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## Sarah and Hagar: Ancient Women of the Abrahamic Covenant

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## SARAH AND HAGAR

### ANCIENT WOMEN OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

*Janet Hovorka*

Though we have more information about the relationships between Abraham and his wives than about any other marriages in the scriptures, and though millennia of scholars have thought and written about this great prophet, there are many ostensible relationship problems in these stories that we have not yet begun to understand. Scholars of many faiths have been quick to defend what looks like Abraham's moral lapse in the "she is my sister" episodes (see Genesis 12:10–20; 20:1–18). However, many other questions still remain. Sarah is held as an example of Christian living for us (see Hebrews 11:11; 1 Peter 3:6), and Hagar received two visions of the Lord, and yet they seem to have had many lapses of character. Why did Sarah deal "hardly" with Hagar? Why did the Lord allow Hagar to be driven into the wilderness? Why was Hagar haughty toward Sarah? What was the "mocking" that Ishmael did to Isaac, and why did it inspire Sarah to cast Hagar and Ishmael out? Why was Sarah allowed to remove Ishmael from the line of inheritance? Were Hagar and Ishmael excluded from the blessings of the covenant? Why does the great patriarch Abraham, who some point to today as the instigator of the patriarchal order, sometimes seem so bound by matriarchal rule? Why is the covenant passed down through Abraham's descendants in a matrilineal manner, according to whom the mother of the child was, instead of according to who was the oldest? Why does the youngest of Abraham's descendants in each generation inherit the wealth of the father following ultimogeniture rather than the typical Near Eastern primogeniture succession of the oldest? While the text may not give us the answers to all these questions, there is a need for more LDS reflection on the relationships that existed between Abraham and his wives.<sup>1</sup>

1. Latter-day Saint writings on the relationships between Abraham and his wives include Hugh Nibley, "The Sacrifice of Sarah: A New Look at the Pearl of Great Price, Part 11," *Improvement Era*, April 1970, 79–95, republished in Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 343–81; S. Kent Brown, "Biblical Egypt: Land of Refuge, Land of Bondage," *Ensign*, September 1980, 45–50; Carol Cornwall Madsen, "Mothers in Israel: Sarah's Legacy," in *Women of Wisdom and Knowledge*, ed. Marie Cornwall and Susan Howe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 179–201; Jerrie W. Hurd, *Our Sisters in the Bible* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983);

This preliminary study is intended to look at Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar and their relationship to the covenant. In ancient sources, it appears that the covenant referred to in Genesis and the Book of Abraham was made between Abraham, Sarah, and the Lord, a covenant among three people. Likewise, Hagar becomes part of this covenant to some extent, although from the text that we have, her involvement is harder to ascertain. This joint effort shows that the Abrahamic covenant can be viewed as a type of marriage covenant, and later prophets compared it to a marriage when the promises were passed down to the children of Israel. The Abrahamic covenant viewed as a marriage covenant fits quite well with what Latter-day Saints understand about Abraham and the covenant of marriage entered into in LDS temples in modern times. Three major aspects of the Abrahamic covenant—stipulations, blessings, and tokens or signs—are seen in the examples of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. When taken together, Genesis, the Book of Abraham, and Doctrine and Covenants 132 reveal ample evidence that Sarah and even Hagar were very active participants in the covenants that were made with the Lord in their time.

### What Is a Covenant?

A covenant can be any agreement between two or more consenting parties. The Oxford English Dictionary definition reads, “A mutual agreement between two or more persons to do or refrain from doing certain acts; a compact, contract, bargain.”<sup>2</sup> Modern readers sometimes have a hard time understanding how binding these promises were because current covenant relationships are not considered as permanent. Prior to Abraham’s time, however, covenants were common throughout the ancient Near East and were strictly binding in social and political situations.<sup>3</sup> In the Old Testament, “covenant” is the translation of the word *bērît* (see Genesis 17:7–8). The term does not have an established etymology.<sup>4</sup> One possible Hebrew root, *brh* means to “select” or “choose” and denotes the idea that the parties to the covenant carefully choose each other as partners. Another possible meaning comes from an Akkadian word *biritu*, which is to “fetter” or “join together,” and represents an absolute, binding contract. Thirdly, another meaning for the Hebrew root, *brh* is to “eat bread,” harking back to Semitic hospitality traditions binding a host to protect his guest. This last definition is reminiscent of the covenant renewal that takes place as part of the sacrament.<sup>5</sup>

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Thomas W. Mackay, “Abraham in Egypt: A Collation of Evidence for the Case of the Missing Wife,” *BYU Studies* 10/4 (1970): 429–51; Gaye Strathearn, “The Wife/Sister Experience: Pharaoh’s Introduction to Jehovah,” in *Thy People Shall Be My People and Thy God My God*, Sperry Symposium Series (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994), 150–65; and S. Michael Wilcox, *Daughters of God: Scriptural Portraits* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998).

2. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “covenant.”
3. Covenants (treaties) are common from the Early Bronze Age (Ebla, Byblos, etc.) through the Iron Age (Assyria, etc.). Most record a treaty between two political entities and include a structure common to Old Testament covenants including identification, history, stipulations, provisions for periodic reading, witnesses, blessings and curses, ratification, and imposition of the curses. See the overview in George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), s.v. “covenant.”
4. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 1:114 n. 18.
5. Victor L. Ludlow, *Principles and Practices of the Restored Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 289–90. See also Victor L. Ludlow, “Unlocking the Covenant Teachings in the Scriptures,” *Religious Studies Center Newsletter*, Brigham Young University 4/2 (1990): 1, 4.

In the Abrahamic covenant and other biblical covenants, the elements of stipulations, blessings, and tokens or signs are set by the Lord. In this type of covenant, “the two parties to the agreement do not stand in the relation of independent and equal contractors. God in his good pleasure fixes the terms, which man accepts.”<sup>6</sup> Important to the structure of these covenants are the stipulations—what the recipient agrees to do—and the blessings—what God agrees to do. Van Beek clarifies, “God takes the initiative with a conditional promise, specifying attainable blessings and setting the terms for people to receive them. . . . The terms have been set by the Lord for both the rewards (blessings, salvation, exaltation) and the efforts demanded (obedience to rules and commandments).”<sup>7</sup>

A covenant is usually entered into with some kind of a token or visible sign of the agreement. Ancient Near Eastern covenants had a wide range of signs and ceremonies that brought a group under covenant. The most widespread was that of sacrificing an animal, which often included sharing a meal.<sup>8</sup> In the Old Testament, the words for entering into a covenant are *kārat bērit*, translated literally “to cut a covenant.” Tokens or covenant entrance ceremonies include the sacrament (or shared meal), baptism, ordinations, weddings, and other temple rites. These visible signs “serve as a signal that individuals enter into or reaffirm personal covenants with the Lord.”<sup>9</sup>

There are many types of covenants that the Lord has made with his children. Some of these include baptism, tithing, Sabbath observance, the Word of Wisdom, the united order, and a number of covenants that Latter-day Saints make in the temple.<sup>10</sup> The whole of the gospel is often called the “new and everlasting covenant.” “The provisions of this covenant are that if men will believe, repent, be baptized, receive the Holy Ghost, and endure in righteousness to the end, they shall have an inheritance in the celestial world.”<sup>11</sup>

Temple marriage is a significant example of a covenant between the Lord and his people. A marriage covenant is a promise made between three people—the husband, the wife, and God. James Duke elaborates: “Eternal marriage is a covenant, a sacred promise that a wife and a husband make with each other and with God, attested to by both mortal witnesses and heavenly angels.”<sup>12</sup> The husband and wife covenant with each other and with God to remain true and faithful to each other and in return, enjoy the blessings of a happy, eternal family in the life to come. Some of the tokens or signs of the covenant include the sealing ordinance that takes place in the temple and the change of the woman’s last name.

