"This Woman's Son Shall Not Inherit with my Son": Towards a Womanist Politics of Belonging in the Sarah-Hagar Narratives

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Abstract

Traditionally, male theorists of nation have presumed that the needs of the nation have been solely the concern of the male members of the collectivity. Feminist theorists of nation have analyzed the intersections of gender and nation to show that women's participation has been more than as the symbolic bearers of the nation or its metaphoric or symbolic boundaries. The question of who belongs and the various political projects that decide who belongs and who does not as members of the group is the politics of belonging. This article examines the Sarah-Hagar narratives to explore how gender, ethnicity, and class intersect with the politics of belonging to determine who belongs as a member of Israel and who gets excluded. I will also introduce a theoretical framework for a womanist politics of belonging.

Introduction

"U.S. News and World Report" contributor Julia Klein published an article in 2008 titled, "Why Scholars Just Can't Stop Talking About Sarah and Hagar."[2] The article addressed such issues as female rivalry, surrogate motherhood, inheritance customs, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although one might conclude from the contributors to the article that it is mostly female scholars who can't stop talking about the two women, many readers, male and female are fascinated by Sarah and Hagar's story. That interest is due in part, as biblical scholar Naomi Steinberg suggested in the article, to the issues of belonging raised in the stories: "What does it mean to be a member of society – who's in and who's

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[2] Julia M. Klein, "Why Scholars Just Can't Stop Talking About Sarah and Hagar" *U.S. News and World Report*, accessed July 27, 2013, http://www.usnews.com/news/religion/articles/2008/01/25/why-scholars-just-cant-stop-talking-about-sarah-and-hagar.

out?"[3] I agree with Steinberg that the story of Sarah and Hagar, found in the so-called Abraham cycle in the book of Genesis (12-25), are narratives about belonging. However, more importantly, I contend that the stories of Sarah and Hagar are about the *politics* of belonging.

The appeal of the stories of Sarah and Hagar for me grows out of my interest in the work of Black women religious scholars, who focused their attention on the biblical figure Hagar because her experience of God resonated with their own experiences as Black women.[4] An example is Delores S. Williams, who found in Hagar a prototype for African-American women's quest for "survival/quality-of-life."[5] These womanist scholars are heirs of an older tradition of appropriating Hagar's story by Africans enslaved in America, who empathized with the plight of the exploited, abused and abandoned Egyptian slave woman who made a way in the wilderness for herself and her son. She became their spiritual mother and they "Hagar's children."

In this article I enter the ongoing conversations about Sarah and Hagar to explore the intersectionality of race/ethnicity, gender, class and the politics of belonging to both define and maintain the symbolic boundaries of the nation of Israel that include some as members of Abraham's family and exclude others, and who decides.[6] I combine feminist theory of gender and nation and literary criticism, with a womanist biblical hermeneutic to argue that, while on one level the Sarah-Hagar narratives are about who is a member of the nation of Israel, on another level there are the political processes that determine who

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3 Ibid.

4 Alice Walker coined the term "womanist" in her essay "Coming Apart" (ed. Laura Lederer; *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography.* [New York: Harper Perennial, 1980], 84-93). Walker explained the preference for the term womanist by Black women rather than feminist because of its strong root in Black women's culture: It "comes to me from the word 'womanish,' a word our mothers used to describe, and attempt to inhibit, strong, outrageous or outspoken behavior when we were children: 'You're acting womanish!'"

5 Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 8.

6 Legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to describe the multiple social divisions that work together to oppress women of color ("Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, 6 Jul., 1991: 1241-1299).

belongs and who gets excluded. I contend that it is Sarah, despite her limitations as a woman in a patriarchal society, who uses the political project of maternal privilege to enforce the boundaries between her son Isaac (Israelites), Hagar (Egypt), and Hagar's son Ishmael (Ishmaelites). I will also propose a reading that will move towards laying the groundwork for a womanist politics of belonging.

