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February 2021

# Hagar and Potiphar's Wife: A Representation of Egypt in Judaism and Islam

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### Recommended Citation

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15/12/2020

### Hagar and Potiphar's Wife: A Representation of Egypt in Judaism and Islam

#### **Abstract:**

As a nation and land, modern Egypt has gradually been depicted as a female. Considering Egypt's prominence in Judaism and Islam, from a close reading of Jewish and Islamic texts pertaining to two Egyptian women—Hagar and Potiphar's wife— various similarities could be noted between these female figures and Egypt as portrayed in the two Abrahamic religions. While Potiphar's wife seems to be more representative of Egypt in Judaism and Islam, the different portrayal of both women across religious texts provides each with a space to reflect different aspects defining Egypt in each religion.

**Key words:** Judaism, Islam, Hagar, Potiphar's wife, Zuleikha, Egypt, Genesis, Exodus, Qur'an, Egyptian women

While the nation is an abstract concept, with the rise of nationalism various states endorsed a visual representation of their nation; gendered personification was one way of representing this concept. Apart from the masculine icons opted for by England and the United States of America through John Bull and Uncle Sam respectively, other states embraced a female representation of their country. Looking at the Middle East region, it would be expected that a patriarchal society like Egypt would favor a male representation of its nation. Nonetheless, Egypt— both the territory and the nation— was with few exceptions illustrated as a woman. Whether stemming from popular parlance describing Egypt as *Umm al-Dunya* (Mother of the World) or the mere recognition of

words such as *Misr* (Egypt) and *Umma* (nation) as feminine nouns, female figures became the most representative depiction of Egypt (Baron 57-58). Departing from modernity and acknowledging the prominence of Egypt as an ancient civilization, in this paper, I extend the relationship between Egypt and its female depiction to examine how two Egyptian female figures—Hagar and Potiphar's wife—as described in Jewish and Muslim scripture and traditions conform and contribute to the general depiction of Egypt in these two Abrahamic religions. My textual analysis leads me to attest that while both Egyptian women delineate various aspects of Egypt, Potiphar's wife is more representative of Egypt in both religions.

A brief comparison between these two women elucidates why they were chosen for the scope of this paper. While Hagar was a slave who did not enjoy much social status, Potiphar's wife was a free woman with a much higher position in society pertinent to her marriage. Notwithstanding this difference of position, both women share various similarities. Apart from being Egyptian; they both played pivotal roles in the lives of two Hebrew characters. To elaborate, despite being subordinate to Sarah as a slave and concubine, Hagar was able to conceive and with the birth of Ishmael, she opened the door that was long perceived locked for Abraham. On the other hand, Potiphar's wife similarly influenced the life of Joseph. Her lust for Joseph laid the groundwork for his imprisonment and his encounter with the butler who then introduced him to the pharaoh causing his eventual rise to power. Moreover, both women disturbed the relationship between different characters. For Hagar, her conception incited a change in power dynamics inside the household of Abraham fuelling heated conflicts between Sarah and Abraham. Likewise, Potiphar's wife's seduction of Joseph and false accusation of him disturbed the relationship he had with Potiphar who degraded him from his service and imprisoned him. Both disturbances in the aforementioned relationships resulted due to these two women's placement of the protagonists'

commitment into question: Hagar made Abraham's commitment questionable for Sarah while Potiphar's wife encouraged Potiphar to scrutinize Joseph's commitment with her false accusation. Acknowledging these parallels, in the following section, I examine whether the similarities between these two Egyptian women can also be generalizable to their representation of Egypt in Judaism and Islam.

### **Hagar in Judaism**

The uniqueness of Hagar in Judaism lies in her relatively elevated representation in the book of Genesis and the contradicting views about her in the Jewish Aggadah. Although Hagar is rarely addressed by her name but rather by her social status as a maidservant in Genesis especially by Sarah, the book delineates her as the first woman to speak with, see, and name God, a privilege unshared by the matriarch Sarah from whom the chosen lineage springs (Amos, 93,95). The rabbinic literature on the other hand, as in the Midrashic texts and the Aggadah, conveys Hagar's actions, intentions, and presence in a negative light (Firestone, 413). This comparison between scripture and tradition is essential to our analysis of Hagar as a character representing Egypt in Genesis and Exodus.

