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‘Cast Out This Bondwoman’

Hagar and Ishmael in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature

Scholars of the Hebrew Bible have a surprising amount to say about ‘sagas’. In 1984, for example, George Coats described the book of Genesis as ‘a cycle of sagas’ – a primeval saga (the creation and flood narratives) and ‘two family sagas’ (Abraham’s and Jacob’s).[1] He defined the family saga – appositely – as ‘a long, traditional prose tale with episodic units’, focussing on the activities of a family (births, marriages, death, travel, strife and separation): family history, which at the same time is national history. ‘See the Icelandic saga’, he adds at one point.[2] In 1987, David Damrosch included a whole section on the Icelandic saga in his study entitled *The Narrative Covenant*: he describes how both sagas and biblical narratives ‘recall, collect and adapt stories from the age of the settling and founding of a nation’ in an attempt to ‘recover and recuperate a rapidly vanishing past’.[3] Both, he argues, are forms of ‘composite

[1] Coats, *Genesis*, p. 34.

[2] Coats, *Genesis*, p. 6.

[3] Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant*, pp. 308–10; cf. the discussion of ‘cultural memory’ in Hermann, ‘Founding Narratives’, pp. 69–87.

Grønlie, S., Dr, St Anne’s College, Oxford University. “‘Cast Out This Bondwoman’. Hagar and Ishmael in Old Norse-Icelandic Literature”. *ANF* 134 (2019), pp. 25–48.

Abstract: This article explores some of the striking likenesses between saga narrative and biblical narrative, which are often noted by biblical scholars. It suggests that a process of ‘convergent evolution’ may lie behind what, in both traditions, has been called ‘saga style’. It then goes to investigate the complex intertextual relations between biblical narrative and saga narrative through a careful analysis of the story of Hagar and Ishmael. The Old Norse-Icelandic translation of this story in *Stjórn* I shows sensitivity to its moral complexity and an unexpected sympathy for Hagar, whose face is perhaps pictured in one of the manuscript initials in AM 227 fol. There are some significant parallels with the story of Melkorka in *Laxdœla saga*, and the scene where Isaac and Ishmael plays recalls some of the scenes involving foster-brothers in the sagas. Although it can be difficult to prove in what direction the influence goes, it is clear both that the saga authors may have drawn on biblical storytelling, and that the translator-compiler of *Stjórn* I was familiar with saga narrative. The reception of Hagar’s story shows how close the affinities between the two traditions are.

Keywords: Hagar, Ishmael, *Stjórn*, Bible, Old Testament, *Laxdœla saga.*

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63420/anf.v134i.27816

artistry that produces characters and scenes of great ambiguity that resist any univocal reading'.[4] His chosen analogues are *Njáls saga* and the prose *Edda* with its blend of myth, historiography and fiction. More recently, in 1991, Meir Sternberg drew freely on saga literature in his study of 'biblical poetics': he uses examples from *Njáls saga* and *Laxdœla saga* in his analysis of narrative technique.[5]

The analogy is just as striking from the other side of the fence, although it is rarely if ever made. Like saga narrative, biblical narrative can be described as dialogical, heterogeneous and multi-vocal: it mixes prose and poetry, fact and fiction, so that history becomes the 'domain of literary invention'.[6] Damrosch has observed that the Bible is 'highly literary at almost every moment, but only sporadically and incidentally does it resemble fictional literature' – a description that would apply well to many sagas of Icelanders – although it tends to be these 'novelistically satisfying episodes' on which most literary criticism is based.[7] As any reader of the sagas will at once recognize, biblical narrative teems with place-names and local customs, sayings and proverbs, monuments and annals; narrative is combined with genealogy and law, and shifts into poetry at moments of narrative climax or intense emotion. Even the proposed development from a 'miscellany' of 'stories, poems, laws and prophecies' to the novelistic heights of David's story in the books of Kings (described by Alter as 'one of the most stunning achievements of ancient literature') can be compared with classical ideas about the growth of the sagas of Icelanders from piecemeal traditions to their high point in the 'literary masterpiece' of *Njáls saga*.[8]

Most intriguing, though, is the affinity of narrative style between the Hebrew Bible and the Icelandic saga. Classic biblical style, like classic saga style, has been described as 'laconic', 'reticent', 'opaque': deceptively 'simple and compact'.[9] Sternberg speaks, for example, of the narrator's 'pseudo-objectivity' while Alter praises his 'rigorous economy of

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[4] Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant*, pp. 311–12. On ambiguity in the sagas, see Miller, *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*, pp. 12–14.

[5] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 70, 329, 367, 377, 396, 417.

[6] Fokkelman, 'Genesis', pp. 15–16; cf. Vésteinn Ólason, 'The Icelandic Saga', pp. 27–47.

[7] Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant*, pp. 32–33.

[8] Fokkelman, 'Genesis', p. 1; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 40; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, *Njáls saga: A Literary Masterpiece*. For this view of how saga narrative developed, see Andersson, *The Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, pp. 204–10.

[9] Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, p. 175; Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 85, 185, 232.

means'.[10] John Barton, one of the foremost scholars of the Old Testament, describes this 'deadpan' style as typical of the oldest layer of biblical narrative.[11] The narrative is anonymous; there is characteristically no direct moral judgement on characters, and rarely any insight into their inner lives, other than what can be inferred from speech and action. This 'house style' runs through Genesis all the way up to Kings, before it gives way to the autobiography of Ezra and Nehemiah.[12] Although the biblical narrator is omniscient, knowing the minds of his characters and God, this knowledge is often withheld from the audience, and typically narration is externally focalized.[13] There are no references to the act of storytelling, no self-reflexive language, no direct address to the audience. Sternberg has commented on how the art of reading in the Hebrew Bible thus runs parallel to the process of living, when we frequently have no idea what others may be thinking or feeling.[14] The consequence is that, far from being didactic, biblical narrative is, as Auerbach famously put it, 'fraught with background': Fokkelman describes how 'the stark surface details bring us to ponder unexpressed psychological depths'.[15]

Barton's most recent work, his 2019 history of the Bible, goes so far as to name this particular biblical style 'saga style', a term which is not, he concedes, standard in biblical studies: 'But the parallel with the clipped style of the Icelandic sagas seems to me to make it appropriate'.[16] He comments not only that it reminds him of the style of the Icelandic sagas, but also that the topics ('such as family events') are to some extent the same as well. Where this style comes from he describes as a 'mystery', since it is only found in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible: 'We cannot say how the Israelites came to develop this sophisticated yet laconic style of narrative in prose, and familiarity with the Bible can blunt our sense of how remarkable it is'. It produced, he suggests, 'more nuanced and complex stories' than the later priestly and moralistic styles with which it is often conflated.

