The paper examines the ‘endangered ancestress’ theme in Genesis, in which the matriarchs, Sarah and Rebecca, are passed off to alien rulers as the sisters of their respective husbands, in Sarah’s case twice. Rather than viewing these incidents as clumsy duplication, the paper reads them as a literary device in a continuous narrative. The paper argues that when read in this way, these incidents serve to underline the singular status of Sarah in contrast to Rebecca and subsequent matriarchs. Sarah is shown to be the unique foremother of Israel. Alone of all her sex, she represents a pristine new beginning, analogous to human beginnings in Eden.

INTRODUCTION

One of the striking features of much of the narrative material in the Hebrew Scriptures is the repetition of story motifs and narrative incidents, often with only slight variations. A noteworthy example are the ‘Endangered Ancestress’ narratives in Genesis, in which ‘the patriarch, the eponymous ancestor of Israel, travels to a foreign country, where he passes his beautiful wife off as his sister because he fears the locals will kill him on her account if they know he is her husband’ (Exum 1993 p. 91). Two versions of the story involve Abraham and Sarah, Genesis 12 (where they are still named Abram and Sarai) and Genesis 20, while the third and final version in Genesis 26 involves Isaac and Rebekah. Most earlier scholarship regarded these stories as evidence of distinct documentary sources behind Genesis (e.g. Noth 1972) and sought to explain the relationship between the three accounts from an historical critical perspective. More recent studies have sought to read the accounts in the broader context of Genesis. Such studies range from arguing that the stories serve to highlight the way the ancestral patriarchs outsmart foreign potentates (e.g. Niditch (1992, p. 22), who prefers the account in Genesis 12) to Exum’s psycho-analytical study focusing on patriarchal fear of ‘woman’s sexuality and woman’s sexual knowledge’ (Exum 1993, p. 111).

Nevertheless, what all these studies have in common is a focus on the stories from the perspective of the male characters, in particular Abraham. Furthermore, I would argue that, for contextual studies especially, such a patriarchal focus has added little to understanding the role of these stories in the broader Genesis narrative. In particular, as Exum asks, why is it necessary ‘to set things up so that another man will seize’ the patriarch’s ‘wife not once, but three times’ (Exum 1993, p. 99)? I would further ask, what is the significance of the sister-wife/brother-husband motif in these stories? These questions might be better answered if the stories are read in the broader Genesis context with a focus on the matriarchs, particularly Sarah, instead.

I will develop such a reading in this essay and argue that the ‘endangered ancestress’ stories in Genesis serve to identify Sarah with Eden and an androgynous ideal as befits the great mother of Israel. The conception and birth of Isaac are framed by these stories to give Sarah a unique
status amongst women. As the foremother of Israel she represents a pristine new beginning analogous to human beginnings in Eden. This essay will examine the literary features of the three stories before sketching a portrait of ancient ideologies of sexuality, gender and reproduction and their role in the Genesis creation stories. I will then return to the motherhood of Sarah and the motif of the sister-brother relationship with Abraham before considering some possible implications of the motif of Sarah’s miraculous motherhood in later Jewish and Christian traditions.

MY SISTER? MY WIFE?

The first endangered ancestress account appears in Genesis 12:10-20. In this terse narrative Abram and Sarai go to Egypt because of a famine. Before entering Egypt, Abram reminds Sarai of her beauty and asks her to tell the Egyptians she is his sister. He does so to preclude the Egyptians from killing him in order to take Sarai. As expected, her beauty impresses the Egyptians who praise her to Pharaoh. She is taken into Pharaoh’s house and Abram is rewarded with great riches. The deity intervenes on Sarai’s behalf striking Egypt with great plagues (thus prefiguring the exodus) to prevent Pharaoh having sex with her. Pharaoh confronts Abram and returns Sarai to him, as he now knows the truth of their relationship, although Genesis never explains how Pharaoh found out. They are ordered to leave Egypt and return to Canaan with great riches that Pharaoh gives to Abram.

In a longer and more detailed narrative in Genesis 20, Abraham again passes off Sarah as his sister, this time to King Abimelech of Gerar. Unlike the earlier incident in Egypt, this time Genesis gives no account of Abraham consulting with Sarah beforehand. Instead, we are told ‘Abraham said of Sarah his wife, ”She is my sister”’ (Gen. 20:2). Consequently, Abimelech has Sarah brought to him. The deity appears to Abimelech in a dream threatening to kill him for what he has done or, in actual fact, for what he intends to do. Genesis informs the reader that ’Abimelech had not approached’ Sarah (Gen. 20:4). In the exchange between Abimelech and the deity, we discover that the deity has ensured that nothing happened to Sarah. The deity says to Abimelech, ‘it was I who kept you from sinning against Me… I did not let you touch her’ (Gen. 20:6). Therefore, whatever Abraham might do, Sarah is under the complete care and protection of the deity. It is almost as if she has been reserved or set aside by and for the deity. While both the accounts of her being endangered by strange men serve to underscore this impression, in this second account alone the deity speaks, declaring that attempts to have sex with Sarah would be ’sinning against Me’ (Gen. 20:6) not Abraham. The chapter ends with Abimelech, his wife and female slaves being healed from an affliction described as the closing of every womb of Abimelech’s household. Various commentators have read this closing of the wombs as signifying Abimelech being struck with impotency. Thus, once again the text assures readers that nothing whatsoever happened between Abimelech and Sarah.

