Sarah and Hagar

Jewish Portrayals

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[-] Abstract and Keywords

The story of Abraham’s two women and their sons is the basis for Israel’s self-understanding as God’s covenant people in the lineage from Isaac. Strife and competition between Sarah and Hagar, leading to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael to the wilderness, drew the attention of rabbinic exeges, storytellers, and of mosaic artists in the Galilean city of Sepphoris. How were the attitudes and behaviors of the two women and their sons to be assessed? Voices in Genesis Rabbah debate causes of the infertility of Sarah and the easy pregnancy of Hagar, the character and attributes of both women, and also what kind of “play” by Ishmael caused Sarah to force Abraham to send the boy and his mother away. The chapter concludes with consideration of the damaged mosaic floor of the Sepphoris synagogue and the relation of its images to both Jewish and...
Christian iconography of the era.

*Keywords:* heir, harsh treatment, wilderness, *Genesis Rabbah*, Sephoris synagogue

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**Figure 4.1** Abraham casting out Hagar and Ishmael. Rembrandt van Rijn, 1637. Etching: 15.7 cm × 13.3 cm.


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(p.121)

In a drawing made after the mid-1630s Rembrandt focused on the figure of Hagar when she was sent by Abraham into the desert. The theme of the two rival women was a widely depicted subject... Yet only Rembrandt’s etching *The Expulsion of Hagar* really shows the contrast between the triumphant Sarah, gleefully peeping through the doorway with a satisfied smile on her face, and the desolate figure of the weeping Hagar.

Anat Gilboa, *Images of the Feminine in Rembrandt’s Work*¹

Commanded by God to leave his native land and travel to the land of Canaan, Abram (to be renamed Abraham), obeyed, and once at his destination the Lord appeared to him and declared “I will assign this land to your offspring” (*Genesis* 12:7). Some time later, when Abram was told by God that “[his] reward would be very great,” he responded, “O Lord God, what can you give to me, seeing that I am childless, and the one in charge
of my household is Dammesek Eliezer?” God reassured Abram that Eliezer, his steward, would not be his heir. None would be but “your very own issue” (15:1–4).

15:5 He took him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And he added, “So shall your offspring be.”

6 And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit.

The declaration in Psalm 11:5 that “the Lord tests the righteous” often evokes the memory of God’s command that Abraham offer his son as a burnt sacrifice, but the verse could stand over the entire biblical history of the patriarch. It certainly applies to the narrative telling of the birth of two sons to Abraham, first by Sarah’s maidservant, Hagar, and then by Sarah herself. The drama involving his two women and their sons is one of conflict, upon which hinges the character of God’s different relationships with Abraham’s offspring.

In this chapter, after reviewing the Hebrew Bible’s presentation of the events, we turn to Jewish interpretations of the story by rabbis and by artists. The community’s scripture interpreters will be observed working to ensure that this sacred story presents the origins of Israel’s covenant relationship with God in the most powerful words and images possible. We shall also become aware of their awareness of a counterinterpretation by Christians.

Sarah and Hagar in Genesis

16:1 Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. 2 And Sarai said to Abram, “Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid, perhaps I shall have a son through her.” And Abram heeded Sarai’s request. 3 So Sarai, Abram’s wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian—after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years—and gave her to her husband Abram as concubine. 4 He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem. 5 And Sarai said to Abram, “The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The Lord decide between you and me!”

6 Abram said to Sarai, “Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.” Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her.

7 An angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur, 8 and said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” And she said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai.”

9 And the angel of the Lord said to her, “Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment.” 10 And the angel of the Lord said to her,
“I will greatly increase your offspring,  
And they shall be too many to count.”

11 The angel of the Lord said to her further,

“Behold, you are with child  
And shall bear a son;  
You shall call him Ishmael,  
For the Lord has paid heed to your suffering.  
12 He shall be a wild ass of a man;  
His hand against everyone,  
And everyone’s hand against him;  
He shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen.”

13 And she called the Lord who spoke to her, “You are El-Roi,”  
by which she meant, “Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!”

14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it is between Kadesh and Bered.—  
15 Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave the son that Hagar bore him the name Ishmael. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. (p.123)

17:1 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am El Shaddai. Walk in My ways and be blameless. 2 I will establish my covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous.” 3 Abraham threw himself on his face; and God spoke to him further, 4 “As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. 5 And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations.

6 I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you. 7 I will maintain my covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and your offspring to come. 8 I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding. I will be their God.” . . . 15 And God said to Abraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. 16 I will bless her; indeed I will give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she shall give rise to nations; rulers of peoples shall issue from her.” 17 Abraham threw himself on his face and laughed, as he said to himself, “Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?” 18 And Abraham said to God, “O that Ishmael may live by Your favor!” 19 God said, “Nevertheless, Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac; and I will maintain my conveanent with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come. 20 As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father
of twelve chieftans, and I will make of him a great nation.

21 But my covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.” 22 And when He was done speaking with him, God was gone from Abraham.

18:9 They [the three men who visited Abraham in Mamre] said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he replied, “There, in the tent.” 10 Then one said, “I will return to you next year, and your wife Sarah shall have a son!” Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent, which was behind him. 11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having the periods of women. 12 And Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment—with my husband so old?”

13 Then the Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?’ 14 Is anything too wondrous for the Lord? I shall return to you at the time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” 15 Sarah lied, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was frightened. But He replied, “You did laugh.”

21.1 The Lord took note of Sarah as He had promised, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. 2 Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken. 3 Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had borne him, the name of Isaac. 4 And when his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God had commanded him.

5 Now Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

6 Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” 7 And she added,

“Who would have said to Abraham
That Sarah would suckle children!
Yet I have borne a son in his old age.”

8 The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

9 Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. 10 She said to Abraham, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” 11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. 12 But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. 13 As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed.”

14 Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave
them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. 15 When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, 16 and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, “Let me not look on as the child dies.” And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.

17 God heard the cry of the boy, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is.

18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” 19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink. 20 God was with the boy and he grew up; he dwelt in the wilderness and became a bowman. 21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Questions that arise for us as we read these passages—especially those concentrated on the chief characters’ motivations and actions—were under discussion among Jews from the time of the Torah’s creation and circulation. Readers of the Hebrew understood easily the etymological sense of the names given: the connection of Isaac with laughter; of Ishmael with heeding or hearing of the change from Abram to Abraham, with its connotation of his paternity of many; the suggestion of seeing and being seen in Hagar’s naming of the Lord as El Roi (with its implication: I see you, and I am still alive) and El Shaddai, taken to mean “God Almighty.” More complex questions concerning the story, however, demanded deeper exploration.

Omitted from the passages above are two parts of the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar that are worth pausing over. Twice while traveling in the lands of powerful rulers, Abraham fears death because of Sarah’s beauty—that he will be killed by those who are attracted to Sarah, and wish to obtain her for themselves. Abraham urges her to lie about her identity, calling herself his sister. In Genesis 12:10–20, the regent desirous of Sarah was Egypt’s Pharaoh, whose taking of her into the palace benefited Abraham (he gained many animals), but brought plagues upon the Pharaoh and his household “on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram” (12:17). Once scolded, Abraham was sent away, with Sarah and “all that he possessed.” Though it is not mentioned, are readers to suppose that it was at this time that Sarah came into possession of Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant?

What occurs when Abraham and Sarah sojourn in Gerar (Genesis 20) is a near replay of what Abraham’s lie earlier caused to happen. King Abimelech learns of Sarah’s presence in his realm, and acquires her. In a dream visitation, God corrects Abimelech’s misunderstanding of who Sarah is, warning the king that she is not his to possess and enjoy. Sarah’s husband, God informs the king, is a prophet of such power that he can make successful intercession for him. Further, Abimelech will die, with all his household, unless he restores Sarah to Abraham. When Abimelech berates Abraham for his deception concerning Sarah, Abraham has a two-part rejoinder, or rationalization:
I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father’s daughter, though not my mother’s; and she became my wife (20:11–12).

The king’s prompt peace-making entails the gift of cattle and slaves to Abraham, followed by the restoration of Sarah to her husband. An additional gift or payment is made: a thousand pieces of silver paid to Abraham—a gesture Abimelech construes and describes to Sarah as an exoneration and public vindication of her.

(p.126) In the final two verses (17–18) we learn how dangerous the situation had become for the royal house of Gerar:

Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children; for the Lord had closed fast every womb of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, the wife of Abraham.2

Since this latter episode falls in Abraham’s story just prior to the notice of Sarah’s pregnancy, later interpreters, the rabbis in particular, were prompted to discuss what might have transpired between Abimelech and Abraham’s “sister” while she was in the king’s company. The event impinged, as we shall see, upon important questions not only of morality, but also of genetics—that is, matters of paternity and motherhood.

Driving the Abraham narrative is the insistent claim that God’s covenant with Abraham and “his offspring” is with and through Isaac. The Lord’s blessing of Ishmael and those whom he will father is of a different order. Nonetheless, chapter 17’s concluding verses report Abraham’s covenant-prescribed circumcision of thirteen-year-old Ishmael, as well as his own circumcision and that of the other males (home-born and purchased slaves) of his household. Ishmael, on account of his circumcision, and despite the distinction God makes in vv. 19–20, would seem to be included in the covenant, a participant in its obligations and benefits, but this does not prove to be so.