The resemblances between these two literary traditions are so striking

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[10] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 75, 170, 190; Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 23–24.

[11] John Barton, 'Dating the Succession "Narrative"', pp. 101–104.

[12] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 71–75.

[13] Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, pp. 55–56; Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, p. 33; Ska, *The Exegesis of the Pentateuch*, p. 99.

[14] Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 71–75, 178.

[15] Fokkelman, 'Genesis', p. 23; cf. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 18; compare what Miller says about the sagas in *Hrafnkel or the Ambiguities*, p. 18.

[16] Barton, *A History of the Bible*, pp. 39–41.

that, had biblical translation into Old Norse predated the appearance of the first sagas, it would be tempting to posit biblical influence on the development of 'saga style'. However, in contrast to the saint's life, there is no evidence that this is the case. The saga authors may well have been familiar with the stories at the beginning of the Old Testament, but the extant translations come later. The 'saga style' that characterizes both traditions must have developed independently in each one. With some trepidation, I'd like to propose a biological model for this: convergent evolution. This explains the way in which two species may evolve similar features, which are not present in any common ancestor, in response to environmental pressures. One well-known example is filter feeding in whales and sharks; another is echolocation, which evolved independently in bats and dolphins. Similarly, it might be helpful to think of the styles of storytelling in the Hebrew Bible and the Icelandic sagas as 'convergent': they have come to resemble each other, not because of any shared ancestry, but because of the environment in which they arose. Both traditions of storytelling belong to small and not particularly prosperous peoples living on the edge of great civilizations: Egypt and Mesopotamia for the biblical writers, and the Latin Christian West for the saga authors. Their development of a masterful narrative prose has thus been characterized as something of a mystery.[17] At the same time, both are peoples with a strong consciousness of doing something distinctively new: laying the foundations for a new identity and sense of nationhood, whether the United Monarchy or the Icelandic Commonwealth.[18] In both places, the combination of rapid cultural change and a somewhat critical view of the past led to the rise of an extraordinarily rich narrative prose out of an oral tradition of storytelling.

My focus here, though, is not on these similarities in and of themselves, but on their consequences for intertextual relations. What happens when you introduce a bat to a dolphin – when you translate biblical stories into Icelandic 'sagas'? I would like to argue that, far from being obscured in the process of reception, these affinities of style are both recognized and developed in the biblical translations.

There are, of course, some complicating factors, not least the fact that the Hebrew Bible did not come to the medieval Icelanders in Hebrew, but in the Vulgate translation, which was itself based on Old Latin and

[17] Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant*, p. 1; cf. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, p. 232.

[18] Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant*, p. 43; a similar argument is made for the Icelanders in Schier, 'Iceland and the Rise of Literature in "terra nova" ', pp. 168–81.

Greek translations as well as on Hebrew texts.[19] We are therefore at least at one remove from the Hebrew Bible itself. Moreover, it did not come to the Icelanders as the Hebrew Bible, but as the Christian Old Testament – not just as history, but more importantly as 'types' and 'allegories' foreshadowing the New Testament and the sacraments of the Christian Church.[20] This is how most medieval Christians encountered the stories at the beginning of Genesis, as expressions of a timeless reality mediated via the liturgy, in sermons, or through Christian art. In the Redemption window of Canterbury Cathedral, from the late twelfth century, for example, New Testament scenes are accompanied by their Old Testament precursors: Noah's release of a dove, Moses's vision of a burning bush, and David's escape from Saul are placed respectively to the left, below, and to the right of the Resurrection. Likewise, in the Old Icelandic Homily Book, from c. 1200, the homilist explains Isaac's blindness, in the story where Jacob steals Esau's birthright, as a figure for the blindness of the Jews in the presence of God incarnate, despite their foreknowledge of his coming.[21]

The translations of the Old Testament into Old Norse are collectively known as *Stjórn*, but in fact *Stjórn* consists of at least three translations from different time periods, which only occur together in one manuscript.[22] The youngest of these is *Stjórn* I, which runs from the beginning of Genesis to Exodus chapter 18. If the prologue in AM 226 and AM 227 fol. is to be believed, this translation was made in either Iceland or Norway in connection with the court of King Hákon Magnússon (who reigned between 1299 and 1319).[23] The two main manuscripts for the text

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[19] On the biblical text used by the compiler of *Stjórn*, see Astås, *An Old Norse Biblical Compilation*, pp. 63–65. For the transmission of manuscripts of the Bible in Greek and Latin, see further van Liere, *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible*, pp. 80–109

[20] On the problematics of the terminology, see Barton, 'Old Testament or Hebrew Bible'. I prefer the term Hebrew Bible here, unless an explicit comparison is being made with the New Testament. The fullest account of how the Bible was read in the Middle Ages is de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, and the best account of the Bible in the liturgy is still Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*.

[21] *Íslensk Hómilíubók*, ed. by Sigurbjörn Einarsson *et al*., p. 83.

[22] On the date and provenance of the manuscripts, and *Stjórn* I, II and III, see Kirby, *Bible Translation in Old Norse*, pp. 51–73; Jakob Benediktsson 'Some Observations on *Stjórn* and the manuscript AM 227 fol.', pp. 7–39; Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, 'Heroes or Holy People? The context of Old Norse Bible translations', pp. 107–22; Sverrir Tómasson, Review of *Stjórn. Vols I–II*, pp. 121–28.