To begin with, Egypt in Genesis represents a place that promises enrichment yet threatens individuals (Greifenhagen 31, 45). In Abraham's detour to Egypt, the Pharaoh's possession of Abraham's wife in his place threatens the integrity of the promised lineage from Abraham. Yet, Abraham leaves Egypt with plenty of livestock and even a slave woman—Hagar—as a gift from the Pharaoh (Gen. 13:1; 16:1). Hagar the Egyptian reflects this feature about Egypt. Despite being subordinate to Sarah in social and marital status, Hagar surpasses Sarah in a defining factor of femininity, fertility, through which she is able to enrich Abraham. Nonetheless, her conception of Ishmael poses a threat to the lineage promised from the womb of Sarah. Expanding on the trait of

fertility characterizing Hagar, Egypt is also regarded as a fertile land possessing needs that outsiders lack (Greifenhagen, 32). In the story of Joseph as well as that of Abraham, Egypt offers food to inhabitants of other lands during famine, thus bearing similarity to Hagar's offering of an offspring for barren Sarah and Abraham. In this way, Hagar provides a representation of Egypt's fertility as well as its threat of intrusion on the promised lineage.

While a major theme can be drawn between Hagar and Egypt by looking at a reverse story of Exodus and affliction, going with a linear reading of events, another connection can be extended from Hagar's conception and her consequential insolent treatment of barren Sarah (Greifenhagen, 32). The change in power dynamics in Sarah's house echoes the change seen after the succession of the Pharaoh who did not recognize the contributions made by Joseph, resulting in the loss of the Hebrews' favorable treatment in Egypt (Gen. 16:4; Ex. 1:8). Thus, both Hagar and Egypt represented by its Pharaoh, shared their assertion of power over others in their possession of a novel social privilege, being a Pharaoh or bearing a child. Also related to power is Hagar's powerlessness at the beginning and end of her story. While Egypt was a powerful country until the end of Joseph's life in Genesis, Exodus portrays a generally weak and defenseless image of Egypt during Moses (Greifenhagen, 101-102). It is Hagar's helplessness after her final departure from the house of Sarah which she shares with Egypt of Exodus (Gen. 21-14-16). Likewise, she was put to the test of losing her firstborn like the Pharaoh of Moses, though hers was saved by God, unlike the Pharaoh's heir (Gen. 21:17-20; Ex. 11:5).

On the other hand, in the Jewish Aggadah, the emphasis is put on Hagar's lack of faith and trust in the God of Abraham even after seeing God's saving miracle to her son in the desert (Ginzberg 220). In Midrashic texts in general, Hagar is an "unreformed idolater" (Reinhartz & Walfish 106). It can be argued that this negative portrayal pertinent to idolatry is emblematic of

the pagan Egypt of Exodus, unable despite the plagues to obey the God of Moses. Furthermore, it is this idolatrous quality of Egypt in Exodus which makes this civilization and land function as an ideological marker separating the God-led Hebrews from the Gentiles in the construction of the Israelites' birth as a nation (Greifenhagen 157). The light shed by commentators on Hagar's Egyptian identity and the othering language attributed to her and her son in Genesis can be used as a lens from which to see the similarity between Hagar's role to that of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible (HB)(Firestone 402; Greifenhagen 32).

### **Hagar in Islam**

Although Hagar's name was not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an but only alluded to in one verse (Qur'an 14:37), she occupies a considerable position in Islamic tradition. In Muslims' consciousness, Hagar is the "mother of Arabs" and a righteous woman in pagan times (Trible & Russell 9). In *Lives of the Prophets* as recorded by Al-Tha'labi, Hagar's story bears great similarity to the one recorded in Genesis until her expulsion from Sarah's house. However, unlike the proliferating mention of Egypt in the HB, in the Quran Egypt is only mentioned five times, thus limiting our ability to draw connections between Hagar and her country.