Genesis 21:1–21 is, for the Bible, the climax of the story of Sarah and Hagar and their rivalry. Strong emotions—heights and depths of the characters’ lives—are on display. Verses 1–8 celebrate the Lord’s fulfillment of the promise concerning Sarah. A great feast marks Isaac’s weaning, the end of his infancy.

The drama that follows in vv. 9–21 grows out of Sarah’s fearful or hostile attitude toward Hagar and her son. The two-mother, two-son household has come to a crisis. Sarah is reported to have seen Hagar’s son playing (the text discloses neither the manner of Ishmael’s play, nor whether his half-brother Isaac might have been involved, as many later interpreters will presume), and apparently what she sees stirs her to a strong action. Abraham, on her orders, sends Hagar and her son away the next day, supplying them with bread and water.

Wandering in the wilderness near Beer-sheba, their provisions run out and Hagar foresees their doom. An angel approaches Hagar and directs her actions; God then opens
Hagar’s eyes to the sight of water, and she and her son are saved.

(p.127) From this point on, Ishmael and Hagar are virtually absent as actors in the Abraham saga. Interestingly, Ishmael surfaces once more in the story, joining his half-brother in burying their father (near Sarah) in the cave of Macpelah (25:9). The list of Ishmael’s twelve sons and their region of settlement is preceded by a reference to his mother, “Hagar the Egyptian,” at 25:12. That chapter begins with mention of another of Abraham’s wives, Keturah, whose six sons are named, as are the descendants of the first two of these, Jokshan and Midian (vv. 1–4). The lesser importance for Abrahamic history of these sons and of others whom he “begat” by concubines is clearly indicated: “Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac” (v. 5). His other male offspring were given gifts by Abraham and sent “away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East” (v. 6). Ishmael’s status is at once similar and different. He too was distanced from Isaac, yet he received from God the blessing of numerous offspring, and of nationhood (16:20, 21:13, 18).

It is necessary at this point to visit the narrative following the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael and their trial in the wilderness. Genesis 21:14–21 resumes the main story of Abraham’s dealings with God and his “favored” offspring in telling of the akedah—the binding of Isaac. This test of Abraham—taking Isaac, whom he loves, to Moriah to offer him as a sacrifice to God—ends in the boy’s (and the father’s) deliverance from this obligation, and a restatement and elaboration of God’s covenant promise:

22:15 The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, 16 and said, “By myself I swear, the Lord declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, 17 I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. 18 All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed my command.”

Jon Levenson, in his The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son, eloquently spelled out the significance of this divine pledge, in its now revised form:

It converts the standing promise of Abraham of innumerable progeny into a consequence of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. . . . This is a transformation of enormous import. It renders the very existence of Abrahamic peoples dependent (p.128) upon their ancestor’s obedience to the fearsome directive to make of his beloved son a burnt offering to his God. The agedah, in short, has become a foundational act, and its consequences extend to every generation of those whose father is Abraham. Our people exists and perdures, the Israelite narrator seems to be saying, only because of the incomparable act of obedience and faith that the patriarch-to-be carried out on an unnamed mountain in the land of Moriah. In light of the interpretive move that the second angelic address evidences, it is hardly a source of wonderment that, at least since biblical times, Jewish thinkers have continually pondered the troubling story of the binding of Isaac. Nor is it surprising
that the pondering is usually most intense when the existence of Jews is threatened, and their survival, to all appearances, miraculous.³

Sarah’s name does not appear in the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac, though later interpreters will find a place for her in the event’s retelling. Her death at age 127 in Kiriath-arba (Hebron) is recounted in chapter 23, along with Abraham’s purchase of a burial site, the cave of Machpelah. The fortunes of Isaac and his successors are the subject of the continuing chapters of Genesis, and so we read in chapter 24 the colorful story of the mission of Abraham’s servant to find a fitting wife for Isaac—someone from the patriarch’s homeland, not “from the daughters of the Canaanites” (v. 3). The happy (and destined) result of the servant’s search is the beautiful virgin, Rebekah, who hails from the family of Abraham’s brother, Nahor. The next stage of the history of Abraham’s seed has a happy beginning:

Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother’s death (24:67).

Sarah, through whose son the people of the covenant will come into being and ultimately possess the land promised to them, becomes, from the Tanakh’s (and later, Judaism’s) viewpoint, the mate and partner of Abraham. The reality of her prominence in the tradition surfaces in references to the grave of the “fathers” and their women at Machpelah (in Genesis 49:29–33, Jacob, dying in Egypt, requests that his corpse be taken to the land of Canaan for burial in the company of Abraham and Sarah, and of Isaac and Rebekah, his parents.)

We should take note, here, of the appearance of Isaac’s name in the recurring formula which identifies the triad of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.⁴ The unfolding history of Israel cannot be recorded without allusions back to the Abrahamic covenant, and, simultaneously to Isaac, the guarantor of its promise and power.

(p.129) Genesis Rabbah on Sarah and Hagar

Genesis Rabbah (GR), an anthology of teachings compiled in the late fourth to early fifth centuries CE, contains a treasure trove of rabbis’ ruminations on the scriptural account of Abraham’s two women. Sarah and Hagar enjoy their prominence by virtue of being means to a divine end: they are child producers in the service of God’s promises that from Abraham’s loins nations will come, with future offspring as numerous as particles of dust, grains of sand, stars in the heavens.⁵ Genesis Rabbah reveals clearly the rabbis’ familiar methods for untangling problems and for filling in gaps perceived in the biblical text: a passage under consideration suggests another, in whose light the first may be considered anew. Individual words likewise gain fresh connotations from their appearances elsewhere in scripture. We have already met rabbis’ regular employment of examples and parables from outside the scripture to add strength to their arguments.

Genesis 16

In Genesis Rabbah XLV we find a set of speculations about Sarah’s barrenness, and also the possibility of Abraham’s infertility. Reading “Now Sarai Abram’s wife bore him no
children” in the light of Proverbs 31:10 (“A woman of valor who can find, for her price (mikrah) is far above rubies”), and recalling in Ezekiel 16:3 the term “origin” (mekuroth) connotating pregnancy, a line of argument reconstructs the reproductive histories of Abraham’s brothers. Calculating that Haran (Abraham’s brother) fathered his first child when he was six years old, the rabbis pondered how, with this prodigious procreativity at work among his male kin, it was possible that Abraham could not beget a child. The infertility must have been Sarah’s. But this inference is challenged by Rabbi Judah, who reminds his fellow sages that the text states that Sarah bore no children to him (Abraham), not ruling out the possibility that she might have produced children with a different mate. R. Nechemiah insists that the text cannot be construed in that way: Sarah was herself infertile. The verse draws comment here because Genesis Rabba’s format is a verse-by-verse midrash on scripture, and Genesis 16:1 in its vocabulary allows various interpretive options. But there are also other concerns, less grammatically inspired, attaching to this topic. They might be put under the rubric of divine purpose, or providence. How, ask the rabbis, does God’s commitment to the covenant made with Abraham come to hinge on the pregnancy of a long-barren woman? Is it the case that God’s most important actions—like the promise of land and nationhood—are manifest through wonders and miracles? Sarah’s conceiving of Isaac requires careful attention, standing as it does in close relationship to the pregnancy of Hagar, and the biblical record of Abraham’s other women and their children.

Scriptural cross-referencing done in connection with the verse, “And she had a handmaid, an Egyptian” also led to diverse opinions—namely, (1) that Hagar was Sarah’s property, and thus was a person whom Abraham was obliged to support, but was not free to sell; that (2) Hagar was the Pharaoh’s daughter, given to Sarah in the aftermath of that ruler’s attempt to wed or bed the one he believed to be Abraham’s sister—an explanation attributed to R. Simeon b. Yohai; and that (3) the name Hagar derives from the Hebrew word agar, meaning “reward” (Genesis 12:7). Similar exegetical strategies produce a variety of meanings attaching to Sarah’s declaration, “Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing,” and also to her remark that she too might be “built up” in Abraham’s having a son “through” Hagar. Sarah speaks as she does because she understands the cause of things, and does not (like many, apparently, in the social world of the rabbis) seek a pregnancy-inducing amulet or charm. Sarah’s being built up, a rabbi asserted, referred to survival or to restoration to life. His idea was confirmed (or generated) by Rachel’s plea to her husband Jacob in Genesis 30:1, “Give me children, or I shall die.” Sarah, childless, is as good as dead, and her building up depends on her becoming a mother—of her surrogate’s child.