[23] Scholars are divided over Norwegian or Icelandic provenance; see for example Astås, *An Old Norse Biblical Compilation*, pp. 149–59; Selma Jónsdóttir, *Illumination in a Manuscript of Stjórn*, pp. 49–65.

of *Stjórn* I both date to the mid-fourteenth century: Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, AM 227 fol., which was probably made at the Benedictine monastery of Þingeyrar in the North of Iceland, and Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling, AM 226 fol., which was made in Helgafell in the South-West of Iceland. This is interesting, because the monastery at Helgafell may have been Victorine by this time, and the Victorines had a significant impact on how the Bible was read in the later Middle Ages.[24] In particular, they championed the importance of mastering the literal or historical level of biblical interpretation, before moving on to the allegorical level. So, in his *Didascalicon de studio legendi* (*Didascalicon, On the Study of Reading*), a sort of study-skills guide for new students, Hugh of St Victor writes: 'Just as you see that every building lacking a foundation cannot stay firm, so also it is in learning. The foundation and principle of sacred learning is history'.[25] Likewise, in his *De scripturis et scriptoribus sacris* (*On Sacred Scripture and its Authors*), he emphasises that: 'To ignore the letter is to ignore what the letter signifies and what is signified by it'.[26] Only once the literal sense has been fully researched, should an allegorical sense be sought.

The Victorines laid a new emphasis on studying the historical books of the Bible, and studying them as history. Both Hugh and Andrew of St Victor wrote commentaries on Genesis, and they drew not only on patristic commentary, but also on Jewish scholarship, especially the rabbinical school of Rashi in Paris.[27] Perhaps the best known, certainly the most influential, pupil of the Victorines was Peter Comestor, whose *Historia scholastica*, from c. 1170, blends biblical narrative with historical commentary in a continuous text. It was enormously popular: from 1215 on, when it was approved by the pope, it became *the* set text for first-

[24] Bekker-Nielsen, 'The Victorines and their Influence on Old Norse Literature', pp. 33–35; Gunnarr Harðason, 'Victorsklaustrið í París og norrænar miðaldar', pp. 148–60.

[25] 'Fundamentum autem et principium doctrine sacre historia est, de qua quasi mel de fauo, ueritas allegorie exprimitur', in *Hugonis de Sancto Victore. Didascalicon*, ed. by Buttimer, Book VI, p. 116; translated in *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St Victor*, trans. by Taylor, p. 138.

[26] 'Litteram autem ignorare est ignorare quid littera significet, et quid significetur a littera', in Hugh of St Victor, *De scripturis et scriptoribus sacris*, ed. by Migne, col. 13d; translated in Hugh of St Victor, 'On Sacred Scripture and its Authors', trans. by van Liere, p. 217.

[27] van Liere, 'Biblical Exegesis through the Twelfth Century', in *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, pp. 157–72; Ocker, 'Scholastic Interpretation of the Bible', pp. 259–71; Berndt, 'The School of St Victor in Paris', pp. 468–94.

year theology students in Paris, and it was translated into pictures in the *Bibles moralisées* and into the vernacular in what came to be called the *Bibles historiales*.[28] This is the context to which *Stjórn* I belongs: it contains clearly marked additions from the *Historia scholastica* as well as from Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum historiale*, for which Comestor was also a source. In places, it fuses the text of the Vulgate with the *Historia scholastica* without any visible indication. The prologue in AM 226 fol. specifies that its primary subject is history: 'Býrjaz þessor giorð ok hefz af sǫgðum guðs hallar grund uellí. þat er af sjalfre sogunní en æigi af hennar skyríng. eda skilningi' ('This work begins and sets out from the foundation of Gods hall, that is from the history itself, and not its signification or figuration').[29] It is no coincidence that, in AM 226 and 225 fol., *Stjórn* I, II, and III are followed by works of universal history such as *Rómverja saga*, *Alexanders saga* and *Gyðinga saga*.

The compiler of *Stjórn* I, then, inherited along with the text of the Vulgate Genesis an allegorical tradition of interpretation. But he wrote at a time when there was an increasing emphasis on the historical level of interpretation, with its greater openness towards human action and intention. In what follows, I want to explore these exegetical tensions in the story of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16 and 21. I've chosen this story because it was consistently allegorised by the Fathers of the Church, and yet can simultaneously be read as a tense family drama with clear parallels in the sagas of Icelanders. It is therefore a good test case for the extent to which the compiler of *Stjórn* I is working with allegorical abstractions, or is alert to the saga potential of the scene. I provide it here in the Douay-Rheims translation, since the Norse translator based his work on the Paris Bible:[30]

> She took Agar the Egyptian her handmaid, ten years after they first dwelt in the land of Chanaan, and gave her to her husband to wife. And he went in to her. But she, perceiving that she was with child, despised her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram: Thou dost unjustly with me: I gave my handmaid into thy bosom, and she perceiving herself to be with child,

[28] Morey, 'Peter Comestor, Biblical Paraphrase and the Medieval Popular Bible', pp. 6–35; Clark, *The Making of the Historia scholastica*, pp. 13–14; Wolf, 'Peter Comestor's *Historia scholastica* in Old Norse translation', pp. 149–65.

[29] *Stjórn*, ed. by Astås, pp. 4–5. The last phase is omitted from the Prologue in AM 227 fol.

[30] All quotations from the Vulgate are taken from *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. by Fischer and Weber, rev. by Gryson. All English translations of the Latin Vulgate are from the Douay-Rheims Bible, accessible at < http://drbo.org> [accessed 12 October 2019].