Nonetheless, looking at the Quran, a famous verse mentioning Egypt is uttered by Joseph to his brothers and family, “فَلَمَّا دَخَلُوا عَلَى يُوسُفَ آوَىٰ إِلَيْهِ أَبْوِيهِ وَقَالَ ادْخُلُوا مِصْرَ إِن شَاءَ اللَّهُ ءَامِنِينَ” (“Later, when they presented themselves before Joseph, he drew his parents to him- he said, ‘Welcome to Egypt: you will all be safe here, God willing’”) (Qur'an 12:99). Various commentators have interpreted the verse to allude to a description of Egypt as a safe place (Manṣūr).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Islamic traditions describe multiple relentless trips made by Hagar between two sites in Mecca in

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<sup>1</sup> Digital copy inaccessible

search of help after departing Sarah's house. These trips are interpreted to convey her determination to fight for her child (Hassan 154). As one's determination to fight for one's and others' lives is integral to ensuring their safety, it can be argued that Hagar's care for her child can be translated to the political and social safety Egypt provides to others, reminiscent of Joseph's remark. Furthermore, Egypt's welcoming of Joseph and his relatives by offering them (as an unknown tribe) a land is also reflected in Hagar's establishment of civilization in Mecca from which the Arabs are viewed to descend (Qur'an 12:99; Al-Tha'labi 230-231; Hassan 154-155). By making a community out of an unknown people and land, Hagar in Islamic traditions reflects Egypt's acceptance and sheltering of outsiders (Al-Tha'labi 140-141; Hassan 155).

### **Potiphar's Wife in Judaism**

In the book of Genesis and Jewish traditions, exemplified in Midrashic texts and the Aggadah, the wife of Potiphar (or Zuleika as named in the Jewish Aggadah) is firmly established in her representation of the wiliness of women which men are urged to avert in fear that it would threaten their righteousness (Amos 242; Goldman 37; Aycock 482). While the motif of an unfaithful wife vainly seducing an innocent man and accusing him of a forced sexual relationship might not be painting a representative picture of Egypt, there are various ways in which Zuleika was emblematic of Egypt as depicted in the book of Genesis and Exodus.

First, looking at Zuleika's characteristics and behavior, the Aggadah makes the case for her cunningness. When seducing Joseph with her beauty did not yield a favorable response from him, Zuleika opted for more powerful strategies. She approached Joseph at times with the desire to be introduced to his God and poisoning his food with magic spells before faking illness during a national festival to increase her chances of being alone with him (Ginzberg 352-356). While her behavior was not explicitly interpreted in the light of skillful scheming and cunningness, the

progression of her behavior in the Aggadah conveys her clever scheming. Similar to Zuleika's behavior in the Aggadah, the Pharaoh ruling Egypt before the birth of Moses adopted similar cunning schemes to limit the power of the Hebrew population in Egypt and was explicitly described as acting with shrewdness (Ex. 1:10). Furthermore, the number of tricks Zuleika opted for highlighted her resilience. The same relentless perseverance can be seen in the Pharaoh of Exodus who proceeded with chariots after Moses and the Israelites to meet them at the Red Sea; refusing to have his power be challenged, like Zuleika (Ex. 14:5-9).

Apart from the relationship between Zuleika's slyness and persistence and its conformity to a picture of Egypt presented by its Pharaoh of Exodus, both Egypt and Zuleika symbolize a temptation for the Hebrews, and thus, a danger to their ancestors (Greifenhagen 35). Through her sexual advances, Zuleika sought to seduce Joseph, who nevertheless resisted and showed his obedience to God. It is arguable whether the same spiritual firmness was expressed on the part of the Israelites when they wandered in the desert of Sinai, as Egypt presented a temptation for them by its food (Ex. 16:3; Num. 11:5). However, as much of a test as Egypt was for the Israelites' allegiance to God, Zuleika also served as a test and danger to Joseph's relationship with God, further forging herself in an image of Egypt.

