

CHARACTERISATION AND PLOT(S) IN GENESIS 16: A NARRATIVE-CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

A narrative analysis of the plot(s) of Genesis 16 brings to the fore the motifs of barrenness, wilderness, and divine encounter, and indicates that the text presupposes God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael, which is more clearly emphasised in Genesis 17 and 21. Be that as it may, one of the major tasks facing a narrative-critical reader of Genesis 16 is to account for the author's special concentration on the characters of Hagar and Ishmael in a narrative that majorly concerns Abraham and his household. Does this focus suggest the divine election of Hagar and Ishmael? In this article, I shall demonstrate that the motifs of barrenness, wilderness, and divine encounter are narrative devices used by the narrator to underline, in advance, the "theology of separation" and God's compassion for, and salvation of, the afflicted. I shall also analyse how some factors in the narrative portray God's and the narrator's disapproval of Sarah's involvement of Hagar in her marital life. This shows that Abraham and Sarah tried to bring about the fulfilment of God's promise in their own way, which is contrary to the plan of YHWH, who had plans (of election) for Isaac. In other words, the focus on Hagar and Ishmael does not presuppose divine election of them, it rather prefigures, among other things, that the place of Ishmael would be in the wilderness.

Keywords: Genesis 16; Plot; Characterisation; Narrative analysis; Barrenness; Wilderness; Divine encounter

Introduction

Over the years an enormous amount of research has been undertaken on Gen. 16. However, the characterisation and plot(s) of the narrative deserve more attention. Among other things, a narrative-critical analysis of these narrative elements points to the motifs of barrenness, wilderness, and divine encounter. These motifs, especially the last two, have been alluded to by some scholars to argue that Gen. 16 emphasises the characters (and "election") of Hagar and Ishmael more than it accentuates the pursuit of progeny on the part of Abraham and Sarah and the narrator's presupposition of the election of Isaac (Dozeman 1998:23–43; Nikaïdo 2001:219–242). But scholars also observe that the narrative plot(s) of the narrative and the way the narrator presents the characters show that the text presupposes God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael, which is more clearly emphasised in Gen. 17 and 21. However, it must be noted that one of the major tasks facing a narrative critic of Gen. 16 is to account for the author's special interest in the characters of Hagar and Ishmael in a narrative that majorly concerns Abraham and Sarah's desire to have a child. By analysing the plots and the roles of the characters of

the narrative, I aim to demonstrate that the motifs of barrenness, wilderness, and divine encounter are narrative devices used by the narrator to underline, in advance, the “theology of separation” and God’s compassion for, and salvation of, the afflicted. I shall also analyse how some factors in the narrative portray God’s and the narrator’s disapproval of Sarah’s involvement of Hagar in her plan to have a child. This implies that Abraham and Sarah tried to bring about the fulfilment of God’s promise in a way that was contrary to the plan of YHWH, who had plans (of election) for Isaac.

This article is divided into three major parts. In the first part, I shall briefly discuss the meaning or/and importance of characters and plots in biblical narratives. This will include briefly explaining the five stages of plots in biblical narratives. I will dedicate the second part to the analysis of the various stages of plots as they apply to Gen. 16. In the course of this analysis, the motifs of barrenness, wilderness, and divine encounter as they apply to the various characters of the narrative, will be discussed. Finally, I will explore the narrator’s perspective in the narrative, arguing that there are reasons to think that the plan of Abraham and Sarah to have a child through Hagar, as it is presented in the narrative, neither enjoys the narrator’s approval nor God’s endorsement. In other words, the concentration on Hagar and Ishmael does not presuppose their divine election, it rather prefigures, among other things, that the place of Ishmael would be in the wilderness.

Characterisation and plot(s) in biblical narrative

Characterisation and plot are two important factors in Narrative Criticism. It is through the characters, be they fictional or historical characters, that the views of narrators are expressed and narrators communicate with their readers. Narrators often present the characters’ points of view about the major issues in the narratives.

Also, every narrative that involves the narrator’s interaction with the characters requires narrative plots which facilitate the flow of the story. A plot is a systematic and a well-thought-out plan through which the intentions of the narrator or the writer can be communicated. Hence, writers or redactors carefully choose what to include or exclude in the development of the story. They may have obtained their story from different conflicting sources, but they intend to make logical sense of the sources they use (as far as possible).

Gunn and Fewell (1993:102) and Marguerat and Bourquin (1999:43–45) note that five major stages of plots can be identified in biblical narratives: Exposition (initial situation), conflict (or complication), transforming action, *dénouement* (resolution), and final situation. A brief explanation of these stages is necessary, since I shall apply them in my analysis of Gen. 16.

As the term implies, *exposition* reveals the initial situation that requires attention. It could be an unfulfilled desire or a lack. It initiates the major series of events in narratives and prepares the minds of readers to understand that there is a situation that needs to be addressed. In this way, the appetite of the reader is stimulated. This initial situation identifies the “who”, “what”, and sometimes “how” (Marguerat and Bourquin 1999: 43). Who are the characters involved? What is the major problem? And how did this problem come about?

Conflict or *complication* has to do with the challenge that arises in an attempt to solve the problem pointed out in the initial situation. Here the tension in the narrative unfolds.

In the words of Abasili (2016:28), “it is at this stage of the narrative that the reader’s interests are given the greatest boost”. The expectation becomes higher and the reader wonders how the problem could be solved.

