On grace and fidelity

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Hagar

Genesis 16 narrates the beginning of the story of Hagar and Ishmael. It begins with a reminder by the writer and Saraï herself that she didn't bear children (Gen 11:30; 16:1). I mentioned in class that allusion to Saraï's beauty was made a couple times in the text (Gen 12:11; 24:16)—a rare kind of qualification—and that this special grace, in the form of a surplus of beauty, can be taken to be a portent of a long absence of children, as if too much grace had to be compensated by a lack of it elsewhere in one's life. The pattern occurs also in the story of Rachel and Jacob (vs Leah), and in that of Hannah, the mother of prophet Samuel.

In ancient Eastern Mediterranean agrarian societies, the bearing of male children was a fundamental good for both the mother and father. From the wife's point of view, motherhood was part of the larger hidden and implicit contract between families that the story of Abraham takes pains to formulate as part of a larger promise and alliance repeated seven times across the chapters of his story (from 15 to 22). The importance of child-bearing was based on the hope and trust that one's husband or one's son(s) would provide for their mother (or "see to it", as the language in the story of Abraham suggests). Children, particularly elder-born boys, given the structure of families, were to carry out this basic duty of protection of their mother, especially if she was not a kin of the husband and had followed him into his household (the normative situation). She was a kind of stranger in her husband's house or at least represented interests that could be at variance with those of her husband and his family.

Given this basic structure, one may consider that Hagar, Saraï/h, and the daughters of Lot represent limit cases of family politics that are explored in some depth by the author(s). Let's look at each of them in turn. Sarah is a "sister" of Abraham, according to Gen 20:12: daughter of the same father but a different mother, or rather a paternal cousin or niece. In other words, she is closely related on the paternal side, the side that has control of family reproduction and access to land through property inheritance. She is not an "alien" in her family, far from it, as she is part of the ancestral group. But what was the reality? The situation of women as alien spouses and mothers is explored in some detail in the stories of Hagar (Gen 16 and 21) and especially that of Ruth. Both women represent hated enemy groups (or potential enemies). They can only be integrated

if their origins are completely erased (except for the name, "the Egyptian," or "the Moabite") and if through their unceasing labor and willingness, they provide food and descendence. This is true of Ruth who acts as a sort of self-giving female Abraham. Hagar, however, is a slave who cannot "give" freely her labor. Her son Ishmael will remain outside the main system of contractual obligations and therefore remain a potential enemy.

Commentary on Gen 16

16:1–3 The repeated divine promise of a descendence makes Sarai's infertility all the more problematic.

16:3 *(Saraï) gave her (Hagar) to her husband Abram as a wife.* The Hebrew words for "her husband" and "a wife" sound exactly the same and are juxtaposed at the end of the phrase. The author's purpose may have been to heighten the confusion, or even to indicate that Hagar, an Egyptian slave (two strikes against her), was justified in feeling like a regular, honored, spouse.

16:4 Immediate conception by Hagar, or at least without the enormous delay Sarai had to endure before the miraculous birth of Isaac. See the first paragraph above for a suggestion regarding the beauty of Sarai as causing this delay.

16:6 Abram's concession to Sarai (*Do to her as you please*) leads to oppression and the fleeing of Hagar. The word for oppression, ענה, is used very often in the Hebrew Bible for dire situations that trigger the deity's attention and salvation. In this case, its use for an Egyptian slave is parallel to its use to describe the Pharaoh's repression of Hebrews and their forced labor in Exodus 1:11.

16:7 The story at the well evokes the type-scene of man meeting woman at the well, far from habitations. The standard list of elements includes: a long trip; rest at a well outside of a city; a watering of people and animals with a contest element; a short conversation establishing identities; an invitation to a formal meal (with characters running often); and finally a marriage. In this story, an angel appears at the well.

The angels that appear in a few passages of Genesis may be a rather late development in monotheism, when the sole divinity, a bit like a king of kings, has a court of messengers (the original meaning of "angel") that bring messages without involving the supreme god.

16:9 *Submit!* that is, allow yourself be punished and oppressed. The verb used in verse 6 for "to oppress" is used again.

