phases of Sarah’s gradual discovery of what the theme of laughter signifies in her life. In the light of her final state of contentment Sarah’s original fear of mockery and weak sense of self-worth can be viewed as providing an ironic counterpoise to the character’s more mature self-knowledge.

The theme of irony leads on to the issue of the narrative genre of Genesis 12–24. William Whedbee argues that what is at stake in Genesis 12–50 is domestic comedy.²⁴ Ironic reversal is at work in role reversals, the scheming use of sexuality and the matter of rewards achieved through deception.²⁵ In these usages the genre of Comedy with its u-turn plot shape can be discerned. Since the main characters all survive the events narrated of them, often because God intervenes in their career, it can be suggested that God has the last laugh, since it is divine energy which ensures the arrival of the promised heir, Isaac.²⁶ This comedy is not without its dark side, since pathos is encountered in the scenes involving Hagar in the wilderness and the narrative veers towards tragedy with the threats to the life of both sons. Whedbee argues, though, that these last motifs are examples of comic agony rather than true tragedy.²⁷ Their purpose is to heighten the tension and to underline the ultimately comic nature of the plot. There is in the end no death – or just the death of the mother, as recorded in Genesis 25.

Abraham and Sarah can be viewed as individuals whose characters are developed by the narrator’s use of irony.²⁸ The deepest irony is that of parenthood. For Abraham it is not till chapter 17 that he engages with the concept of progeny sufficiently to enact the covenant of circumcision, and even then he doubts that there is more to fatherhood for him than he already

Genesis 20. He notes the derisive nature of Sarah’s laughter; she is afraid that people will laugh at her.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.155, where Sacks discusses the close sound resemblance of the Hebrew words for playing and laughter.

²⁴ Whedbee, *Comic Vision*, entitles the whole section of Genesis ‘domestic comedy’ since it involves household narratives with a happy-enough ending.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.68–9

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.76

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.84. See also Tribble and Russell (eds.) *Hagar*, p.53 which notes the seriousness of the situation in which a father poses a threat to each of his two sons.

²⁸ Cf Good, *Irony*, p.92, where he suggests that the birth of Ishmael and its vexation for Sarah provide ironic suspense to the promise of descendants. Hagar’s arrogance in Genesis 16 lends irony to Ishmael’s stance and expulsion in Genesis 21.

has.²⁹ Yet, having waited for a prolonged time for a specially promised son, Abraham throws parenthood into doubt again in the scene of the *Akedath*.³⁰ For Sarah the irony bites deeper still into her characterisation. She finds her path to motherhood difficult, full of twists and turns. Use of Hagar seemed the way forward but only throws Sarah back against the infertility of her own body. As noted earlier, Sarah's fortunes as mother can be measured against the concept of laughter. Ironically, she attempts to smooth all difficulties from her son's path to inheritance by the ejection of the rival male offspring only for her husband to negate her efforts in his willingness to sacrifice her child. Hagar's role, meanwhile, is that of comic agony.³¹ She is an individual characterised by suffering in the face of death, her own and her son's, yet she lives on to see the deity face to face and to see her son married to a woman of her ethnos. Here a model of human identity is formed in relation to a woman's capacity to become a parent.

Characters in conflict

The main characters of the Abraham story are thus focalised by the ironic ups and downs of parenthood. Their key function is their contribution to the continued life of the community by the production of progeny. The need to continue the family line drives the plots concerning Abraham and Sarah; Sarah, Abraham and Hagar; Sarah and Hagar – as well as playing a part in the last stages of the story of Lot.³² The plot stresses the absence or presence of sons; characterisation depicts the status of parents of potential and actual children. Although this puts a particular gloss on the lives of Sarah and Hagar there is still room for complex characters to emerge within the story,

²⁹ See here Deborah Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible*, New York/London: Routledge, 2002, p.54, where she points out that Abraham is a 'victim' too, since he is childless through divine act. When Sarah conceives through divine intervention God usurps Abraham's male role.

³⁰ This is clearly a topic of major theological interest for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Jewish re-use of the suffering theme embedded in this story has been wide-ranging. For an examination of new lines of interpretation see Yael Feldman, "Isaac or Oedipus? Jewish Tradition and the Israeli Aqedah" in Cheryl Exum and Stephen Moore (eds.), *Biblical Studies, Cultural Studies*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, pp.159–189. In particular Feldman discusses the tension between heroic images of Isaac and that of Isaac as victim, in the context of Israel's wars in the Middle East in the 20th century.