The *transforming action* is the turning point of the story. It includes the attempt or the series of attempts to bring about a solution to the problem evident in the narrative, a problem that triggers tension as discussed in the second stage. The difference between complication and transforming action is minimal. The aim of transforming action is, according to Marguerat and Bourquin (1999:44), to remove the difficulty announced by the story, while complication aims to trigger the action and bring about dramatic tension.

The *resolution* stage has to do with the solution to the problem which is raised in the stages of complication and transforming action. Here the consequences of the transforming action or the series of transforming actions for the character or characters involved are described. This stage further describes how serenity is restored and also has to do with the resolving of complications.

The *final situation* is the conclusion of the narrative. It describes a new situation that has been brought about as a result of the sequence of words and deeds in the narrative. In what follows, I discuss how these five stages of plots apply in the selected narrative.

The plot(s) of Genesis 16

Here I shall discuss the five stages of plots as they apply to Gen. 16. In the course of this discussion, I shall also address the motifs of barrenness and childlessness, wilderness, and God’s compassion for the afflicted, noting the purpose they serve in the narrative.

Exposition (v. 1): Barrenness and childlessness

Sarah’s¹ barrenness is the problem introduced in the first verse of Gen. 16. Although Sarah was Abraham’s wife, she had not given birth to a child for Abraham. These are two incompatible realities, at least in ancient Israel. “In the ANE context, a ‘real’ wife was by definition, a woman who bore children for the perpetuation of her husband’s lineage” (De-Whyte 2018:82). This is in line with Naomi Steinberg’s view that the barrenness of Sarah has the function of informing the readers about the crisis facing Abraham (lack of heir) and the need to determine and search for this heir (Steinberg 1993:44). This lack presupposes the uniqueness of the birth of Isaac (cf. 21:1–7); a special birth of a special child. The major characters include Sarah, the wife of Abraham (אשרם אשת), Abraham, the husband of Sarah, and Hagar, the Egyptian² (שפחה מצרית), the maiden of Sarah. Sarah is naturally expected to give birth to children for the genealogical continuity of the family. She also holds the privilege of power over Hagar who is only a maidservant, accountable to her and not to Abraham (Westermann 1985:238), since “the maiden attended primarily to the personal needs of her mistress and was not the common

¹ Note that Abraham and Sarah came to be known by these names only in chapter 17:5 when their names were respectively changed from Abram to Abraham and from Sarai to Sarah. For the purpose of this research and for the sake of consistency, I shall refer to them as “Abraham” and “Sarah” respectively. However, I shall retain the preference of scholars in this regard when I directly quote their work. This is also applicable when I quote directly from the biblical texts (Gen. 11–21) where their names are mentioned.

² The designation מצרית שפחה has often been linked to the incident in Gen. 12 where, for the sake of Sarah, Abraham is given gifts, including male and female slaves.

property of husband and wife” (Sarna 1989:119). More so, the Hebrew rendering וְלָהּ, which expresses the idea of possession, indicates Sarah’s right and authority over Hagar.

Sarah has no son and seems to have lost hope of giving birth to a son who would become the heir of Abraham. This situation is captured by the statement לֹא יֵלְדָהּ לוֹ (bore him no child). This genealogical gap brought about by the barrenness of the wife of Abraham presupposes the need to seek for a solution to this situation.³ Note the expression that begins the narrative: וְשָׂרָי אִשְׁתֵּי אַבְרָם לֹא יֵלְדָהּ לוֹ (Sarai the wife of Abram bore him no child, NRSV). As has been observed by many scholars, in Hebrew syntax, the verb-subject-object (VSO) word order enjoys an overwhelming statistical dominance over the subject-verb-object (SVO) word order and is often referred to as the basic Hebrew word order (Moshavi 2010:10–17). However, Gen. 16:1 begins with the subject. This “unusual” syntactic structure of the sentence could be explained based on the intention of the writer to emphasise the identity of the subject, Sarah. While Gen. 15 focuses on Abraham and his lack of progeny, from the outset of Gen. 16, the emphasis shifts from Abraham to Sarah. This seems to show that the narrator does not call attention only to her actions expressed by the verbs attributed to her, but also her personality. The major issue of the narrative is centred around Sarah, whose barrenness must have been a situation of great concern. She needs to find a solution to her problem of barrenness. But she has to plan along with her husband, Abraham. This brings me to the next level of the plots of Gen. 16.

Complication (vv. 2–5): Hagar looks down on Sarah

Verses 2–5 are crucial in the analysis of Gen. 16 because they play an important role in the development of the story. This section relates the efforts of Sarah to bring about a solution to her problem of barrenness and childlessness by involving Hagar, and exposes how this plan leads to a more complicated tension. Sarah’s assessment of her situation of barrenness is that it is YHWH who prevents her from bearing children (v. 2). She, therefore, suggests to Abraham that he go in to Hagar to have a child through her. Sarah’s proposal resonates with the provisions of many ANE marriage laws. For instance, the Hammurabi code 145 and 146 contains the following provisions:

If a man marries a *naditu* [priestess]⁴, and she does not provide him with children, and that man then decides to marry a *sugitu* [maiden], that man may marry the *sugitu* and bring her into his house; that *sugitu* should not aspire to equal status with the *naditu*.