Thus, covenants between God and man contain three vital elements: stipulations, blessings, and tokens or signs. When the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, he clearly laid out those three components, and Abraham accepted the terms: “And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

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6. “Covenant,” Bible Dictionary in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints edition of the King James Bible (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979), 651.
  7. Wouter Van Beek, “Covenants,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:332–33.
  8. Such ceremonies are seen from Assyria to Rome and are “widespread in both time and space” (Mendenhall and Herion, “covenant”).
  9. Van Beek, “Covenants,” 1:332.
  10. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1979), 167.
  11. *Ibid.*, 166–67.
  12. James T. Duke, “Marriage: Eternal Marriage,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:858.

## Abraham and the Covenant

*For I have purposed to take thee away out of Haran,  
and to make of thee a minister to bear my name  
in a strange land which I will give unto thy seed after thee  
for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice (Abraham 2:6).*

The Abrahamic covenant has been aptly explained in other sources, so a brief overview will suffice here.<sup>13</sup> I will use three main texts in which the covenant with Abraham is established—Genesis 15, Genesis 17, and Abraham 2—to illustrate the stipulations, blessings, and tokens or signs of the Abrahamic covenant.

### Covenant Stipulations

Obedience to the Lord is prominently stipulated in the sacred texts, and Abraham’s life, in particular, is an example of righteousness. In the scriptures, Abraham obeyed every command the Lord asked of him throughout his life. Abraham was told to leave Haran (Abraham 2:6), he was given the commandments included in the gospel (Abraham 2:10), and he was told to be perfect (Genesis 17:1). Twice the Lord asked of Abraham a sacrifice, first of animals (Genesis 15:9–12), and then of his son Isaac (Genesis 22). “Abraham became a man of good repute (Genesis 14:13, 18–20; 23:1–16) and was trusted by God, who commended him, saying, ‘I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment’ (Genesis 18:19).”<sup>14</sup> Abraham obeyed all of these things; “he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).<sup>15</sup>

Christ taught that Abraham had been awarded a place in heaven (Matt 8:11; Luke 16:19–31). Paul says that the covenant was confirmed through Abraham’s righteousness, “after he had patiently endured” (Hebrews 6:15). In the Doctrine and Covenants, Joseph Smith is told, “Go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham; enter ye into my law and ye shall be saved” (D&C 132:32). He is celebrated in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 8:2; Jacob 4:5; Alma 5:24), extolled for his great faith (Hebrews 11:8–19; James 2:21–23), and cited as an exemplary tithe payer (Alma 13:15; Hebrews 7:1–2). From the scriptures we know that Abraham kept the stipulations of the covenant and could thus merit the blessings of the covenant.

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13. Besides the sources quoted below, other studies include Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 417–38, 458–80; Edward J. Brandt, “The Covenants and Blessings of Abraham,” *Ensign*, February 1973, 42–43; Spencer W. Kimball, *Abraham: An Example to the Fathers* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977); Ellis T. Rasmussen, “Abrahamic Covenant,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:9–10; Monte S. Nyman, “Abraham, the Father of the Faithful,” Sperry Lecture Series (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1975); Michael S. Wilcox, “The Abrahamic Covenant,” in *A Witness of Jesus Christ: 1989 Sperry Symposium on the Old Testament*, ed. Richard D. Draper (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 271–80; and Stephen D. Ricks, “The Early Ministry of Abraham,” in *The Pearl of Great Price: Studies in Scripture*, ed. Robert L. Millet and Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 2:221–22.

14. Rasmussen, “Abrahamic Covenant,” 9.

15. President Kimball listed the qualities of Abraham that we are called on to follow in Spencer W. Kimball, “The Example of Abraham,” *Ensign*, June 1975, 3–7.

## Covenant Blessings

The blessings of the Abrahamic covenant can be divided into three main categories that Van Seters identifies as “numerous progeny, the land of Canaan, and the promise to be Abraham’s God.”<sup>16</sup> The first promise of a numerous posterity is given in Abraham 2:9–11. This promise takes on an added significance because of Sarah’s inability to have children. However, Abraham is promised a son—an end to the problem of childlessness. The progression of the promise of a son to the promise of a great posterity entails the blessing of “eternal increase”<sup>17</sup> because “the desire for many descendants cannot be fulfilled in one event, like the birth of a son, but must extend over generations of steady growth.”<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, Abraham is given the promise of a land of inheritance for his descendants as recorded in Abraham 2:6, 19. In the ancient Middle East, the promise of a cultivated land meant the difference between life and death. Genesis 17:8 defines this land as the “land of Canaan,” but it is also described as “this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates” (Genesis 15:18).

Finally, the greatest blessing of the covenant is the Lord’s promise to be Abraham’s (and later Israel’s) God as found in Abraham 2:9–11 and Genesis 12:3, 17:7–8, and 22:18. Included in this blessing are the promises that the Lord would bless him “above measure” and that he and his descendants would receive the “Gospel” and the “Priesthood,” which are “the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal” (Abraham 2:9–11). The blessing of God’s presence is even more explicit with each succeeding generation when the patriarchal covenant is renewed with Abraham’s son and grandson (see Genesis 26:3, 24; 28:15; 31:3; 46:3.)

## Covenant Tokens or Signs

The Lord commanded Abraham to observe two tokens or signs of the covenant following the common pattern of covenant establishment. These were to stand as symbols of the binding relationship between the Lord and Abraham. First, Abraham was required to change his name from Abram to Abraham (Genesis 17:5), for a name change was a common ancient sign of making a covenant.<sup>19</sup> One of the most famous examples from the ancient Near East is that of Amenhotep IV, who changed his name to Akhenaton when he introduced a monotheistic reform in New Kingdom Egypt.<sup>20</sup> Abraham’s name change also signifies a change in religion. The first name, Abram, means

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16. John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 288.
  17. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 13. See also Bruce R. McConkie, “The Promises Made to the Fathers,” in *The Old Testament: Genesis to 2 Samuel: Studies in Scripture*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert Millett (Salt Lake City: Randall Book, 1985), 3:47–62.
  18. Claus Westermann, “Promises to the Patriarchs,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Keith Crinn et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), suppl.: 692b.
  19. On name changes and covenants see Truman G. Madsen, “‘Putting on the Names’: A Jewish-Christian Legacy,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 1:458–81; Bruce H. Porter and Stephen D. Ricks, “Names in Antiquity: Old, New and Hidden,” in *By Study and Also by Faith*, 1:501–22; Stephen D. Ricks and John J. Sroka, “King Coronation and Temple: Enthronement Ceremonies in History,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 236–64; and Hugh W. Nibley, “On the Sacred and the Symbolic,” in *Temples of the Ancient World*, 535–621.
  20. G. H. R. Horsley, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Names, Double.” Name changes for religious reasons are especially common in Roman, Ptolemaic, and early Christian periods.

“the father is exalted” while the name Abraham means “father of a multitude.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, the name change not only symbolizes a new life and new covenant for Abraham but also serves as a reminder of the promise of a great posterity.

As a second token, the Lord commanded Abraham to perform the rite of circumcision.<sup>22</sup> The Lord said to Abraham, “And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you” (Genesis 17:11). The Lord also instructed that Abraham’s children be circumcised by the time they were eight days old (Genesis 17:12–13). Abraham immediately circumcised Ishmael and those in his household, as well as Isaac when he was eight days old (Genesis 17:23–27; 21:4). It is evident that the token of circumcision was vital to the covenant, because the Lord stated that one who was not circumcised “shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant” (Genesis 17:14).