³¹ Cf. Whedbee, *Comic Vision*, pp.82–4. He contrasts Hagar's concerns over Ishmael as a tragic event with the greater horror of Abraham's assault on Isaac.

³² At the end of the destruction of Sodom narrative there are no men to be husbands and Lot's line is threatened so his daughters seduce him into incest. This may be a smear on the genealogy of a people neighbouring on Israel, but it also serves a practical purpose in that what matters above all is the survival of the clan. This scene fits Berquist's definition of sexual excess.

as the two women react to their parent status and interact with each other in this area of life. Particular human identities appear as each woman seeks to establish herself as an individual and to find and take over, her own social niche, in competition with the other.³³ Models which can be discerned here are the otherness of being a parent, other mothers and the mother as other. In the rest of this paper each of these identities will be investigated in line with the contents of the text of Genesis 12–24.

To stress the theme of Otherness is to respond to the several manifestations of tension and hostility present in the story of Abraham. Abraham begins a new stage in life by abandoning his own culture and the sameness of existence.³⁴ He rejects the deities of his previous culture in order to follow one particular deity, a call which requires him to set off for an other destination. This pattern of choosing other paths continues with the agreement of Abraham and Sarah to produce a child by going outside their relationship, to the other woman, Hagar the Egyptian. Sarah's eventual pregnancy, meanwhile, is achieved in tension with her status as an old woman and sets fertility as the otherness balanced against old age.³⁵

While these occasions of difference operate within the household of Abraham the ultimate face of otherness is to be found in the contrast between life within the family and social status outside the kinship unit. Thus the other pole to the intimacy of Sarah and Abraham is provided by life in foreign courts, in the stories of Genesis 12 and 21. The reader is left asking whether the placing of the woman in another man's social group destroys the unity between that woman and her former husband.³⁶ The plot sequence answers those uncertainties by the restitution of Sarah to Abraham, an event accompanied by disruption in the foreign household (verse 17, 'great plagues'). In Hagar's

³³ Cf. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36. A Commentary*, translated John Scullion, London: SPCK, 1986, pp.238–9. He argues that what happens to Abraham, Sarah and Hagar not only draws all three into one relationship but also embraces their relationship with God. Sarah's demand is based on God's negative action to her; in patriarchal anthropology a woman has life only as a member of a family where she is fertile for her husband. Tribble and Russell, *Hagar*, p.39, discusses the manner in which Sarah and Hagar are caught in a patriarchal bind.

³⁴ See Hugh White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.112. He comments that Abraham is called to surrender his future to the Divine Word and is thus called into primary inter-subjective relation to that Word. This speech event marks the start of a new story in Genesis.

³⁵ Cf. page 3 above, where Sternberg's treatment of old age was noted. See also Good, *Irony*, 97. Here he argues that Abraham's story is a tightly structured whole, carrying its double theme of a promised heir and a promised land by the nuancing of promise with ironic actuality.

³⁶ See Berquist, *Corporeality*, p.67 where there is a discussion of the ideas of Mary Douglas, especially her commentary on the way in which household purity is linked to the idea of woman as a vessel filled with male fluid. This fluid should be that of male members of the household and not that of men from another household.

case, the other pole is that of the wilderness.³⁷ Here the new partner is not another man but death itself. Yet it is a male, a deity, who, in chapter 16, finds Hagar in her weak condition, nurtures her and restores her to the household of Abraham. The presentation of life inside the ancestral home and death or disruption outside it, offers the reader the chance to reflect on the importance of kin and household in maintaining individual identity. This is especially the case for women since, unlike Abraham in Genesis 14, they have no other stage on which to enact their lives but that of the private domestic community.

This emphasis on the social life of family has been noted by Jon Berquist in *Controlling Corporeality*.³⁸ Starting from the link between the whole nation of Israel and one founding family, Berquist argues that sexual procreation is a highly significant aspect of human identity.³⁹ Sexuality is to be used as a means for expressing the needs of the whole social body⁴⁰ within a culture where households are self-sufficient economic units, producing the bodily labour needed for the continuity of domestic groups, via the dominant male's access to women.⁴¹ The role of sexuality is to bind the social group together, thus profiling the roles of father and mother as of high social status. But sex has an excessive quality and its presence is a story produces ambiguity and acts which transgress social borders.⁴² In Genesis 12–24 sexual emphases are found in the elevation of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah, the grand patriarch/matriarch of the clan. They are, however, found also in Sarah's struggle to achieve motherhood by the means of surrogacy, blurring the border between her identity and that of the other woman.