> despiseth me. The Lord judge between me and thee. And Abram made answer, and said to her: Behold thy handmaid is in thy own hand, use her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai afflicted her, she ran away. And the angel of the Lord having found her, by a fountain of water in the wilderness, which is in the way to Sur in the desert, He said to her: Agar, handmaid of Sarai, whence comest thou? and whither goest thou? And she answered: I flee from the face of Sarai, my mistress. And the angel of the Lord said to her: Return to thy mistress, and humble thyself under her hand. And again he said: I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, and it shall not be numbered for multitude. And again: Behold, said he, thou art with child, and thou shalt bring forth a son: and thou shalt call his name Ismael, because the Lord hath heard thy affliction. (Genesis 16:3–11.)
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> And the child grew and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast on the day of his weaning. And when Sara had seen the son of Agar the Egyptian playing with Isaac her son, she said to Abraham: Cast out this bondwoman, and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with my son Isaac. Abraham took this grievously for his son. And God said to him: Let it not seem grievous to thee for the boy, and for thy bondwoman: in all that Sara hath said to thee, hearken to her voice: for in Isaac shall thy seed be called. But I will make the son also of the bondwoman a great nation, because he is thy seed. So Abraham rose up in the morning, and taking bread and a bottle of water, put it upon her shoulder, and delivered the boy, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Bersabee. And when the water in the bottle was spent, she cast the boy under one of the trees that were there. And she went her way, and sat over against him a great way off as far as a bow can carry, for she said: I will not see the boy die: and sitting over against, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy: and an angel of God called to Agar from heaven, saying: What art thou doing, Agar? fear not: for God hath heard the voice of the boy, from the place wherein he is. (Genesis 21:8–17.)

This is a complex and, in many ways, disturbingly topical story about migration, race, slavery, and surrogacy. It is also one of the earliest passages in the Hebrew Bible to be given an allegorical meaning. For the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, writing in c. 50 CE, Sarah stands for divine virtue, while Hagar represents preliminary or encyclical studies.[31] In his first epistle to the Galatians, written in c. 50–60 CE, St Paul interprets Hagar as bondage to the law and Sarah as spiritual freedom.[32] These two allegories form the backbone of most patristic

[31] Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament*, p. 25.

[32] Galatians 4:22–39 ('For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, and the other by a free woman. But he who was of the bondwoman, was born

commentary on the passage, which typically sets Hagar against Sarah in a series of binary oppositions: Sinai versus Jerusalem, the Old Testament versus the New, the flesh versus the spirit, the Synagogue versus the Church. Although in one sense this enriches the story through drawing it up into an extra-temporal frame of reference, in another it undeniably smoothes over the human drama and moral ambiguity, most obviously in the case of Abraham and Sarah's problematic actions. So, on the rivalry between the two women, Philo of Alexandria comments: 'Do not suppose that you have here one of the usual accompaniments of women's jealousy. It is not women who are spoken of here, it is minds'.[33] Likewise, in his commentary on Genesis 16, Rupert of Deutz (c. 1025–1171) reminds his readers: 'Herein lies written not the history of a people, but rather heavenly and analogical mysteries'.[34] Abraham and Sarah's persecution can be retrospectively justified through 'providential typology', the literal meaning redeemed by means of allegory.[35] Yet clearly this runs against the grain of the story in the Hebrew Bible; a densely psychological drama in which both women have been thought of as simultaneously 'victim' and 'victimizer'.[36] It is intriguing that so much attention is given to Hagar, when her role in the story is, finally, to be rejected, once it is clear that Ishmael will not become Abraham's heir.

One of the consequences of these allegorical readings is that Hagar is often portrayed negatively in vernacular adaptations. There are some good examples of this in Old and Middle English translations, and they show remarkable consistency in the portrayal of Hagar from the tenth to the fifteenth century. In the Old English poem *Genesis A* in the Junius manuscript, which dates to c. 960–990, Hagar's defiance of Sarah, implied in the Vulgate's 'despised' (Latin *despexit*), is amplified considerably:[37]

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according to the flesh: but he of the free woman, was by promise. Which things are said by an allegory. For these are the two testaments. The one from mount Sinai, engendering unto bondage; which is Agar: For Sinai is a mountain in Arabia, which hath affinity to that Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But that Jerusalem, which is above, is free: which is our mother […] Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he, that was born according to the flesh, persecuted him that was after the spirit; so also it is now. But what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son; for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the free woman').

[33] *The Works of Philo*, trans. by Yonge, pp. 304–6.

[34] 'Uidelicet quod non hic popularis historia conscripta sed caelestia sint consignata mysteria', in Ruperti Tuitiensis *De sancta Trinitate*, ed. by Haacke, 5.24, vol. I, p 356; translation from Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, p. 61.

[35] Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, p. 34.

[36] See Mellinkoff, 'Sarah and Hagar', p. 35; Trible, *Texts of Terror*, pp. 11–27.

[37] *The Junius Manuscript*, ed. by Krapp, pp. 67–68.

> Hire mod astah þa heo was magotimbre
> be Abrahame eacen worden.
> Ongan æfþancum agendfrean
> halsfæst herian, higeþryðe wæg,
> wæs laðwendo lustum ne wolde
> þeowdom þolian ac heo þriste ongan
> wið Sarran swiðe winnan. (ll. 2237–43)
>
> Her [Hagar's] heart puffed up when she became pregnant with a son by Abraham. The stiff-necked woman began to treat her owner with disdain, carried herself with pride, was hostile, would not willingly endure her slavery, but she began to struggle fiercely and shamelessly against Sara.

It is she who 'struggles' against Sarah, rather than Sarah who 'afflicts' her. Indeed, when the angel intercepts her first attempt to run away, he tells her firmly that 'Þec Sarre ah' ('Sara owns you'). Writing on this and other Anglo-Latin and Old English depictions of Hagar and Ishmael's story, Catherine Karkov comments that it was retold 'in ways that foregrounded their sins, their wickedness, and their deceit'.[38] The *Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament* (c. 1400–10) takes even more significant liberties, omitting both Sarah's ill treatment of Hagar and Hagar's first attempt to run away. Instead, it tells us that Sarah faithfully protects Hagar and Ishmael, despite Hagar's arrogant behaviour towards her:[39]

> When Agar wyst* scho was with chyld, *knew
> hyr hert in pride begane to ryse;
> Hyr maystrys that* was meke and myld *mistress who
> in all hyr dedes scho can dyspyse.
> Then Sarai wyst scho was begylyd,
> bot ever scho wrogh os woman wyse*. *behaved as a wise woman
> Hyr and hyr barn both can scho bylde*, *protect
> and prayd ever God for bettur gyse* *guise
> To send them sum ryght ayre* * true heir
> that myght ther welthes weld* (ll. 517–26). *wield

When Hagar is driven away, after Sarah grows suspicious of Ishmael, Abraham implausibly steps in and reconciles them, with a happy outcome for all:

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[38] Karkov, 'Hagar and Ishmael', p. 217. See also Anzelark, 'An Ideal Marriage: Abraham and Sarah in Old English Literature', pp. 187–2012.

