Seeing and Hearing: The Interrelated Lives of Sarah and Hagar

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ABSTRACT For about three decades, the lives of biblical Sarah and Hagar overlap (Genesis, 12, 16, 18, and 21). In that time, as women they form a relationship, they contend for the affection of Abraham, and each bears him a child. On occasions, their interactions are fraught with emotional issues as they compete for power or status within the Abrahamic family. The focus of this article suggests that a close reading of the biblical texts involved shows many parallels in language between the narratives that deal with Sarah and Hagar, as well as parallel language describing events in Abraham’s life. This article centers on the crucial words “see,” “hear,” and “eyes/sight” in their various forms as they are found in the four relevant chapters. The repetition of these words is a purposeful literary device and connects Sarah to Hagar, and both women to Abraham.

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David J. Zucker, PhD is Rabbi/Chaplain at Shalom Park, a Senior Continuum of Care Center in Aurora, Colorado. His latest book is The Torah: An Introduction for Christians and Jews. His articles and book reviews appear regularly in a variety of journals, including Women in Judaism. For contact information please go to his website, www.DavidJZucker.org.

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Zucker, David J., “A Still Stranger Stratagem: Revisiting Notice next: though Sarah was the elder wife, yet Hagar bare the first son. So the first man Adam was the son of Hagar; though he was born perfectly pure and spotless, he was not the son of Sarah when he was in the garden. Hagar had the first son. She bore Adam, who lived for a time under the covenant of works. Have not some of you, dear sons of Hagar, felt exceedingly irritated when you heard this doctrine? You have said, “It is dreadful, it is horrible, it is quite unjust, that I may be as good as I like, but if I am not a son of the promise, I cannot be saved; it is really awful, it is an immoral doctrine; it does a deal of damage, and ought to be stopped.” So Hagar became another woman in the life of Abraham. Hagar, the first woman to appear in the Bible as oppressed and abused woman, demands a great deal of attention. But we are not able to know more about her apart from those written by the editors who were definitely male. Hagar went back and bore Abraham a son. Later God also gave Sarah a son as God had promised to her and she named him Isaac. In order to protect her privileges, Sarah cast away Hagar and her son Ishmael. So we can see that Sarah and Hagar were women within a patriarchal society who were both exploited and oppressed. But Hagar experienced a more complex kind of discrimination for she was the victim of sexual, caste, social as well as national or racial discrimination.