Theory of Gender and Nation

Feminist theorists of nation often begin their analyses of gender and nation with Benedict Anderson's idea of nations as "imagined communities." Anderson defined the nation as an imagined political community consisting of members bound together by their loyalty to the cause, limited in reach, yet sovereign in its freedom to self-rule.[7] According to Anderson, the nation as a political community is imagined not because it never really existed, but rather because most of its members have never met one another, yet shares a common cause.

Much of the literature on nations and nationalism presume that it is the males with power that move nationalist projects forward and that the needs of the nation are exclusively the interest of men and reflect male aspirations.[8] For example, Anderson's conception of the nation as an imagined community takes for granted the notion that:

> The nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal *comradeship*. Ultimately it is that *fraternity* that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings (emphasis mine).[9]

Even Tamar Mayer noted the paradox that membership in the collectivity is based on gender and sexuality: "through control over reproduction, sexuality and the means of representation, the authority to

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7 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6-7.
8 Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

define the nation lies mainly with men."[10]

Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis were the first to argue the merits of a gender analysis. They demonstrated that women are not only affected by nationalist projects and processes, but also affect them. They identified at least five ways women affect and are affected by nationalism: As biological reproducers of members of the nation; central participants in the ideological reproduction of the boundaries of the group; transmitters of the nation's culture; symbolic signifiers of national difference; and as participants in national, economic, political, and military struggles.[11] Nevertheless, women often are still excluded from the centers of influence in how the nation is organized and the organizing categories that establish the boundaries for membership.

Politics of Belonging

National boundaries, real or imagined, are socially constructed. These boundary constructions "involve mechanisms of both inclusion and exclusion of individuals on the basis of the categorization of human subjects into those that can belong and those that cannot."[12] According to Yuval-Davis, "belonging" is an emotional attachment, such as one gets about feeling "at home." This is different from the "politics of belonging," the political projects, which construct the boundaries of a collectivity that determine who is an insider and who is an outsider.[13]

Yuval-Davis describes various organizing principles of belonging that make one a member of a collectivity depending on the political project. For example, some groups organize around shared biological origins (or at least the myth of common descent). Membership for others is based on common culture, religion and/or language. Another organizing principle is loyalty and solidarity, based on common values, such as that which we have in the United States.[14] Similar to the politics

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10 Tamar Mayer, "Introduction" in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 2.
11 Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour, and Class and the Anti-Racist Struggle* (London: Routledge, 1992), 115.
12 Anthias and Yuval-Davis, *Racialised Boundaries*, 1.
13 Nira Yuval-Davis, *The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* (Los Angeles; London: Sage, 2011), 10.
14 Ibid., 20-21.

of belonging is what Sara Ahmed refers to as the "cultural politics of emotion." It is another organizing principle that uses emotions to establish national boundaries. According to Ahmed, emotions such as fear and hatred can move us to create borders. They explain how we are affected by others or moved by others. Emotions can also move us to defend the established borders once we feel that they have been transgressed.[15]

This article uses the work of Anthias and Yuval-Davis to read the narratives about Sarah and Hagar to explore how such principles operate to define who is included as a member of Abraham's family (and by extension an Israelite), who is excluded, and who has the power to decide. It will also attempt to examine what their stories might look like through a womanist politics of belonging.

Reading Sarah and Hagar – Again

Without getting into the debate whether Israel should be understood as a nation in the modern sense of the term, Genesis 12-25 is similar to other national narratives in that it functions to construct an identity based on a shared myth of common origin, common solidarity and common destiny.[16] Such stories were central to the identity of the people of Judah taken into exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E.[17]

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15 Sara Ahmed, "The Politics of Fear in the Making of Worlds" in *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 3, (May-June 2003): 377-398, accessed January 30, 2014, http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.auctr.edu:2051/doi/pdf/10.1080/09518390 32000086745.