Abraham honored his part of the covenant with the Lord through his adherence to the stipulations, his receipt of the blessings, and his obedience to the tokens, allowing the covenant to endure in this form throughout the generations of his descendants. Thus, “the covenant relationship between God and his people involved blessings and responsibilities. [Now] we must inquire how far the women of Israel received the blessings and how far they shared in the responsibilities.”<sup>23</sup>

### Sarah and the Covenant

*That face is fair, wherein we trace  
The seal of God’s sustaining grace;  
And they are brilliant, who are bright  
With sacred truth’s unerring light.*<sup>24</sup>

Sarah is revered in scripture, biblical commentary, and literature as a strong and beautiful matriarch of the house of Israel. Her beauty is cited as the main reason for Pharaoh’s interest in her (Genesis 12:11). Jewish legend records that “she was a helpmeet worthy of Abraham,” who was compassionate, generous, and considered a prophetess who could bring her people closer to God.<sup>25</sup> The Midrash states that it was Sarah who taught and converted the women while Abraham taught the men.<sup>26</sup> However, her relationship with the Lord and participation in the covenant is a subject of much debate. In general, her association with the covenant is either met with silence,<sup>27</sup>

21. A. R. Millard, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Abraham.”

22. For a general overview of the token of circumcision, see Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 1:46–48.

23. Mary J. Evans, *Woman in the Bible: An Overview of All the Crucial Passages on Women’s Roles* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1983), 27.

24. Francis M. Caulkins, *Eve and Her Daughters of Holy Writ* (New York: American Tract Society, 1861), 17.

25. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 1:203; see also 3:206, 5:258, 5:215.

26. *Midrash Rabbah Song of Songs* 1:3 and *Midrash Exodus* 50:1.

27. Besides commentaries already listed in this study, some of the major works on Genesis that are silent on the subject include Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12–50* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); J. Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12–50* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, trans. David E. Green (Grand

disdain that she was not included,<sup>28</sup> or a cursory mention that she was included in the covenant.<sup>29</sup> As yet, no in-depth study has shown how she relates to the covenant. Nonetheless, she certainly participated in the covenant if she fulfilled the stipulations, received the blessings, and had tokens similar to Abraham's.

### Covenant Stipulations

Like Abraham, Sarah was under the same obligations in keeping the covenant. According to the scriptures, Sarah followed every command that the Lord required of her, and she is, like Abraham, held up as an example of righteousness.

Sarah's behavior when taken by Pharaoh and Abimilech is an excellent example of her obedience and commitment to the covenant (Genesis 12, 20; Abraham 2). These rulers posed a major threat to Abraham's family.<sup>30</sup> The Lord instructed Abraham to have Sarah say she was his sister in order to preserve his life (Abraham 2:22–25). Such a statement required great faith on her part, because these rulers could have endangered her and her marriage. However, Sarah kept her covenant with the Lord as well as her marriage covenant with Abraham. Nibley observed, "Of course, Pharaoh wanted to have Sarah for his wife, but Abraham and Sarah had made a covenant to each other, and Abraham in this story (1Q GenApocr, the *Genesis Apocryphon*) is outside the palace walls all night and prays to God to spare Sarah."<sup>31</sup> Like Abraham, Sarah had many opportunities

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987); P. A. Verhoef, "Abraham/Abram" in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:351–58; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949); G. Charles Aalders, *Genesis, Bible Student's Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981); Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972); and Walter Russell Bowie, "Genesis," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick et al. (New York: Abingdon, 1952), 1:458–65.

28. Some examples include the following: "When the new God enters into a covenant with the first patriarch, the first woman in patriarchal history is entirely passive. A relation is established between Yahweh and Abraham—if Sarah is a participant we do not know, perhaps she doesn't know herself. While her husband talks with, or even argues with God, establishes a new religion, conquers and distributes new territory, looks after herds, erects altars, goes to war, etc., Sarah is depicted as living in a narrow and limited world, entirely concentrated upon the potential of her uterus" (Inger Ljung, *Silence or Suppression: Attitudes Towards Women in the Old Testament* [Uppsala: S. Academiae Upsaliensis, 1989], 93). Likewise, "It is a covenant with those who are competent to enter into such a thing; that is to say with the men; they represent the people. . . . Woman has no place in this revelation, therefore she is a constant danger to the worship of Yahweh" (Ludwig Koehler, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. A. S. Todd [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957], 69).
29. Some examples include the following: "With them were restored the covenants and promises of our first parents" (Hugh Nibley, "Patriarchy and Matriarchy" in *Old Testament and Related Studies* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986], 1:98); and "Women were full members of the covenant community" (Evans, *Woman in the Bible*, 32).
30. A wonderful analysis is found in Strathearn, "The Wife/Sister Experience: Pharaoh's Introduction to Jehovah," 150–65. See also Thomas W. Mackay, "Abraham in Egypt: A Collation of Evidence for the Case of the Missing Wife." Nibley wrote that it was Sarah's royal blood that brought the problem about: "It was also a pharaoh who sought the hand of Sarah, the true princess, in order to raise up a royal progeny by her" ("Patriarchy and Matriarchy," 99).
31. Hugh Nibley, *Ancient Documents and the Pearl of Great Price* (Provo, Utah: BYU Division of Continuing Education, 1986), 11.



to lose sight of the promises the Lord had made. Among these were various threats to the fulfillment of the covenant, such as barrenness (Genesis 11:30, 16:1), age (Genesis 17:17, 18:12), and the binding (Akedah) of Isaac (Genesis 22).<sup>32</sup>

When we look at her standing in other scripture, it becomes clear that Sarah, like Abraham, kept the stipulations of the covenant. Peter held her up as an example to women in his day (1 Peter 3:5–6); likewise, Paul noted that it was through Sarah’s faith that Isaac was conceived “because she judged him faithful who had promised” (Hebrews 11:11). Isaiah said, “Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you” (Isaiah 51:2). On one occasion the Lord even instructed Abraham to follow Sarah’s counsel (Genesis 21:10–12). Every scriptural reference to Sarah evidences that she is a model example for the righteous to follow. Consequently, she was also given the blessings the Lord had promised her.

### Covenant Blessings

Like Abraham, Sarah received the same three promises and blessings of the Abrahamic covenant—a numerous posterity, a land of inheritance for her descendants, and the blessing of God’s presence in her life. The Lord saw Sarah as important, not simply as a physical vessel to bring about a temporary fulfillment of the covenant, for “Sarah, of course, figures indispensably in the blessing given to Abraham, and the Lord promised her explicitly that she would be ‘a mother of nations’ (Genesis 17:16).”<sup>33</sup>

Sarah played a key role in Isaac’s physical and spiritual development. Mary Pratt Parish suggests that “his faith in the one true God would depend largely on the influence his mother would have upon him. Through her he would learn of the covenant the Lord had made with Abraham. . . . In this sense, Sarah was the guardian of the covenant, for its continuance would depend largely on her influence.”<sup>34</sup>

To the Israelites, having Sarah as an ancestress was just as important as having Abraham as an ancestor. David Bakan observes that “not all the offspring of Abraham are Israelites; the Israelites stem only from Sarah. Sarah is more definitely the ancestor of the Israelites than Abraham.”<sup>35</sup> Even in Judaism today, the importance of matrilineal descent remains. “Circumcision is not the only requirement for Jewish males; they must also be born of Jewish mothers. And whether the man who impregnates a Jewish woman is circumcised or not, her offspring will automatically be recognized as a Jew, a member of her group.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Sylvia Aschliman correctly concludes that “women were not nominal to God’s covenant. They too were central to the experience of promise and fulfillment.”<sup>37</sup>

32. See also J. Cheryl Exum, “The Mothers of Israel: The Patriarchal Narratives from a Feminist Perspective,” *Bible Review* 2/1 (1986): 60–67; Dixon Sutherland, “The Organization of the Abraham Promise Narratives,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 95/3 (1983): 337–43; John H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed: The Status of Women in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 79; Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economic Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 54; Hugh Nibley, “Patriarchy and Matriarchy,” 98.