³⁷ Cf. Nina Rulon-Miller, "Hagar. A Woman with an Attitude" in Philip Davies and David Clines (eds.), *The World of Genesis. Persons, Places and Perspectives*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, p.75. Here she points out that Hagar has experience of seven typical bible-scenes as defined by Robert Alter – annunciation/encounter at a well/epiphany in a field/initiatory trial/ danger in the desert/ testimony of 'dying' hero. Hagar's versions of these types are all related in the narrative to her flight/expulsion to the wilderness.

³⁸ See note 8 for bibliographical details. Berquist offers a complete study of sociological issues with regard to images and perspectives on embodiment which are present in the OT. See also Mark Brett, *Genesis. Procreation and the Politics of Identity*, New York/London: Routledge, 2000. This volume addresses the setting of Genesis 12–24 with regard to its exclusivist and inclusivist tendencies, as a message for a community living within the Achmaenid Empire of the 5th century BCE.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.53

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.57

⁴¹ *Ibid*, pp.64–5

⁴² *Ibid*, p.78

The otherness of parenthood

In the ancient world as today, the capacity for parenthood is rooted in basic human existence, while at the same time it is often conflictual and the cause of much social pain. In infertile partnerships human beings seek outside help to produce a child of that relationship, but, even so, parenthood can remain an other state, incapable of being achieved. Human beings must then form their personal worth while being incapable of bodily procreation. The story of Sarah's motherhood reflects this kind of problem. How can Sarah be fully human without a social niche of her own such as having a son would provide? So powerful is this social drive that Sarah is prepared to give up on her own body and turn to that of a surrogate womb. But her strategy backfires. Far from building Sarah up, Hagar's pregnancy serves only to underline Sarah's lack of social worth and dignity.⁴³ Yet Sarah does eventually come to see herself as fully woman and fully human, once her son is conceived. In her new status she can demand of the male in charge of the household that he protect her rights and that of her child in the face of social rivals, in chapter 21.

There is here a kind of liberation at work. Sarah is liberated from silence to a person with socially acceptable voice. Donna Fewell and David Gunn suggest that Sarah moves to a voice of her own as she seeks to ensure her own well-being, in her offer to Abraham of access to her servant.⁴⁴ Sarah uses Hagar not so much for Abraham's benefit as for her own social advancement, through the production of sons.⁴⁵ But this attempt at an independent voice fails, for the child to be born is very much Hagar's property.⁴⁶ Sarah only reaches the voice of an independent parent in her laughter at the birth of Isaac, several scenes later. And even then Sarah's liberation from lower social status owes much to empowerment by divine assistance, for it is God who insists in chapter 17 that it is Sarah's child who will be Abraham's heir.⁴⁷ In Genesis 18 Sarah finds a different form of liberation. Listening to the two male voices discussing the birth of her son she laughs to herself at such fantasies. It is now far too late for her to achieve that valued status she had sought some time before and she has let go of any

⁴³ The biblical phrase here is 'building up', which offers a wordplay on the two terms, 'son' and 'build' which have a similar shape. The stress is on the advantage of surrogacy for Sarah herself, rather than for a son for his own sake. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror*, London: SCM Press, 2002, p.7, stresses the fact that Hagar is a silent instrument. Robert Alter, *Genesis*, New York: Norton Publishing, 1996, p.67, reflects on the verbal message of the play on son and build.

⁴⁴ Donna Fewell and David Gunn, *Gender, Power and Promise. The Subjects of the Bible's First Story*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993, p.45

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.45

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.46

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.47

expectations of that kind. God's address to the silent listener returns Sarah to the bonds of social constraint, refuting her freedom to laugh at what might-have-been.⁴⁸ But the ultimate liberation is now just around the corner. Nothing can surpass Sarah's completion of herself as a woman of the household by fulfilling the desired condition of female fertility. Judith McKinley describes this ultimate reality as that of a "bodied story" of "the joy of a child born of sexual pleasure – albeit of a miraculous old age".⁴⁹

