

Book Review

Savina J. Teubal. *Ancient Sisterhood: The Lost Traditions of Hagar and Sarah*. Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press/Ohio University Press, 1997.

This book argues that the biblical story of Hagar and Sarah, including the two versions of Hagar's expulsion out of Abraham's household into the desert conceal an entirely different story about the women's relationship and their social status. The allegedly jealous competitiveness described in Genesis covers up a much more complex institution of childless priest[esse]s and their social and economic rights and duties. The book is divided into three sections: "Discovering the Sources," "Two Silent Texts" and "Conclusions."

In the first part of the book Teubal challenges the biblical presentation of Hagar as a lowly slave as well as the post-biblical interpretation of Hagar as Abraham's concubine. In the introduction Teubal posits a matriarchal society in the Ancient Near East, dedicated to the worship of Goddesses like Inanna in Mesopotamia, Isis in Egypt and Anath in Canaan. Hagar's designation as Egyptian must be considered in the context of Egyptian history where women enjoyed "remarkable legal equality" for the most part (p. xxxiv). "Discovering the Sources" argues that the Genesis stories distorted the story of Hagar to suit the political interests of the young monarchy that emerged in Israel (p. 18). For one thing, the biblical story obscures the meaning of Hagar's experience in the desert by the well, an experience that refers to the worship of a desert deity, "El-roi" and to the institution of a Desert Matriarch. Teubal suggests that Hagar was a *Naditu* priest and argues that she may have been Pharaoh's daughter, or his royal wife or sister. Teubal argues that Hagar's function was childbearing, a rather important function that was of great significance for childless priests like Sarah. Drawing a distinction between "*shifhah*" and "*amah*" [slave, maid] – terms that are both attributed to Hagar in the Bible, Teubal links the first term to the function of a woman who bore children for a barren priest and who served herself as a priest. That Hagar was childless before coming into Sarah's service provides the likelihood that she was a priest. Teubal argues that Hagar was Sarah's companion, a clan member of equal status rather than a slave or a servant as the later interpretation of "*shifhah*" and the term "*amah*" suggests.

Part Two, "The Silent Texts" highlights the closeness and cooperation between the historical Hagar and Sarah, a relationship that was severed only after the birth of Isaac. Teubal suggests that Sarah's baking of cakes for the three guests ("angels") who announce her son's birth is related to the worship of the Goddess Hathor. She also associates the feast with the ceremony of the Hieros Gamos, the wedding of the Goddess and the king. Baking breads, then is the function of the priest, Sarah, who represents the Goddess in the ceremony. Thus, Genesis 18 explains "how Sarah became impregnated during the ritual of the sacred nuptials and it explains the means by which the conception of Isaac (sic) became endorsed by Sarah, a priest who lived by the code of childlessness" (p. 111). Teubal suggests that Sarah does not expel Hagar out of jealousy but because of the priest's legacy: a considerable sum of money, which included her dowry, the bridal gift and ring money. Sarah's purpose in expelling both Hagar and Ishmael was to disinherit the latter in favor of her own son, Issak (sic).

Teubal suggests that the desert narratives attributed to Hagar reveal suppressed traditions about the Desert Matriarch. The motif of the miraculous well and the birth of a son are part of an original story according to which the Desert Matriarch experiences the mystery of impregnation by a desert deity, El-roi. This god reveals to the matriarch her son's destiny. The matriarch rather than the son is the center of the biblical story, which nevertheless obscures the element of the betrothal between the Desert Matriarch and the god-bridegroom. Teubal associates the reconstructed Desert Matriarch text with Arabian pre-Islamic religion, though she rejects any linkage of the Matriarch with the Goddess Neith. The author contends that Hagar was the ancestor of two powerful and distinct tribes: the Hagarites and the Israelites. The Hagarites played an important role in the development of Islam. According to Muslim tradition, Hagar and Abraham are buried in the Holy House at Mecca.

In sum, Teubal sees the biblical story of Hagar as one example of the overall biblical attempt to "denigrate the characters of the matriarchs in favor of the patriarchs" (p. 176). Her controversial reconstruction of the historical Hagar and Sarah should certainly give scholars pause and offer suggestive techniques for further re-readings of ancient androcentric texts.

Esther Fuchs
University of Arizona, Tucson