The rabbis ruminate about Hagar’s quick conception of a son to Abraham—arguably as a result of their “first intimacy.” To Rabbi Eleazar’s claim that this never happens, a rejoinder marshals as evidence the pregnancies of Lot’s daughters (Genesis 19:36), who presumably had sex with their father only once. Rabbi Tanhuma explains that unusual case with unusual imagery: “By an effort of will power they brought forth their virginity, and thus conceived at the first act of intercourse.” A comparison of Hagar’s and Sarah’s
procreative capabilities (and of the qualities of their respective sons) is the yield of a botanical metaphor volunteered by R. Hanina b. Pazzi: “Thorns are neither weeded nor sown, yet of their own accord they grow and spring up, whereas how much pain and toil is required before wheat can be made to grow!” That is, Ishmael is easy, spontaneous, and worthless; Isaac is the product of “labor,” is “worthy fruit,” and thus of great value.¹⁰

The rabbis can give explanations for the fact that notable women were sometimes barren: God loved to hear their prayerful requests (Song of Songs 2:14 is cited in support), or their infertility caused them to depend on their (p.131) husbands’ support, when their great beauty might have made them self-reliant, or that being barren they might pass their lives without the burdens of having and raising children. These lines of male thinking are capped with one offered by a trio of rabbis: The matriarchs were for a long time barren “so that their husbands might derive pleasure from them, for when a woman is with child she is disfigured and lacks grace. Thus the whole ninety years that Sarah did not bear [a child] she was like a bride in her canopy.”¹¹

A very different opinion and valuation of Sarah’s barrenness is put on the lips of Hagar in a piece of narrative meant to illustrate how, after Hagar became pregnant, “her mistress was lowered in her esteem” (16:4b). A passage in Genesis Rabbah reports:

Ladies used to come to inquire how [Sarah] was, and [Sarah] would say to them, “Go and ask about the welfare of the poor woman [Hagar].” Hagar would tell them: “My mistress Sarai is not inwardly what she is outwardly: she appears to be a righteous woman, but she is not. For had she been a righteous woman, see how many years have passed without her conceiving, whereas I conceived in one night!” Said Sarah: “Shall I pay heed to this woman and argue with her! No; I will argue the matter with her master!”¹²

Sarah’s complaint to Abraham about Hagar’s disrespect is in the form of curse-like challenge. She wants the wrong done to her to fall on him (16:5). The text, revealing as it does rancor between husband and wife, produces contrasting comments by the sages. On the one hand, Sarah is understood to have made a valid complaint. Her claim that Abraham should himself bear the wrong suffered by her gains credence when it is recalled that Abraham said to God in 15:2 (“seeing that I shall die childless”). If he had said “We go childless,” Sarah would not be suffering humiliation, for a child would have been born to them both.

On the other hand, “the wrong done to me” (hamasi) that Sarah speaks of suggests the idea that she scratched (himmes, to scratch) Abraham, and this observation triggers a brief cataloguing of bad characteristics of women in general. Sarah is the exemplar of half of these:

The rabbis said: Women are said to possess four traits: they are greedy, eavesdroppers, slothful, and envious. Greedy, as it says, “And she took the fruit thereof and did eat it” (Genesis 3:6); eavesdroppers: “And Sarah heard in the tent
door” (*Genesis* 18:10) [when the visiting angel predicted the birth of Isaac in the next year]; slothful: “Make ready [quickly] three measures of fine meal” (*Genesis* 18:6) [understood to imply that Sarah did not eagerly bestir herself to prepare the meal for the Lord/the angelic visitors]; envious: “Rachel envied her sister” (*Genesis* 30:1).\(^{13}\)

The sharp exchange between Sarah and Abraham that grows out of Sarah’s resentment of Hagar requires, the rabbis think, critical assessment. Sarah’s too speedy move to litigation (“Let the Lord decide between you and me”) was itself blameworthy, and won her the punishment of a shortened life. She would otherwise have lived as long as her spouse.

Abraham’s refusal to take action against Hagar (“Your maid is in your hands”) and the subsequent harsh treatment of her by Sarah also required explanation. Supported by a prohibition in *Exodus* 21:8 against selling a servant with whom one has become displeased, the patriarch’s line of reasoning is this: “after we made her a mistress [i.e., gave her the status of a wife], shall we make her a bondmaid again?”\(^{14}\) Finally, there are speculations about the kind of harshness Sarah visited upon Hagar: she kept Hagar from Abraham’s bed; “she slapped her face with a slipper,” she made her do slave tasks in connection with the baths.\(^{15}\)

Hagar’s flight is clearly the result of Sarah’s maltreatment, but whether she leaves Abraham’s household in fear, in defiance, or in sorrow is not indicated in *Genesis* 16:6, nor taken up by the teachers of *GR*. What *does* draw the interpreters’ attention is the fact that Hagar is three times identified in the text *not* as Sarah’s equal (i.e., as wife or mistress in her own right), but as maidservant—by Abraham when he speaks to Sarah (“your maid”), by the angel of the Lord who finds Hagar at the spring in the wilderness (“Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from?”), and in her own response (“I am running away from my mistress Sarai”). The point being registered about Hagar’s place in the scheme of things is bluntly and comically put: “So runs the proverb: ‘If one man tells you that you have an ass’s ears, do not believe him; if two tell it to you, order a halter.’”\(^{16}\)

When God’s angel discovers Hagar in flight, he urges her to return to Sarah “and submit to her harsh treatment” (16:9), and we learn later in the passage that Hagar has obeyed the angelic counsel. She is back in the household of Abraham when she gives birth to Ishmael.

Ishmael is next in line for scrutiny. The rabbis’ discourse is evoked by scripture’s report that the angel of the Lord said to Hagar that he “will greatly increase [her] offspring,” and that she will bear a son to be named Ishmael (*Genesis* 10–11). Rabbi Isaac notes that only three figures in the tradition were called by their names before birth—Isaac, Solomon, and Josiah (in *Genesis* 17:16, *1 Chronicles* 22:9, and *1 Kings* 13:2, resp.). An unattributed opinion follows: “Some add Ishmael among the nations.” The \(^{\text{p.133}}\) distinction being made presumes that although Ishmael shares with Isaac, Solomon, and Josiah the apparent honor of being given his name prior to his birth by the Lord or the Lord’s
angel, he does not belong in their category. Ishmael, son of Abraham, is counted a non-Jew—one among the nations.

Negative estimates of Ishmael fill the succeeding passages in *Genesis Rabbah*, which address phrases by which the angel described him to Hagar in *Genesis* 16:11–12. The rabbis ponder what it means that Ishmael will be a “wild ass of a man.” R. Johanan takes the view that it signifies only that he will be raised in the wild, rather than in civilization, while Resh Lakish asserts, “It means a savage among men in its literal sense, for whereas all others plunder wealth, he plunders lives.” And what sense is to be drawn from the prediction that Ishmael’s hand would be “against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him” (16:12)? The *kol bo* (“against him”) of the text suggests his doglike (*kalbo* equals dog) taste for carrion.

It is worth asking what associations the name Ishmael carries for the rabbis as they consider this text in *Genesis*. Their *midrashim* from the early centuries of the common era inevitably link the angel’s pronouncement that Ishmael would be a perpetual warrior in conflict with “everyone” to Israel’s past history. The progeny of Ishmael had long since held a place in the biblical roll of enemies. In Psalm 83, a prayer for God to speak and act in a time when “foes assert themselves against [His] people” and threaten to eradicate Israel’s name from mention and memory, the clan of the Ishmaelites, and also of the Hagarites, are identified along with such traditional adversaries as the Edomites, Ammonites, Amalekites, Philistines, and the Assyrians.

We may see this representation of bellicose Ishmael and his offspring also in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* (PRE), a compilation of rabbinic teaching and lore edited in the early centuries after the rise of Islam. Here we read of “six (people) [who] were called by their names before they were created: Isaac, Ishmael, Moses, Solomon, Josiah, and King Messiah.” Ishmael’s presence in the group is explained simply by referring to *Genesis* 16:11, and giving the meaning of his name a new turn:

Why was his name called Ishmael? Because in the future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will hearken to the cry of the people arising from (the oppression) which the children of Ishmael will bring about in the land in the last (days).

The hostile inversion is clever: Ishmael, the boy called into existence because God “hearkened” to his and his mother’s misery, is now an oppressor whose victims God will hear and heed. Elsewhere in the text (p.134) Rabbi Ishmael speaks of fifteen travesties that the children of Ishmael will accomplish in Israel—in the future and “in the latter days.” Among these terrible actions are measurings of the land, desecration of a cemetery, falsehood’s triumph over truth, the removal of statutes “far from Israel,” the destruction of writings, the despoiling of the tombs of the kings of Judah, and this:

They will … fence in the broken walls of the Temple; and they will build a building in the Holy Place; and two brothers will arise over them, princes at the end.

These prophecies attributed to Rabbi Ishmael are of course retrospective, pointing as
they do to the claiming of the Temple mount as *haram* (a sacred place) and the building in the late seventh century of what came to be known *al-Masjid al-Aqsa* (the al-Aqsa mosque, or more literally, “the furthest mosque” from Mecca and Medina), and to the sons of the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid, al-Amin and al-Mamun, who sequentially held power from 809 to 833 CE.

Future-looking, however, is *PRE*’s expressed messianic hope positioned at the end of the list of woes brought upon the Jews by sons of Ishmael:

> And in their days the Branch, the Son of David, will arise, as it is said, “And in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed” (*Daniel* 2:44).

This characterization of the sons of Ishmael as the Muslim foes of Israel is part of a traceable development. Having its origins in the Sarah-Hagar story, the opposition between Isaac and Ishmael already in later portions of *Genesis* became a story of divided and hostile families and nations. Esau (like Ishmael, a firstborn son denied his inheritance) took one of Ishmael’s daughters, Mahalath, as a wife (*Genesis* 28:6–9). The Ishmaelites who purchased Jacob’s son, Joseph, and took him to Egypt (*Genesis* 37:25ff.) are portrayed as a people quite other than the Hebrews. Needless to say, a thoroughly different perception and valuation of Ishmael took shape in Muslim tradition and commentary, as chapter 6 will demonstrate.