16 Scholars such as Steve Grosby maintain that Israel should be viewed as a nation based upon its origins as having descended from a common ancestor, Abraham, its claim to a political identity and autonomy, and its attachment to a specific territory (*Biblical Ideas of Nationality: Ancient and Modern* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002]). Other theorists contend that the nation is a modern phenomenon that is anachronistic to ancient Israel. See Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1960) and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

17 The limited focus of this essay does not allow for an examination of the competing traditions of Israel's origins in the ancestor narratives in Genesis and the Moses-Exodus story. For a fuller treatment see Konrad Schmid's *Genesis*

The story of Abraham is portrayed as the story of the family that God chose to raise up as the people of Israel. According to the story, the deity YHWH called a man named Abram from Ur of Chaldea in Mesopotamia to leave his homeland, his inheritance, and his father's household for the land of Canaan with the promise to make of him a great nation (Genesis 12). Abram obeys YHWH's command and leaves for Canaan, where he settles with his wife, Sarai. The narrator shares with the reader that she is barren (Gen 11:30). This statement was intended to build suspense that the promise would be deferred before it could come to fruition.

YHWH later makes a covenant with Abram consisting of a threefold promise: he would be the father of a multitude of nations; he would have abundant offspring; and he would possess all the land of Canaan (Gen 17:2-8, 15-16). YHWH also proceeds to change their names to Abraham, the "father of a multitude of nations" and Sarah, who would be "the mother of kings," as a sign to future generations that they would continue to flourish. YHWH's words harkened back to the earlier statement that Sarai was barren. In Gen 17:19 YHWH declared that Sarah would give birth to a son, who would be Abraham's heir of the covenant, and whose descendants would become the nation of Israel (vv. 17-19). In the context of the exile, this story gave comfort to the deportees that despite their current condition YHWH would restore their land, their fecundity, and their national identity. It would also serve to establish the boundaries for membership: YHWH would set the criteria, but Sarah would be the first to maintain them.

A brief survey of commentaries will show that traditional (male) biblical scholars focused primarily on the theme of promise-fulfillment. These readings were concerned with Sarah and Hagar to the extent that Sarah's barrenness and Hagar's birth to Ishmael represented a threat to the promise, or how their story represents a "rivalry between women" motif.[18] In contrast, feminist scholars were less interested in the patriarch Abraham and the promise-fulfillment motif, than in the lives of the two

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and the Moses Story: Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible (Siphrut, 3; translated by James D. Nogalski; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010).
18 See E. A. Speiser (*Genesis* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964], 120-21.); Walter Brueggemann (*Genesis* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982], 180.); Claus Westermann (*Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984], 235-37.).

women in the stories. They read the stories of Sarah and Hagar through the categories of gender, ethnicity/race and/or class. An example is Phyllis Trible's literary-rhetorical critical reading of Hagar, which details the exploitation and abuse of this slave woman by her mistress. Trible's analysis demonstrates the way in which the plots in the two narratives on Hagar in Genesis 16 and 20 move to reveal how her status as a female, an Egyptian and a maid results in her bondage, expulsion, and homelessness. Trible concludes that, "Her story depicts oppression in three familiar forms: nationality, class and sex."[19]

Naomi Steinberg's analysis of the Sarah-Hagar narratives examined heirship patterns and comparative kinship data to argue that Sarah's status as a primary wife automatically entitled Isaac to be Abraham's lineal heir, overriding Ishmael's status as the firstborn due to his mother's status as a maidservant.[20]

Delores Williams's reading of Hagar was the first womanist interpretation of this biblical figure. Using a constructive theological approach, Williams read Hagar's story through the lens of African-American women's historic experiences of slavery and surrogacy – involuntary and voluntary during the antebellum and post-bellum periods. Williams named this female-centered tradition of African-American biblical appropriation "survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation" because God was neither concerned with nor involved with Hagar's liberation, but rather God provides her with the resources to survive and have a quality of life.[21]

The same year Williams's book was published womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems published her womanist monograph, which included a chapter on Sarah and Hagar. Weems combined social-historical criticism and literary criticism with African American oral tradition to interpret the stories of Sarah and Hagar from the perspective of African American women's experiences. She describes their stories as reflecting "ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and sexual exploitation."[22]

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19 Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984), 27.
20 Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1993), 78-79.
21 Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 6.
22 Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988), 2.