If a man marries a *naditu*, and she gives a slave woman to her husband and she then bears children, after which that slave woman aspires to equal status with her mistress – because she bore children, her mistress will not sell her; she shall place upon her the slave-hairlock, and she shall reckon her with the slave women. (Roth 1997:109)

³ The genealogical notes often begin with אלה תולדת (these are the generations) as in the case of Shem and Terah in Gen 11:10, 27. But in the case of Abraham, the barrenness of his wife meant a break in the genealogical note and presupposed a special focus on him.

⁴ This law was applicable only to some women with the status of a priestess. Even though Sarah is not referred to as a priestess in the narrative, the meaning of her name (princess) seems to indicate that she was a woman of great status (De Vries 1962:219–220; Yee 1992:981–982). But being a woman of great status does not necessarily imply that she was a priestess. The narrative makes no such claims.

As can be noted, the Hammurabi code 146 permitted a childless woman to offer a maiden to her husband so that she could bear children for the husband. This similarity between Sarah's action in Gen. 16:2 and the provisions of the above text arguably suggest that Sarah was following a widely practiced marriage system.

Why did Sarah want a child through Hagar? Was this desire connected with the genealogical continuity of Abraham and Sarah's family, in which case YHWH's promise is given consideration, or was she acting to raise her status as a married woman? These questions arise as a result of the statement which the narrator presents as Sarah's motive for her action – אבנה – which could be translated as “that I may be built up”.⁵ Many scholars opine that the above Hebrew expression should be understood against the background of Sarah's desire to bring to fulfilment God's promise to Abraham (Von Rad 1963:186; Speiser 1964:120; Neufeld 2006:137). Neufeld, in particular, believes that Sarah was “aware that if she were to remain passive, Abram would, in the end, seek to provide the child of promise through another channel” (Neufeld 2006:137). Contrary to this, Drey (2002) argues that Sarah's intention to be “built up” had nothing to do with the promise made to Abraham. He presents two major reasons for this position. First, Sarah's concern was selfish, second, the gender of the child is not mentioned (Drey 2002:186–187).

The verbal form, אבנה (first person singular of בנה), excludes Abraham's need for a child and suggests that Sarah was more preoccupied with her personal desire to be built up than she was with bringing about the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham. In line with this argument, Fewell and Gunn (1993:45) maintain that Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham, not for Abraham's sake, but to consolidate her self-worth and security as a woman.⁶ This idea is further strengthened by the fact that the same expression occurs in Gen. 30:1–3 when Rachael hands over her maid to Jacob to be “built up”, even though her husband, Jacob, already had sons. According to Teubal (1984:33), אבנה is used in Gen. 16:2 to denote the desire for lineage or succession. She maintains that in the translation “that I may be built up”, “Sarah is not necessarily hoping to have a son; and she is indicating that she intends to regard the maid's child as her offspring, not her husband's” (Teubal 1984:33). This argument is not in line with the textual witness of the LXX of the translation of MT's אבנה.

The LXX's τεκνοποιήσης (that you may have a child, LXE) shifts the subject of the verb from first person singular to second person singular. In this case, the emphasis is on Abraham becoming a father and not on Sarah being built up. Hence, while the LXX's translation could be connected to the desire to fulfil God's promise of progeny, MT concentrates on Sarah being built up. Whatever the case, even though there is nothing in MT's translation of Gen. 16 to suggest that it was Sarah's desire to bring about God's fulfilment that led to her plan of having a child through Hagar, the impression that this desire of hers was tied to the desire of Abraham to have an heir should not be excluded. The situation of Sarah is unique when compared with that of Rachael: both Abraham and Sarah were childless. On this basis, the second argument of Drey is not convincing. Even

⁵ KJV, RSV, NRSV, and NET prefer the translation, “that I may obtain children”.

⁶ They liken this action of Sarah to that of Abraham in Gen. 12. They both offer the women in their possession for the sake of their security. According to them, Abraham traded the sexuality of Sarah for the sake of the security of his life, while Sarah traded the sexuality of Hagar to secure her place as the wife of Abraham.

though the gender of the child is not mentioned, “being built up” here presupposes, among other things, a desire for genealogical continuity. Speiser (1964:120) and Zucker and Reiss (2009:3) endorse this line of thought when they state that אבנה is a wordplay on בן (son). Thus, in the context of Gen. 16:2, אבנה could mean “that I may have a son”. Nevertheless, this does not imply an objection to the argument that Sarah’s expression of her desire to have a child through Hagar was egocentric. Whether the desire of Sarah was linked to Abraham’s search for an heir or not, he had to play a role in Sarah’s desire to be built up. And his response to Sarah’s suggestion is evident in the statement וישמע אברם לקול שרי (and Abram listened to the voice of Sarai, NRSV).⁷

The expression וישמע אברם לקול שרי requires special attention. The Hebrew verb שמע is semantically complex, and would later become a keyword in characterising Israel’s relationship with God – a word which expressed their choice to follow the dictates of YHWH and reject other gods (cf. Deut. 6:4–9). Among other things, it implies, “to heed the voice of someone”, “to fulfil a request”, “to follow one’s advice”, “to obey an order or command”, “to consent to a suggestion” etc. (Schult 1971:1704–1711; Schoville 1997:175–184). Abraham’s listening to Sarah in Gen. 16 is reminiscent of the creation narrative in which Adam listened to the voice of his wife (Gen. 3:17).