[39] *The Middle English Metrical Paraphrase of the Old Testament*, ed. by Livingstone, pp. 60–63.

And Abraham dyd all hys mayn* *everything in his power
and mad acord them two betwene.
Togedder then thei dwell
in feleschep full fayre;
Grett myrth thei mad them amell* *among themselves
for Ysaac theyr ayre (ll. 653–60).

Both these translations try to avoid moral ambiguity by reshaping the story into something more straightforwardly edifying and exemplary.

Here is the same passage from Genesis 16 in *Stjórn* I, where it is entitled 'Fra þi er abram gat at eiga ysmael meðr agar ok engillinn vitraðiz henni' ('How Abram begot Ishmael with Hagar and the angel appeared to her'):[40]

> Enn sua sem hon uissi at hon hafði barn getið af þeira sambúð þa fyrerleít hon sina husfru saray. enn abram let æigi sem hann vissi huat tiðiss var. Saray talaði þa til abrams Vrettlegha giorer þu viðr mik. ek gaf mina þionostu konv vpp i þinn eigínlegan faðm. Nu þegar sem hun finnr at hun hefer barn getít þa fyrersmaar hon mík dęmí guð drottinn milli mín ok þin. hann svaraði ok sagði sua, Se ambáátt þín er iþinu valldí giǫr meðr hana a þeim leið sem þer likar. Ok þegar sem saray þiaði hana ok þrǫngði þa flyði hon vndan ok ętlaðiz heím i egipta land. Fann guðs engill hana þa eina saman sua sem hon þýrst ok uilltiz vegar hafði komit til eins brvnnz eðr uppsprettv a ueginum er liggr uiðr eýðimorkína sur ok sagði sua til hennar. Huaðan komt þu agár ambatt eðr huert hefer þu byriat þina ferð. hon suaraði. Ek flý fra minni frv saray. Engillinn sagði þa til hennar. huerf aftr þu til þinnar frv. legg þik ok gefz henní i valld. Ok enn talaði hann til hennar. Margfalldlegha man ek fjǫlga þitt af kęmi ok fyrer fiolðans saker man þat æigi talt verða. ok enn sagði hann sua: Se þu hefer meðr manni buið, ok mant þu svn fęða ok hans nafn mant þu ismael kalla fýrer þa skýlld er guð heýrði þina neýð ok angist.
>
> And when she realised that she had conceived from their union, then she looked down on her mistress Sara. And Abram acted as if he did not know what was going on. Sara said to Abraham: 'You have treated me unjustly. I gave my servant into your embrace. Now, as soon as she finds that she has conceived a child, she scorns me. May the Lord God judge between me and you'. He answered and said: 'See, your slave-woman is in your charge. Do with her whatever you wish'. And when Sara enslaved and oppressed her, then she fled from there, intending to go back to Egypt. God's angel found her alone as, thirsty and having lost her way, she had come to a well or spring on the path that lies by the wilderness of Sur, and said to her: 'Where have you come from, Agar the slave-woman,

[40] *Stjórn*, ed. by Astås, pp. 170–71.

> and where are you travelling to?' She answered: 'I am fleeing from my mistress Sara'. The angel then said to her: 'Turn back to your mistress, humble yourself, and put yourself in her charge'. And again he said to her: 'I will increase your offspring greatly, and because of their multitude they will not be numbered'. And again he said: 'See, you have conceived a child, and you will give birth to a son, and you will call his name Ismael, because God has heard your distress and anguish'.

This is followed by a long addition from Comestor, which is marked off by the rubrics. This addition is Comestor's own; it tells us that Ishmael became the ancestor of the Ishmaelites, who are identified with the Saracens (a terms that refers vaguely to Turks, Arabs, or Muslims), and then moves into an apocalyptic prophecy of future conflict between Ishmael's sons and the Christian world.[41]

The first thing to note is how well the Old Norse translation replicates the stylistic techniques of biblical prose, specifically that of meaningful repetition.[42] As in the Vulgate, attention is drawn through repetition to Hagar's changed attitude to Sarah after the conception of her son: 'þa fyrerleít hon' ('then she looked down') in the narratorial voice echoes 'þa fyrersmaar hon' ('then she scorned') in Sarah's complaint, so that Sarah's subjective impression of Hagar's contempt is confirmed by objective observation. Again, as in the Vulgate, Abraham's judgement is divinely condoned: he absolves himself by telling Sarah: 'ambáátt þín er iþinu valldi' ('your slave-woman is in your charge'), and the angel addresses Hagar as 'slave-woman' ('ambatt') and orders her to place herself in Sara's charge ('henní i valld'). There is a subtle alignment of the narrative here with the perspective of the oppressors.

There is another type of repetition in the passage, though, which is characteristic of the style of *Stjórn* I: the repetition of doublets.[43] This repetition sets the divine imperative (to establish Isaac as heir to the covenant) against the acuteness of Hagar's suffering. Where the Vulgate describes Sarah as 'afflicting' (*affligens*) Hagar, the Old Norse tells us that Sarah 'þiaði hana ok þrǫngði' ('enslaved and oppressed her'). Where the Vulgate, echoing the earlier 'afflicting', tells us that God has heard Hagar's 'affliction' (*afflictio*), the Old Norse tells us that God has heard 'þina

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[41] *Petri Comestoris Scolastica Historia*, ed. by Sylwan, pp. 92–93. On this prophecy and its connection to the crusades, see Ogle, 'Comestor, Methodius and the Saracens', pp. 318–24.

[42] On 'meaningful repetition', see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 120; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, p. 112; Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 375–91.

[43] Astås, *An Old Norse Biblical Compilation*, p. 111.

neyð ok angist' ('your distress and anguish'). As in the Hebrew Bible, this is the only insight we get in the passage into Hagar's emotions and it comes indirectly through the voice of God. Sif Rikhardsdóttir has shown that, in the *riddarasögur*, alliterating pairs are used frequently at moments of dramatic climax, and work aurally to intensify the emotionality of the text.[44] The alliteration and word-pairs here draw attention to the negative emotions associated with Hagar's plight.