The completion of Abraham's story, however, challenges that pleasure. In Genesis 22 Isaac faces death and there is no mother's voice to intercede for him. In *Abraham! Abraham!* Jerome Gellmann notes how several midrashic passages attribute Sarah's death to her pain at the idea of her son's sacrifice.⁵⁰ Phyllis Tribble regards the record of Sarah's death as the sacrifice of a woman character to male power plays within the narrative.⁵¹ Once Isaac is growing up the story has no more need of a mother and Sarah is written out. "She dies alone and then Abraham went to her."⁵² Gellmann however, points out that in Jewish tradition Sarah's three cries at hearing of her son's binding are represented by the three *shofarim* at Rosh Hashannah.⁵³ Sarah's role is independent of that of Abraham since her path is spirit-based and in the sounding of the ram's horn the "children of Sarah turn to God pleading that he rescind his demands for sacrifice that have accompanied Jewish history".⁵⁴

The other mother

The pathos attendant on Sarah's motherhood takes on a new dimension when faced by that of the competition between Sarah and the

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp.48–9

⁴⁹ McKinley, *Reframing*, pp.126–7

⁵⁰ Jerome Gellman, *Abraham! Abraham! Kierkegaard and the Hasidim on the Binding of Isaac*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003, p.94. Gellman makes a study of the possible interconnections between the commentary of moral philosophy and that of theology with regard to this story of father and son.

⁵¹ Phyllis Tribble, "The Sacrifice of Sarah" in Alice Bach (ed.), *Women in the Hebrew Bible. A Reader*, New York/London: Routledge, 1999, p.286. Whereas Isaac lives on in the narrative, Sarah is now written out.

⁵² *Ibid*, pp.28–7, where Tribble argues that midrashim on Isaac allow him to be a willing victim but Sarah is given no chance to rectify her last acrimonious attack on Ishmael and dies without opportunity for atonement. Her death at a distance from the main story events underlines this sense of separation.

⁵³ Gellman, *Abraham*, p.97. Gellman points out that Jewish rabbinic commentary kept a place for both Abraham and Sarah, who have parallel roles: Abraham as Law and Sarah as Spirit.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.103

other mother, Hagar.⁵⁵ The addition of Hagar's story widens the scope of parenthood from a potentially 'cosy' scenario of one father plus one mother equals one son. For Sarah mother hood is to be struggled for, whereas for Hagar it comes naturally and easily. But Hagar's ease in mothering results not in freedom but oppression. The start of parenthood already involves a silencing of Hagar's own social voice. She is simply handed over without apparent consultation and Sarah's claim on her womb robs Hagar of her own individual identity. Conception, however, restores that voice to Hagar since she 'looks down' on her mistress who remains physically barren.⁵⁶ For Sarah, Hagar now becomes the truly other – the rival who must be removed. McKinley argues that Hagar is the silenced servant whose relegation to oppression carries the projection of Sarah's lowered self-esteem onto this other woman.⁵⁷ Rulon-Miller describes Hagar as "homeless woman, abused woman and surrogate mother",⁵⁸ while Phyllis Trible goes further in *Texts of Terror*, defining Hagar as "one of the first females in Scripture to experience use/abuse/rejection in a story narrated from the oppressor's perspective".⁵⁹

Hagar's subjection to the woman who desires to write her out socially is compounded by her ethnic origins.⁶⁰ She is an Egyptian and thus a foreigner: one whose rights do not have to be respected as she is 'not one of us'. Rulon-Miller reflects that symbolically Hagar represents a foreign land which is at the same time a "lost Eden", for Egypt is a place of great allure in the Hebrew Bible.⁶¹ Hagar's influence on Abraham drags him away from the pure line of Israelite descent and threatens his true allegiance to Israel's deity. Her ease of fertility can thus be viewed as itself a matter for suspicion and her dignity as parent deconstructed by the presence of social threat. Yet the promise of descendants is given also to Hagar. What is more she is placed on a par with Moses since she meets God in the

⁵⁵ Cf. McKinley, *Reframing*, p.130, notes how the narrator sets Sarah and Hagar in binary opposition to each other. See here Trible and Russell (eds.) *Hagar*, p.59, p.116.

⁵⁶ 'look' is what the text actually says. Cf. Westermann, *Genesis*, p.240. Hagar's attitude underlines the importance of the theme of motherhood for social status and identity, since it reverses the legal hierarchy of mistress and servant.

⁵⁷ McKinley, *Reframing*, p.122

⁵⁸ Rulon-Miller, *Hagar*, p.60

⁵⁹ Trible, *Terror*, p.5

⁶⁰ McKinley, *Reframing*, p.120, picks up on the theme of slavery and ethnic origin. Gender studies show how women carry in their bodies the collective honour of a nation. See here Trible and Russell (eds.) *Hagar*, p.44, pp.118–9, where the issue of slavery is discussed: also p.120 with regard to the application of the women's hostility to current Israeli-Palestinian relations.