Finally in Genesis 26, Isaac passes off Rebekah as his sister while sojourning in Philistine Gerar, an account which combines features of both these earlier stories. It takes place in Gerar, ruled by a king called Abimelech, just as in the second Abraham/Sarah account. Moreover, Isaac and Rebekah move to Gerar on account of famine, the same reason Abraham and Sarah move to Egypt in the first account in Genesis 12. Genesis 26 opens with an allusion to Genesis 12 by having the deity appear to Isaac and tell him not to go to Egypt but, instead, to Gerar. However, in this account, there are also differences. Isaac only passes off Rebekah as his sister when asked
by the men of Gerar. He does not act proactively, as does Abraham. Furthermore, Rebekah is not taken into the king’s house nor saved by divine intervention as Sarah was. There is no attempt to take Rebekah by anyone. Instead, the truth is only uncovered after the pair have been in Gerar ‘a long time’ (Gen. 26:8) when Abimelech, looking out the window, spots Isaac fondling Rebekah. A final and most significant difference is that, at the time of these events, Rebekah is already a mother of twins while Sarah is childless in the earlier parallel stories. In order to analyse the significance of Sarah’s subsequent motherhood in the light of these stories it will first be necessary to address some ancient perspectives on sexuality and gender.

**AN ECONOMY OF PENETRATION AND THE ANDROGYNOUS IDEAL**

Genesis comes from and reflects a world in which gender and sexuality are constructed as a hierarchical continuum. This hierarchy is one based on penetration. Men are the ones who penetrate and they stand at the top of the hierarchy. Below them are women and below women are eunuchs and hermaphrodites. Virgin women and girls also occupied a similar subordinate ambiguity in the hierarchy. Likewise, a particular ambiguity applied to boys who occupied a transitional space between the world of women and that of adult men. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the monstrous – penetrated men and penetrating women. Men can penetrate everyone in the lower levels of the hierarchy without loss of status. Thus, the masculine ideal of the ancient world operated not as an ideal stereotype but rather as a 'sliding scale' or continuum from hegemonic masculine exemplar through to the category of 'unmen' (Anderson and Moore 2003, p. 69). Anderson and Moore include females in the category of unmen, but, while recognising that being an unman is a feminised position, I would argue a similar continuum applies with the feminine ranging from a hegemonic feminine ideal to a masculinised or out-of-control unwoman. This gender/sexuality system overlapped with other hierarchies. Outsider foreign males and slaves could be subject to penetration by insider males and masters without loss of status to those men who penetrated. Male rape could thus be employed against defeated prisoners of war explicitly to deny them their male status.

Nevertheless, within this hierarchy male-female reproductive sexuality was privileged. Family (but not the nuclear family) was crucial to the ancient world and reproductive sexuality was understood in agricultural terms of seed and soil. The male sows the seed and the female is the field in which the seed is transformed and from which it is then brought forth (Delaney 1991, pp. 30-36). Associated with this understanding is the practice of endogamous or (patrilineal) close kin marriage. As Carol Delaney observes, ‘women are land… fields and daughters are tended and the fruits of this labour are to be kept within the group’ (Delaney 1991, p. 102). If women are like fields, then, just as a man can increase his holdings in land, so, too, with women. Polygamy and concubinage are a feature of the ancient world from which Genesis came. While economic factors might mandate monogamy for many, there is no opprobrium attached to polygamy. Moreover, while a man might accumulate many fields, a field can only have one owner. Women are bound to one man to raise up children for him. A man is not bound to one woman and is free to sow his seed within or without marriage. Nevertheless he must recognise the proprietorial rights of other men over their women. Adultery is always a crime against the husband, not the wife. This monogenetic ideology of procreation and corresponding endogamous marriage systems are a feature of Mediterranean/Middle Eastern cultures from prehistory. However it is important...
to note that some ancient Greek pre-Socratic and Hippocratic thinkers favored a duogenetic theory of procreation whereby both the female and the male contributed seed in procreation. Most prominent was Galen, in the Hippocratic tradition, who nevertheless, under the influence of Aristotle’s monogenetic thought, attributed ‘a much lower value to this (female) contribution’ (van der Horst 1996, p. 123). Likewise, Rabbinic Judaism held to a duogenetic theory of procreation whereby the female contributed the red matter of the body and the male the white matter (van der Horst 1996, p. 130).