33. Sydney Smith Reynolds, “Mother in Israel,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:963.

34. Mary Pratt Parrish, “Guardians of the Covenant,” *Ensign*, May 1972, 26.

35. David Bakan, *And They Took Themselves Wives* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), 73.

36. Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*, 139.

37. Sylvia Albrecht Aschliman, “A New Look at Women of Old,” *Bible Today* 28/6 (1990): 353.

As mentioned above, Abraham rejoiced concerning Ishmael, saying, “O that Ishmael might live before thee!” (Genesis 17:18). Yet “without diminishing the stature of the patriarch—who is obviously content with his offspring Ishmael, and is blessed by El Shaddai with a promise of twelve princes as progeny—a covenant is made with Sarah.”<sup>38</sup> The text explicitly mentions Sarah’s posterity and not just Abraham’s. In verse 16 of the King James Version, the Lord tells Abraham, “And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.” The Septuagint, the Vulgate, and the Syriac versions of the Bible read, “I will bless him. . . . He will give rise to nations; rulers of people shall stem from him,” apparently referring to Isaac. However, in the Masoretic text the whole verse refers to Sarah using the words *bēraktîhâ*, *kaytâ*, and *mimmennâ*: “I will bless her . . . she will give rise . . . (will come) from her.” Victor Hamilton asserts that the Masoretic version is more logically accurate, noting that “Sarah is central to this part of the unit. Isaac will come later.”<sup>39</sup>

The second blessing of a land of inheritance was also given to both Abraham and Sarah. Sarah certainly benefited from the protection and security a land of inheritance could afford her. Some have suggested that the gifts that Pharaoh gave the pair in Egypt were gifts bestowed on her.<sup>40</sup> Specifically, Pharaoh is also said to have given Sarah the land of Goshen.<sup>41</sup> In biblical times, a mother with wealth would bequeath it to her children separate from the estate of their father.<sup>42</sup>

The question of inheritance through a legitimate son seems to have some affinity to ancient Mesopotamian religious practices. Savina Teubal has suggested that Sarah may have belonged to a group of Mesopotamian priestesses comparable to that of the Akkadian *nadîtu*. Such a priestess would have considerable wealth of her own. Teubal writes: “That Abram is laden with wealth (that includes assets of the priestess) reflects Babylonian custom, where the husband administered the possessions of his *nadîtu*-wife.”<sup>43</sup> It was also the practice of the *nadîtu* that they remained childless and other women were designated to have children to become their heirs. Teubal uses the hypothesis to explain that Sarah was childless by choice and was given a companion (Hagar) to have children for her. The Lord may have alluded to such a tradition when he said in Doctrine and Covenants 132:34 that “God commanded Abraham, and Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to wife. And why did she do it? Because this was the law.”

When Isaac was born, a break in the *nadîtu* tradition was established, and Hagar and her son were disinherited from Sarah’s wealth but not necessarily Abraham’s. The “she is my sister” episodes may also be explained as a “heiros gamos” with a *nadîtu* priestess. Likewise, there is a precedent in the *nadîtu* tradition for when Sarah “dealt hardly” with Hagar. Given all of the correlation between the actions of the patriarchs’ wives and the *nadîtu*, it is quite possible that the function of a priestess may have influenced Sarah and Hagar before they were introduced to the priesthood of Yahweh.

38. Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*, 29. Again, the covenant motif is not carried further by Teubal.

39. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 475 n. 2.

40. Nibley, “Patriarchy and Matriarchy,” 99.

41. *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer*, 36:1, cited in Aaron Rothkoff, “Sarah/In the Aggadah,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Cecil Roth et al. (Jerusalem: Keter, 1994), 14:868, and Jacob Zallel Lauterbach, “Sarah in Rabbinical Literature,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer et al. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1905), 11:55.

42. Savina J. Teubal, *Ancient Sisterhood: The Lost Traditions of Hagar and Sarah* [previously published as *Hagar the Egyptian*] (Athens: Swallow Press, 1990), 115.

43. Teubal, *Ancient Sisterhood*, 125.

Finally, Sarah experiencing the blessing of God's presence is well documented in the scriptures. For instance, the Lord commanded Abraham to follow her counsel, at one point saying, "In all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice" (Genesis 21:12). In addition, Peter and Paul both cited her example as one that the women in their day should follow (1 Peter 3:5–6; Hebrews 11:11). Thus, Sarah received the same blessings as Abraham. She was promised and attained the blessings of posterity, a land of inheritance for her children, and the companionship of the Lord.

### **Covenant Tokens or Signs**

It is clear that Sarah participated in a name change that marked her acceptance of the covenant. Concerning this token, Gordon Wenham writes: "To mark these great promises, the names of Abram and Sarai are changed to the more familiar Abraham and Sarah and the national rite of circumcision is instituted as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham's descendants."<sup>44</sup> Like Abraham's name change, the change from Sarai to Sarah marked entry into the covenant. It appears this alteration was more symbolic than a mere change in definition. However, this change certainly signifies entry into the covenant. Gale Yee mentioned, "Sarai's name is changed to Sarah, just as Abram's name becomes Abraham. Name changes signify a new reality. Thus, the barren Sarah is brought into God's covenantal promise as the mother of many nations and kings."<sup>45</sup>

It could be argued that when the covenant was established in Genesis chapters 15 and 17, Sarah was not present and thus the covenant did not involve her directly. For example, Trevor Dennis points out that while the Lord acknowledged her blessings, "Not once [did] he address them to Sarai."<sup>46</sup> However, this need not be interpreted as evidence that Sarah was not as much a part of the covenant as Abraham.

Some scholars have suggested that in Genesis 18:9–15, when Sarah "laughed" at the angels' announcement that she would have a son, Abraham kept the covenant to himself and did not share it with her because of his "reticence" described in Genesis 17:17.<sup>47</sup> In my view Sarah's laugh was not a laugh of surprise or ridicule. The Hebrew term for "laugh" is *tišḥaq*, from the root *šḥq*, meaning "to laugh" (the name Isaac also derives from this Hebrew term).<sup>48</sup> This term is used previous

44. Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16–50*, ed. David A. Hubbard et al. (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 2:17.

45. Gale A. Yee, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "covenant," 5:981.

46. Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 37.

47. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 477. Ljung writes of the patriarch's wives: "They are curious, dishonest, and distrustful and thus not worthy of being addressed by Yahweh. For when he finally turns to the mother of his chosen people, he does this with an unfriendly admonition, consisting of three words: 'You did smile'. Prior to this he has discussed Sarah with Abraham, even though he knew that Sarah was eavesdropping behind the tent door. Eavesdropping is a bad thing, both in the Old Testament and today—but what else can Sarah do, if she wants to know what is discussed or planned: Yahweh doesn't address her, and her husband doesn't report anything to her. This becomes evident in Sarah's laughter, an echo of Abraham's earlier laughter (17:17)—had he then told her about Yahweh's promise, she would not have been surprised now. The inequality is apparent and carried out in detail: When Abraham laughs, Yahweh patiently repeats his plan, when Sarah laughs, she receives a snub as an answer" (*Silence or Suppression*, 94). This theory forgets that Sarah must have been told because her name was changed.

48. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 850.

to Sarah's experience in Genesis 17:17 when Abraham initially laughs at the news that Sarah will bear a son. Significantly, Joseph Smith changed the word *laughed* to *rejoiced* (Genesis 17:17 JST). With this change in mind, it stands to reason that Sarah also likely rejoiced at the news<sup>49</sup> and that Isaac was named after this laughing (*ṣḥq*) out of a spirit of joy and rejoicing. Furthermore, certainly Abraham would have informed Sarah about the covenant if her name was to change (Genesis 17:15). Thus, this name change provides ample support that Sarah was included in the covenant.