Returning to the exegetes of *Genesis Rabbah*, and to their concerns in their era, we find them pondering what occurs near the conclusion of *Genesis* 16, when Hagar called out to “the Lord who spoke to her.” The rabbis considered this unusual encounter and exchange rich in possibilities. Again, the standing of Hagar with God is at issue—a matter seen specifically in relation to, or in comparison with, the divine favor shone to Abraham’s other wife:  **(p.135)**

R. Judah b. R. Simon and R. Johanan in the name of R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon said: The Holy One, blessed be He, never condescended to hold converse with a woman save with that righteous woman [viz. Sarah], and that too was through a particular cause (*GR* XLV.10).

The cause seems to have been God’s need to confront Sarah about her laughter, whereas the Lord simply addressed Hagar by way of an announcement to her about her future as a mother. But questions press themselves upon the commentators: was it God, or an angel, who spoke to Hagar? The prevailing opinion is that God communicated with her “through an angel,” though the great privilege which came to Hagar via the divine visitor at the spring raises another issue. What did she mean in saying (16:13) “You are a God of seeing”? According to Rabbi Aibu, she meant “Thou seest the sufferings of the persecuted.”

There is, however, more to be considered in the latter part of verse 13, which can be translated, “Have I even here (*halom*) seen him that seeth me?”²⁴ A very positive
estimate of Hagar derives from noting the occurrence of this same word, *halom*, in 2 Samuel 7:18. Upon hearing from the prophet Nathan that God will establish his house and kingship, David responds: “What am I, O Lord God, and what is my family, that You have brought me thus far [or: even here—*halom*]?”—that is, to royal status.\(^{25}\) *Genesis Rabbah* advanced the view that Hagar’s situation was like that of David. From her will issue rulers, as the angel promised—the angel appearing to her, not in the company of her mistress, but “even now” when she, a runaway, was alone at the spring.

The rabbis’ interpretations both confirm and destabilize what might seem to be *Genesis* 16’s obvious presentations of Abraham and his two women. Nuances attach to Sarah and her ambitious desire for a son for Abraham, her anger at being deprecated, her aggressive challenges to Abraham about which son will be his heir, and her desire for revenge against Hagar. At the same time, the interpreters tease out reasons why Hagar gloats in her pregnancy, deems Sarah, and attempts to flee her difficulties. Bold in her interrogation of the Lord’s angel, who brings her good tidings, Hagar nevertheless accedes to his injunction to return to her household and submit to Sarah’s cruel treatment of her. We notice that even while disparaging Hagar, the commentators credit her interactions with God, and honor the privileges with which she is blessed. Abraham, in the midst of the rivalry between the two women, seems to deflect Sarah’s charge against him, while at the same time tolerating her maltreatment of Hagar, who has conceived and delivered his firstborn.

*(p.136) Genesis 21:1–21*

We turn now to *Genesis Rabbah*’s treatment of the earlier verses of chapter 21, those which precede the final rift between Abraham’s two women, and Hagar’s being cast out. At considerable length, and with an array of supporting biblical texts, the rabbis celebrate God’s faithfulness in keeping his promise concerning Sarah. For God to remember or take note of the pledge of the birth of Isaac to her and to Abraham, as the rabbis reflect on the passage, signifies a number of things. God accomplishes what he decrees when this is for the world’s good (though he sometimes postpones or relents from action when he has promised to bring evil—i.e., judgment). Sarah’s confidence in the promise is praised. No longer one who laughs, she is imagined exclaiming: “What! am I to lose faith in my Creator! Heaven [forbid]! I will not lose faith in my Creator, ‘For I will rejoice in the Lord, I will exalt in the God of my salvation’ ” (*Habbakuk* 3:18).\(^{26}\)

Considerable (and amusing) interest centers on the means by which the capacity to produce a child came to Abraham and Sarah. The rabbis speak of youth restored, sexual potency returned to Abraham, the Lord’s creation of an ovary for Sarah, the onset of her menses, and the provision of milk for her nursing of Isaac. Concern for Sarah’s virtue is great, in order that it not be suspected that she was impregnated by Abimelech, from whose sexual aspirations she had only recently escaped, with God’s help (*Genesis* 20). A moral claim is advanced. Sarah, having emerged from the houses of the Pharaoh and Abimelech unjured, *deserved* to be remembered by God and made a mother to Abraham’s son. The fact that the text (21:2) states “bore to Abraham” rules out suspicion; “This teaches that she did not steal seed from elsewhere.” Furthermore, Isaac
too, like his father, bore “a son in his old age.” The rabbis argue in several ways that Sarah’s pregnancy was sufficiently lengthy “that it might not be said that he [Isaac] was a scion of Abimelech’s house.”

A striking legend is inspired by Sarah’s versified exclamation in v. 7:

Who would have said to Abraham
That Sarah would suckle children!
Yet I have borne a son in his old age.

The commentators pause and puzzle over “children,” in the plural, and then set about their work. Abraham importunes Sarah to put modesty aside, and to bare her breasts so that her miraculous flow of milk can be publicly observed. The milk is then offered to the offspring of many noble (p.137) ladies who come (while doubting their worthiness) in order “that [their] children might be suckled with the milk of that righteous woman.”

Sarah’s declaration in Genesis 21:6 that her God-given happiness will be enjoyed by all who hear of it, becomes a prophecy fulfilled when more miracles occur. The matriarch’s being remembered by God—that is, her giving birth to Isaac—released these additional wonders: “many other barren women were remembered with her; many deaf gained their hearing; many blind had their eyes opened, many insane became sane.” Verbal connections with other scriptures allow the rabbis to elaborate on the ways that God’s fulfillment of the promise of Isaac’s birth to Sarah was “a gift granted to the world.”

The celebratory tone of GR’s treatment of the birth of Isaac and Sarah’s happiness echoes Genesis 21:1–8. But immediately after the “great feast” marking the boy’s weaning, according to vv. 10ff., threatening clouds come over the household of the patriarch. This change begins with the protective mother sensing danger (Genesis 21:10–11):

Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. She said to Abraham, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

What was the “playing” of Ishmael that so aggravated Sarah? Rabbi Akiba’s interpretation leads off a series of opinions. The verb that underlies “playing,” or “making sport”—tsahak—is the same that appears in the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. Failing in her attempt to seduce Joseph, she tells Potiphar that his “Hebrew servant ... came into me to make sport of me” (Genesis 39:17). Akiba deduces that “this teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael ravish maidens, seduce married women, and dishonor them.”

Rabbi Ishmael recalls the use of the term “sport” or “play” in Exodus 32:6, which tells of the Hebrews’ actions around the golden calf on the plain below Sinai. Sarah, then, spied Ishmael committing idolatry. He is imagined building altars and there sacrificing locusts, the entertainment of a wicked, cruel youth. No, others argue; she saw a violent act. Rabbi Eleazar (drawing on the appearance of “sport” in 2 Samuel. 2:14, where a battle by
sword and dagger is described), asserts that Ishmael committed bloodshed. Aware of the notice that Ishmael became an archer (Genesis 21:20), R. Levi recalls images from Proverbs. 22:18ff. in which the “play” of a person who deceives his neighbor is compared to the behavior of “a madman who casts firebrands, arrows, and death.”

Perhaps because he finds these varied opinions too speculative, or because he has reservations about imputing such shameful behaviors to a son of (p.138) the great patriarch Abraham, Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai takes a different tack, reading vv. 9–10 together. “Playing” suggests to him mockery—specifically, Ishmael’s attitude toward the festive commotion surrounding the birth and childhood of his half-brother, “for when our father Isaac was born all rejoiced, whereupon Ishmael said to them, ‘You are fools, for I am the firstborn and I receive a double portion.’”33 Here it is not Ishmael’s warlike character that arrested Sarah’s attention, but rather his assertion of his rights of primogeniture, expressed in a spirit of disdain and greed. On this reading, Sarah’s protectiveness of her son has to do with Isaac’s patrimony—she is forcefully reminding her husband of the promise made and now fulfilled by God, and of Abraham’s commitments to the covenant.

We recall that Sarah’s demand that the “slave woman and her son” be dismissed caused Abraham great pain, “for it concerned a son of his” (21:11). A single scriptural text is brought forth in GR by way of comment: “Thus it is written, ‘And shut his eyes from looking upon evil’” (Isaiah 33:15). The gist of this midrash entails a criticism of the patriarch, who “shut his eyes from Ishmael’s evil ways, and was reluctant to send him away.”34 One wonders, however, if another meaning may be intended by the citation of the text—a comment more sympathetic to Abraham. The phrase in question in Isaiah 33 falls in a number of descriptions of a righteous person “who spurns profit from fraudulent dealings, waves away a bribe instead of grasping it, stops his ears against listening to infamy, shuts his eyes against looking at evil” (v. 15). Is it possible that the rabbis acknowledge Abraham’s distress, imagining that he might have considered the banning of his son an unrighteous act, and that for this reason he averted his eyes, and recoiled from it?