In this article I read the stories of Sarah and Hagar through a womanist hermeneutic a little differently. For example, unlike Williams, I do not read Sarah and Hagar's relationship through modern American racial categories that regarded the differences between Hagar and Sarah as the tensions between African slave women and their white mistresses: "[Hagar speaks to] generation after generation of black women because her story is their story of suffering at the hands of white women."[23]

In contrast, I contend that the differences between Hagar and Sarah are ethnicity and class. The ancient world would have viewed Hagar and Sarah as belonging to different ethnic groups, not different racial categories. Where ethnicity refers to the common culture traits that distinguish one group of people from another, race is a modern cultural invention of human differences that assigns special worth and status to some groups and lower status to others.[24] Renita Weems concedes as much, but goes on to say that, "The story of the Egyptian slave and her Hebrew mistress is hauntingly reminiscent of the disturbing accounts of black slave women and white mistresses during slavery."[25]

Therefore, while acknowledging that racial differences would have been alien to ancient writers, Sarah would still be regarded as a "woman of color," same as Hagar if we were using modern racial categories for a woman who originated from Ur of Chaldea in Mesopotamia, so I call Sarah "sister" as well.[26] Nevertheless, despite our different approaches, I along with Weems and Williams still arrive at the conclusion that despite being a woman in a patriarchal society, Sarah still uses her privilege to subjugate and exploit Hagar.

An analysis of the Sarah-Hagar narratives in Genesis returns us to the point mentioned above that YHWH promised to bless Abram with descendants too numerous to count, but we know that his wife Sarai is barren. When Abram complained that he had no offspring and concluded that the heir of his house would be his steward Eliezer, YHWH rejected

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23 *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 15.
24 Audrey Smedley and Brian Smedley, "Race as Biology is Fiction, Racism as a Social Problem is Real: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives on the Social Construction of Race," *The American Psychologist*, 60, no. 1(January (Washington-Williams 2005) 2005): 16-26.
25 *Just A Sister Away*, 7.
26 This is a play on the titles of both Weems's and Williams's books and the adoption of fictive kinship to include Sarah as "Black" woman or "sister."

this plan and promised Abram that he would have a child who would come from his own body (Gen 15:2-4).[27] One chapter later Abram indeed gets a biological heir when Sarai's Egyptian handmaid bears him a son after they had been in the land of Syria-Palestine ten years (Gen 16:3-4).

The reader is left with the impression that being born Abram's biological son was sufficient criteria for Ishmael, his son born to Hagar, to be a member of Abram's family and heir to YHWH's promise to Abram. However, one chapter later and the reader is confronted with the realism that a political project of biological descent did not necessarily make one born of Abraham's loins his patrilineal heir to the promise. Instead, a different political project of belonging would supersede biology.

The reader finds that when God made the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, God stipulated that there would be a sign of the covenant.[28]As a sign of Abraham's acceptance of the covenant, God commanded him to circumcise every male among him and every male going forward after the eighth day of birth (Gen 17:10). According to v. 14, circumcision was a sign of participation in the covenant and any of Abraham's male descendants who did not undergo this symbolic act should be "cut off" from the people of Israel.[29]

In the shift from a political project of biology to one that is theologically determinative of the rite of male circumcision, gender and nation intersect. Abraham circumcises Ishmael with all the other males in his household. However, just a few verses later God reveals that Isaac, the son yet unborn to his wife, Sarah, not Ishmael will be Abraham's patrilineal heir (17:19). Therefore, Ishmael is soon displaced as heir to the covenantal lineage and the benefits following from it, but not as Abraham's son. There is no mention of the status of Hagar, who is just an agent used to move the story along, only to later be demoted from secondary wife to slave to outcast.

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27 Genesis 15 is attributed to the Yahwist or J source. A second promise to Abram is made in Gen 17:2-7 is attributed to the Priestly school.