⁶¹ Rulon-Miller, *Hagar*, pp.62–3. Egypt is the place of slavery for Israel but also a refuge. This can be seen from the story of Jacob/ Joseph and in later prophetic references in the book of Jeremiah, where chapter 43 discusses the possible aid to be found for Judah against Mesopotamian powers.

wilderness.⁶² This oppressed woman has a motherhood which is acceptable to God. As mother-to-be she sustains a direct encounter with God and still lives. What is more, through her motherhood she is worthy to 'name' God.⁶³

This twofold characterisation of Hagar as unworthy slave and dignified matriarch offers a nuanced view of parenthood as at the same time natural yet resulting in a social rejection of the parent-to-be. Despite her condemnation within the domestic community, on her own in the wilderness, this woman is dignified by her pregnant state and has her identity restored as matriarch of a future nation. The suppression of her right to live as mother in the domestic context brings about, paradoxically, freedom and dignity.⁶⁴ Hagar chooses to escape, even at the cost of her life, but, by doing so, wins fulfilment in the embodied state of parenthood.

Trible suggests that Hagar becomes a 'wise woman', a theologian of divine and human encounter.⁶⁵ And this can be said about a woman who chooses her independent identity at the cost of living always on the edge between life and death. For Trible, Hagar offers a model of resistant resilience to those other women at the social edge: "the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the divorced mother with child, homeless, indigent, relying on hand outs from the power structure, the welfare woman".⁶⁶ Is Hagar victim or villain?⁶⁷ Does she bring on herself what she deserves by her arrogance and independent stance? Or is her self-sufficiency all that this woman can rely on since she has no natural allies in society? If Hagar is viewed as a single character standing for a whole community can her embattled stance be taken as the reaction of a victimised ethnic group and can her profile be used to explore inter-community controversy and the alienation of the other in global conflicts?⁶⁸

⁶² Rulon-Miller, *Hagar*, p.76

⁶³ Trible, *Terror*, p.13. Hagar calls the Name, which is a power not given to anyone else in the OT. Trible and Russell (eds.) *Hagar*, p.40, deals with the issue of the kindly nurture which the wilderness provides for Hagar.

⁶⁴ Trible, *Terror*, p.9, p.16. Trible points out that Hagar flees from Sarah just as Israel will flee from Egypt. Sarah harasses her slave woman just as the Pharaoh will do to the Hebrews, so Hagar prefigures Israel while Sarah prefigures Egypt, here. See also, Trible and Russell (eds.) *Hagar*, p.47.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p.13

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.23

⁶⁷ This is a reference to the twin approaches to Hagar, as noted by John Thompson. For bibliographical detail of his paper see note 7 above.

⁶⁸ It is worth noting here how the same story can be appropriated by different groups. If Isaac is the victim and heir in Jewish and Christian interpretation, this role is taken by Ishmael in Islam. Rather than this drawing religious groups together it can underscore their rivalry. Kuschel, *Abraham*, chapter 6, wants to use the Abraham story to unite rather than to divide, religions and societies. For a Muslim woman's reading of the story see Trible and Russell (eds.) *Hagar*, chapter 6.

Motherhood as other

But Sarah, too, can occupy that same space of aloneness and vulnerability, since one form of alienation and suspicion is nearer to home, and found in male/female relationships.⁶⁹ The female as pair to the male is at once the sign of desire for unity and the fear of absorption by the other.⁷⁰ Turning the mother into a model of otherness can be found particularly in the scenes of Abraham and Sarah in foreign places. When entering Egypt Abraham tells Sarah that her beauty will put him in danger.⁷¹ Sarah's sexuality will make her an object of other men's notice, he thinks. Thus an asset, a beautiful wife, turns into the greatest threat to male survival. As the woman is set aside so also her capacity for mothering Abraham's progeny is set at a distance. She becomes truly other, inculturated in a foreign society, a member of an other man's harem. But trouble ensues for this other household and Pharaoh realises that this woman is in fact the property of an other male.⁷² Sarah is returned as the source of dire threat. Each male in his turn has to deal both with desire for the beautiful partner and with the danger this brings. The wife/mother is continually placed into the category of a potentially life-threatening opponent. In this edgy tale Abraham turns his 'own' woman into the totally other of an alien social world, while Pharaoh discovers that reality is other than it appears at first sight.⁷³

But why did Abraham give Sarah away? One answer relates to the role of mother. Fewell and Gunn note that Sarah appears to be barren and so is of no great value inside Abraham's household.⁷⁴ She is written out, and for Hugh White this silence is evidence of her

⁶⁹ This is to pick up Bal's use of Freudian theory in her study, *Lethal Love*, where she suggests that patriarchal misogyny is linked with Freudian views on fear/desire. Biblical narratives which deal with the female body and its capacity for motherhood scare readers by publicly dealing with sexual issues. In this setting motherhood explores human identity under the sign of difference. See also McKinley, *Reframing*, pp.9–10: male fears are projected onto Sarah.