The continuing narrative in Genesis has God address words to Abraham that seem, while upholding Sarah’s admonition to send away the threatening mother and son, consolatory rather than accusatory. Certainly God reinforces Sarah’s wish, telling Abraham, “whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring will be continued for you” (v. 12). Nonetheless, God does reassure the patriarch about his first son, saying “I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed” (v. 13).

The biblical narrative of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael presented puzzles to the commentators in Genesis Rabbah that may or may not have held for them the kind of pathos seen in Rembrandt’s rendering. They wondered how Abraham’s action of placing the water skin on Hagar’s shoulder was to be construed—positively, in that he showed generosity in providing her with an abundance of water, or negatively, showing Hagar to be a water-bearing servant? Was the father discouraging any impression that the boy with her was his freeborn son with a claim on his inheritance? Why (p.139) did the
biblical text state that Abraham put provisions for the journey, plus the child, on Hagar’s shoulder as he sent her away? The rabbis were conscious of the problem of seeing Ishmael as a young child (the GR comments that he was twenty-seven years old at the time), but their explanations are differently framed. Ishmael had to be carried because he had been made ill by Sarah, who “cast an evil eye on him, whereupon he was seized with feverish pains.” Wandering in the wilderness near Beer-Sheba, Ishmael consumed the water in the way a feverish person drinks, and so, with none left, was on the verge of death.

Another question arises from the story. Having put Ishmael under a bush, Hagar separated herself to the distance of a bowshot, “for she thought, ‘Let me not look on as the child dies.’ And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears” (21:16). Is her thought prayerful? Is it something else—an accusation? The Hebrew word for bowshot calls to mind a similar term that connotes hurling words, or “one who criticizes” (ke-mateheth).

So, it is proposed, hurling her complaints on high, Hagar spoke as a woman who impugned God’s justice, saying, “Yesterday Thou didst promise me, ‘I will greatly multiply thy seed, etc.’ (Genesis 16:10), and now he is dying of thirst!”

Hagar is not alone in raising questions of justice. According to R. Simon, ministering angels accosted God and put to him a challenge starkly different from Hagar’s. “Lord of all ages, to a man who is destined to kill your children with thirst will you provide a well?” The ministering angels, the rabbis suppose, are presuming that a passage in Isaiah (21:13ff) tells of a time when Arabs, Ishmael’s descendants, murderously ignored the Israelites in their desperate plea for water.

What follows is a statement regarding the basis upon which God judges, or acts on behalf of, human beings. About the person (Ishmael) whom the angels foreknow will someday be injurious to his children (of the line of Isaac), God asks: “What is he now?” They answer, “Righteous.” God declares that he judges the human as he or she is in the present, “at the moment,” not on the basis of that person’s future character and deeds. The hook on which this argument hangs is an element in verse 17, “where he is,” which is taken to mean “as he is at present.” So God hears the cry of the boy and one of his angels calls to Hagar from above:

What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him (Genesis 21:17b–18).

(p.140) The theological argument about God’s ways of judging seems at first to stand at some remove from the agonizing of Ishmael and his mother, but of course as a scene depicting the plight of those who are suffering, it naturally raises questions about God—his silence and his inaction, or his purpose and power in relation to the event. The next verse reveals the mode of divine rescue. “God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink” (v. 19). Two rabbis
comment that all people are blind until God opens their eyes. The implication that the problem lay with Hagar is followed by the observation that she lacked faith even after having been enlightened—she filled the water skin because of doubt about the well, being anxious that it might vanish as quickly as it appeared.38 (We shall see that Muslim interpreters similarly criticized the action of the rescued Hagar, who was said to have attempted to dam, and preserve, the waters of the spring.)

Even though the previous commentary on this incident regarded God’s decision to intervene and save Ishmael “where he [was]” (i.e., for what he was then) as evidence that the youth was a person of righteousness and merit, concluding remarks about his future life take a negative turn. The two Hebrew words for “became an archer” (robeh kashoth) point to two others (rabbah, kashiuth) suggesting that Ishmael grew in cruelty. This narrative section’s final verse telling of Hagar’s finding an Egyptian wife for her son (v. 21) prompts R. Isaac, not without prejudice, to remark, recalling Genesis 16:1 (“She [Sarah] had an Egyptian maidservant”), that a stick tossed in the air will fall back to its point of origin.39

In the biblical drama of Abraham’s family, the cast-out mother and son leave the stage, Hagar not to appear again, and Ishmael returning only to join Isaac in burying their father. Genesis pursues the story of Abraham and Sarah through to the events of their deaths and burials in chs. 23 through 25, and then turns to the stories concerning the patriarch’s “seed”—Isaac, Jacob, Joseph.

Revealed once again in these pages of Genesis Rabbah was the typical mode of rabbinical scriptural analysis—the production of midrash that explored, rather than attempted to achieve consensus on, the actions of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Isaac and Ishmael—and their Lord. Rather, holding scripture and all of its parts to be God-given treasure, the rabbis were in search of its rich prizes—its multiple lessons and truths.

Abraham’s Family in Early Jewish Art: Mosaics in the Sephoris Synagogue
The 1923 discovery of multiple biblical scenes in a third-century “house synagogue” in Dura Europas (on the Euphrates) fully dispelled the notion that adherence to the commandment against idolatry prevented Jews from producing figural art.40 Further excavations in Palestine brought to light a number of splendidly decorated synagogues, one of which has a role to play in our search for Jewish artistic interpretations of Abraham’s women and their sons.

We should begin by acknowledging that nowhere in early Jewish art does a depiction of Hagar survive. Do we see Ishmael? Very probably, but a case needs to be made for this. Isaac does appear, and not infrequently, because of the popularity of depictions of the aqedat Yitzhak, the “binding of Isaac” at the time his father prepared to sacrifice him to God.

Sarah is the one to be searched out, and she is believed to be shown in a portion of the mosaic floor uncovered in 1993 by archaeologists Ze’ev Weiss and Ehud Netzer.41 A small but elegantly decorated synagogue dating from the fifth century was built in the
lower Galilean city of Sepphoris. In that era the city, which had long been regarded as an important center for Jewish life, preserved many features of its having been a typical Greco-Roman municipality. It also showed signs of the growing strength of Christianity; several churches (constructed upon the foundations of what had been pagan temples) stood near the cardo, Sepphoris’s main street—close to the city’s administrative center.\(^{42}\) It is hard to know the extent to which pagan sights and sounds might have continued in the city in the fifth to sixth centuries, but the proximity of Jewish (a Talmudic report tells of eighteen synagogues) and Christian buildings in Sepphoris allows us to presume some measure of social interaction between Jews and Christians. A bit later, we shall explore how much they knew about each others’ beliefs, and interpretations of biblical narratives.

In a summary description of their discovery, Weiss and Netzer wrote:

> The most significant remnant of the synagogue is its mosaic floor which was designed as a single long carpet measuring 16.0 × 6.6 m[eters]… . The carpet in the nave is divided into 7 horizontal bands of unequal height, with a zodiac in the center. Some of the bands have internal subdivisions. The floor is made up of 14 panels containing a variety of decorations, some of which make their first appearance in Jewish art here. Dedication inscriptions, mostly in Greek, adorn the panels but bear no relationship to the scenes in them. All of the depictions that comprise the main mosaic carpet face in one direction, perpendicular to the nave’s longitudinal axis, thus emphasizing the bema, the focus of religious activity in the synagogue. Although each panel features a different scene, they are all thematically connected.\(^{43}\)

The proposal by the excavators that the art program of the mosaic carpet centered in the themes of “promise and redemption” generated lively (p.142) scholarly discussion, with diverse opinions about what overall sense can be drawn from the multiple panels, which depict images of the ark and two menorahs, scenes of temple sacrifices (the name Aaron appearing next to an effaced figure standing at an altar), a large Zodiac image similar to those found in other synagogues of the period), and two scenes having to do with Abraham.\(^{44}\)

Bypassing here the discussion of the mosaic floor in its entirety, we close in upon issues of interpretation pertaining to the latter mosaics, which bear directly on this chapter’s topic. The first of these (Figure 4.2), largely damaged, showed the head-covering and forehead of a woman standing in a doorway—Sarah, its excavators determined.
Figure 4.2 Sarah depicted in a mosaic panel of the Sepphoris synagogue. Fifth to sixth century CE. Courtesy of Prof. Zeev Weiss, The Sepphoris Excavations, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

Figure 4.3 is a drawing in which Weiss reconstructed what this mosaic showed and suggested.

Figure 4.3 Drawing, courtesy of Prof. Zeev Weiss, The Sepphoris Excavations, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

(p.143) Weiss described the scene in this way:

Only small fragments of the original panel are preserved. One figure, standing in a rectangular structure, can be seen on the left of the panel. Traces of two other figures can be identified beside it. One is standing to the right of the rectangular structure, and the other is depicted in a reclining position farther to the right and below the previous one. Traces of a cloth with a fringed hem, which probably covered a table that stood in the picture’s foreground, are visible below the reclining figure. Although this scene is poorly preserved, analysis of its remains in
light of a close parallel in the presbytery in St. Vitale, Ravenna (mid-sixth century CE), makes it possible to reconstruct what was once depicted here. The three angels reclined in the foreground of the panel next to a low table. Abraham, their host, is located to their left, and behind him, Sarah stands in the tent listening to his conversation with his guests. The presentation of the story of the Binding of Isaac as a direct continuation of the scene of the angels’ visit to Abraham is also found in Ravenna (if the identification suggested here is accepted). In Jewish art, this theme makes its first appearance in the Sepphoris synagogue.45

(p.144) The mosaic (Figure 4.4) on the north wall of the church of San Vitale to which Weiss refers postdates the Sepphoris synagogue by approximately a century (San Vitale was constructed in the period 528–547), but it does provide the similar configuration of the Sarah image that gave Weiss and Netzer external support for identification of this mosaic’s subject. The two biblical stories in the mosaic pavement initially visible to those entering the synagogue—first, the angels’ visitation to Abraham and Sarah at Mamre and second, the depiction of the near-sacrifice of Isaac—appear in the San Vitale wall mosaic aligned on a horizontal plane, and appear, not surprisingly in this Christian context, beneath a cross held aloft by angels.