28 Scholars suggest that the Priestly school changes the divine name YHWH in v. 1a to the generic term for God (Elohim) beginning with v. 1b because the Priestly source believed the divine name for Israel's god had not been revealed to Israel until the revelation to Moses at Sinai (Exod 3).

29 This is a play on the phrase translated in English as "to make a covenant." In Hebrew to make a covenant is literally to "cut a covenant" from the verb "to cut" (Heb. *karat*) and the noun "covenant" (Heb. *berit* or *brit*; cf. Gen 15:18).

The narrator has made clear that it is YHWH who has defined the criteria for membership: the circumcised male descendants of Abraham and Sarah. However, with Ishmael still residing as a member of Abraham's household, those boundaries remain rather fluid. Someone needs to enforce the maintenance of the boundaries.

Political Project of Motherhood

If circumcision represents fruitfulness and fullness, then barrenness represents infertility and emptiness. Sarah may be barren, but there are other ways to achieve motherhood. Ishmael's conception was the result of Sarai's decision to give her slave girl Hagar to Abram to produce a son. This was not an act of sympathy towards Abram for not having a son. Sarai was personally motivated to become a mother for her own benefit. Until now, the writer had not offered a reason why Sarai was barren. However, Sarai speaks for the first time in Gen 16:2 and blames YHWH for her barrenness: "And Sarai said to Abram, 'Look, YHWH has kept me from bearing children. Go at once into my slave girl so that I may build a family by her'" (my translation). If YHWH won't reverse her circumstances, then she will take matters into her own hand.

Most English translations of Gen 16:2 read that Sarai gave her slave girl or handmaiden to Abram so that she could become a mother: "obtain children" (KJV and NRSV); "have a son" (JPS); "build a family" (NIV). The NIV translation is the closest to the Hebrew. The Masoretic Text (MT) reads *'ibbaneh*, which is from the Hebrew verbal root *banah* for "to build," and can be used metaphorically as "to build a house," as in perpetuating and establishing a family, or in reference to a childless wife obtaining children by means of a secondary wife or concubine (Gen 30:3). Hagar does not speak, so we can infer that this is done without her consent. Even if she had consented, the unequal power dynamics between Hagar and Sarai and Abram subjected her to their will.

Ancient family legal codes granted Sarai the prerogative as a barren wife to obtain a child through a surrogate.[30] However, Sarai has

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30 A document on marriage and divorce customs from the ancient Near Eastern city Nuzi closely corresponds to Genesis 16. The document, translated here by E. A. Speiser, records that a certain Shennima married a woman named Gilimninu (HSS 5 no. 67). We are told that if, "Gilimninu bears children, Shennima shall not take another wife. But if Gilimninu fails to bear children,

two purposes in becoming a mother. On one hand Sarai gives Hagar to Abram so that *she* may "be built up" through Hagar. Sarai would increase in honor or esteem in the eyes of other women through motherhood. In a patriarchal world where a woman's barrenness can be a source of shame and ridicule, few women would deny themselves the opportunity to remedy the situation. Certainly not all women were in a social position to do so. Sarai's social status not only accorded her the privilege of having a slave girl of her own, but also the power to use Hagar for her own purposes.

Ancient family legal codes aside what happened to Hagar is rape. Many of us are familiar with stories of relatives, who were domestic workers raped by male employers, with the tacit or explicit approval of the wife or mother, who may have pretended not to see or hear her maid being sexually assaulted – even when proof of the attack was produced months later.[31] The mistress of the house under such circumstances might not have intended to "build up" a family. Nevertheless, many of us also know of offspring of such unions who were sent away to live with other family members to hide the mother's family's shame, or were placed with adoptive middle class families, who were deemed better able to provide for the child's economic and social security. In either case the woman of lower socio-economic status was involuntarily made to contribute to the building of a family.