It needs to be stressed that the world of Genesis and the worlds that shaped it did not share contemporary notions of heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual. Homoeoticism, same-sex love and desire certainly did exist but were understood very differently. For the ancient world, males were penetrators and as long as they conformed to that role there was no shame. Shame and stigma were associated with the penetrated male, while the penetrating female could also be viewed as monstrous. Eunuchs and hermaphrodites were accepted but were subordinate to males and females, together with virgin women/girls and boys. Pederastic desire could be accepted but tensions arose from the fact that boys were proto-men. Class and ethnicity were crucial. A slave boy and/or a foreign boy could be a legitimate object of sexual desire and penetration. In classical Athens, desire for a boy of one’s own class and ethnicity could be legitimate provided no penetrative sex was involved. While girls as proto-women were already legitimate objects for penetration and desire, as proto-women they were ‘valuables’ to be ‘transacted by others’ (Delaney 1991, p. 78). Their value lay in the integrity of their wombs, the property of their fathers and, subsequently, their husbands. However despite the transactional value of girls and the ambiguity of boyhood, boys are, or grow up to be, men and seedbearers, upon which family continuity depends, and thus their status within a given community will outweigh that of girls.

These patterns of sexuality and gender still predominate in much of the Mediterranean and Middle East today but are extremely ancient.¹ Such patterns were shared by ‘pagan’ and ‘Israelite’/biblical communities alike, not in strict uniformity but subject to historical, socio-cultural and religious variations. What they share, though, are their origins in agricultural experience. The earth, the land, the soil is feminine, mother, womb. The sky is the masculine realm – rain and dew are understood as analogous to semen. Sky is heaven – ouranos in Greek – and as Benko notes, the ancient world understood that ‘heaven and earth love each other… and there is continuous intercourse’ between them from which ‘not only did life begin’ but ‘continually renews itself’ (Benko 1993, p. 90). Ancient cosmologies told how Earth gave birth to Heaven ‘to cover her everywhere over and be an ever-immovable base for the gods’ (Hesiod’s Theogony, cited in Benko 1993, p. 89). In Athens, marriages were dedicated to Heaven and Earth, Ouranos and Gaia, whose primal union was understood as the prototype of all marriages. However, the ancients believed a primordial catastrophe occurred causing the separation of earth and heaven. In Greek mythology they are forced apart by Kronos after Gaia gives birth to Okeanos, while in Sumerian mythology the primal unity of heaven and earth is ruptured by Enlil, the air-god.²

Benko further points out that the pagan genderings of heaven and earth are also found in the biblical literature. Consequently ‘things that pertain to the celestial sphere are usually masculine and those representing earthly dimensions are feminine… God is the father figure and also the husband, Israel, the wife’ (Benko 1993, p. 90).
This imagery is also linked to the ancient ritual of the sacred marriage, *hieros gamos*. According to Kramer, the ‘Sacred Marriage Rite was celebrated joyously and rapturously all over the Ancient Near East for some two thousand years’ (Kramer 1969, p. 49). Kramer argues that it was first developed in Sumeria as a fertility ritual to ensure both agricultural productivity and human procreation. He notes that a ‘well-nigh obsessive veneration of… the fertile field and the fecund womb… pervades the Sumerian literary compositions, their myths and hymns’ (p. 50).³

Benko points out that, in the Greco-Roman world, while sacred marriage was ‘no doubt… a fertility ritual… meant to ensure good harvest’ it also ‘pointed toward the great mystery of the union of Earth and Sky’ thus symbolising ‘the joyful restoration of the cosmos to its undifferentiated state’ (Benko 1993, p. 68). Thus sacred marriage represented ‘a sacramental henosis… a return to unity with God, being completely filled with and absorbed into the divine’ (p. 69).

Benko further argues that these sacred marriage themes and motifs manifest most startlingly in the cult of Cybele, the Great Mother of Anatolia, through the self-castration of male devotees, the order of Galli, who dedicated themselves fully to her service. As Benko observes, castration ‘changes a man into a condition which is "neither male nor female"’ thus becoming ‘an androgynous person… returned to the primordial state of undifferentiation’ (p. 78). Through castration, the Galli surrender their patriarchal penetrative maleness, locating themselves on the middle rung of the gender hierarchy.

That sacred marriage can represent a breakdown of gender binaries is also found in Jewish tradition as attested by this passage from the Zohar:

> When they (the masculine and the feminine) unite, they look as if they were one body. From this we learn: the masculine by itself is like only one part of a body, and the feminine also. But when they join together as a whole, then they appear as one real body... The *matronita* united herself with the king. From this one body resulted. Thence comes the blessing of this day. (Zohar 1984, III, 296a).

This passage and the rituals of sacred marriage behind it draw on ancient myths of the primal androgyne, the first human who, combining male and female within itself, reflects the primal unity underlying the world. The power of this myth derives from the fact that in the patriarchal gender structure based on a hierarchy of penetration, the middle or intermediate level, due its very indeterminacy, evoked the primal androgyne.