Even more interesting is the shift in this passage from describing Hagar as *þjónustukona* ('serving woman') to calling her *ambátt* ('slave-woman'), In the Vulgate, the same noun is used in both places (*ancilla*), but in the Hebrew there is also a shift from 'servant' (*šiphâ*) to 'slave' (*'āmâ*), but later, between Genesis 16 and 21.[45] This is particularly interesting, because the translator-compiler would have known the Hebrew only through the Latin, so that the shift from *þjónustukona* to *ambátt* here may be the compiler's own intuitive response, showing a keen awareness of the power struggle between the two women and the subtle shifts in social status conferred by child-bearing. Finally, there is a short addition from Comestor: *et Abram dissimulabat*, which is translated: 'enn abram let ægi sem hann vissi huat tiðiss var' ('Abram acted as if he did not know what was going on').[46] This idiom, which occurs elsewhere in *Stjórn* I, as well as a couple of times in *Njáls saga*, implies a certain culpability or negligence on Abraham's part.[47] The moral ambiguity of this scene, then, is remarkably well captured in the Norse translation.

The same ethical complications are present in Genesis 21, which is entitled: 'Fra burð ýsaacs ok þi er agar var brott rekín meðr sýni sinum ýsmael' ('About the birth of Isaac and how Agar was driven away with her son Ishmael'). To this AM 226 fol. adds 'ok hversu gud uitradiz henni' ('and how God appeared to her'), drawing attention to yet another repetition in the narrative: Hagar's two theophanies. There follows a long (unmarked) addition from Comestor about the significance of Ishmael playing, a point of controversy because the Hebrew verb is ambiguous:[48]

> Sma sueinninn ýsaach vox upp ok er hann var þrevetr af vandiz hann moður miolk ok a þeim sama deghi sem þat býriaðiz hafði faðer hans inni veizlu mickla. gekk hann þa fýrsta tíma framm fyrer sins fǫður borð. ok

[44] Sif Rikhardsdóttir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature*, pp. 49–50.
[45] Trible, *Texts of Terror*, pp. 21 and 30 (note 9).
[46] *Petri Comestoris Scolastica Historia*, ed. by Sylwan, p. 92.
[47] *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 45, 283.
[48] *Stjórn*, ed. by Astås, pp. 192–93.

> sem þeir leku sier bááðer samt bręðrner. ýsmael svn agar ok ýsáách. ok hinn ellrí lek illa meðr hinum ýngra. þa hugsaði sárra ok skilði epter komanda vfrið af leikinum þeim sem hun sáá. at hinn ellri mvndi hínum ýngri drottna vilía þann tíma sem faðer þeira er allr. ella kugaði ýsmael hann til at dýrka likneskí þau sem hann hafði ser af leiri gert epter ebreskra manna sǫgn. Ok sem męðr hans mislikaði þetta talaði hon til abrahams: Rek i brott ambattína ok hennar sun þuiat æigi man ambattar sun sáá erfingi þinn uerða meðr sýní mínum ysáách. Abraham tok þersv hennar tali helldr þungliga fyrer svnar sins skýlld ýsmaels ok gaf sér ekkí vm.
>
> The small boy Isaac grew up and, when he was three, he was weaned from breast milk. And on the same day that this happened, his father held a great feast and he went before his father's table for the first time. And as the brothers were playing both together – Ishmael, Agar's son, and Isaac – and the older treated the younger roughly, Sarah reflected and perceived in their game the coming war, in that she saw that the older would wish to dominate the younger when their father was old, or Ishmael would coerce him into worshipping idols which he had made of clay, according to the Hebrew people. And, since this displeased his mother, she then said to Abraham: 'Drive away the slave woman and her son, because the slave woman's son will not inherit together with my son Isaac'. Abraham took what she said rather hard for the sake of his son Ishmael, and paid little heed to it.

The apparent innocence of the brothers' playing, together with the lack of explanation for Sarah's reaction led both Jewish and Christian commentators to embroider here. The idea that 'playing' refers to idolatry goes back to Jerome's *Hebrew Questions on Genesis* (c. 390 CE) and is of probable rabbinic origin.[49] It is pictured in many manuscript illuminations: in the Queen Mary Psalter, as here, Ishmael is depicted forcing Isaac to pray to idols, and in a German manuscript of Rudolf von Ems' *Weltchronik* from 1400–1410, where the two boys are fighting, there are clay idols on the left, one of which has been knocked over; they serve as the implied motive for the fight.[50] Other commentators suggested that Ishmael was mocking Isaac or playing roughly, and it is clear from the illustrations in the Isabella Psalter and the Egerton Genesis that the bigger Ishmael is picking on the smaller Isaac. The Norse translation tells us first that 'the brothers were playing' ('leku sier'), which sounds innocent enough, but then at once adds that the older 'lek illa meðr hinum yngra' ('treated the younger roughly'). Ishmael seems to blame here, but the

[49] Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, pp. 37–43.
[50] Mellinkoff, 'Sarah and Hagar', p. 44.

goalposts shift again when we are told of Abraham's response to Sarah's urging: 'Abraham tok þersv hennar tali helldr þungliga fyrer svnar sins skylld ysmaels ok gaf sér ekkí vm' ('Abraham took what she said rather hard for the sake of his son Ishmael, and paid little heed to it'). Such expressions of muted emotion are common in the sagas, and serve to emphasise here the curious weakness of Abraham's stance.[51] We can only guess what mixture of paternal emotion lies behind this attitude of feigned indifference.