On the other hand, by building a family, Sarai succeeds where YHWH and Abram have thus far been slow to do: perpetuate and establish a family for Abram. In Deut 25:5-6, if one of two brothers living under the same household should die, the wife of the deceased becomes the wife of her brother-in-law in order to bear a son to perpetuate her dead husband's name. If he refuses she may appeal to the elders, charging her brother-in-law with refusing to "build up his brother's house" (v. 9; cf. Gen 38; Ruth 1:11-13; 4:11). The verb *banah* used in Gen 16:2 is the same in Deut 25:9.

Gilimninu shall get for Shennima a woman from the Lullu country (i.e., a slave girl) as concubine. In that case, Gilimninu herself shall have authority over the offspring" (*Genesis*. ABD [New York: Doubleday, 1962], 120).

31 White segregationist Senator Strom Thurmond's (R-SC) relationship with Carrie Butler, a Black teenage maid employed by his parents in 1925, resulting in him fathering a biracial daughter, Essie Mae Washington-Williams, is a familiar one (*Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond* [New York: HarperCollins, 2005]).

Sarai takes on both YHWH's and the brother-in-law's roles in building a house for Abram. Although Sarai is not a childless widow, in the event Abram died without a male heir that she could call her own, she would be in a precarious situation with no one to care for her.[32] Therefore, although Hagar bore Abram a son (Gen 16:15), it was Sarai, not Hagar who would be his mother. By perpetuating and establishing a family for Abram, Sarai both increased in status through motherhood and secured her future by having a son who would care for her in the event something happened to Abram. However, her actions up to this point do not change Ishmael's status as a member of Abram's family. Things will take a turn in Genesis 21.

Commentators often refer to Genesis 21 as the account of Isaac's birth and the fulfillment of YHWH's promise of fecundity to Abraham through the birth of a son of his seed. However, according to Gen 17:16-19, this narrative is just as much about Sarah. Abraham was content to have Ishmael as his lineal heir. However, God tells him that Sarah will conceive and give birth to a son Isaac, who will be his heir. According to Steinberg above the reason is because only Abraham's son by his primary wife could be his patrilineal heir. Therefore, Ishmael's status as the son of a slave woman, despite his primogeniture and circumcision, a sign marking him as a covenantal member, prevented him from being Abraham's lineal heir. In contrast, in a more recent work Steinberg contends that Ishmael would have maintained his status as the patrilineal heir despite his mother's status if Isaac had not been born.[33]

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32 Paula Hiebert's essay on biblical widowhood makes the distinction between the modern concept of the widow as a woman whose husband has died and her obligations to him are terminated, and the biblical notion of a woman whose husband has died and she has no father-in-law or sons to care for her ("Whence Shall Help Come to Me: The Biblical Widow" in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* [ed. Peggy Lynne Day; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989], 125-141).

33 Steinberg examines the effects of being a child in a polygamous household in the Hebrew Bible (*The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible* [Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013], 84-85). Here she argues that when Ishmael was Abraham's only son he was entitled to the rights and privileges of the firstborn son. However, Isaac's birth reconfigures the household from a monogamous to a polygamous one. Steinberg is defining "monogamous household" here as Abraham, Sarah and Ishmael (Gen 16:16). The household shifts to a

However, as the narrator reports, Genesis 21 begins with the announcement that YHWH has remembered Sarah and fulfilled the earlier promise to give her a son. Abraham named him Isaac as God had instructed him in Chapter 17. Sarah's exuberance is evident as she proclaims, "God has given laughter to me; all who hear will laugh because of it" (Gen 21:6; author's translation). Being a mother is not new to Sarah. However, giving birth to a son raises motherhood to a new level for Sarah.

Sarah, Abraham, Hagar and the two boys appear to peacefully coexist until Isaac is weaned. The text does not give a specific age when Isaac was weaned, but it changes Isaac's status within Abraham's household. Until now, as I mentioned above, Ishmael was Sarah's son and Abraham's heir. However, once Isaac is circumcised (v. 4) and weaned, he displaces Ishmael as Abraham's patrilineal heir, but not as Abraham's son.