The covenant's second token of circumcision was not required for Sarah.<sup>50</sup> This commandment was simply irrelevant because it applied only to males. Mary Evans has observed that the "women's lack of circumcision is not seen as excluding them from the covenant, although it may indeed reflect their lower status in society. In fact, the passage in Genesis 17 where circumcision is introduced as a covenant sign is interrupted by the special mention of the blessing on Sarah."<sup>51</sup> Thus, Sarah enjoyed all the blessings and benefits of the covenant. She obeyed the Lord's commandments, proved true while suffering trials, and became an example of righteousness. She was blessed with a great posterity and an inheritance of land for her children, as well as the Lord's presence in her life. However, the clearest indication of Sarah's active participation in the covenant occurred when she took upon herself a new name.

### Hagar and the Covenant

*Thus Hagar found relief and peace  
Through tenderness divine,  
While time unrolled the wondrous lease  
Of Ishmael's mighty line.*<sup>52</sup>

Hagar's role has been perceived and interpreted in somewhat negative ways in both Latter-day Saint and Christian circles. Her story, says Teubal, "has sanctioned the inferiority of women and the endorsement of slavery."<sup>53</sup> For many Christians, the Lord's command that Hagar return to Sarah's control makes it difficult for them to accept that the Lord loves all people. Megan McKenna asserts that "we tend to identify with Sarai and not with Hagar, who, annoyingly, keeps being inserted into the story and complicating matters by her behavior and the events surrounding her and Sarai."<sup>54</sup>

Scripture gives much more information about Sarah than Hagar. And what is available about Hagar is tightly focused on three events—the conception of Ishmael, the fleeing from Sarah, and the banishment (Genesis 16, 21). It is therefore more difficult to ascertain the extent of her involvement in the covenant. However, a careful examination of the biblical text shows that Hagar enjoyed many of the same aspects of the Abrahamic covenant that Sarah and Abraham did. Although the Lord in Genesis 17 states that he would establish his covenant with Isaac (v. 21), Hagar and her

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49. Wilcox, *Daughters of God: Scriptural Portraits*, 26.

50. For a general overview of the token of circumcision, see also De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, 1:46–48.

51. Evans, *Woman in the Bible*, 27.

52. Caulkins, *Eve and Her Daughters of Holy Writ*, 29.

53. Teubal, *Ancient Sisterhood*, xxi.

54. Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994), 174.

descendants occupy a position that denotes some sort of covenantal relationship with the Lord as well. Like Abraham and Sarah, Hagar obeyed the commandments of the Lord, was deemed righteous by Him, and shared in the same blessings of the Abrahamic covenant: a great posterity, a land of inheritance for her children, and the companionship of the Lord.

According to Genesis 16:1, Hagar was an Egyptian who became Sarah's handmaid. Jewish legend asserts that she was Pharaoh's daughter, given to Sarah because Pharaoh was so impressed with Sarah's character.<sup>55</sup> Don Benjamin notes that "Sarah negotiates a covenant with Hagar to be a surrogate mother for her . . . [then] Peace is restored when Yahweh negotiates a covenant with Hagar and Abraham which is virtually identical to the covenant negotiated with Sarah and Abraham."<sup>56</sup>

### Covenant Stipulations

Like Sarah and Abraham, Hagar sacrificed to follow the dictates of the Lord. It is difficult to determine exactly what happened between Sarah and Hagar in chapter 16 that prompted Hagar's obedience. When Hagar "saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes" (v. 4), and "when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face" (v. 6). Sarah's reaction to Hagar's animosity can be better understood in light of common Near Eastern practices.

A similar situation to Sarah and Hagar's is found in Hammurabi Law number 146: "When a seignior married a hierodule [*naditu* priestess] and she gave a female slave to her husband and she has then borne children, if later that female slave has claimed equality with her mistress because she bore children, her mistress may not sell her; she may mark her with the slave-mark and count her among the slaves."<sup>57</sup> In "dealing hardly" with her, Sarah may have returned her to the status of handmaid as was her right according to common Near Eastern practice. Other parallels are found in the Nuzi tablets,<sup>58</sup> an Egyptian text,<sup>59</sup> Assyrian marriage contracts,<sup>60</sup> and a neo-Assyrian text from Nimrud.<sup>61</sup> These examples demonstrate that a barren wife can give her husband another woman to bear children, but the wife is not allowed to treat the handmaid or the children badly.<sup>62</sup>

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55. R. Simeon b. Yohai said: "Hagar was daughter of Pharaoh. When he saw the wonderful deeds that were done for Sarah when she was in his house, he took his daughter and gave her to Sarai, saying, 'It is better that my daughter should be a servant girl in this household, rather than a matron in some other house'" (*Genesis Rabbah* 45:1, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation*, trans. Jacob Neusner, Brown Judaic Studies, vol. 105 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985], 2:146).
  56. Don C. Benjamin, "Stories of Hagar," *The Bible Today* 35 (January 1997): 29.
  57. Theophile J. Meek, trans., "Code of Hammurabi 146," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating To the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 172. See also G. R. Driver and John C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952–55), 1:245–65, and 2:57.
  58. Theophile J. Meek, trans., "Mesopotamian Legal Documents," in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating To the Old Testament*, 220.
  59. Alan H. Gardiner, "Adoption Extraordinary," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 26 (1940): 23–29.
  60. Julius Lewy, "On Some Institutions of the Old Assyrian Empire," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 27 (1956): 8–10; Driver and Miles, *Babylonian Laws*, 1:369–70.
  61. B. Parker, "The Nimrud Tablets 1952—Business documents," *Iraq* 16 (1954): 37–39.
  62. For a summary of scholarly consensus on the application of Hammurabi's Law to this text see Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess*, 33–37. See also John Van Seters, "The Problem of Childlessness in Near Eastern Law and the Patriarchs of Israel," 401–8; Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 68–71; Mary Callaway, *Sing O Barren One: A Study in Comparative Midrash*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 13–16; Speiser, *Genesis*, 119–21; André

After Hagar fled into the wilderness, an angel of the Lord visited her and told her, “Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands” (Genesis 16:9). This passage need not be viewed only as a divine sanction or a command of subjugation to Sarah. Perhaps the Lord sought to keep Hagar and Ishmael in the house of Abraham as a protection until they could establish a house of their own. According to Elsa Tamez, “What God wants is that she and her child should be saved, and at the moment, the only way to accomplish that is not in the desert, but by returning to the house of Abraham. Ishmael hasn’t been born. The first three years of life are crucial. Hagar simply must wait a little longer, because Ishmael must be born in the house of Abraham to prove that he is the firstborn (Deuteronomy 21:15–17), and to enter into the household through the rite of circumcision (Genesis 17). This will guarantee him participation in the history of salvation, and will give him rights of inheritance in the house of Abraham.”<sup>63</sup> Similarly, D. S. Williams notes, “God apparently wants Hagar to secure her and her child’s well-being by using the resources Abram has to offer.”<sup>64</sup> Hagar needed the security of Abraham’s family to see Ishmael through the vital years of his childhood, and Ishmael needed the companionship and example of his father, Abraham.

Finally, Hagar was judged worthy to receive a visit from an angel of the Lord on two separate occasions. Both episodes are exceptional in the Bible because they are granted to a woman who was Egyptian. John Otwell observed, “Both of these passages reveal that the two narrators and their auditors took it for granted that a woman could receive a theophany. Only the use of the messenger (the angel) sets the structure of the incidents apart from similar theophanies to Abraham.”<sup>65</sup> These angelic visitations show that the Lord cared about Hagar and desired to give her covenantal promises.

