Comparative Summary

Sarah and Hagar: Mothers to Three Families

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How did Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures and their interpreters treat the relationships between Sarah and Hagar—and between their sons? This guiding query in chapters 4 through 6 produced, more than anything else, our discovery of profound differences in viewpoint and fundamental beliefs between the three religions. Narratives of Abraham and his two women, when fashioned to serve each community, resulted in Sarah and Hagar becoming mothers to three families—three diverging religions.

The clash between Sarah and Hagar described so vividly in Genesis chapters 16–18 and 21 attracted further exploration and comment in Genesis Rabbah, where we found rabbis intensifying the women’s animosity. Hagar’s arrogance and ill-will were increased in further (imagined) incidents, explaining and justifying some of Sarah’s harsh actions toward her. (The biblical traditions that identified the Hagarites and the Ishmaelites as enemies of the Jews were obviously influential in the exegetes’ expanded characterizations of Abraham’s two women.) The wonder of Sarah’s birth-giving received celebrative treatments, to which were added reports of
miraculous healings accomplished by her milk. Because the scriptural account did not explain what Sarah witnessed in Ishmael’s “playing,” the rabbis provided numerous opinions— for example, that she saw him threatening Isaac with his archery, or “ravishing maidens,” or committing idolatry. These actions explained Sarah’s defense of Isaac, and her demand that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away. Abraham’s pangs of concern for Ishmael, (p.218) his firstborn son, were treated sympathetically by the rabbis, we noted, and the theologizing about how God found Ishmael worthy of being saved when he (and his mother) were at the point of death, was ingenious. What presides over, and is woven into, these many elements of commentary in Genesis Rabbah, we recognized, was the claim so firmly established in the Genesis account—that the covenant made by God with Abraham belonged to those children of his whose foremother was Sarah, and who stemmed from the line of Isaac—and Jacob, and Joseph.

In a panel in the mosaic floor of the Sepphoris synagogue we saw the bare remnants of the scene in which this promise that Sarah would bear Isaac was delivered by visitors. The commonalities and the differences in Jewish and Christian understandings of this episode—and of the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham—brought to our attention the close familiarity of each religion’s scripture interpreters with the others’ lines of reasoning and distinctive religious convictions. Matters under debate strongly and directly influenced the production of their diverging interpretations of the same story.

Attempts by Christian interpreters to make the Bible’s account of the strife between Abraham’s two women and sons serve the churches’ best interests were definite and aggressive. The apostle Paul’s bold (and idiosyncratic) allegory of Abraham’s family and its divisions (Hagar representing Mt. Sinai and slavery under the law, and Sarah representing heavenly Jerusalem and freedom) commenced, only a few decades after Jesus’s public ministry, the construction of a radical Christian claim: the covenant blessing God first bestowed upon Abraham and his successors through Isaac had passed from the Jews to the new community (composed of both Jews and Gentiles) who believed Jesus was God’s promised messiah. The sermon on the birth of Isaac by the theologian and biblical
scholar Origen showed us his careful attention to the story, his way of using (differently from Paul) Sarah and Hagar “to think with,” and his consistent push to bring the biblical episode’s challenges directly to the lives and life decisions of his hearers. Were not the characters of the two brothers, and tensions between them, now present in the churches, where some believers clung to God out of fear, while others turned to God with the “freedom of love”?

A remarkable painting in the Ashburnham Pentateuch of Sarah and Hagar together, their boys skirmishing in front of them, showed Sarah asking the enthroned Abraham to deny any inheritance to Ishmael. We found this characterization of Sarah to be not only literal—that is, true to what the biblical text describes—but also thematic, since Sarah’s demand upholds and defends the covenant promise that belongs to their son Isaac and to those who stand in his line. Sarah’s uprightness and confidence\footnote{p.219} in God was similarly reflected in two contiguous scenes which portrayed (1) her endangerment in the palace of Abimelech, whose dreams warned him not to seek sex with her, since she was Abraham’s wife, not his sister, and showed (2) her release, vindicated, from the king’s house.

In the splendid mosaic within Sta. Maria Maggiore which depicted the three men who visited Abraham, and were fed by him and Sarah, we met another Christian interpretive presentation of Sarah: the angelic promise of her wondrous pregnancy and the birth of her son symbolically prefigured the event principally pictured in the great Roman basilica—Christ’s birth to Mary.

We learned that not in the Qur’an, but in Muslim commentaries treating Abraham and his sons, and particularly in the genre of stories of the prophets, we gain access to many other traditions about Sarah/Sara and Hagar/Hajar. Those sources, replete with isra’iliyyat—traditions from the Jews and Christians—treat and elaborate upon the competition and conflict between the women and their sons. There is Qur’anic reference to Ibrahim’s wife (with Sarah the person being indicated), but Hagar goes unmentioned (since the relationship between the two women is not reported), even
though it is implied that she was among those whom Abraham
sent to a barren place near God’s “sacred House.” Hagar’s
importance appears, we noted, in the Qur’an’s endorsement in
14:37 of Meccan pilgrims’ sa’y, the running between the hills
of Safa and Marwa, as she desperately had done, looking for
help for Ishmael, when he lay dying of thirst.

The rise and development in the ninth and tenth centuries CE
of Muslim traditions concerning Mecca, the fortunes of Hagar
and Ishmael at the well of Zamzam, and the commission of
Abraham and Ishmael to build God’s house did not prevent
writers like al-Tabari and al-Tha’labi from revisiting the lore of
Sarah’s harsh relationship with Hagar, speculating about
whether circumcision was the punishment inflicted by the
mistress on her slave, or what kind of playing by Ishmael led
to the expulsion of him and his mother from Abraham’s
household in Syria. However, it was not the portrait of Hagar,
oppressed, that prevailed in Muslim cultural consciousness.
Rather, her endurance of trial and testing when the water
supply ran out for her and her son, the miracle of the gushing
forth of the spring, and more fundamentally, as Barbara
Stowasser wrote, her being “part of the divine plan to
establish God’s true sanctuary and its rituals” marked her as
one of God agents, an exemplar of faithful submission and
duty. This honor of Hagar was, and is, preserved, in her burial
—and her son, Ishmael’s—near the prophet Abraham’s
maqam, or standing place, at the Ka’ba.

Finally, the imagination of Muslim interpreters of Abraham
and his women took us to a new chapter—a grand conclusion
—in the saga. A painting illuminating a manuscript of
al-Nisaburi’s Qisas al-anbiya we discovered to be not a
celebration of the completion of the Ka’ba by Abraham and
Ishmael, but the depiction of a reunion of the two halves of
Abraham’s family (Sarah having been required to forgive and
reconcile). Gathered together before God’s house (as al-
Nisaburi had imagined in his story-expansion), the angel
Gabriel announces that Sarah will give birth to Isaac. The
painting and the text’s narrative present a reunion of
Abraham, his women, and his sons, and accomplishes this in a
decidedly Muslim denouement of the story—centered in
Mecca, the place of true worship and of true blessings from God the merciful.

The significantly different values and goals that became transparent as we plumbed several Jewish, Christian, and Muslim understandings of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael provided compelling evidence not only of the three communities’ knowledge of each others’ belief systems and traditions, but also the sharpening social divergence due in significant measure to debate over their scriptures’ messages and meanings.