Sarah observes the boy Ishmael "Isaacing" (*metsacheq*) and her emotions turn from the joy of motherhood to disgust and hatred.[34] The English translations for *metsacheq* are usually "playing" with (NRSV) or "mocking" (NIV). The word is a participle of the Hebrew root *tsachaq* for "to laugh," as in Sarah's laughter in v. 6, the same root for Isaac's name *Yitschak*. However, I translate *metsacheq* "Isaacing" because in my opinion, Sarah saw Ishmael behaving in some way as though he were still Abraham's patrilineal heir. Sarah is aware that he no longer is and has already switched loyalties from Ishmael to Isaac. In one moment Ishmael goes from being Sarah's son to "the *son of Hagar* the *Egyptian*" (v. 9; emphasis mine) whom Abraham had fathered.

Sarah becomes enraged and orders Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael: "And she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman and her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit with my son Isaac'" (v. 10). Gender, ethnicity and class intersect here as a way to discriminate against Hagar and Ishmael. Twice Sarah refers to Hagar by the Hebrew term *'amah* ("female slave") emphasizing her lower status.[35]

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polygamous one after the birth of Isaac, where two mothers now reside: Sarah, Isaac's mother and Hagar, Ishmael's mother (Gen 21:2).

34 Scholars debate whether Ishmael was considered a boy or an adolescent. The Hebrew noun *na'ar* for boy can be youth or a young man (*HALOT*, 707).

35 Hagar's status goes from a *shiphchah* in Genesis 16:3 to an *'amah* in Genesis 21:10, 12. *Shiphchah* is translated "handmaid" and *'amah* is translated "female

Moreover, Ishmael is set apart as the son of a slave and Egyptian woman. Sarah does not just ask Abraham to send out Hagar and Ishmael. Her emotional outburst is met with the demand to foreibly remove the two from Abraham's provision and protection. The verb "cast" (*garash*) is used only three times in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 21:10; Exod 11:1; Prov 22:10). In each context it means to forcibly remove or drive out.

The politics of belonging require someone or something to initiate the exclusivity of one group over another. In Gen 21 that someone is Sarah. She is the one who maintains the boundaries between Abraham/Israel and Ishmael/Ishmaelites. Until now, who would be Abraham's patrilineal heir had been established, but the boundaries between the Israelites, on one side and the Ishmaelites and Egyptians on the other side, were still fluid as long as Ishmael and Hagar remained in Abraham's household. Isaac's circumcision and weaning appears to be the precipitating event. Perhaps the certainty that Isaac was now a full member of Abraham's family, or the prospect of shared wealth between Isaac and Ishmael ("the son of this woman shall not inherit along with my son"), triggers what I describe as the political project of motherhood. As Steinberg put it, "Sarah works to secure a firm and future position for herself in Abraham's household through the birth of her son [for]...a woman's power comes through her son."[36] This demonstrates that motherhood rather matrimony provides Sarah with status and membership, even if an auxiliary one.

Sarah maintains the boundaries between the Israelites, which she now views as threatened, represented by Isaac, and the Ishmaelites, represented by Ishmael, and the Egyptians, represented by Hagar, by expelling the two. Abraham views Sarah's command as "very evil" on account of Ishmael being his son.[37] Some feminist scholars defend Sarah, arguing that Abraham is ultimately responsible for expelling Hagar and Ishmael:

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slave." Biblical scholars do not agree on whether the status of one is higher than the other.

36 Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage*, 78.

37 The NRSV translates Gen 21:11a "The matter was very distressing." However, MT reads, "The thing was very evil in Abraham's eyes." Sarah's action in response to what she "sees" in v. 8 Abraham sees as an evil deed in v. 11.

to "build up a house" when YHWH's promises of a child are not realized soon enough. YHWH eventually provides her with her own son, Isaac, and when Ishmael becomes a threat to Israel's identity, she acts again. On one hand, she is to be admired for her resourcefulness. On the other hand, she demonstrates that women can be both oppressed and oppressing.[40] Sarah's treatment of Hagar helps dispel the fallacy of the so-called universal sisterhood.