Figure 4.4 Abraham welcomes strangers, prepares to sacrifice Isaac. Mid-sixth century CE. Mosaic in San Vitale, Ravenna. © Art History Images.

In the church decoration both parts of the single mosaic scene stand not only as pictorial Abrahamic history but also as symbols understood to prefigure the annunciation of the birth of Jesus and his sacrificial death. As if to hold the two images together and make manifest their connected meaning for Christians, the angels at the center have in front of them as they sit at the table what, in this setting, can only be eucharistic bread.46

In the Sepphoris synagogue, the two scenes will of course only convey Jewish meanings, but in the social-religious context of Palestine’s—and Sepphoris’—fifth and sixth centuries, it would be surprising if their presentations were not cognizant of, and resistant to, Christianized appropriations of these two important scriptural stories. We want to weigh how the akedah scene in the Sepphoris mosaic (Figure 4.5) reveals—or gives strong intimations of—the ideas and perspective of its artists.
Again, a drawing by Weiss (Figure 4.6) clarifies what can be seen in the damaged mosaic.

Weiss describes the two panels on this band of the mosaic floor:

The two youths whom Abraham has left, together with an ass, at the foot of the mountain, are depicted in the left panel. The ass, which has a colored pack-saddle on its back, stands in the foreground of the scene; behind him is one of the youths who is extending one hand forward and holding a spear in the other. The second youth is seated on the left beneath a tree and grips the reins of the ass in one hand. The continuation of the story in the panel on the right has been largely destroyed. On its left side one can discern a sparsely branched tree to which a ram is tethered by means of a reddish cord; only the head of the ram remains intact. Below it, two pairs of shoes removed by Abraham and Isaac as they approached the site of the sacrifice are visible, a detail absent in other depictions of this episode. In another surviving part of the mosaic in the center of the panel, one can possibly identify the blade of a knife, and to its right the remains of a cloak. In the light of the numerous parallels in Byzantine art, it appears that Abraham was depicted in the foreground of the original panel, his body being far larger than the other figures beside him. In his raised right hand he held the knife, while his
other hand grabbed Isaac, perhaps only by his forelock. Isaac, probably portrayed on a smaller scale, appeared next to Abraham, (p.147) on the right, beside an altar that was located on the panel’s right side. The ram on the left side of the panel completes the portrayal of the biblical narrative.47

The content and arrangement conform to another mosaic depiction of the aqedat Yitzhak found in the sixth-century Beth Alpha synagogue (Figure 4.7).

![Figure 4.7 Aqedah scene from the Beth Alpha synagogue. Sixth century CE. Photo courtesy of the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.](image)

Distinctive here are the tituli in Hebrew, which read (from the right): “Isaac,” “Abraham,” “Do not raise [your hand]” (the angel of the Lord’s words from heaven to Abraham in Genesis 22:12), and the declarative statement, “Here is the ram” (22:13).

In the Sepphoris mosaic’s aqedah scene (and also in Beth Alpha’s) the ram is tied to the tree or bush, rather than caught in it by its horns (as Genesis 22:13 relates). The motif of the ram tethered with a rope is regarded as a piece of “artistic midrash” meant to clarify and expand what the ram’s appearance in Genesis 22:13 signifies: tied up and awaiting this event, the ram’s presence was providential, not accidental.48 The tethered animal to be sacrificed in Isaac’s stead was in thematic keeping with this and other artists’ interpretive additions focused on divine oversight of the event—namely, the hand of God shown atop the painting of the aqedah in Dura Europas’s synagogue, representing the voice from heaven (bat qol), or the hand pictured in conjunction with the divine command given in letters, observable above the ram in the Beth Alpha image.49

(p.148) Significance attaches to another detail concerning the rope that tethers the ram. The artists knew the rabbinic teaching which, expanding upon the description of the scapegoat sacrificed on Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:10), held that the rope was crimson—its symbolism found in Isaiah 1:18—“Be your sins like crimson, they can turn snow white.” By this motif, there could be put in place a thoroughly Jewish commentary on what the ram was and signified. The animal available to Abraham was the bearer and remover of Israel’s sins. Passages in both the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud refer to the crimson thread tied between the ram’s horns—the former text noting that the other end of the woolen rope was attached to a rock as the scapegoat was pushed over
the precipice.\textsuperscript{50}

Rabbinic discourses pertaining to the \textit{aqedah} spend considerable time on Isaac’s attitude (willing or questioning) about what is to befall him; by contrast the artists do not portray Isaac as an adult, with the result that greater interest and centrality belongs to the figure of the ram.\textsuperscript{51} For example, \textit{Genesis Rabbah}’s extensive commentary on the “binding of Isaac” often takes into consideration thoughts and emotions of Isaac and Abraham as they speak to each other, or of Abraham when he “picked up the knife to slay his son” (\textit{Genesis} 22:10). The angels, in close attendance, are imagined as weeping at the sight.\textsuperscript{52}

Further, a passage in \textit{GR} discloses sharp consciousness of Israel’s historical situation, and the place of the \textit{aqedah} in Judaism’s ritual life. The ram spied by Abraham \textit{ahar} (“behind him”) is given a temporal twist, so that R. Judan can say, “After all that happened [i.e., our redemption from slavery in Egypt, the gift of the Torah, etc.], Israel still fall[s] into the clutches of sin and [in consequence] become[s] the victim of persecution; yet [Israel] will be ultimately redeemed by the ram’s horn, as it says, ‘And the Lord God will blow the horn, etc.’” (\textit{Zechariah} 9:14).\textsuperscript{53} R. Hanina b. R. Isaac adds, “Throughout the year Israel [is] in sin’s clutches and led away by [her] troubles, but on New Year they shall take the \textit{shofar} and blow on it, and eventually they will be redeemed by the ram’s horn.”\textsuperscript{54} Rabbi Hanina’s remark lets us know that the story of the binding of Isaac was read at Rosh Hashana, even though it had earlier been associated with Passover.\textsuperscript{55} Christian preaching at Easter, which transformed the bound Isaac into Christ crucified, would have been one of the motivations for moving the reading of the \textit{aqedah} to another feast in the Jewish calendar. As noted earlier, Melito, a second-century bishop in the city of Sardis, had, with strong polemical force, taught his congregation at Easter what the “sacrifice of Isaac” signified for him and his fellow-believers.

The synagogue mosaic emphasized the animal’s role in the drama not only by putting the scapegoat’s red leash on him, but also by depicting in (p.149) the upper registers the \textit{menoroth}-surrounding ark, Aaron’s priesthood, and the central importance of sacrificial animals, including birds, in the cultic life of the Temple. The ritual consciousness of Jews was being evoked in this imagery, and the relation of these realities to the ram that took Isaac’s place as the offering at Moriah was obvious.

In the \textit{Tanhuma Yelammedenu}, a collection of exegeses many of which stem from the fifth through seventh centuries, we find a variation on the interpretations already met:

\begin{quote}
\textit{A ram caught in the thicket by his horns.} The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Abraham: “let them blow upon the ram’s horn to Me, and I will save them and redeem them from their sins.” This is what David meant when he sang: \textit{My shield and my horn of salvation, my high tower} (\textit{Psalm} 18:3).\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

And of course our mosaic panel is art in a place of worship, not in a book. The liturgical hearing and seeing of the \textit{aqedah} recalled and confirmed the congregation’s sense of identity as God’s beloved—tested, protected, and redeemed.
Only in the Sepphoris synagogue’s *aqedah* iconography is found the feature of two pairs of upturned shoes, shed by the smaller Isaac and by his father. Weiss notes that in *Genesis Rabbah* 56.2 one meets the tradition that clouds and “the Shekhinah (Divine Presence) ... dwelt in the place chosen for Isaac’s sacrifice.”57 One recalls God’s command in Exodus 3:5 that Moses remove his sandals at Mt. Horeb, since it is “holy ground.” A place of God’s powerful presence and speech requires those who ascend it to proceed with feet unshod.58 In this detail of the pairs of shoes resides the claim that this mountain in Moriah, like Horeb, is a “mountain of God” and that the *aqedah* ranks in importance with the giving of the Law at Sinai. But the image of the shoes left off at the place of the binding of Isaac may be understood to signify more than proper respect for hallowed space. Over against Christian interpretations of the binding of Isaac in Christological terms, the shoes say: this event of God’s pardon took place in our holy place, and was revealed to our ancestors.