Last but not least, an even bigger theme connecting Zuleika and Egypt lies in Zuleika's explicit emphasis on her ethnic distinction as an Egyptian from the Hebrew Joseph, reminiscent of Egypt's role in Genesis and Exodus as a nation and land providing an ethnic and religious marker of polarity between the Hebrews and Gentiles (Gen. 39:14; Greifenhagen 45, 156-157). Furthermore, in both books, Egypt is portrayed as a menacing place that individuals enter unwillingly and depart quickly from (Greifenhagen 31). In a similar way, Zuleika's house and desires symbolize a pit Joseph was unwillingly thrown in as a slave and averted in pursuit of



righteousness. Hence, Zuleika confirms the otherness of Egypt to the Hebrews and echoes its portrayal as a place to depart from.

Despite the multiple similarities allowing this Egyptian woman to represent her country, a major difference can render this representation incomplete. In conforming to solely negative themes related to Egypt, the figure of Zuleika in Jewish readings fails to convey the safety Egypt represents in Genesis, evident from Abraham and the children of Jacob's visit to Egypt to find a haven from famines in their lands (Gen. 12:10; 41:54; Greifenhagen 32).

### **Potiphar's Wife in Islam**

In the Qur'an, the wife of Potiphar is similar to the one in Genesis. However, books of Islamic traditions portray a distinct side to the story of this woman. Although regarded as an instrument of Satan (Stowasser 52,54; Gregg 315; Goldman 47), Zuleikha— as called in Islamic traditions— is also a celebrated character who endures punishment, morally transforms, and marries Joseph at the end (Al Tha'labi 212). Due to the scarcity of Egypt's mention in the Qur'an, this section recruits various Egyptian characters— Pharaoh of Moses and Egyptian magicians— from the story of Moses and the Exodus to allow for extended analysis.

The first common characteristic between Egypt and Zuleikha stems from a reading of the Egyptians' use of language as conveying their arrogance and pride in their land. A reading by some scholars of verses 40:26 and 7:127 in the Qur'an notes a translation where the Egyptians or Pharaoh speaks of the land of Egypt as the "Earth" rather than a land, which conveys the Egyptians' sense of centrality and superiority (Mansūr). Also, the Pharaoh explicitly takes pride in his dominance which is described to denote his wickedness and conceit (Qur'an 7:127; 7:133). This superiority, wickedness, and strong sense of power is also characteristic of Zuleikha in her commands of Joseph to yield to her desires and her use of threats (Qur'an 12:32). Also, related to their sense of

superiority is the Pharaoh and Zuleikha's reliance on threats and torture as a way of punishing and urging people to do what they want. For instance, the Pharaoh tortures the magicians who believed in the God of Moses while Zuleikha threatens Joseph with imprisonment and humiliation to make him comply with her demands (Qur'an 7:124,141; 12:32). Thus, in both stories, the Egyptian characters recognize their political and social superiority and misuse it.

Furthermore, the Qur'an and Islamic commentators make the case for Zuleikha's treachery as characteristic of her gender (Qur'an 12:28; Stowasser 54). Although not a female and not deceiving himself, the Pharaoh resorts to his Egyptian magicians who skillfully tricked an audience and performed "great sorcery" (Qur'an 12:116). While deception failed in both stories, Zuleikha's behavior can be seen as conforming to an image of Egypt where trickery is used for protection, as the Pharaoh tried securing his image against belittlement in front of Moses and Zuleikha tried deceiving her household to escape criticism.

Another similarity between Zuleikha and Egypt can be detected from Egypt's portrayal in the Quran as opposing the message of God sent by Moses and as unreceptive of God's messengers (Qur'an 7:101-102). Likewise, tradition regards Zuleikha as an agent of Satan in her opposition to Joseph's desire for chastity (Gregg 315).

Another interesting connection between Zuleikha and Egypt can be based on stories in Islamic tradition. Looking at the accounts by Al-Nisaburi and Al-Tha'labi, the authors describe a part of Joseph's story absent from the Quran. In it, Zuleikha's beauty fades after Joseph's rise to power due to her constant weeping over her loss of Joseph (Gregg 305-306). It can be argued that her loss of beauty echoes Egypt's loss of harvest and famine during Joseph (Manşūr). Further confirming this connection between Egypt and Zuleikha is Egypt's survival of the famine due to

Joseph's effort and the restoration of Zuleikha's youth as a result of Joseph's prayer to God (Gregg 305).