Each of the various organizing principles of belonging mentioned in this article has its challenges. Moreover, given the issues around the unequal treatment of mothers in U.S. public policies, even the political project of motherhood is problematic. Therefore, I imagine that a womanist politics of belonging, beginning with Sarah and Hagar's stories, would be bold, outrageous, and audacious, like the two women. They have been called "haughty," "resentful," "jealous," "uppity," and "insolent," to name a few. African American women are familiar with these labels, particularly the label "mad" or "angry Black woman," persistent stereotypes in American culture and society, which assert that African American women are irrationally emotional or hysterical. It is a handy trope for exerting control over African American women's bodies and lives. Even First Lady Michelle Obama has been unable to escape this stereotype.[41]

A womanist political project would turn this stereotype on its head and African American women would own the emotion of "righteous indignation" – anger that is justified in response to the tri-dimensional gender, racial, and class discrimination of African American women – in working for the full inclusion of all people. It would also recognize the two women's different racial/ethnic, socioeconomic and political backgrounds, despite them both being women of color. That makes their political projects different, but not diametrically opposed. Therefore, a womanist politics of belonging would compel them to work together to dismantle the oppressive and exploitative systems that worked against the three of them (Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham) as aliens

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40 For more on Sarah as the oppressed and the oppressor see Mignon R. Jacobs's *Gender, Power, and Persuasion: The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

41 Michael Powell and Jodi Kantor, "After Attacks, Michelle Obama Looks for a New Introduction," in *The New York Times*, June 18, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/18/us/politics/18michelle.html?_r=0.

There is confusion within the self, seen in the conflict between Sarah and Abraham, both of whom represent Israel. Abraham is ultimately responsible for the abjection, since only he, and not Sarah, has the authority to send Hagar and Ishmael away. In each version, however, the narrator makes the patriarch Abraham look better by having Sarah bear the brunt of the blame.[1]

There is enough blame to go around. First, it is God who completes the abjection of Ishmael (and Hagar) in Gen 22:2: "Take your son, your *only son* Isaac, whom you love" (emphasis mine), amounting to an erasure of Ishmael. Second, Sarah initiated the act by demanding that Abraham expel the two, God gave divine sanction (Gen 21:12-13), and Abraham passively acquiesced.

In the end Sarah's actions, authorized by God, have made certain that not only are the Ishmaelites and Egyptians rejected, but also the sons born of Abraham to Keturah, his secondary wife of a lower socioeconomic status (Gen 25:1).[2] Instead, they receive mere tokens just before Abraham's death: "Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac" (25:5-6). The political project of motherhood demonstrates that one woman can use her informal power and privilege to affect who is included and excluded as members of a nation.

Towards a Womanist Politics of Belonging

The politics of belonging and the political projects that drive them are constructed around boundaries that include some and exclude others. Hagar and Ishmael represent the "Other," who must be removed, as they posed a threat to the covenantal lineage that identified who was a member of Israel according to the ancestral narratives in Genesis 12-25. Sarah, who was barren at the beginning of the story, takes the initiative

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1 J. Cheryl Exum, "Hagar en Procès: The Abject in Search of Subjectivity" in *From the Margins, I: Women of the Hebrew Bible and Their Afterlives* (cds. P. S. Hawkins and L. C. Stahlberg; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 5-6.
2 Keturah is called Abraham's wife *('isshah)* in Gen 25, and his concubine *(pilegesh)* in 1 Chr. 1:32-33. Some scholars believe that the *pilegesh* was a non-Israelite woman.

in a foreign land.

  Working from this, a womanist politics of belonging would include a political project that would work to dismantle boundaries that perpetuate social inequalities that welcome the "native" and reject the "alien." It would create boundaries only to the extent that they are necessary temporarily for health and wholeness.[42] It would also, on the one hand, reject identity politics that ignore the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class in marginalizing African American and other women of color, and on the other expand the intersectional analysis to include all members of society.[43] These are some of my thoughts as I work towards a womanist politics of belonging.

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42 Walker, *Our Mother's Gardens*, xi.
43 Yuval-Davls, *Politics of Belong*, 8.

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