⁷⁰ Cf. Bal, *Lethal Love*, p.33 – woman is to be feared, as noted by Fokkelman on the subject of David and the death of Uriah. The concepts of death, woman, wall, battle, shame and folly are interwoven in that particular narrative.

⁷¹ McKinley, *Reframing*, p.10. She discusses Abraham's fantasy concerning other men having sex with his wife, which adds to the view that woman is now discovered to be a serious risk. Also Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, p.42. Sarah's beauty is her guilt. She will cause her husband harm by this quality.

⁷² Cf. *Ibid*, p.42. Abraham has base fears but the foreigners are in fact 'men of honour' so the illusory nature of the threat is revealed. Could the foreigners be more honourable human beings than the local hero? See also McKinley, *Reframing*, p.9. If Sarah is a focus she is also a pawn.

⁷³ McKinley, *Reframing*, p.11. This scene can be read as a prototype of Israel in Egypt. Sarah as mother of Israel had experienced all that her 'sons' would later suffer in the way of exploitation.

⁷⁴ Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, p.43

powerlessness in the “face of this strange strategy of her husband”.⁷⁵ McKinley also comments on the exploitative abuse of Sarah in this scene.⁷⁶ These approaches identify the mother-in-waiting as a worthless pawn and as a piece of property. In contrast, White notes that Gunkel thought Abraham’s lie to be a clever device to save everyone and that Sarah collaborated with the plan,⁷⁷ while Westermann states that silence is consent.⁷⁸ In this last reading, the ‘ancestress in danger’ theme could be seen as a comic plot which ends with the rescue of the endangered mother by divine intervention.⁷⁹

Fewell and Gunn suggest that Sarah the mother-to-be has her dignity here, in that her consent to such an arrangement would have emerged from her sense of responsibility for the father/husband’s safety.⁸⁰ But even so Sarah has a very small part in the story, a fact which highlights the fragility of motherhood as productive of human identity. Handed to and fro between the two men, Sarah’s capacity for independent action is limited and the plot focuses on the advantages to the father of these deals.⁸¹ Putting the mother in danger, was that a positive gamble or a throw away gesture of an unwanted asset? The fact that Abraham does this again in Genesis 21 when Sarah is pregnant emphasises the mother’s ambivalent status in the household economy. As Fewell and Gunn remark, “despite God’s pointed restoration of Sarah, Abraham seems to have learned nothing of her value”.⁸²

Models of human identity

It has been shown above that Abraham and Sarah are caught up in an ongoing domestic tension. As players of the mother/father roles

⁷⁵ White, *Narration*, p.185

⁷⁶ McKinley, *Reframing*, pp.9–10

⁷⁷ White, *Narrative*, p.174

⁷⁸ Westermann, *Genesis*, p.163

⁷⁹ It has been pointed out that the two stories in which Abraham gives his wife away can be viewed as examples of a generic folk tale motif: the ‘ancestress in danger’. This theme heightens attention on the part of readers who are exploring their ancestral roots. For a discussion of this motif see, for instance, David Clines, “The Ancestor in Danger: But not the Same Danger” in *What Does Eve Do to Help? And Other Readerly Questions in the OT*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991. See also references to this motif as part of the wider OT deception theme in Michael Williams, *Deception in Genesis. An Investigation into the Morality of a Unique Biblical Phenomenon*, New York: Peter Lang, 2001.

⁸⁰ Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, p.43. The comment is also made that Sarah has the silence of a survivor and thus God recognises her need.

⁸¹ White, *Narration*, p.185 notes that Sarah is used for the purposes of the men in the story and is not permitted to come to speech in this scene. She plays the part of an innocent victim.