By stating that Abraham listened to the voice of Sarah, the narrator seems to prepare the reader to keep in mind how listening to the voice of Sarah conflicts with harkening to God’s plan. Even though this is not stated in this narrative, YHWH’s appearance to Abraham after the birth of Ishmael (Gen. 17), in which YHWH talks about the birth of Isaac, seems to suggest God’s disapproval of the way Abraham went about acquiring a child. Thus, God says to him in 17:1, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.” Here the term אל שדי (God almighty) implies a sense of the supremacy of God and his plan over the human plan. According to Herbert Lockyer, it highlights God’s “power to fulfil every promise He had made His people” (Lockyer 1975:12–13). Abraham wanted to bring about the fulfilment of God’s promise of an heir in his own way, and not in God’s way. He carried out a plan which God did not approve of and he is informed that God is the almighty whom he should walk before and be blameless.

Abraham went in to Hagar, as was suggested by Sarah, and she conceived (ותהר). One would expect that the statement “and she conceived” (ותהר) regarding Hagar would imply that Sarah’s plan to have a child through Hagar would be a perfect solution to her problem of childlessness. On the contrary, Hagar looked down (ותקל) on her. The text is silent about the exact action or attitude of Hagar towards Sarah. But this attitude of Hagar threatened the legal status of Sarah, provoking jealousy and bitterness in her. This is expressed in Gen. 16:5 which contains a statement of one who is embittered and full of regrets. In this verse, Sarah expresses her pain and frustration, and accuses Abraham of being culpable (המסי עליך) for Hagar’s disdainful action towards her, and appeals to YHWH, whom she blames for her childlessness, to be the judge (ישפט יהוה) between her and Abraham (ביני וביניך). Elements of regret can be observed in Sarah’s expression. She does not refer to Hagar by her new status (a wife of Abraham) but calls her שפחתי (my maiden). She seems to regret that she had given Hagar to Abraham as a wife. This expression of regret captures the narrator’s disapproval of her involvement of Hagar in

⁷ From here on I shall use the NRSV for direct quotations from the Bible and will indicate when I use other versions.

her pursuit of a child. Abraham in turn gives a response that allows Sarah to handle the situation her way. “Then Sarai dealt harshly with her and she ran away from her” (16:6).

Transforming action (v. 6): Sarah oppresses Hagar and she flees

In Gen. 16: 6 Sarah responds to the disdainful attitude of Hagar by oppressing her. Since the plan of Sarah to have a child through Hagar brought more complications rather than a solution – the threat to her social status as the mistress and the main wife of Abraham – she had to take measures to solve the problem. After she expresses her pain and regrets and receives the approval of Abraham, she deals harshly with Hagar who later runs away (ברח). It is noteworthy that in Gen. 16, Abraham speaks for the first time in v. 6. The words that he speaks, הנה שפחתך בידך עשי לה הטוב בעיניך, (“Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please”, RSV), suggest that the narrator presents him as being ready to act according to the desires of Sarah without considering how Hagar would feel. This is also in line with his listening to Sarah in v. 2. Furthermore, while Sarah hands Hagar over to Abraham as a wife (אשה), and not as a maiden (שפחה), Abraham refers to Hagar as the maiden of Sarah, telling her (Sarah) that her maiden is at her disposal to do with her what is good in her eyes. Sarah, who determines what is good in her eyes, treats Hagar harshly and Hagar runs away.

The statement ותענה שרי (and Sarah oppressed her) and its resultant effect (flight of Hagar) depict a relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. Hagar may have departed out of her own volition (Exum 2019:74), but she must have been harshly dealt with. Whatever Sarah’s action or attitude towards her, it must have been extremely severe to make Hagar run away into the wilderness despite her pregnancy. The Hebrew term ותענה, which captures the action or series of actions of Sarah towards Hagar and which made the latter flee, was also used to express the oppression of the Hebrews by the Egyptians (Ex. 1:11–12). In Ex. 1:11 it is clear that the Egyptians oppressed the Hebrews through forced labour (בטבלתם). But the reader is not informed of the exact act of Sarah to Hagar in Gen. 16. Whatever the case, the Hebrew expressions גברתה בעיניה (which refers to the action of Hagar towards her mistress) and ותענה שרי (which captures what Sarah did to oppress Hagar) bring to the fore the aftermath of Sarah and Abraham’s involvement of Hagar to solve their problem of childlessness. While Sarah was slighted in the sight of Hagar (גברתה בעיניה), Hagar was harshly dealt with by Sarah (ותענה שרי), to the extent that she had to flee into the wilderness where she encountered the angel of YHWH, who instructed her to return to her mistress.

Resolution (vv. 7–14): Divine intervention in the wilderness

The conflict between Sarah and Hagar, which led to the flight of Hagar into the wilderness is resolved by the angel of YHWH who tells Hagar to go back to her mistress and submit to her. The narrative location in vv. 7–14 changes from the house of Abraham and Sarah to the wilderness. The movement of Hagar (who is carrying Ishmael in her womb at this time) into the wilderness prepares the minds of readers for the settlement of Ishmael in the wilderness of Paran (21:21), a location that would play a role in separating Ishmael from Isaac. Hence, it could be argued that the wilderness serves as a narrative device to emphasise the separation motif.

The narrator introduces another character, the angel of YHWH (מלאך יהוה), who plays an important role in the narrative. In vv. 1–6 the angel of YHWH neither acts nor speaks.