Studying the Sepphoris *aqedah* scene in the light of Christian uses of the image, art historian Herbert Kessler suggested that another detail—a barely noticed omission from the Jewish imagery—can also be thought to serve the cause of a distinctive Jewish claim *adversus Christianorum*. *Genesis* 21:6’s report that “Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac” fails to appear in the Sepphoris *aqedah* image, and in other Jewish representations of the scene. Christian exegetes and theologians as early as the second century asserted that this biblical detail held the clue that Isaac’s sacrifice anticipated and pointed to Jesus’s bearing his (p.150) own cross to the place of his death, and Christian artists *did* show Isaac with the wood in his arms.59 Kessler’s study of miniature paintings of the scene in the *Christian topography* manuscripts (dating from the eleventh through the twelfth centuries, but “surely copied from a 6th- or 7th c. Syrian model and hence ... rather close to the Sepphoris mosaic in place and time of origin”) prompted him to speculate:

> The ubiquitousness of the depiction of Isaac bearing the wood in Early Christian art, and hence of the typological interpretation, may have induced the mosaicist [at the Sepphoris synagogue] to omit it.60

In his *Bound by the Bible* Edward Kessler, a historian of Jewish-Christian relations, pursued concerns akin to those of Herbert Kessler by searching for evidence of “exegetical encounters” between Jews and Christians who interpreted the sacrifice of Isaac.61 Early in his study he remarked about rabbis’ responses “to Christian claims about ownership of Scripture,” and quoted a passage from the *Tanhuma*:

> When the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses “write” (Ex. 34:27), Moses wanted to write the Mishnah as well. However the Holy One, Blessed be He, foresaw that ultimately the nations of the world would translate the Torah into Greek and would claim, “We are Israel.”62

Kessler observed that the church fathers, while not abandoning the narrative’s strong interest in Abraham’s faithfulness to God’s command, gave concentrated attention to Isaac as the prototype of Jesus. Kessler argues that the rabbis knew and used concepts
from this Christian trajectory of ideas, turning them to their own purposes. Examining a piece of commentary in *Genesis Rabbah* 56.3 which likens Abraham’s placing of the wood on Isaac to “a man who carries his cross on his shoulder”—a phrase which was “undoubtedly deliberate”—Kessler noted that this “is as near to an explicit reference to Christianity as we shall find in rabbinic interpretations” of this time period.\(^63\) He continued:

Rather than associating Isaac with death and martyrdom, the [rabbis’] purpose was to emphasize Isaac’s *willingness* to give up his life and suffer torture. This is why the rabbis deliberately failed to associate Isaac with such martyrs as Akiva… . It is Isaac’s willingness to give up his life that provides the basis for those interpretations [i.e., those that spoke of his fear of the knife] and appears to be a response to the Christian teaching that Christ was willing to give up his life for Israel. The rabbis argued that there existed numerous biblical figures, (p.151) such as Isaac at the Akedah, who were willing to give up their lives on behalf of Israel. These examples showed that no special significance should be given to the willingness of Christ to give up his life. In the words of the rabbis, ‘you find everywhere that the patriarchs and the prophets offered their lives on behalf of Israel.’ In other words, the sacrifice of Jesus was not a unique event. Isaac was used to counter Christological claims of uniqueness.\(^64\)

We cannot leave unexamined the Sepphoris mosaic’s representation of the other half of the band showing the *aqedah*. Abraham’s servants may be regarded as biblically required, but the mosaic portrayal of them is provocative. The two men are turned toward each other, with the larger, spear-bearing man on the right speaking and gesturing in the other’s direction. Is the viewer of this panel that adjoins the sacrificial scene meant to recognize these two attendants, and to have some idea of what is transpiring between them? Familiar, presumably, were *aqedah* traditions like the one found in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 31, which gives the names of those who accompanied Abraham and Isaac to the place of sacrifice: Eliezer, the servant, and Ishmael, the patriarch’s other son. How did these two, told to stay behind with the ass, occupy themselves during the time Abraham and Isaac went to the mountain top to “worship” (as Abraham says)?

Contention arose between Eliezer and Ishmael. Ishmael said to Eliezer: Now that Abraham will offer Isaac his son for a burnt offering, kindled upon the altar, I am his first-born son, I will inherit (the possessions) of Abraham. Eliezer replied to him, saying: He has already driven you out like a woman divorced from her husband, and he has sent you away to the wilderness, but I am his servant, serving him by day and by night, and I shall be the heir of Abraham. The Holy Spirit answered them, saying to them: Neither this one nor that one shall inherit.\(^65\)

The exchange resonates with one of the fundamental themes and plot lines of *Genesis*: inheritance rights and competition between sons for these. Ishmael sees his opportunity to lay claim to the rights of a firstborn son, while Eliezer, after likening Ishmael’s status to that of a rejected wife, bases his own claim upon a life of devoted service. The two men
personify values worthy of comparison and judgment in this rabbinic tale, but in its telling the Spirit of God summarily ends the debate. The denial of both men and their claims by the Spirit “points” the listener to the wonder that is transpiring on the mountain. A similar redirection of the eye must have happened to viewers of the mosaic. But we pause over the best preserved part of band 6 because here the artists, no doubt aware of some form of the midrash we have in PRE, have Ishmael re-entering the (p.152) Abrahamic story (back from the wilderness of Paran where he was left in Genesis 21:20–21), armed with a spear, rather than the bow which God predicts he will master.

Ishmael’s presence in the scene underlines, with a nonbiblical image, this scripture narrative’s chief theme: it is to Abraham’s son born to Sarah (not to Hagar’s son) that God’s covenant applies. The patriarch has demonstrated his faithfulness, at which point the angel of the Lord reiterates (and as Jon Levenson emphasized, transforms) the blessing: “Because you have done this and not withheld your son, your favored one, I will ... make your descendants as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command” (Genesis 22:16–18).

We conclude our consideration of Abraham’s family in the figural art of Sepphoris by turning once more to Sarah. Though the artists did not place Sarah anywhere in the band of the synagogue mosaic depicting of the binding of Isaac, she would have been imagined behind that scene by those whose eyes fell on the two panels they met as they entered the building. A main reason for this was that in Genesis the account of Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac in chapter 22 is followed only a few verses later by the report of the matriarch’s death. We know that in some synagogues the two stories, the aqedah and the death of Sarah, constituted a single Torah portion to be read to the congregation.⁶⁶

The juxtaposition of the “binding of Isaac” and Sarah’s demise prompted speculation that there was a cause-effect relation between the two happenings. A passage in Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer tells of a visit to Sarah by Sammael/Satan, who knows of, and is frustrated by, Abraham’s fidelity to God at the altar he has prepared for Isaac on the mountain. During the time when Abraham and his son are at the mountain in Moriah, Sammael falsely informs Sarah that Isaac has been slain and given to God as a burnt offering by her husband. Sarah weeps, then wails aloud with three long and three short cries like those of the shofar, and dies.⁶⁷ It is the stuff of tragedy—a dangerous deceiver, working off to the side of drama’s main action, turns to the woman who had once laughed in incredulity, and brings her to tears of agony and to her death, even while the God of Abraham is rescuing her son, their son, at center-stage. Sympathy for Sarah, even among those who take the moral point about her vulnerabilities, must have brought an image of her to mind.

The latter part of this chapter has been an exploration of how Jewish mosaic artists at Sepphoris chose to represent Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac and Ishmael both similarly and differently from those descriptions we possess in literary texts. Sharply evident in the work of the artists of the (p.153) Sepphoris synagogue are indications that the Jews knew themselves to be debating a scriptural story held in common with their rivals.
Herbert Kessler’s comments about the importance of the synagogue and its art illumine the interactions between religious communities that are this study’s principal interest.

What this new discovery tells us about the relationship of Jewish to Christian art during late antiquity, then, is appropriately complex. It supports the hypothesis that Christians may well have based some of their imagery on Jewish models; but it reminds us, as well, that they did so only within the polemics of who are the Chosen People. Moreover, it suggests that the Jews, in turn, deployed the shared pictorial repertory to stake out their own claims, particularly their faith that their covenant with God had not been abrogated but would, indeed, be renewed. And while Jews may well have taken the lead in deploying Roman artistic forms to their own religious purposes, by the 5th c. they seem to be following the Christians, or at least, to be in dialogue with them. The faceless Helios [in the Zodiac], the omission of Isaac carrying faggots, and even the spectacular representation of Aaron consecrating the Tabernacle might well be responses, not initiatives, in a debate over who was the true heir to God’s grace, a debate conducted, in part at least, through pictures. Seen from this perspective, viewed through the lens of Christian art, the Sepphoris mosaic appears even more clearly and uniquely Jewish.”

In how many ways and with what intended goals did early Christian interpreters explore the scriptural story of Abraham’s two women and their sons? We have already had glimpses of their viewpoint and tactics, but the next chapter treats more fully the manner in which churches’ teachers and artists pressed the assertion that the story’s meaning became clear only with and subsequent to the appearance of Jesus as God’s annointed one—and Son. Two important factors were operative in the churches’ appropriation of Abraham’s narrative. First, it was Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, and the covenant of God made available through them and their posterity that Christians laid claim to—not Abraham’s other family. Second, originating as a sect within Judaism, believers that Jesus was God’s promised messiah asserted that they had become God’s favored people, and obviously found themselves immediately (and also permanently) in debate, conflict, and controversy with their parent religion. In the next chapter we shall become acquainted with the churches’ determined efforts to Christianize Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac.