### Covenant Blessings

Hagar was also given the same three blessings of the Abrahamic covenant as Abraham and Sarah: posterity, a land for her descendants’ inheritance, and the presence of God. First, in both of her theophanies in the desert, the Lord promises Hagar a great posterity, saying, “I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude” (Genesis 16:10), and again, “Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 21:18). Both promises were made directly to Hagar (unlike the promises made to Sarah).<sup>66</sup> The posterity of Hagar also fulfills the Abrahamic covenant. Doctrine and Covenants 132:34 reads, “From Hagar sprang many people. This, therefore, was fulfilling, among other things, the promises.”<sup>67</sup> Abraham

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Parrot, *Abraham and His Times* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 102–4; Sidney B. Sperry, *Doctrine and Covenants Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1960), 731–32; and Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 239. S. Michael Wilcox presents an interesting scenario for “dealing harshly.” He likens the incident to a bishop who will not issue a temple recommend to an unworthy member for a wedding (*Daughters of God: Scriptural Portraits*, 30–31).

63. Elsa Tamez, “The Woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation,” *Cross Currents* 36/2 (1986): 137.
64. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenges of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), 21. Also, “She has to think of her child, not herself” (McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children*, 177).
65. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed*, 163.
66. Phyllis Tribble writes that “this promise to her lacks the covenant context that is so crucial to the founding fathers” but does not substantiate the claim (*Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 16).
67. Sidney B. Sperry also wrote, “From Hagar there sprang many descendants of Abraham, thus fulfilling the promises made to him” (*Doctrine and Covenants Compendium*, 732).

too received a promise of the Lord concerning Ishmael, saying, “I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 17:20). Indeed, this promise was realized when Ishmael, like Jacob, fathered twelve sons (see 1 Chronicles 1:29–31).

From the text it is apparent that Hagar also enjoyed the second blessing of a land of inheritance for her children. The separation of Hagar and Ishmael from Sarah and Isaac was likely a way to divide the inheritances and provide Ishmael with a land of his own. Sarah said, “For the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac” (Genesis 21:10). Sarah was not being spiteful in her request. According to Josephus, Sarah “loved Ismael, who was born of her own handmaid Hagar, with an affection not inferior to that of her own son.”<sup>68</sup>

The departure of Hagar and Ishmael may also have been a way to grant Hagar freedom from her handmaid status. Hagar’s position turns “more servile” in chapter 21 before she is released, giving emphasis to the fact that she is leaving a menial situation.<sup>69</sup> Some scholars have noted similarities between Hagar’s exodus into the wilderness in chapter 21 and the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.<sup>70</sup> McKenna writes, “Theirs is a mini-version of the larger story to come when Yahweh will hear the cry of a whole people in bondage and lean down to their cries as God leans down to this woman and child.”<sup>71</sup> Hence, the parallels within the two stories of the exodus and Hagar’s separation strongly suggest that Hagar was granted freedom and given a place of inheritance.

Hagar also enjoyed the third promise of the Abrahamic Covenant—the companionship of the Lord. Her two visions are as substantial as any vision recorded in the scriptures (Genesis 16:7–14 and 21:17–19). In both, Hagar is told of the great love the Lord has for her and her posterity. The second vision, in particular, occurs after Hagar leaves Abraham’s household; the Lord comforts her and reminds her of his promises. “What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation. And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink” (Genesis 21:17–19). Teubal writes that these theophanies were singular in the scriptures. She states, “Notwithstanding, the Hagar episodes record the only time in the bible that God is given a name, and the name is given by a woman. Hagar’s god is a god who knows her, who addresses her in familiar terms: ‘What troubles you, Hagar?’ he asks with the tender concern of a loving relative.”<sup>72</sup> McKenna also notes that the visions were affirmations of an impartial God. He is seen “taking note of her, just a maid, a pregnant slave, and an Egyptian,

68. Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.12.3, in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 42.

69. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 51. The word is *ammah*, discussed below.

70. Phyllis Trible suggests that there is a contrast between the exodus story and Hagar’s “banishment,” and yet her argument is completely unconvincing. She notes that in the exodus story the Hebrews are “sent away” (*slh*), using the same word as in the Hagar story and yet sees freedom for the Hebrews but banishment for Hagar. The parallels point to freedom for both rather than contrasts (*Texts of Terror*, 16).

71. McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children*, 181. See also Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 9–35, for a discussion of how Hagar’s being oppressed under the Hebrews is a “precursor of Israel’s plight under Pharaoh” (p. 13).

72. Teubal, *Ancient Sisterhood*, xxxvi.

not even a Jew! God cares about everyone.”<sup>73</sup> In sum, Hagar, like Abraham and Sarah, enjoyed the threefold blessings of the Covenant—great posterity, a land for her descendants’ inheritance, and the companionship of the Lord.

### Covenant Tokens or Signs

The biblical account does not mention any tokens given to Hagar in a covenant setting. However, in Jewish tradition Hagar’s name is later changed to Keturah, the name of the third wife of Abraham (Genesis 25:1). In light of the first covenant token of Abraham and Sarah, a name change to Keturah could suggest Hagar’s entry into the covenant. Jewish sources cite Hagar’s piety as the reason for her name change.<sup>74</sup> “[Hagar’s] fidelity is praised, for even after Abraham sent her away she kept her marriage vow, and therefore she was identified with Keturah.”<sup>75</sup> Likewise, “She was so called, because after having gone astray after idols, she again attached herself to a life of virtue.”<sup>76</sup> It is possible that after the death of Sarah, Hagar fully entered the covenant and her name changed to Keturah, thus becoming an undiminished wife of Abraham.

Was there a change in Hagar’s position in Abraham’s life? There is some question as to Hagar’s status. She is sometimes called handmaid, sometimes bondwoman, sometimes wife. She probably held different roles or a combination of roles at different times in her life. Whatever the position she held, Teubal rightly asserts, “It is important that we free ourselves from the paradigm of the nuclear family so we are not tempted to compress the biblical family into that structure.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, we must be careful to not project our modern moral structure into the relationship between Abraham and Hagar.

Three Hebrew terms describe Hagar’s status in the family of Abraham: *šiphâ*, *ʾiššâ*, and *ʾāmâ*. *Šiphâ* is usually rendered “handmaid”<sup>78</sup> and refers to a maid belonging to a woman.<sup>79</sup> In Genesis 16:3, Sarah takes her *šiphâ* Hagar and gives her to Abraham to be his *ʾiššâ* or wife.<sup>80</sup> There is debate as to how *ʾiššâ* should be translated here. Some render it “concubine,” some “wife.”<sup>81</sup> It is significant that the specific word for concubine, *pilegeš*,<sup>82</sup> doesn’t ever appear in reference to Hagar.<sup>83</sup> However, even though Hagar may have legally been Abraham’s wife, Genesis 16 only refers to her once as *ʾiššâ*, and every other time as *šiphâ*. According to James E. Talmage this is explainable because, “Hagar, . . . though his wife, was still the servant of Sarai.”<sup>84</sup> Genesis 21 describes Hagar’s

73. McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children*, 178.

74. See *Midrash Rabbah Genesis* 61:4 in Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah*, 334–35.

75. Hartwig Hirschfeld, “Hagar,” in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 6:138.

76. Elimelech Epstein Halevy, “Hagar,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 7:1076.

77. Teubal, *Ancient Sisterhood*, 115.

78. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1046.

79. Teubal suggests that Hagar’s main function was as companion to Sarah and possibly as a lay priestess who would bear children for her *naditu* companion (*Ancient Sisterhood*, 49–62).

80. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 61.

81. For discussion of scholarly views on the status of Hagar, see Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 11.

82. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 811.

83. Doctrine and Covenants 132 does not clear up the status of Hagar. Verse 34 notes that “Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to wife,” while verse 37 tells us that “Abraham received concubines, and they bore him children.” It is not clear whether Hagar was included among the concubines.

84. James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1952), 414.



status as changing exclusively to *ʾāmâ*, which is another word for “handmaid” but more demeaning.<sup>85</sup> Evidence for this can be found in Hammurabi Law 146, where someone like Hagar may be marked with “the slave-mark.” This contrasts nicely with her servitude to Sarah and her freedom recorded at the end of chapter 21. However, Doctrine and Covenants 132 refers to Hagar only as Abraham’s “wife” (vv. 34 and 65).

There is similar ambiguity as to Keturah’s status.<sup>86</sup> There are two words used to describe her: *ʾiššâ*, “wife” (Genesis 25:1), and *pilegeš*, “concubine” (1 Chronicles 1:32–33). If Hagar was released from her handmaid condition in chapter 21, she was free then to be a full and unhindered wife of Abraham and may have been accepted into the covenant with a name change to Keturah.

Of course, the second token of the covenant, circumcision, did not apply to Hagar. However, Ishmael, like Isaac, shared the blessings of posterity and land which spring from the covenant of Abraham. As stated earlier, when Abraham and Sarah’s covenant was established, the Lord also promised, “And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly . . . twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 17:20).

Therefore, Hagar very likely participated in a covenant with the Lord. Like Abraham and Sarah, Hagar followed the will of the Lord and was considered worthy of angelic visions. She was blessed with a great posterity, a land inheritance for her descendants, and the Lord’s presence in her life. And, at least according to Jewish tradition, her name was changed, suggesting entry into the covenant.

### The Abrahamic Covenant as a Marriage Covenant

The relationships between Abraham and Sarah and Abraham and Hagar clearly illustrate the principles of a marriage covenant. For instance, to aid in the fulfillment of the covenant, Abraham and his wives made a joint effort. In addition, when the Abrahamic covenant was passed down through Abraham’s descendants, later prophets often compared it to a marriage with the Lord.

#### Joint Effort

Isaiah wrote that the Lord “called him [Abraham] alone” (Isaiah 51:2). Was the Abrahamic covenant an agreement between the Lord and Abraham alone? Isaiah answers in the same verse, “Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you.” The word translated as “alone” in this verse is *ʾeḥād*, the same word as the numeral one. However, *ʾeḥād* can also mean “united” or “each one.”<sup>87</sup> Further, the male preposition in Hebrew is inclusive of the female. So Isaiah 51:2 can also be translated, “Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you, for I called them as one united, and blessed them and increased them each one.”

Hugh Nibley has observed that it took great humility for Abraham to ask Sarah to say she was his sister and for Sarah to ask Abraham to go in unto Hagar.<sup>88</sup> It also took great humility for Hagar to return from the wilderness and submit to Sarah, for Abraham to accept Hagar as his wife, and

85. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 51.

86. Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis*, 85. See also Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 396.

87. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 25.

88. Nibley, “Patriarchy and Matriarchy,” 99.

for Hagar to become a second wife to Abraham. Concerning Sarah's actions in the episode with Pharaoh, Douglas Clark wrote, "Her sacrifice demonstrated her equality with Abraham and their mutual dependence."<sup>89</sup> Sacrifice made it possible for Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar to realize a true unity. Indeed, all three exhibited great interdependence on each other and on God. This interdependence was mirrored in the covenants they unitedly made with the Lord.

### Prophetic Comparisons to a Marriage

As the Abrahamic covenant was passed down from generation to generation, biblical prophets would compare it to a marriage covenant between Israel and the Lord. Isaiah 54:5–6 is a good example: "For thy Maker is thine husband; the Lord of hosts is his name; and thy Redeemer the Holy One of Israel; The God of the whole earth shall he be called. For the Lord hath called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, and a wife of youth, when thou wast refused, saith thy God."<sup>90</sup> This allegory continued throughout the Bible into the New Testament. Mendenhall and Herion write, "The relationship between God and Israel was also very frequently viewed as analogous to that of a husband and wife. . . . This metaphor continued in use not only in early rabbinic Judaism but also in NT Christology, where Christ is portrayed as the 'bridegroom' and the Church as 'bride.'"<sup>91</sup>

Hence, the Abrahamic covenant is closely connected with the covenant of marriage. Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar approached it as joint effort, and the ancient prophets compared the continuation of the covenant with Israel to a marriage.

### Abrahamic Covenant and Latter-day Saint Marriage Covenants

Modern Latter-day Saints believe the Abrahamic covenant is very similar to the covenants made at the altars in the Lord's temples in modern times. The requirements are similar to those asked of Abraham and his wives. The blessings of the Abrahamic covenant are passed on to modern Latter-day Saints in the covenant of marriage. There are also tokens to an LDS marriage covenant as well.

For Latter-day Saints the *stipulations* within a temple marriage covenant are clear. Obedience to the Lord is foremost in such matters as belief in God, repentance, attending meetings, sustaining leaders, and obeying the Word of Wisdom, which are prerequisites to entering into the temple. LDS sealing covenants thus require the same kind of obedience to the Lord required in ancient times.

The *blessings* given in the Abrahamic covenant are quite similar those promised to LDS couples when they are married in the temple.<sup>92</sup> "When a worthy couple kneels at the sacred marriage altars

89. E. Douglas Clark, "Abraham," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:8.

90. See also Hosea 1–3, Jeremiah 3:14, Jeremiah 31:32, and Ezekiel 16, to name a few.

91. Mendenhall and Herion, "covenant."

92. It appears that the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were restored to Joseph Smith shortly after the restoration of the principle of celestial marriage. Specifically referring to the Abrahamic blessing of the priesthood, Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon Cook found in the Joseph Smith diary that "Joseph Smith, however, clarifies that Abraham's endowment (Abraham Facsimile Number 2, figure 3 and 7) was greater than that which his descendants Aaron and Levi would be allowed; and thus 'Abraham's' Patriarchal Priesthood (the ordinances of the endowment and patriarchal marriage for time and eternity) comprehended the Aaronic portion of the endowment. . . . Aside from this theological commentary, it is important to point out that the Prophet's teachings fit perfectly within a historical context. . . . The Prophet and his wife, Emma . . . were sealed on 28 May 1843. . . . But the higher ordinances that confer the fullness of the priesthood had not as yet been administered. However one

of the temple . . . [they] are promised the same blessings that were bestowed upon Abraham in ancient days. That is, they are assured of an eternal posterity, the rights and powers of the priesthood of God, and an eternal family relationship based upon the patriarchal order.”<sup>93</sup>

To modern Latter-day Saints, the *tokens* of entering the marriage covenant are comprised within the temple sealing ceremony. For example, Joseph Smith taught that the blessing of a great posterity—an Abrahamic blessing—is dependent on a temple marriage: “Except a man and his wife enter into an everlasting covenant and be married for eternity, while in this probation, by the power and authority of the Holy Priesthood, they will cease to increase when they die; that is, they will not have any children after the resurrection. But those who are married by the power and authority of the priesthood in this life, and continue without committing the sin against the Holy Ghost, will continue to increase and have children in the celestial glory.”<sup>94</sup>

It is a widespread practice today for the wife to take the family name of the husband as her own. This tradition is also found in the Bible. David Anderson wrote, “Yet another situation giving rise to renaming is marriage. Isa 4,1 indicates that upon marriage, the wife would be called by the name of the husband. This does not mean that she no longer used her own name, but that her husband’s name was an additional appellation for her.”<sup>95</sup> However, prior to an LDS temple sealing both the bride and groom receive a new name in the endowment, which could be viewed as a sign or token preparatory to the marriage covenant.