⁸² Fewell and Gunn, *Gender*, p.44

of household leaders they cannot escape each other's desires and the consequences of each other's actions. Sarah cannot escape her husband's wishes with regard to Egypt and Gerar. Abraham cannot escape his wife's desires with regard to Hagar and Ishmael. Their joint parental role both pulls them together and sets them apart. And this is an 'eternal triangle' for there are three human beings caught up here, as two mothers and one father battle for status, for progeny and for survival, physical and social. At different points in the narrative each of the three persons is portrayed as hostile to the others. It is within this context of unity and discord that models of human identity have to be sought.

One source of exegesis can be found in Paul Ricoeur's volume *Oneself as Another*.⁸³ Ricoeur notes approvingly MacIntyre's theory of the narrative unity of a life and stresses how identity emerges from "the unity of a life considered as a temporal totality".⁸⁴ This unitive model is "threatened by the disruptive effect of the unforeseeable events that punctuate it".⁸⁵ In this model the key to meaning is the way in which individuals develop a rounded understanding of their subjectivity by reflecting on the unitive and disruptive challenges to identity which life brings, regarding the self as an other whose profile can be both respected and challenged.⁸⁶ Looking at the two women in Genesis 12–24 it is possible to comment on the relations between Sarah and Hagar as one example of subjectivity at work.

Sarah intends to cement her role in the family by drawing in Hagar but then has to deal with the disruptive effects this move has on her own status. Her response in chapters 16 and 21 is to recreate a more unitive pattern to her social life by driving out the rival matriarch from the domestic community. In this manner Sarah claws back for herself a respect based on her prior claim to intimacy with the patriarchal leader. Hagar's profile starts with the disruption caused by being handed over to Abraham but this soon becomes unitive for her since she proves to be fertile and her sense of self-worth increases. But this increase proves to be a source of disruption since it triggers her mistress's disapproval. Disruption in turn promotes the greatest sense

⁸³ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, translated Kathleen Blamey, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. This work addresses issues of moral identity and links this with Ricoeur's interests in narrative form and its suitability as a tool for discussion of wider philosophical and religious matters.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.158–9

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.147. Also John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension. Religion, Philosophy and Human Value*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.84. He argues that emotional states such as anger and pity can have a vital role in directing our attention to life experience and shaping how we view things.

⁸⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, p.194. Also Cottingham, *Spiritual Dimension*, p.42. He argues that the phrase 'they will be done' does not represent basement before an alien will but the expression of objective moral realities to which we must conform to prosper. See also Tribble and Russell, *Hagar*, p.185, for a treatment of conflict issues in the narrative.

of subjective independence, imaged in her flight to the wilderness.⁸⁷ Overall, it is Sarah whose character develops most through a unitive dynamic of respect for her own needs, since the narrative ultimately endorses her role as mother within Abraham's domestic community and Hagar whose character centres most on the impact of disruptive challenges to her status quo, since she ultimately finds her niche as a mother outside Abraham's household.

A second tool for commentary comes from the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. Here the 'face of the other' is promoted as a means of nuancing the self-interest at the heart of subjectivity towards a greater objectivity, while retaining a focus on personhood.⁸⁸ Parenthood can be viewed as a major example of this balance at work, for parenting produces in the child an other that goes out from, yet stays in relationship to, the parent.⁸⁹ Parents both have the duty to protect the interests of their offspring as though in extension of the parental self and also the duty to respect the individuality of the child as s/he grows to adulthood. Moreover, respect for the child is situated within the encompassing compassion and support which parents offer to one another within the family economy. Since the narrative of Genesis 12–24 centres on the theme of parents and children, it is possible to use Levinas's thought to explore ethical models of relationship within the narrative.

The results of such an investigation bring to light both ethical and non-ethical behaviour patterns in the several short stories within the whole narrative. If the Levinasian model is applied to the scene of Abram and Sarai in Egypt, for example, it is possible to argue that the relationship between the potential parents does not really produce this kind of nuanced respect – a reality which lies at the heart of the flawed nature of the choices made.⁹⁰ Abram and Sarai begin in such an intimate state that the wife/ mother has lost her position as a genuine dialogue partner, while at the same time being treated as a hostile other. The result of her movement into Pharaoh's court balances the

⁸⁷ On the place of subjective reflection on what constitutes suitable action see Cottingham, *Spiritual Dimension*, p.43. Here he states that in making decisions we have to live in a world which 'I' did not create and which contains other free beings who are entitled to respect.