Ultimately, of course, God endorses Sarah's apparently necessary cruelty, encouraging Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael back into the desert, with only a bottle of water between them. Hagar's second theophany, with its rare heart-breaking insight into her feelings, is managed delicately in the Old Norse:[52]

> Þa lagði hvn hann niðr vnder einu tre þi sem þar var. Gekk sidan sua langt brott i fra þuí sem ǫrskotz lengð er ok settiz þar niðr, at hon sęi æigi upp a sins sunar dauða ok talaði sua fẏrer sialfri ser. æigi skal ek sia upp áá þat at sun minn deẏr. Grét hon þa meðr hááʀi rǫddu þar sem hon sat i gegn þui sem sueinninn láá. Guðs engill kallaði þa til agar sua segiandí. huat giǫrer þu agaar? hirð æigi at ottaz þuiat at guð heẏrði sueinsins rǫdd ok enn. helldr þína [AM 226 fol. raudd] fyrer sueínsins skẏlld.
>
> Then she laid him down under a tree that was there, then went as far away from it as the length of an arrow-shot, and sat down there, so that she would not have to watch her son's death, and she said to herself: 'I shall not watch my son die'. Then she wept with a loud voice, as she sat opposite where the boy lay. God's angel then called to Agar, saying: 'What are you doing, Agar? Do not be afraid, because God has heard the boy's voice, or rather your voice for the boy's sake'.

Here, the Old Norse follows the biblical custom of rendering internal monologue as direct speech ('she said to herself'), but it also exploits the meaningful repetition characteristic of biblical narrative in order to heighten the sense of Hagar's suffering: it repeats Hagar's insistence in first indirect, then direct speech: 'at hon sęi æigi upp a sins sunar dauða' ('so that she would not have to watch her son's death'); 'æigi skal ek sia upp áá þat at sun minn deyr' ('I shall not watch my son die'). The other important repetition in the passage has also been added: 'Grét hon þa meðr hááʀi rǫddu' ('She wept with a loud voice'), 'guð heẏrði sueinsins rǫdd' ('God heard the boy's voice'), and in AM 226 fol., 'helldr þína

[51] *Laxdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, pp. 51, 242; *Brennu-Njáls saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 87, 296; *Grettis saga*, ed. by Guðni Jónsson p. 109.

[52] *Stjórn*, ed. by Astås, p. 193.

raudd fyrer sueínsins skỳlld' ('or rather your voice for the boy's sake'). The last phrase translates Comestor's 'id est, fletum matris pro puero' ('that is, the tears of the mother for the child').[53] By placing these words in the angel's mouth and repeating 'voice', the passage insists on the centrality of Hagar's lament. The expression used by the angel 'hirð æigi at ottaz' ('do not be afraid', Latin 'noli timere') creates a further chain of repetition linking Hagar's theophany to those of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Moses.[54]

Hagar's suffering, and God's merciful response to it, is foregrounded in this passage, and in AM 227 fol., in the column immediately opposite, the face of a woman is sketched in the capital N (Fig. 1). Faces appear in manuscript initials on fols 11r, 12v, 30r, 103r, 113v and 116r of this manuscript; all are male and bearded, with the exception of this one, and four of them inhabit an initial N, perhaps punning on Latin *nomen* or Old Norse *nafn*. The face is surely Hagar's: her heavily drawn eyebrows and downturned lips exude misery, and she seems to be pictured under a shrub or tree, as in Genesis, below a drop of water, perhaps reminding us of her tears or her thirst. The unexpected intimacy of this face heightens the emotion of the text: we come face-to-face with Hagar's misery.[55] Most poignantly, Hagar stands outside her own story, looking towards the words in the opposite column, where we find Sarah's pronouncement of her banishment: 'Rek i brott ambattínna ok hennar sun' ('Drive away the slave-woman and her son').

Hagar, then, retains her prominence and invites empathy in the Old Norse translation, but more than this, she has a counterpart in the sagas of Icelanders, another slave-woman who carries her master's child, quarrels with his wife, and is eventually driven from the family home: Melkorka in *Laxdœla saga*. It is an intriguing coincidence, at the very least, that *Laxdœla saga* was probably written down at the monastery of Helgafell, where AM 226 fol. was produced.[56]

One of the things that these two stories have in common is the term *ambáttarsonr* ('the slave-woman's son'), which is absolutely central to this passage in *Stjórn* I and occurs four times in quick succession in *Laxdœla saga*; the only other saga of Icelanders in which it occurs is *Vatnsdœla saga*, in an insult made about Þorkell krafla, another saga hero

[53] *Petri Comestoris Scolastica Historia*, ed. by Sylwan, p. 107.
[54] *Stjórn*, ed. by Astås, pp. 167, 246, 401.
[55] See Downes and Trigg, 'Facing up to the History of Emotions', pp. 3–11.
[56] *Laxdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, pp. xxiv–xxv.

Fig. 1. Reykjavík, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum, AM 227 fol., 30r. Courtesy of Stofnun Árna Magnússonar á Íslandi.

who is illegitimate.[57] In all of these cases, the use of the term relates manifestly to inheritance, land and posterity. So, when Jórunn sees all the goods that Melkorka's son by her husband Hǫskuldr has accumulated, she comments bitterly that: 'Hefir ambáttarsonr sjá auð til þess, at uppi sé hans nafn' ('That slave-woman's son has enough wealth to ensure his name is remembered').[58]

More striking than this shared word, though, is the shared perspective of *Stjórn* I and *Laxdœla saga*, the close attention in both cases to the plight of the slave-woman, and the delicacy with which sympathy is apportioned. Just as, in *Stjórn* I, Sarah can be thought of as both victim and victimiser, so too no one can really blame Jórunn for being put out when her husband comes home with a foreign slave-woman, and suggests that she move in for good.[59] As in *Stjórn* I, matters do not improve when Melkorka gives birth to a son whom Hǫskuldr adores: Jórunn insists that

[57] *Laxdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, pp. 50, 62–63, 68; *Vatnsdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, p. 117.

[58] *Laxdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, p. 68.