In Jewish tradition and also in some Christian accounts is found the notion that the first human was an androgynous being, subsequently separated into two by the deity. Jewish Kabbalah understands Genesis 1 as a textual representation of the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, the map of the ten emanations/Sefirot of the Divine that give rise to existence. The seven days of creation are understood as representing the seven lower Sefirot of the Tree, while the first three words and/or verses of Genesis 1 are understood to represent the supernal Sefirotic triad at the top of the Tree. The Tree is equally a map of the Divine, a map of creation and a representation of the Primal Human. The Tree consists of a male, female and intermediate column. Furthermore, while each Sefirah will present as female or male, it contains both aspects, the one overshadowed by the other depending on the column in which it is located. Hence, the Genesis creation prologue speaks of humans being created male and female ‘in the image of God’ (Gen. 1:27). The Kabbal-
istic Tree suggests that the androgyne is the model for each and every human, that male and female represent a fluid continuum in each individual that must be brought into harmony. This androgyny is also found in Tantra where the goal of the spiritual quest is to unite Shakti (female) and Siva (male) within the person.

The androgyne’s trace is found more clearly in the second creation account in Genesis 2-3. The second story begins as a dry land creation with God/YHWH Elohim creating a human being (in Hebrew adamah or groundling) from the ground. YHWH Elohim creates all the animals from the ground as potential companions for the human being. Each of them are brought to it and named by it but none of them are suitable companions. Finally, YHWH Elohim puts the human to sleep and takes one of its sides to shape into a woman. YHWH Elohim brings the woman to the now male human who rejoices for now he has a true companion – ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of man this one was taken. Therefore a man... clings to his wife and they become one flesh’ (Gen. 2:23-4). These words echo Aristophanes’ tale in Plato’s Symposium according to which humans, originally dyads of three sexes – male, female and hermaphrodite - and since bisected in punishment by the gods, must quest to find their other half, to reconstitute that lost primal unity of male, female or hermaphrodite so that each pairing can become one flesh. Similarly, in Jewish tradition, the human couple of Genesis 2 was understood to originally have been two sides or faces of the one being, which the deity finally separated to form women and men. As the hermaphrodite inhabits the intermediate realm of the ancient gender hierarchy, to become one flesh, a husband must give up his gender privilege and with his wife descend to the intermediate level, neither male nor female.

Furthermore this second creation account is introduced by the image of primal androgynous unity of heaven and earth. Creation begins in the days before YHWH Elohim ‘sent rain upon the earth’ (Gen. 2:5), before the separation of earth and heaven. Instead, the creative process begins with the self-moisturing or self-fertilising of the earth, itself, by which ‘a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth’ (Gen. 2:6). Only then does YHWH Elohim form the ground creature, adam, from the fecund ground (adamah) and, subsequently, ‘all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky’ (Gen. 2:19).

Genesis 3 tells of the transition from a mythical, primal, paradisiacal world of Eden to the conflicted, hierarchical and day to day world of ordinary human life and, in particular, how death entered the world. The serpent encourages the woman to taste the fruit of the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. At first resisting, she finally eats and the man follows her example. They then become aware of their nakedness and are shamed. YHWH Elohim curses both the serpent and the earth, and condemns the humans to a life of struggle and pain. The human pair are expelled from Eden so that they may no longer eat of the Tree of Life to remain immortal. Eden is placed under the watchful guard of the cherubim and thus death becomes part of human life.

As Niditch points out, this story represents a shift into the world of birth and death, ‘in which man and woman relate to each other sexually and according to social roles, a world in which they work hard and know the difference between good and evil’ (Niditch 1992, p. 17). In the fate that YHWH Elohim lays on the woman and the man one can see the emergence of the hierarchy by which the male will rule over the female and the dominion the man will attempt to impose upon the earth:
To the woman (YHWH Elohim) said, 'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbirth, in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you.' And to the man he said, '...cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground' (Gen 3:16-19).

The woman will suffer and struggle to give birth and, like her, the earth, the primal mother, from which was born, so effortlessly, the earth creature in Genesis 2, will now give forth fruits only through human struggle and toil. Now both earth and woman are in struggle with the man who seeks to impose his dominion over them. It is as if to instantiate this reality that, immediately, the man names the woman, Eve/Hawah, for she will be the mother of all the living. As Phyllis Trible astutely observes, this verse echoes the naming of the animals by the earth creature in Genesis 2, an act by which the earth creature has asserted both its dissimilarity from and dominion over them. By naming her ‘the man reduces the woman to the status of an animal’ (Trible 1978, p. 133). The name reduces her to a functional utility in relation to the man. No longer now is sexuality driven towards restoring the primal union but instead becomes an act of domination and ownership. The man sows his seed in womb and field and seeks to assert his ownership of both and of the harvests he reaps from them.

Genesis 2 culminates not only with the creation of the woman as crown of creation but also with the high, mythic, androgynous vision of sexuality as restoring the primal union of one flesh amongst humans. In Genesis 3 this egalitarian vision of sexuality is superseded by the shift to a utilitarian and hierarchical economics of procreative sexuality in the patriarchal social order. In that this order is not spoken as a curse by YHWH Elohim upon the humans (it is the earth and the serpent who are cursed), it could be argued that Genesis seeks to endorse the world as it is, or at least that women and men should understand and accept their place in it. However, by explaining human life by means of the shift from a mythic realm of Eden to the world of the everyday, the mythic androgy nous realm remains as a dangerous memory, critiquing and challenging the patriarchal procreative hierarchy of seed, field and womb.