⁸⁸ See here the essays on Levinas in Tamara Eskenazi, Gary Phillips and David Jobling (eds.), *Levinas and Biblical Studies*, Atlanta: Scholars/ SBL, 2003. In her introduction (p.15) Eskenazi discusses the way in which Levinas' method emerges from his use of Hebrew Bible language for 'in face of' – that is, before the person of another.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.9

⁹⁰ Cf. Cottingham, *Spiritual Dimension*, p.164. Moral maturity cannot be achieved as a 'private event' but only through systematic accommodation between a person's own development and that of others whose lives are intertwined with the individual profile. See also the conclusions of Tribble and Russell (eds.) *Hagar*, pp.187–192, where three moral topics regarding inter-relationship are identified: motherhood constrained by patriarchy, promise constrained by competition, hospitality constrained by difference.

'excessive' identification of wife/husband at the beginning of the story with an overly-distant separation of father/mother. Sarah is now cut off from her potential as respondent to Abraham's need for a son and becomes fully a distant other, as Abraham had wished.⁹¹

In Genesis 21, by contrast, a more appropriate model of the relation of self and other can be found in the link between parent and child. Both parents show deep concern for the rights of the two sons in the family. Sarah is concerned with the rights of Isaac as his father's true heir, while Abraham worries about the dangers to Ishmael. The picture is not simple, however, for in Genesis 22 Abraham chooses between the primacy of two significant others, his son and his God. The binding of Isaac may fulfil his obligation as servant/son⁹² to a divine patriarch but it does not immediately promote the subjective interests of Isaac.⁹³ Respect for the others within the household, then, is not a straightforward and smooth process in Genesis 12–24. It remains for the deity to listen to all three adults and their children and to produce actions which support the subjective rights of survival of mothers and father and of sons.

It has been argued in this paper that useful models of human identity can be found in the topic of parenthood and this has been supported by the scrutiny of the characters of mothers and father as presented within the domestic comedy of Genesis 12–24.⁹⁴ The study of the narrative has indicated the inevitability of complex social relationships within family and kin relations and the ways in which

⁹¹ Cf. Ricoeur, *Oneself*, p.320. An agent is one who exerts power over another by treating them as the mere object of the agent's activity. This occurs because of disesteem of the self on the part of the agent and a hatred of the other. The suffering involved in this power relationship exceeds that of physical pain and is experienced as a loss of will to exist. Mostly, such sufferings are inflicted on human beings by human beings.

⁹² The Hebrew word '*ebed*' allows for a play on the terms servant and son since it can mean both of these relations – a possibility not found in English. Abraham is God's son insofar as he is loyal to divine service and thus made the founder of a chosen people which in Exodus becomes God's family.

⁹³ See the study by Carol Delaney, *Abraham on Trial. The Social Legacy of a Biblical Myth*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998. This work explores the issue of child sacrifice as a strand in European culture. Delaney argues that this owes a great deal to the OT material in Genesis 22 and the impact of this in Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Humanist perspectives. She ends by noting that such a myth can endorse the act of war and its slaughter of children, in which the voice of the mother is absent, except for weeping. See also Susan Shapiro, "'And God Created Woman' Reading the Bible Otherwise" in Eskenazi et al (eds.), *Levinas*, pp.159–195, 162, where she emphasises the way in which selfhood does not reside in becoming more of the 'same'; rather a person becomes ethical by responding to the needs of the Other before considering personal desire for survival. In Genesis 22 the challenge to Abraham can be seen in this way since Isaac is his father's hope for survival through his descendants.

⁹⁴ Cf. Cottingham, *Spiritual Dimension*, pp.171–2. He reflects on the link between inner and outer lives and the confrontation with the mystery of existence. We are called to join with others in exploring that mystery and so to be integrated into living structures that can sustain our lives.

these relationships both create and disrupt the self-understanding of individuals of their human identity and social worth. In particular the story encourages the reader to explore the ways in which a tension between freedom and constraint operates as a major force in the shaping of a human being to fill his/her social role within the domestic community. Mothers find that they are not free to engage in the role of parent without their profile impacting on other women within the kinship unit, while at the same time being enabled to reach their full social status as women because of their fertility. Although the father has the function of leadership he is required to take into account the views of major female players within the domestic drama, even when this threatens his freedom to protect and nurture his offspring by another woman. Sons are a precious commodity but their voices are subordinated to the progress of events in an adult world, even if this leaves them wailing from thirst or bound in silence under the father's knife. Ultimately the only character to emerge as capable of free independent activity in these scenes is the deity whose concerns ultimately uphold the right to life and dignity of both the mother and her child.

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