Notes:

(2.) We notice the echo, or replay, of the theme in 12:17: “But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife,” causing the Pharaoh to summon Abraham and ask him why he has deceived (and punished) him.


(4.) See, for example, 1 Chronicles 29:18 and Exodus 33:1, where God speaks of the land he “swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”; also Leviticus 26:42, and Jeremiah 33:26.

(6.) Reflecting on the child-bearing of the matriarchs—Sarah and Rebekah, notably—we read a passage from the Jerusalem Talmud in H. Freedman and M. Simon, Midrash Rabbah, vol. 1, p. 378, n. 1: “Y.T.: Righteous women, as in the case of Sarah, find pregnancy more difficult of attainment than rubies.”

(7.) In this instance, and in the one involving Abimelech, the rulers gave their daughters to Sarah. The reasoning: “Better let my daughter be a handmaid in this house [i.e., the house of woman of Sarah’s character and God-protected power] than a mistress in another house.” See Freedman, Simon, Midrash Rabbah: Genesis, GR XLV.1, 380.

(8.) GR XLV.4, 381.

(9.) Ibid. Freedman, at 381, n. 6, gives the literal translation of “by an effort of will power” as “they mastered themselves.”

(10.) GR XLV.4, 381.

(11.) GR XLV.4, 382.

(12.) Ibid.

(13.) GR XLV.5, 383. Explanatory additions in brackets are my own.

(14.) GR XLV.6, 384.

(15.) GR XLV.6, 384.

(16.) GR XLV.7, 385.

(17.) GR XLV.9, 386.

(18.) An interpretation of 16:12 (NRSV: “And he shall live at odds with all his kin”) tends in the same direction, likening Ishmael to an enemy of Israel who “fell” (suggested in place of “dwell” on the basis of Ishmael’s death in Genesis 25:17) before an attempt to “stretch out his hand against the Temple” (GR XLV. 9). But which enemy of Israel is in view—Nabatea, and their king, Artese? The armies of Rome? See Freedman, Simon, Midrash Rabbah: Genesis, 387, n. 1.

(19.) See 1 Chronicles 5:19: “they went to war with the Hagarites,” and also 1 Chronicles 5:10, 5:20.

(20.) Gerald Friedlander, Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer. Kugel, Traditions, 933, writes of the work: “Its allusions to Islamic culture and to Arab rule over the land of Israel certainly suggest that this work was put into its final form after the Arab conquest—according to some, as late as the eighth or ninth century CE. At the same time, the text preserves many ancient traditions, including quite a few known only from the biblical Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha.”
At GR LII.10, 468–69, we see the rabbis elaborating upon the great feast in colorful terms. The conquest element is strongly projected. Og is there, dressed down by “the Great One of the world” for his impudence in calling Isaac scrawny. God proceeds to warn him that he will see myriads of Isaac’s descendants, and be done in by them. Reference is made to Numbers 21:34: “And the Lord said unto Moses: Fear him not; for I have delivered him into thy hand.” The celebratory meal was ominous. Thirty-one (or more) of the kings slain by Joshua were all there. The passage’s message is clear: the fates of Israel’s (later) foes were sealed already in the days of the first patriarch.

Ishmael was born fourteen years before Isaac. See Genesis 16:14 and 21:5.

Many tomes have been devoted to the topic, but see the brief essay, “Representational Art,” 366–371. Rachel Hachlili’s “Synagogues in the Land of Israel,” 113, quotes “an Aramaic paraphrase in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of Leviticus 26:1, which
modifies the Bible’s stern prohibition against making and bowing down to ‘carved stone’:

... nor shall you place a figured stone in your land to bow down upon it. But a pavement figured with images and likenesses you may make on the floor of your synagogue[s]. And do not bow down [idolatrously] to it, for I am the Lord your God.

(41.) Ze’ev Weiss and Ehud Netzer, Promise and Redemption. See also Ze’ev Weiss, The Sepphoris Synagogue, 360 pages + 211 illustrations.

(42.) See Seth Schwartz, Imperialism and Jewish Society, 142–145, [203]–206. Christian buildings in Sepphoris are described in Ze’ev Weiss and Ehud Netzer, “Sepphoris in the Byzantine Period,” 81–89. The authors comment (85): “The proximity of private and public buildings, both on the acropolis and in lower Sepphoris is rather surprising, as this phenomenon has not been encountered elsewhere in Palestine. In both Roman and Byzantine Sepphoris large and ornate mansions were built close to simple homes, a feature noted throughout the city. Moreover, a clear and rigid division into neighborhoods according to social, religious, or economic status cannot be discerned.”

(43.) The quotation is from Ze’ev Weiss, “The Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic and the Role of Talmudic Literature in Its Iconographical Study,” 20–21.

(44.) Essays in Levine and Weiss, eds., From Dura to Sepphoris, engage in various ways the interpretation advanced by Weiss and Netzer in Promise and Redemption. A challenging critique and re-evaluation appears in Schartz, Imperialism, 248–259.


(46.) Robin M. Jensen, Face to Face, 120: “The equality of the three [visitors] and their function as symbols of the three distinct persons [of God] with one shared nature may be intentionally expressed by the composition. Here, however, the iconography also points to the importance of the eucharistic offering made directly below, at the altar in the center of the presbyterium.”


(49.) The hand of God first appears in Jewish art in just this scene painted next to the Dura Europos synagogue’s Torah shrine, though in that instance, the ram’s horns, entangled in a tree, hold him in place; there is no rope tether.

(50.) Mishnah Yoma 5.6.2–6, and Talmud Yoma 39a, b.

(51.) See the provocative treatment of this question of the ram tied to, rather than caught up in the tree’s branches, in Kessler, “Art Leading the Story,” 73–81, esp. 78–81. Kessler’s concluding sentences are these: “Artists also expanded the role of the ram. The
ram in the Biblical story is on the mountain in the land of Moriah by chance and plays a minor role in Rabbinic literature, whereas in artistic midrash the ram is quite different through its significant size and prominent placement.”

(52.) GR LV1.5, 495.

(53.) GR LV1.9, 498.

(54.) GR LV1.9, 499.

(55.) See Levenson, Death and Resurrection, [173]-199.

(56.) The translation is from Samuel A. Berman, Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu, 148-149. For the history of the text, see Marc Bregman, The Tanhuma-Yelammedenu Literature.

(57.) Levine and Weiss, From Dura to Sepphoris, 27.

(58.) See Joseph Yahalom, “The Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic and Its Story,” 84, for his comments about “barefoot worship and the sanctuary.”

(59.) See Clement of Alexandria, The Instructor (Paedagogus) 1.5.23, and Origen, Genesis Homily VIII. 6. Origen, while interpreting themes from Hebrews 5–10 for his third-century congregation, proclaimed: “That Isaac himself carries on himself ‘the wood for the holocaust’ is a figure because Christ also ‘himself carried his own cross,’ [cf. John 19:17] and yet to carry ‘the wood for the holocaust’ is the duty of a priest. He himself, therefore, becomes both victim and priest.” The translation is from Ronald E. Heine, Origen, 140–41.

(60.) Hebert Kessler, “The Sepphoris Mosaic and Christian Art,” 66, 70. Kessler adds (70): “the text accompanying the miniatures depicting the sacrifice of Isaac in the manuscripts of the Christian topography provides a typological reading of the Hebrew Bible; Isaac carrying the fire wood on his shoulders on the way to his sacrificial death is taken as a type of Jesus carrying the cross to Golgotha, ‘Abraham leading his son to sacrifice on one of the mountains symbolizes the mystery of the passion and resurrection of Christ’. Any such interpretation is, of course, precluded in a synagogue floor mosaic.”

(61.) Edward Kessler, Bound by the Bible.

(62.) Edward Kessler, Bound by the Bible, 29.

(63.) Ibid., 113.

(64.) Ibid., 115, 116. It is because of attention to the question of Isaac’s willingness that rabbinical texts (unlike Jewish artistic representations) point to his maturity (thirty-seven years of age, twice in GR). Kessler, 110–113, proposes that this emphasis serves as a counter against some Christian arguments (like that of Melito of Sardis) that Isaac, as
antetype, was preparatory and “young” in relation to Christ crucified, who actualized what Isaac had only typified. This competitive interplay between interpretations is, Kessler insists, another case of “exegetical encounter” between Jewish and Christian interpreters of Genesis 22:1–19.

(65.) PRE 31, 224, trans. slightly altered. Joseph Yahalom, “The Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic and its story,” in Levine and Weiss, eds., From Dura to Sepphoris, 87, calls attention to this exchange between Eliezer and Ishmael in its several versions in Pirke d’Rabbi Eliezer and in the later Midrash Hagadol and Midrash VaYosha, and offers his own commentary on the two as they appear in the Sepphoris mosaic: “The picture in the mosaic ... which shows Eliezer holding, or waving, the rope that is tied to the ass, seems to support his claim to Abraham’s possessions. (He was, in other words, a loyal servant.) On the other hand, Ishmael’s spear, the weapon of war used in the desert, indicates a clear threat to the faithful servant.”


(67.) PRE 32, 233–234.