**ANDROGYNY, EDEN AND SARAH THE MIRACULOUS/VIRGIN MOTHER**

The myth of the primal androgyne, I believe, is also behind Sarah’s story and is strongly evoked in the second endangered ancestress account, preceding the conception and birth of Isaac. In Genesis 20, when Abimelech challenges Abraham as to why he passes off his wife as his sister, he responds that they are indeed brother and sister. While they have different mothers, they have the same father, Terah. Incidentally this form of brother-sister marriage is not condemned under the Mosaic Law. Interestingly, too, brother-sister marriage is the closest ‘heterosexual’ instantiation of the androgyne ideal, for, in their parentage, they are literally one flesh. While Abraham and Sarah have different mothers, they are in their parentage, they are literally one flesh. While Abraham and Sarah have different mothers, under the monogenetic understanding of procreation those mothers are the fields that nourished them, the fruit of their father’s seed. Like the primal humans of Genesis 1-2, Abraham and Sarah are the primal ancestors of Israel and therefore instantiate the androgyne ideal, albeit refracted through a patriarchal monogenetic filter.
Crucially, the following chapter relates the conception and birth of Isaac, which had been announced to Sarah in Genesis 18. In verse 21:1, the divine role is described in very concrete terms. The deity visits Sarah – in the Hebrew the word used, paqad, can be translated as visited or attended to/dealt with. In Rabbinic tradition, the word is read as ‘remembered’, in line with other accounts of miraculous conceptions in the Hebrew scriptures. However, the use of paqad here singles out Sarah from those other accounts where it is not employed. The verse then continues that the deity then ‘did for Sarah as he had promised’ – the word ‘did’, a form of sh, can also have the meanings of make or effect. Perhaps the latter meaning might be preferred, as Rabbinic exegesis has understood verse two as paralleling verse one. Genesis 21:2 says that Sarah conceives and then bears a son. Thus her conception is to be read beside her being visited by the deity while Isaac’s birth is what was done or effected for her through this visitation.

What is also striking in this account is the minimal role Abraham plays here. This absence is also found in both Jubilees and the Zohar. According to Jubilees, Isaac’s conception is an event that involves only Sarah and the deity: ‘And in the middle of the sixth month the Lord visited Sarah and did unto her as He had spoken and she conceived. And she bare a son in the third month’ (16:12-13). Similarly, in the Zohar, it is said, ‘Besides visiting Sarah, God also did something to her in the region on high’ (1:115a). The Genesis account goes on to say that Abraham names and circumcises Isaac but it is actually Sarah, not Abraham, who speaks in verses 6-7, punning on laughter, the basis of Isaac’s name.

I would argue that the endangered ancestress motif makes it is possible to read the Genesis account of the conception and birth of Isaac as a miraculous event wrought by the deity with Sarah alone. The first two endangered ancestress stories show that Sarah is fully under divine protection and guardianship. In contrast, the one concerning Rebekah marks a shift to the world as we know it. Rebekah is already a mother in her own right; she is never at risk and there is no divine intervention. The account of Rebekah in Gerar confirms Sarah’s unique status. But does Abraham have any part to play apart from the circumcision and confirmation of Isaac’s name? In contrast with the birth of Ishmael, Genesis nowhere says that Abraham and Sarah have sex together. Isaac’s conception is completely attributed to the deity – he is the product of a ‘virgin’ conception and birth. Isaac is the only son of Sarah but not of Abraham, who is father of Ishmael and also of the sons of Keturah. However, as Sarah and Abraham are sister and brother they are the one flesh and, consequently, Isaac can be counted as sprung from Abraham’s body.

That Sarah is a miraculous, virgin mother, I have already suggested can be inferred from the accounts of Isaac’s conception in both Jubilees and the much later Zohar. However, these themes can be found in other Jewish, Rabbinic and Christian texts. Philo of Alexandria (1929-1962) specifically states in Posterity and Flight of Cain that, through her barrenness, Sarah has been changed into a virgin (Post. 134). Such restored virginity illustrates for Philo that the deity will only converse with the soul when it has transcended its effeminate appetites and become like Sarah, ‘ranked once more as a pure virgin’ (Cherubim 50). Themes of gender variance pertaining to Sarah appear in Questions on Genesis when Philo discusses the annunciation of Isaac’s conception and birth. Philo says of Sarah’s standing behind Abraham in the tent at Mamre (Gen. 18:11), ‘Virtue stands behind the one who is virtuous by nature... a perfect administrator... who ...directs the entire soul’ (Quest. Gen. IV:13). Sarah’s menopause particularly befits her representing virtue, as she is consequently no longer part of the economy of penetration. Indeed, she has thus become male, foreshadowing Jesus’ promise to female disciples in Thomas 114:2-3.
Menopause represents the control of the ‘female’ aspects of the soul – ‘irrational... akin to bestial passions, fear, sorrow, pleasure and desire’ - which ‘clearly belongs to minds full of Law’ (Quest. Gen. IV:15). Such minds ‘resemble the male sex and overcome passions and rise above sense-pleasure and desire’ (ibid). Most suggestively in relation to the conception of Isaac, Philo says of Sarah’s laughter that it shows ‘a new act... sown by God in the whole soul for the birth of joy and great gladness, which... is called 'laughter'... 'Isaac'” (Quest. Gen. IV:17, see also Abraham 206).