He speaks for the first time in the narrative in his encounter with Hagar when he finds her. The syntactic presentation of the finding of Hagar by the angel of the Lord, וַיִּמְצָאָהּ יְהוָה מֵלֶאךָ, not only emphasises the character and function of the angel of the Lord, it also denotes the implication of the Hebrew word מִצָּא in the verse. The object of the verb (her) is not separated from the verb (מִצָּא) itself. The verb מִצָּא is often used to describe God's discovery of evil or disobedience in the life of a person or lives of a people. For instance, in Gen. 44:16, the verb מִצָּא is used when Judah refers to the awareness of God regarding the evil he and his brothers committed against Joseph – הֲאֵלֵהֶם מִצָּא אֶת עֵינַי עַבְדֶּיךָ (God has found out the guilt of your servants). This usage of מִצָּא is in line with Hamilton's statement that "when God is the subject [of מִצָּא], and the following object is impersonal, the reference is normally to God's discovery of evil or sin in somebody" (see also Ps. 10:15; 17:13; Jer. 2:34; 23:11) (Hamilton 1990:451). Concerning the use of מִצָּא in Gen. 16, Hamilton opines that when the object of מִצָּא is personal and the subject is God (or in this case, the angel of YHWH), then the term carries a more technical meaning – divine encounter and divine election.

The incident in Gen. 16:7–14 is a story of the divine encounter of Hagar. The story is so dramatic that Hagar, in her excitement, names the Lord who speaks to her. But this does not in any way suggest any notion of either the election of Hagar or that of her unborn child, Ishmael. One may suggest that the statement, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude" (v. 10) which is made to Hagar and which seems to parallel God's promise to Abraham (see Gen. 12:2; 15:5; 17:8) shows some elements of divine election. But the announcement of the identity of the first offspring of Hagar, "he shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin", challenges this view. The expression "a wild ass of a man" indicates that the place of Ishmael is in the wilderness, not in the household of Abraham. The biblical reference to "a wild ass at home in the wilderness ..." (Jer. 2:24) confirms this view. Ishmael was not only destined to be a wild ass but would also live at odds with all his kin; an indication that he would be a social deviant. This is similar to the experience of Cain, of whom it was announced that he will be a fugitive and vagabond (cf. Gen. 4:10–12). These qualities do not give an impression of divine election.

From the foregoing, one can observe a seeming "double standard" on the part of YHWH – the message of the angel of YHWH to Hagar (and to her unborn son) has both positive and negative implications. But the functions of both the positive and negative sides of the message become clearer if one takes into consideration that an aspect of the message directly concerns Hagar while the other shows what would become of Ishmael:

¹⁰The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply *your* offspring [הַרְבֵּה אֲרִבָּה] that they cannot be counted for multitude." ¹¹And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Now *you* have conceived and shall bear a son [הִרָרָה וְיִלְדֶת בֶּן]; *you* shall call him [וְקָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ] Ishmael, for the LORD, has given heed to *your* affliction.

¹² *He* [וְהוּא] shall be a wild ass of a man [פֶּרִיא אֲדָמָה], with *his* hand [יָדוֹ] against everyone, and everyone's hand against *him* [בְּרֵי]; and *he* shall live at odds with all *his* kin. (Gen.16:10–12)

A close look at these verses reveals that the part of the message addressed to Hagar (vv. 10–11), indicated by the use of the second person singular pronoun, is positive. But the part of the message referring to Ishmael, indicated by the use of the third person singular, (v.12) is somewhat negative. From the perspective of Hagar, YHWH shows compassion by giving heed to her affliction; but Ishmael would have no place in the house of Abraham, whose heir will be Isaac. Ishmael's place would be in the wilderness (Gen. 21:21).

In a recent article, Pigott (2018) challenges the above English translation of Gen. 16:12, and accuses it of presenting a negative image of Ishmael in a narrative that presents him positively. He prefers the following translation: “And he himself will be a wild-stallion-man. His hand with everyone, and the hand of everyone with him. And before the presence of all his brothers, he will dwell securely” (Pigott 2018:519). With this translation Pigott suggests that the two sons would dwell in harmony. He translates פרא as wild stallion to free the text from every implication of stubbornness and social deviance on the part of Ishmael. Furthermore, by translating בכל as “with all” instead of “against all”,⁸ Pigott claims that Gen. 16:12 “could be understood positively in the sense that Ishmael would be an equal power alongside everyone else” (Pigott 2018:518–519). But what he does not consider very well is what the adjective “wild” designates in this verse. It shows that the place of Ishmael would not be in Abraham's household but in the wilderness. This is in line with Jeremiah's statement, פרה למד מדבר – “a wild ass at home in the wilderness ...” (Jer. 2:24). The point that Ishmael found a home in the wilderness is also expressed in Gen. 21:20–21: “God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the *wilderness* and became an expert *with the bow*.²¹ He lived in the *wilderness of Paran*, and his mother got a wife for him from the *land of Egypt*.” Pigott's translation and interpretation of v.12 fails to portray the image of separation between the two sons which the narrator seems to emphasise in advance.