To clarify the LDS connection between the marriage covenant and the Abrahamic covenant, we must also look at Doctrine and Covenants 132. The Lord talks of the Abrahamic covenant as the fulfillment of a marriage covenant in this section. The whole section discusses the eternity of the celestial marriage covenant or temple sealing covenant. As part of the blessings of the covenant the Lord speaks about the blessings given to Abraham:

Abraham received promises concerning his seed, and the fruit of his loins—from whose loins ye are, namely, my servant Joseph—. . . both in the world and out of the world should they [Abraham’s seed] continue as innumerable as the stars; or, if ye were to count the sand upon the seashore ye could not number them.

This promise is yours also, because ye are of Abraham, and the promise was made unto Abraham; and by this law is the continuation of the works of my Father, wherein he glorifieth himself.

Go ye, therefore, and do the works of Abraham; enter ye into my law and ye shall be saved.

But if ye enter not into my law ye cannot receive the promise of my Father, which he made unto Abraham. (30–33)

The “law” referred to in this passage is the law of celestial marriage.<sup>96</sup> Joseph Smith is promised that he will receive the same blessings that Abraham obtained if he will observe the law of celestial marriage.

month and a day after this 27 August 1843 discourse, Joseph and Emma received the anointing and ordination ‘of the highest and holiest order of the priesthood’” (*The Words of Joseph Smith* [Orem, Utah: Grandin, 1991], 303 n. 21, citing Joseph Smith diary, 28 September 1843, Family and Church History Department Archives).

93. L. G. Otten and C. M. Caldwell, *Sacred Truths of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1993), 2:360.

94. *History of the Church*, 5:391.

95. T. David Anderson, “Renaming and Wedding Imagery in Isaiah 62,” 76.

96. Though clear in the context of the section, another interpretation of the “law” in this passage to be celestial marriage can be found in Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, s.v. “Abrahamic Covenant,” 13.

The Lord also instructs that it is through this law that the Father is glorified; it is through the formation of kingdoms that the Father's work rolls forward. It is interesting to note that this section was revealed while Joseph Smith was translating the section of the Old Testament that deals with the patriarchs.<sup>97</sup>

In other words, modern Latter-day Saints believe the Abrahamic covenant is passed on in a temple marriage. The requirements of obedience are similar to those for Abraham's covenant. The blessings promised are explicitly the same. The sealing ceremony name changes are tokens of the covenant and associated with LDS temple marriages.

## Conclusion

Richard Weis has written an insightful article about six different readings of the Sarah and Hagar stories. These six interpretations range from Elsa Tamez's portrayal of Hagar as a symbol of liberation and exodus to Phyllis Trible's idea that God collaborates with Sarah to oppress Hagar. Weis's article illustrates how many interpretations can come from a biblical story so steeped in millennia of feminist and androcentric interpretation. He writes, "As we have seen, the experience, perceptions and visions of the world, as well as the networks of relationships and group memberships, associated with and composing a reader's social location provide the fund of stories from which the reader draws the story or stories by which she or he organizes a reading of a biblical text. . . . Thus every statement about the meaning of a text is also a statement about the reader's experience, perceptions and visions of the world."<sup>98</sup> Modern Latter-day Saints also see a reflection of their "experience, perceptions and visions of the world" in the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. They see these parallels irrespective of how far removed they are in time.

To bring an LDS point of view to the text, along with commentary and scripture peculiar to the LDS faith, the Abrahamic covenant is a marriage covenant. In this respect, modern LDS women and men see Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar's experience as their own. Elder McConkie writes, "And so I go to the Salt Lake Temple and marry my wife for time and for all eternity, and so begins a new kingdom of God. And if we are faithful, that marriage exists here and it exists hereafter. And I have been given through that ordinance every promise that Abraham received. It is given on a conditional basis. We must be true and faithful and keep the covenant we make in the temple, but if we are faithful, we will receive the blessings. That is what is meant by the promises made to the fathers."<sup>99</sup> In the example of Abraham and Sarah there is the foundation of eternal increase that LDS families believe they are building today.

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97. B. H. Roberts, "Introduction to Volume V," in *History of the Church*, 5:xxix–xxx. See also Sperry, *Doctrine and Covenants Compendium*, 712; and Otten and Caldwell, *Sacred Truths of the Doctrine and Covenants*, 2:356.

98. Richard D. Weis, "Stained Glass Window, Kaleidoscope or Catalyst: The Implications of Difference in Readings of the Hagar and Sarah Stories," in *A Gift of God in Due Season: Essays on Scripture and Community in Honor of James A. Sanders*, ed. Richard D. Weis and David M. Carr (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 268–69. One of the most interesting interpretations I have seen is found in McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children*. She writes about Hagar's "haughtiness": "There is indignation and interpretations of jealousy and pettiness against Hagar among women who are educated and economically stable; there is laughter and delight among poor women" (p. 175). She writes that a group of Latin-American hotel maids were exhilarated with the story of Hagar and revolted against an oppressive boss.

99. McConkie, "Promises Made to the Fathers," 61.

LDS writer Edward Tullidge taught that Sarah was the paradigm for which women should strive: “The Mormon woman is Sarah in the covenant. . . . She has appropriated the text of the covenant. She claims her mother Sarah’s rights. She invokes her mother Sarah’s destiny: ‘She shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her.’”<sup>100</sup> Sarah and Hagar are examples for all LDS women. We should keep in mind the eternal picture of the blessings received by Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, and obtain them in our own lives.<sup>101</sup> Such a broad eternal perspective would ideally make modern family life more purposeful and fulfilling.

According to Parley P. Pratt, this expansive outlook creates a deep, eternal love that improves family relationships:

It was from him [Joseph Smith] that I learned that the wife of my bosom might be secured to me for time and all eternity . . . while the result of our endless union would be an offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, or the sands of the sea shore.

It was from him that I learned the true dignity and destiny of a son of God, clothed with an eternal priesthood, as the patriarch and sovereign of his countless offspring. It was from him that I learned that the highest dignity of womanhood was, to stand as a queen and priestess to her husband, and to reign for ever and ever as the queen mother of her numerous and still increasing offspring.

I had loved before, but I knew not why. But now I loved—with a pureness—an intensity of elevated, exalted feeling, which would lift my soul from the transitory things of this grovelling sphere and expand it as the ocean.<sup>102</sup>

Elder Pratt could see that the stipulations, blessings, and tokens of the Abrahamic covenant were part of the eternal marriage relationship. That connection is well substantiated in the ancient world. It was a joint effort to fulfill the Abrahamic covenant, and Latter-day Saints believe it still is today.

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100. Edward W. Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1877), 534.

101. Carol Cornwall Madsen laments that we have sometimes lost this perspective: “If the concept of mother in Israel, as applied to Latter-day Saint women, seems foreign and unrelated to modern times, it is, perhaps, that we are too far spiritually distanced from those who knew themselves to be chosen out of the world to lay the foundation of a new dispensation and to restore and receive the blessings of God’s covenant with Abraham. If the patriarchal promises seem excessive to modern ears, it is, perhaps, that we are no longer so clearly attuned to the scriptural cadences that informed the religious learning of an earlier generation steeped in biblical imagery, versed in biblical narrative, and grounded in religious symbolism. The linking of Latter-day Saints with their Israelite heritage has more than symbolic value, however. It provides a spiritual as well as lineal continuity that connects Mormonism solidly with its biblical roots. The latter-day mother in Israel is not an anachronism but a modern manifestation of a biblical reality” (“Mothers in Israel: Sarah’s Legacy,” 196).

102. *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 260.