In later Rabbinic tradition the birth of Isaac is accompanied by many prodigies – barren women conceive, women everywhere spontaneously and copiously lactate, the sick are healed and the blind and deaf regain sight and hearing. But the greatest prodigies are associated with Sarah and Isaac themselves. Sarah is said to have given birth without the pain of childbirth with which Eve was cursed. In this sense Sarah represents the restoration of the primal Edenic androgyne ideal. Her motherhood is both miraculous and a new beginning effected by the deity. She, too, lactates prodigiously and many children are brought to her to be nursed. These children are blessed with righteousness. The prodigy concerning Isaac relates to the uncertainty about his paternity. Rabbinic traditions express considerable anxiety about whether or not Abraham is father of Isaac. While they entertain possible doubts about Sarah’s motherhood saying that she was accused of taking in a foundling, it is Abraham’s paternity that is truly in doubt. As if to allay such anxieties, Jewish tradition says that Isaac’s face was changed miraculously to be the exact copy of the elderly face of Abraham.

The androgyne ideal is further reinforced by a strange passage in the Babylonian Talmud:

Abraham and Sarah were (each of them a) tumtum, as it is said: ‘Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were digged’; (Isaiah 51:1) and it is written: ‘Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you’; (Isaiah 51:2). Rabbi Nahman said in the name of Rabbah bar Abuha: Sarah our mother was an (‘aylonith,) as it is said: ‘Now Sarai was barren; she had no child’; (Genesis 11:30) – she did not even have a womb (Yevamot 64a, cited in Gross 2004).

This Talmudic gloss serves to reinforce the androgyne ideal over a monogenetic patriarchy. Both tumtum and ‘aylonith are intermediate gender types. Sally Gross points out that the ‘tumtum is a person whose physical sex is indeterminable because there are apparently no genitalia, although determinate natal sex can sometimes (but only sometimes) be revealed by means of the surgical removal of an occlusion’ (ibid). Similarly, the ‘aylonith is a woman without a womb. Consequently, not only do Sarah and Abraham together represent the androgyne ideal but they each also instantiate it in their own flesh, neither of them being fully male or female.

This androgyne ideal could likewise stand behind the reference to Sarah in Hebrews 11:11. As Pieter van der Horst points out this is a verse over which ‘(m)any translators and commentators have racked their brains’ (van der Horst 1996, p. 113). The problem, he continues, is that the Greek text literally seems ‘to say Sarah that received power to emit semen’ (ibid). Translations have tried to get around it either by rendering the passage to highlight Sarah’s ability to conceive, as in the King James version, ‘Through faith Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed’. Alternatively, as Abraham is the subject in vv. 8-10 and is understood to be in v. 12, he is likewise
made the subject here, as in the NRSV, ‘By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old - and Sarah herself was barren’. This alternative has the effect of rendering Sarah a secondary almost superfluous figure. Van der Horst, however, argues that the passage should be translated literally, that Sarah, through faith, received power to emit seed. His argument is based on a survey of ancient theories of embryology and reproduction, both Rabbinic and Gentile (van der Horst 1996, p. 117-133). In particular, he reads Hebrews 11:11 from the perspective of the duogenetic embryologies of both the Greek Hippocratic and later Rabbinic traditions that allowed for a two-seed model of reproduction, by which both the male and female emitted semen. Interestingly, in the Talmud the sex of the child was determined by whose semen was emitted first. If it was the woman the child would be male, whereas the child would be female if the male emitted first (b. Nid. 31a, cited in van der Horst 1996, p. 131-132). I find van der Horst’s argument for Sarah being represented in Hebrews as emitting semen to be quite convincing. He further backs it up by citing the 10th century Theophylactus of Constantinople, who in his commentary on Hebrews allowed that the text meant that Sarah received 'strength for a seminal emission' (cited in van der Horst 1996, p. 134). Nevertheless, as van der Horst himself points out both monogenetic and duogenetic embryologies held sway in the ancient world. I would argue that Hebrews 11:11 could just as easily be read the same way from a monogenetic standpoint in which case, then, Sarah’s faith gave her the power to emit semen and from that semen alone Isaac was conceived. From the monogenetic perspective, Sarah clearly instantiates the androgyne ideal, most particularly the self-fertilising earth of Eden in Genesis 2:6. Indeed, I would also suggest that it is possible to read the subject of Hebrews 11:12 as Isaac not Abraham. The passage reads, ‘Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore’ (NRSV). This verse quotes the deity’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 22:17 that concludes the account of the binding of Isaac and consequently the verse is taken as referring to Abraham, the one as good as dead denoting his great age. However, subsequent Rabbinic texts preserve traditions in which Isaac barely survives Abraham’s attempted sacrifice. By one account, when the knife of sacrifice miraculously dissolves under the tears of the angels, Abraham attempts to slay Isaac using his thumbnail. Whether with blade or thumbnail, another tradition says that Abraham still cuts Isaac, with the boy losing a considerable amount of blood. Other traditions speak of Isaac’s soul leaving his body temporarily and another says that Isaac was actually killed and burnt on the altar but was miraculously reconstituted and restored to life. Avivah Zornberg in her reflections on Genesis goes as far saying that the sole reality of Isaac’s life is the dread fact of ‘his ashes… piled on the altar’ (Zornberg 1995, p. 128). Given that Hebrews 11:12 follows on from Sarah’s conception of Isaac and directly cites the Genesis account of the binding of Isaac, this one as good as dead can be easily identified with Isaac, the child of the promise, from whom would come descendants innumerable as the stars and the grains of sand on the seashore.