Having found Hagar in the wilderness, the angel of YHWH addresses her with the same title by which the narrator referred to her at the beginning of the narrative – הגר שפחה שרי (Hagar the maiden of Sarai). In other words, the angel of YHWH knows her name, her position in the household of Abraham, and the identity of her mistress. Furthermore, the angel does not address Hagar in connection with Abraham, an indication that the role Sarah made her play in bearing the child of Abraham is not part of her role. At any rate, the angel of YHWH resolves the conflict between her and her mistress by instructing her as follows: שובי אל גברתך והתעני תחת ידיה (Return to your mistress and submit to her power, v. 9).

The words and deeds of Yahweh or/and the angel of Yahweh in Gen. 16 show that God took note of the miserable situation of Hagar without supporting Sarah's involvement of her (Hagar) in her (Sarah's) quest for a child. The story of Hagar's encounter with Yahweh also portrays two of the major functions of an angel: announcement of the birth of a child and (announcement of) deliverance which portrays the notion of God's compassion for the afflicted (Ficker 1997:667–672; Reinhartz 1998:155–160). In some biblical instances, the announcement of the birth of a child is linked with deliverance, as in the case in Judg. 13 in which Samson is born of the barren

⁸ Contrary to Piggott's suggestion, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English lexicon* prefers “against all” as the more accurate translation of בכל on the basis that the context in which the preposition כ is used implies an act of hostility (כ adversative). See Brown (2012:89, reprinted from the 1906 edition).

wife of Manoah. In such situations, the angel announces the deliverance of the mother of the child from the distress of childlessness and barrenness and the greatness of the child, including how the child has been chosen for a special purpose. Although there is a nativity statement by the angel in the case of Hagar, the issue of barrenness, which is often linked to the greatness of the child to be born, is lacking. This challenges the notion that Hagar's encounter with the angel points to the divine election of either Hagar or Ishmael. On the contrary, the birth announcements of Isaac and his eventual birth brings to the fore the relationship between barrenness and the greatness or election of the child to be given birth to by the formerly barren woman (17:15–19; 18:9–10). Hence, it is the announcement of the birth of Isaac (cf. Gen. 21:1–7) which expresses the deliverance of Sarah from barrenness that should be cited as an example of the relationship between barrenness and election of the child born by the formerly barren woman. The narrator's emphasis on the barrenness of Sarah can, therefore, be linked to the fact that she would give birth to a son who has been elected to maintain the generational continuity of the household of Abraham.

Final situation (vv. 15–16): The birth and naming of Ishmael

The narrative concludes with the birth and naming of Ishmael. This includes a statement about the ownership of the child and an emphasis on the age of Abraham when Ishmael is born. Two major issues arise from the way the story ends. First, no reference is made to Sarah, who intended to have a legal right of ownership over the son of Hagar (v. 2). A narrative that begins with an emphasis on Sarah ends without bringing her into the picture. Second, Hagar does not name the child according to the instruction of the angel of YHWH (v. 12), Abraham does.

From a source-critical perspective, many scholars claim that the above situation – the naming of Ishmael by Abraham and not Hagar – could be explained based on the combination of sources in the narrative in which the naming of Ishmael by Abraham could be attributed to P. For instance, Von Rad (1963:186–191) and Westermann (1989: 237) argue that vv. 1a, 3, 15–16 belong to P. Based on this line of argument, the text would read:

^{1a}Now Sarai, Abram's wife bore him no children. ³So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. ¹⁵Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

There is no doubt that the narrative flows when the above three verses are combined. But the issue that needs clarification, is the repetition of the names of the characters without using pronouns to refer to them. For this same reason, source critics attribute vv. 9–10, which repeatedly and consecutively use the expression “angel of YHWH” as the subject of the sentences, to a later addition (Campbell and O'Brien 1993:101, 196–197). Many feminist critics, while accepting this source-critical analysis, think that all “the biblical editors – J, E, P, and R – were united on the patriarchal plotline” (Meyers 1978:92; Tribble 1984:19; Teubal 1990:20; Schüssler Fiorenza 1998:51–52). This implies that they (the biblical editors) intended to draw the attention of the readers to the male characters of

the narrative (Teubal 1990:20). This argument is also applied to Gen. 16:15–16 which, according to Tribble, undercuts Sarah. Going further, Tribble states that even though the name of Hagar is mentioned, what is stressed is not the motherhood of Hagar but the fatherhood of Abraham, who names the child of Hagar and by so doing “strips Hagar of the power that God gave her” (Tribble 1984:19).

The text may be oppressive to Hagar by not allowing her to name her son according to the instruction of the angel of YHWH, but at least the narrative states her ownership of the child against the intention of Sarah to make the son that Hagar would bear hers. Sarah neither names the child nor owns the child. Why this conspicuous shift of attention from Sarah to Hagar? This question becomes more crucial when we compare this situation with those of Leah and Rachel, who both named and owned children born by their maidens (cf. Gen. 30:6–8, 11, 13).⁹ By denying Sarah the legal right of ownership of Ishmael, the narrator informs readers that, after all, the plan of Sarah to have a son through Hagar was a failed plan, a plan which is not in line with that of YHWH, who would later bring Isaac into the picture. On the part of Sarah, there is no indication in the narrative that she recognises the child nor seeks any other means of fulfilling her desperate desire for a child. This indicates that she may have accepted Ishmael or her childlessness (Brewer-Boydston 2018:504). But according to Gen. 21, she does not acknowledge Ishmael as her child, rather seeing him as the child of the slave woman (21:9).