16:11 The birth of Ishmael is announced. "Ishmael" means "El hears", here interpreted as YHWH paid attention to the oppression of Hagar)

16:13 The metaphor of seeing and providing is used to explain the name of the place, El-Roï ("El sees me"). The metaphor of hearing has just been used (Ishmael). Both metaphors are central to the Biblical authors. This is their way of suggesting realities beyond the mundane seeing and hearing of daily life. The metaphor of hearing, listening, and obeying, is normally the central one. But in the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, seeing is the more important metaphor.

Justice and mercy

The following page is a more general reflection on vindicatory justice ("tit for tat" or law of the talion), the rise of individualized vengeance, and the possibility of forgiveness.[1] It is brought about by Abraham's discussion in Genesis 18 of the limits on punishment by the deity. See my notes on Genesis 18:16–21, page 4. Should a whole group or nation be collectively punished when there might be a few righteous or innocent persons in its midst? One may wonder if this kind of question was a permanent feature of ancient societies or on the contrary whether it appeared when social and political had sufficiently changed in this regard. In particular, was it a product of one of the three stages I described in class: the pre-monarchic, royal, or post-monarchic and exilic periods?

In kinship-based societies, before the appearance of central states, vengeance was highly structured . It was an exchange very much like reciprocal giving. It was group based—however one defines "group"—vs other groups. Inside the group, vengeance was prohibited. Discipline and penalties were expected to correct imbalances and could be tied to a cosmological view. Between groups, both alliance and vengeance systems could develop. The obligation (of giving or carrying out vengeance) was felt as a matter of honor. No guilt was involved, it was a matter of order. The Latin etymology for *honor* is not clear, but the meaning of Hebrew *kavod* (כבוד) is clear: weight and therefore glory, substance, heaviness. If vengeance was demanded, the group performed it. It was not an individual matter. So, inside the group and outside the group—with neighboring groups that alliances could be formed with, vengeance was understood as a matter of reciprocity. War, on the contrary, did not pursue reciprocity as a goal.

So, in non-centralized kinship systems, three positions existed in regard to the distribution of gift(s) and vengeance:

1. solidarity within the group and use of punishments as control;
2. alliance or agression with neighboring groups, with vengeance possible;
3. war or peace with enemies, i.e. with groups deemed to be beyond those one might contract alliances with;

The middle position (= alliance with or agression against neighboring groups) could not be maintained when central power developed. Centralization developed against and beyond the external politics of kin groups, fusing groups in a new, larger group. In a monarchy, only two directions or positions were theoretically acceptable: solidarity inside the group(s) (now a "nation" or a people, or working towards it) and hostility towards those outside. So, inter-group vengeance came under the control of the central authority and was claimed to be divine in origin. Arbitrational justice developed as a consequence. This could be illustrated by stories in Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, even though they were rewritten in exilic and post-exilic times.

What religious justifications were brought to bear? What were the technological and social conditions? Demographic development, more investment in local

[1] See Hénaff (2010), 215–16, 230–31.

agriculture, hence development of property by individual households and weakening of clanic identity? Level two was clearly dangerous for supra-group leaders. In other words, the boundary insider/outsider was displaced. Gods and temples must have been an important part of this development.

In more centralized units like kingdoms, the relative weight of kin groups (=determined by "glory," a social good) and their alliances was wearily watched by kings and state elites. I presume that it was one essential part of ancient politics, and the engine of religious evolution as well as exploitation.

What happened after the fall of the kingdoms in -721 and -586? Can one detect changes in the structuring of vengeance in the texts that emerge as a consequence of the swallowing up of small kingdoms into the larger political and military units of Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia? Or did the restructuring of divine laws of judgment after the fall of monarchies and states continue and expand what monarchies were doing, rather than revert to inter-tribal "vindicatory system"? In this reconstruction, delayed historical and otherworldly punishment presumably played a large role.[2]

References

Hénaff, Marcel. 2010. *The Price of Truth. Gift, Money, and Philosophy.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Lemaire, André, and Raymond Verdier, eds. 1984. *La vengeance: études d'ethnologie, d'histoire et de philosophie.* Vol. 3. Paris: Cujas.

[2]On this vindicatory system, see Lemaire and Verdier (1984).