I would further argue that the restoration of Edenic androgyny lies behind the Christian notion of Mary’s virgin motherhood, an image, I believe, that draws on the Sarah motifs. The monogenetic understanding of Sarah’s seminal emission in Hebrews 11:11 can apply just as easily to Mary, making her, too, the instantiation of the androgynous Eden of Genesis 2:6. Mary’s miraculous, virgin motherhood of the male child, Jesus, also accords with Rabbinic notions that the mother’s semen gives rise to the male child. I also suspect that just as Rebekah’s endangerment is used to
highlight the unique status of Sarah, so too Luke deploys Elizabeth’s miraculous motherhood to highlight the unique status of Mary. Elizabeth is like Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah but Mary is the Sarah of the new covenant. I would even go so far as to suggest that perhaps the Edenic androgynous virgin motherhood of Mary/Sarah lies behind the very puzzling contrast Paul makes of Sarah and Hagar in Galatians. As an Egyptian, Hagar should represent the Gentiles not Sarah, the Hebrew foremother. However Hagar is under the old law of patriarchy whereas Sarah, mother of Isaac, like Mary mother of Jesus, is under the new but restored realm of blessing, of primal Eden. Hagar’s son, Ishmael, is born ‘according to the flesh’ but Isaac, like Jesus, is born ‘according to the Spirit’ (Gal. 4:29).

Whether or not Paul’s allegory on Sarah is derived on the parallels between her and Mary, later Christians recognised the parallels between the mothers as well as their sons. One text, On Abraham and Isaac, a poem attributed to Ephrem Syrus, is particularly striking in that not only does it parallel the binding of Isaac to the crucifixion and thus Isaac to Jesus but it also parallels Sarah and Mary and explicitly draws on Jewish traditions of the prodigies attending Isaac’s birth as signs foreshadowing Mary’s miraculous motherhood. Thus it was ‘not nature’s work’ that Sarah’s ‘dead womb conceived and breasts that were dry’ give milk, nor ‘that the Virgin Mary conceived without a man’ (AbrIsaac 10-11). Both women’s motherhood is announced by angelic visitation (AbrIsaac 13-14), while Sarah’s laughter in response to the angel prefigures Mary’s own astonishment at conceiving and bearing a child yet maintaining her own virgin status (AbrIsaac 15-17). Both Sarah and Abraham and Mary and Joseph rejoice at the birth of their sons (AbrIsaac 20-21). Both mothers experience the prodigies of lactation attributed to Sarah in Rabbinic traditions. From Sarah’s breasts ‘(a)bundantly there flowed streams of milk’ and likewise for Mary ‘(a)bundantly the breasts of the Virgin streamed with milk’ (AbrIsaac 22-23). Pseudo-Ephrem (2001) clearly knows these Rabbinic traditions concerning Sarah and can apply them to Mary because of Christian traditions recognising Sarah as a forerunner or type of the Virgin.

**CONCLUSION**

I am arguing that the endangered ancestress motif in Genesis can be read to tell readers something about Sarah’s status as the foremother of all Israel. Sarah, and Sarah alone, is under the direct protection of the deity, a fact highlighted by the contrast to Rebekah in Genesis 26. Thus the conception of Isaac is an act worked by the deity with Sarah alone, signaling a new beginning, reminiscent of Eden. The overtones of Eden are reinforced by the brother-sister motif. Isaac and Rebekah might be close-kin cousins, but Sarah and Abraham share the same father, making them, by monogenetic perspectives of the ancient world, one flesh. As one flesh, they instantiate the androgynous unity of the original Eden, a state of human existence prior to the hierarchical, patriarchal economy of penetration that is the mundane world of ordinary existence. Consequently, Ishmael, conceived under that patriarchal order, cannot be the child of the promise and neither can the six sons of Abraham by Keturah (Gen. 25:1-6). Only Isaac is conceived according to the androgynous Edenic order by a special act of the deity, perhaps by enabling Sarah to emit seed in her own right, paralleling the self-fertilising earth of the Eden creation story.