In what follows, I shall analyse the narrator’s perspective and demonstrate his or her disapproval of how Abraham and Sarah went about their quest for progeny.

The narrator’s point of view

Biblical stories are often told from narrators’ points of view which are often put in the voice of characters or expressed in the background information that they give (Berlin 1983:57): One may argue that in Gen. 16 it is difficult to ascertain what the major concern is: Which character wins the sympathy of the narrator?¹⁰ Does the narrator support the involvement of Hagar in the search for progeny? What images are presented of the various characters? Do these images suggest any element of “election” on the part of Hagar or Ishmael? From the narrator’s perspective, do the actions of Sarah, especially her involvement of Hagar, enjoy God’s approval? Whatever questions one may have, there are reasons to think that the plan of Abraham and Sarah to have a child through Hagar neither enjoys the narrator’s approval nor God’s endorsement: First, the narrative in which Sarah, rather than God, interacts with Abraham, is placed between two narratives (Gen. 16 and 17) in which God interacts with Abraham; second, the emphasis on the identities of Sarah and Hagar; third, the aftermath of Sarah’s involvement of Hagar in her quest for a child; fourth, the identity of Ishmael; and finally, the conclusion of the narrative in relations to its beginning.

⁹ According to records of child naming in the Hebrew Bible, it was not the exclusive reserve of any of the parents to name the child. In some cases, mothers named their children (Gen. 4:1; 29:32–35; 30:18, 20, 24; Judg. 13:24; 1 Sam. 1:20; Is. 7:14), while in other cases fathers did so (cf. Gen. 16:15; 21:3; Ex. 2:22; 2 Sam. 12:24; Is. 8:3). In other cases both parents gave the same name to a child or each parent gave a different name (Gen. 4:25; 5:3; 35:18). From the above one may deduce that in most cases, the naming of a child was the mother’s prerogative.

¹⁰ The narrator, through the character of the angel of Yahweh, comforts Hagar and at the same time asks her to go back to her mistress.

The structural placement of Genesis 16

As has been rightly noted by George W. Coats, the story of Gen. 16 is separated from 15 and 17, “not only by the style of the exposition but also by the content” (Coats 1983:130). While the preceding and subsequent chapters begin with Yahweh’s statement to Abraham, in Gen. 16 it is Sarah who speaks to Abraham. With this structural location of Gen. 16, the narrator seems to draw the readers’ attention to the fact that while Abraham listens to God in Gen. 15 and 17, it is Sarah whom he listens to in Gen. 16. Hence, there is no instruction of Yahweh to Abraham.¹¹ And, as has been noted, listening to Sarah seems to suggest not listening to God, an impression that is also evident in Gen. 3. By placing Gen. 16 immediately after Gen. 15, which presents “the establishment of a covenant to affirm the promise of a child”, the author suggests that “Sarai’s scheme was intended to head off that divine promise by supplying it with a human solution” (Sailhamer 1990:135). This human solution did not provide a long-term solution to the problem of barrenness and childlessness in the family of Abraham and Sarah. This suggests a theological motif: “The divine promise will be fulfilled when all human possibilities have been exhausted” (De-Whyte 2018:274).

Gen. 16 falls within the category of the narratives that express God’s disapproval of human actions of disobedience and humans’ efforts to bring about a human solution to their desires and the fulfilment of God’s promise (cf. Gen. 3:1-19; 4:3-14; 6:1-7; 11:1-9). One can, therefore, argue that, according to the narrative of Gen. 16, Sarah’s involvement of Hagar in the marital life of Abraham and Sarah did not enjoy God’s and the narrator’s approval.

The emphasis on the identities of Sarah and Hagar

In Gen. 16 the continuous and sometimes “unnecessary” emphasis on the identities of Sarah and Hagar is noticeable. Sarah is referred to as the wife of Abraham (אשת אברהם) as opposed to Hagar, an Egyptian maiden (שפחה מצרית) in vv. 2-3. In relation to Hagar, Sarah is a mistress (גברה) of Hagar, her maidservant (שפחה). Note also that the narrator and all the characters in the narrative – Sarah, Abraham, and Yahweh (angel of Yahweh) – identify Hagar as a שפחה (maiden, cf. vv. 2, 3, 6, 8). This shows that the narrator employs all the means available to portray to readers the status of Hagar as a maiden and not a wife. This seems to be a way of drawing the attention of readers to the situation on the ground – the woman who would hand over her maiden to her husband is a wife, who should not have involved her maiden in her situation of barrenness. It is Sarah only who gives Hagar to Abraham as a wife (אשה), a title which Abraham never acknowledges; for he refers to Hagar as Sarah’s maiden and not “my wife”, even after she was given to him as אשה. Furthermore, Abraham says to Sarah, “Your maiden in your hands”. Apart from the title אשה, which Abraham does not acknowledge, no title is mentioned for Hagar in relation to Abraham; an indication that Hagar’s activities in the household of Abraham should have been limited to her service to Sarah and not to Abraham. In other words, from the perspective of the narrator, the service of Hagar to Sarah should not have

¹¹ In the entire narrative of Gen. 16, Yahweh never addresses Abraham and Sarah. He only addresses Hagar, the maiden.

included sharing her husband with her to have a son through Hagar. Could this be the reason why the narrator “denies” Sarah access to the child?