Despite the various links to be drawn between Zuleikha and Egypt allowing her to stand as a representation of her country, Zuleikha does not represent Egypt's fruitfulness. The Qur'an notes Egypt as a land of herbs, onions, lentils, and garlic luring the children of Israel who were wandering in the desert by its quality of food (Manşūr). While Zuleikha was similarly alluring to Joseph, she does not represent Egypt's fruitfulness and fertility. Still, Zuleikha's characteristic and behavior as presented in Islamic traditions molds her into an image similar to that of Egypt drawn by its Pharaoh and inhabitants. Moreover, although the comparison was restricted by the scarcity of Egypt's mention in the Qur'an, more parallels can be drawn between Zuleikha and Egypt in looking at the transformation Zuleikha underwent. In confessing her sin and repenting, Zuleikha resembles Egypt's embracement of Islam and its inclusion in the Islamic Caliphate (Kennedy, 64-69).

In light of the discussed similarities, it can be argued that both Hagar and Potiphar's wife present the Egypt of Judaism and Islam in various ways. In Judaism, Hagar reflects the fertility of Egypt and its threat to the promises of God to the Hebrews while in Islam she echoes the safety provided by Egypt and its provision of a shelter under which outsiders can grow. Potiphar's wife on the other hand bears more similarity to Egypt in both religions where she is emblematic of the general negative representation of Egypt, its Pharaoh, and its inhabitants. She reflects Egypt's sense of superiority and its temptation to Hebrews in Judaism. In Islam, Zuleikha represented the Egyptians through her ill-use of power, sense of superiority, and deceptions. She loses her beauty but regains it in the same way Egypt went through famine and survived. Although Zuleikha's

spiritual transformation does not echo an image of Egypt in the Qur'an, it reverberates the religious transformation of Egypt during the rise of the Islamic Caliphate.

Despite their different representations, both Hagar and Potiphar's wife reflect the otherness of Egypt to the Israelites in Judaism. This could be due to Egypt's presentation in the HB as the archenemy of the Israelites which is in line with the unfavourable representation of these two women in Judaism. Thus they offer a more relevant portrayal of Egypt in Judaism. While in Islam Egypt is similarly presented in a negative light, especially by the Pharaoh in Moses's story, it is represented as an enemy to righteousness and to the messengers of God rather than the children of Israel per se. Thus, in considering the favorable portrayal of these two Egyptian characters in Islamic traditions and the lack of reference to Egypt in the Qur'an, it is difficult to compare and contrast between these women and their country. Nonetheless, even in Islam, Potiphar's wife allows for a more rich representation of Egypt. In explaining this finding, it could be possible to refer to the differing status and life of each woman. To elaborate, Hagar is the Mother of Arabs and is from the beginning presented as a righteous woman in Islamic traditions, which does not conform to the depiction of Egypt as a land against God and righteous messengers. On the other hand, Potiphar's wife is a character bearing spiritual transformation from a vicious woman overridden by her lust to a righteous one winning the love of Joseph at the end. Hence, her prior wickedness was representative in various ways of the refusal of Pharaoh's Egypt to heed to Moses and God's commands.

Building on Mahmud Mukhtar's *Nahdet Misr's* (The Awakening of Egypt) statue depicting Egypt as a woman lifting her head veil and placing her arm around a sphinx symbolizing Egypt's modern political reawakening from the ashes of her ancient Pharaonic glory, one can imagine two statues sculpting a female depiction of Egypt from scriptural times. Following Mahmud Mukhtar's

positive symbolization, for Hagar, a Jewish hand would chisel a plainly dressed slave woman with a child symbolizing Egypt's fertility whereas a Muslim's would carve a prideful woman with a child in a desert surrounded by individuals epitomising Egypt's safety and growth during difficult times. For Potiphar's wife, sculpting a woman with her head held high dressed in an elaborate gown and wearing plaited wig would be emblematic of Egypt's power and cunningness in Judaism whereas a statue of a woman conveying guilt and repentance would adhere to a representation of Egypt as a pagan country becoming a modern lighthouse for Islam.

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