I am further arguing that this way of reading Sarah’s story lies behind the accounts of her miraculous motherhood and the prodigies associated with it in later Jewish traditions, including images of her as a virgin mother. I would further suggest that Mary’s virgin motherhood of Jesus
springs from and is required by such understandings of Sarah’s motherhood. Not only does Isaac, through the Akedah, foreshadow Jesus on Calvary, but so too does Sarah, the foremother of the Old Covenant, foreshadow Mary, the foremother of the New. Indeed, like Sarah, Mary the Virgin represents both a new beginning and the restoration of the Edenic ideal, abrogating the patriarchal order. With Sarah, I would argue that it is possible to read the Genesis stories attentive to the interplay or struggle between the Edenic and patriarchal orders, with the Edenic being deferred, relegated to the realm of messianic possibility. Genesis 18-19, especially, is rich with messianic threads, while Sarah’s death, immediately following the Akedah, can be read to suggest the banishing of Eden, at least for a time. In attempting to sacrifice Isaac, Abraham is asserting the life and death proprietal powers of the patriarchal father, thus declaring Isaac to be bis son.

I am not arguing that the authors of Genesis or the rest of the biblical texts, Jewish or Christian, were necessarily anti-patriarchal. However, I agree with Margaret Barker’s observation of the Adam stories in Genesis that they ‘must be read for what they are – not just a primitive description of how the world came to be made, but the means by which profound issues were addressed in a culture which had storytellers rather than philosophers’ (Barker 2004, her emphasis). I would certainly extend this perspective to all of Genesis (and the other biblical texts). Genesis is not a monologous text. What we have here, instead, are experiments and debates by way of story concerning what it means to be human, divine etc. The authors do not work in a vacuum, either, but draw on their cultural background, which includes notions of the primal androgyne and the original primal unity underpinning creation. Even the deity of the ancestors, El Shaddai, is rich with androgynous overtones. Consequently, the authors are almost compelled by the mythology to envisage dangerous possibilities or, at least, to encode in the text the means by which others might envisage dangerous possibilities.

The deferring of the Edenic vision of the primal androgynous unity, opposing the existing mundane gender hierarchy, to the messianic realm may lie behind the sexual antinomianism of Jewish messianic movements like the Sabbateans and the Frankists. The most successful Jewish messianic movement remains Christianity, in which Mary’s Virgin motherhood represents both a new beginning and the restoration of Eden abrogating the old order. Unsurprisingly, Christian history contains many examples of resistance to the existing gender hierarchy in the form of celibate, gender variant, homoerotic and sexual utopian movements, which provide ways of going back to Eden. Such movements include both the Carpocratian and Encratite movements in early Christianity, the Christian monastic project, the Shakers and a variety of anti-marriage sects in Russia such as the Skoptsy, the castrated ones. Ironically, the recent sudden push for same-sex marriage in the USA could also be located in these trajectories. If successful, it would make explicit the androgynous underpinning of Genesis 2 and marriage models based upon it whereby, in Aristophanes’ words, ‘instead of two’ there ‘shall be one flesh’ (Plato 1951, 192e), regardless of gender.

**FURTHER READING**

Midrash Rabbah: Genesis. Translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of Rabbi Dr. Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon; with a foreword by Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein; London: Soncino; 1939.


ENDNOTES

1 Delaney argues that Islamic monotheism provides an ideological buttress for monogenetic sexuality/gender structures of contemporary rural Anatolia Delaney (1991 p 288). It is worthwhile to reflect on how monotheism itself might have been shaped by ancient Eastern Mediterranean agricultural societies’ concepts of monogenesis.

2 In Egypt, the genders of earth and heaven are reversed, earth being the male deity, Geb, and heaven the female deity, Nut. They, too, were separated primordially when the god of the air, Shu, ‘forced himself between the two and lifted up Nut’ (Benko 1993, p. 88).

3 However, Harman is critical of notions that sacred marriage is purely a fertility ritual in every context. He points out that sacred marriages in India serve either to ‘establish structured relationships between a deity and a group of people’ or to ‘establish or reaffirm relationships among deities as those relationships are perceived by devotees’ (Harman 1989, p. 364).

4 With its sexual imagery of serpent, tree and nakedness, it could well serve as a tale told at puberty, perhaps even for menarche. Being a tale to signify the onset of menstruation and the entrance into the life of pregnancy, childbirth and husbands could signify the central status of the woman in the account. Then again, her confident speaking and acting could signify the mythic realm of Eden in which the rules and conventions of the hierarchical, patriarchal human realm do not apply.

5 The line of the Messiah is itself initiated by the rape of Lot by his daughters in Genesis 19:30-38.
REFERENCES


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