The regret of Sarah and the aftereffect of her action

Sarah’s goal in giving her maiden to Abraham is not achieved. Even though Hagar does conceive and bear a son, Sarah is not built up as a result of this as she expected. On the contrary, her status is threatened to a greater extent; for her maiden treats her with disrespect. This situation must have been frustrating for Sarah who, based on her regrets, accuses Abraham of being responsible for Hagar’s disrespectful attitude towards her. Moreover, Sarah’s involvement of Hagar in Abraham and Sarah’s search for an heir had negative effects for Hagar. She is maltreated by Sarah to the point that she flees. By calling the attention of readers to the negative effects of Sarah’s plan to be built up through Hagar, the narrator seems to emphasise that Sarah’s plan and Abraham’s consent were futile. This expresses elements of disapproval on the part of the narrator.

The identity of Ishmael

I reiterate that the identity of the son of Hagar (the fruit of Sarah’s plan to have children), which is expressed in the statement of the angel of Yahweh about him (cf. Gen. 16:12), shows that he would not have a place in the household of Abraham: והוא יהיה פרא אדם ירו – בכל ויד כל בו ועל פני כל אחיו ישכן – “He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin”¹². The LXX translates the Hebrew פרא אדם as ἄγροικος ἄνθρωπος (a man of the field). Wevers (1993:224) points out that the above translation compares the situation of Ishmael with that of Esau. “When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents” (25:27). The designations “a man of the field” and “a quiet man living in tents”, seem to have been employed by the narrator to show who has been chosen for the continuity of the family lineage. Based on this argument, one could also say that the presentation of Ishmael as a wild ass or a man of the field indicates that his position would be in the wilderness, outside the household of Abraham.

The conclusion of the narrative

As was noted earlier, the ending of the story seems to be inconsistent with the beginning. Wenham captures this observation as follows: “The absence of Sarai is noteworthy. The child was intended to be Sarai’s, but three times the text says ‘Hagar gave birth to a son for Abram ...’ Therefore, although Sarai’s scheme finally succeeded, she seems to have been shut out from enjoying its success” (Wenham 1994:11). In other words, while at the beginning of the narrative, it was Sarah who needed to have a child for Abraham (to be built up), in the conclusion the narrator denies Sarah access to the child born by Hagar. By taking Sarah out of the picture, the narrator seems to be preparing the minds of the readers for how Sarah would give birth to her own son. Hagar had given birth to a son for Abraham, but Sarah would also give birth to a son for Abraham, a son who would be

¹² The LXX English translation (Brenton) reads: “He shall be a wild man, his hands against all, and the hands of all against him, and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren”. The last aspect of the translation, “he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren”, challenges the NRSV’s translation. The former suggests a friendly relationship between Ishmael and his kin while the latter suggests the contrary.

electd by God over Ishmael, as a son of inheritance through whom God would establish his covenant with Abraham (cf. 17:17–21; 21:9–10).

Conclusion

My analysis of the characterisation and plot(s) of Gen. 16 reveals that, to a great extent, the narrative presupposes the election of Isaac over Ishmael. In the course of my analysis, the following motifs, which are recurrent in the Hebrew Bible, came into play: barrenness and childlessness, wilderness, and divine encounter. Other themes associated with the second and third motifs, which are often connected, are birth announcement by the angel of Yahweh, and God’s compassion for and deliverance of the marginalised and oppressed.

Making reference to the motif of childlessness and barrenness which is frequent in the Hebrew Bible, I argued that Gen. 16 could be understood and interpreted in the light of the biblical situation in which barrenness precedes the eventual miraculous birth of a “special son” (Gen. 21:1–7; 30:22–25; Judg. 13:3–5, 24–25; 1 Sam. 1:1–6, 19–28). This special son enjoyed exceptional preference by God and was chosen by Him for a special purpose connected with the deliverance and/or generational continuity of the people of Israel. In some situations, God’s election of a particular son was to the detriment of another person or other persons, usually the brothers or relatives of the favoured son.¹³ This situation often led to conflict between the two parties in which case they were separated by different factors.

Based on the motif of wilderness, which is often linked to divine encounter and deliverance motifs, one may argue that Hagar and Ishmael are heroic characters in the narratives or that their role in the narrative prefigures God’s deliverance of Israel. This line of argument is endorsed by Dozeman (1998:3) and Reis (2002:103) who, from different perspectives, compare Hagar’s experience in the wilderness with the experiences of heroic figures like Moses and Elijah and the people of Israel, God’s chosen people. Be that as it may, while one may accept that the scene in the wilderness portrays God’s deliverance of and compassion for, Hagar, the oppressed, I maintain that the words used for the birth announcement of Ishmael prefigures that his place would not be in the household of Abraham but in the wilderness. In line with the above claim, Steinberg (1993:81) refers to Hagar and Ishmael as wilderness people, a reference that distinguishes and distances Ishmael from Isaac.

Finally, my analysis shows that the scheme of Abraham and Sarah to have a child through Hagar neither enjoys the narrator’s approval nor God’s endorsement. This implies that the concentration on Hagar and Ishmael does not presuppose the divine election of Hagar or Ishmael, it rather prefigures, among other things, that the place of Ishmael would be in the wilderness.

¹³ For example, Cain and Abel (Gen. 4), Esau and Jacob (Gen. 27), Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 39–47). In the case of Cain and Abel, even though Abel did not live to maintain the genealogical continuity of his father, his replacement, Seth did (cf. Gen. 5:3–8).

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