[59] *Laxdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, pp. 26–27.

she must do some work or leave ('fara á brott ella'). It is this that leads to the fight between them when Melkorka is helping Jórunn to undress:[60]

> Jórunn kvazk eigi vita, hvat hon segði satt; kvað sér ekki um kynjamenn alla, ok skilja þau þessa rœðu; var Jórunn hvergi betr við hana en áðr, en Hǫskuldr nǫkkuru fleiri. Ok litlu síðar, er Jórunn gekk at sofa, togaði Melkorka af henni ok lagði skóklæðin á gólfit. Jórunn tók sokkana ok keyrði um hǫfuð henni.
>
> Jórunn said that she didn't know whether she was telling the truth; she said she had no fondness for wondrous people of any sort, and they ended their conversation; Jórunn was not any better disposed to her [Melkorka] than before, but Hǫskuldr was somewhat warmer. And a little later, when Jórunn was going to bed, Melkorka took off her shoes and stockings and laid them on the ground. Jórunn took the stockings and struck her about the head.

This may seem a bit of stretch from Hagar and Sarah, but actually the power struggle between the two biblical women was imagined in very similar ways. The Jewish *Genesis rabbah*, for example, discusses in what way Sarah may have mistreated Hagar and comes up with three possibilities: that she denied her the conjugal bed (which Jórunn does upon Melkorka's arrival); that she hit her in the face with a slipper (which is tantalisingly close to the incident with the stockings); and finally that she set her various demeaning domestic tasks, such as helping her to bathe.[61] Some medieval manuscripts do depict Sarah abusing Hagar: in the Isabella Psalter, she is brandishing a long stick and, in the Egerton Genesis, she threatens her with a distaff, while Hagar bends away and raises her hand to protect her head.[62]

A more distant echo of Hagar (or Melkorka) is to be found in chapters 16 to 17 of *Kormáks saga*, in connection with the figure of Óláfr pái, son of Melkorka and Hǫskuldr from *Laxdœla saga*.[63] Bersi the Dueller rescues an abducted woman, Steinvǫr, from her abductor, but instead of sending her home to her father, he keeps her with him, to the displeasure of his wife Þórdís. Þórdís is even more annoyed when Bersi gives Steinvǫr the boy Halldórr, son of Óláfr pái, to foster. In a quarrel with his wife's brother, Bersi makes use of these resentments to stage a fight between Steinvǫr (who is in the know) and Þórdís (who is not) over a can

[60] *Laxdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, pp. 27–28.

[61] *Genesis rabbah*, vol. 2, 40:4–5, p. 152.

[62] Mellinkoff, 'Sarah and Hagar', p. 42.

[63] *Vatnsdœla saga,* ed. by Einar Ól. Sveinsson, pp. 259–63. With thanks to Tom Morcom for drawing my attention to this episode.

of split milk. Although it is primarily a stragatem, it works because the saga author is sensitive towards the domestic tensions created by extra-marital relations and child-rearing.

The rivalry between women is one aspect of this story; another is the conflict between the half-brothers Isaac and Ishmael, or foster-brothers, as they are called in Old English.[64] The scene where Sarah sees Isaac and Ishmael playing is also paralleled in the sagas. Her foresight, as she watches the two boys together has something in common with that of Gestr Oddleifsson's, as he watches the foster-brothers Kjartan (Melkorka's grandson) and Bolli playing in the river in *Laxdœla saga*:[65]

> Þeir fóstbrœðr hǫfðu verit á sund um daginn; réðu þeir Óláfssynir mest fyrir þeiri skemmtun. Margir váru ungir menn af ǫðrum bœjum á sundi. Þá hljópu þeir Kjartan ok Bolli af sundi, er flokkrinn reið at; váru þá mjǫk klæddir, er þeir Gestr ok Óláfr riðu at. Gestr leit á þessa ina ungu menn um stund.
>
> The foster-brothers had been swimming during the day; Óláfr's sons took the lead in that sport. There were many young men from other farms swimming. Kjartan and Bolli were just coming up from their swim, when the group of men rode towards them; they were almost dressed, when Gestr and Óláfr rode up. Gestr looked at the young men for a while.

It is not until later that Gestr communicates the significance of what he has seen: 'Ekki kemr mér at óvǫrum, þótt Bolli standi yfir hǫfuðsvǫrðum Kjartans, ok hann vinni sér ok hǫfuðbana' ('It will not take me by surprise, if Bolli is to stand over Kjartan's corpse, and in this way bring about his own death too'). A similar prophecy is made about the cousins Steinólfr and Arngrímr in *Víga-Glúms saga*:[66]

> Þá er annarr var fjǫgurra vetra, en annarr sex vetra, léku þeir sér um dag, ok bað Steinólfr Arngrím ljá sér messingarhest. Arngrímr svarar: 'Ek mun gefa þér, því at þat er nú heldr þitt leika en mitt, fyrir aldrs sǫkum'. En Steinólfr sagði fóstra sinni, hvé góða gjǫf hann hafði þegit.
>
> When one was four years old and the other six, they were playing during the day, and Steinólfr asked Arngrímr to lend him a toy horse. Arngrímr answers: 'I'll give it to you, because it's a better toy for you than for me now, because of our ages'. And Steinólfr told his foster-mother what a good gift he had received.

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[64] Sarah refers to Ishmael as her 'fostorcild' in the Old English Heptateuch; see *The Old English Heptateuch*, ed. by Marsden, I, 36 and Karkov, 'Hagar and Ishmael', p. 208.

[65] *Laxdœla saga*, ed. by Einar Ólafur Sveinsson, p. 92.

[66] *Víga-Glúms saga*, ed. by Turville-Petre, p. 21.

Later, a travelling prophetess, Oddbjǫrg, interprets the significance of their childish games: 'Þat kan ek þér at segja, at þeir munu banaspjót eptir berask, ok mun hvat ǫðru verra af hljótask hér í heraði' ('I can tell you that each will bring about the death by spear of the other, and one bad thing after the other will come to pass in this district'). Finally, there is the scene in *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* in which the seven-year-old Egill gets into a spot of trouble with a bigger boy:[67]

> En er þeir lekuz við, þá var Egill ósterkari. Grímr gerði ok þann mun allan er hann mátti. Þá reiddisk Egill ok hóf upp knátttréit, ok laust Grím. En Grímr tók hann hǫndum ok keyrði hann niðr fallit mikit, ok lék hann heldr illa.
>
> And when they began to play, Egill was weaker. Also, Grímr exploited the difference as best he could. Then Egill got angry and lifted up the bat and hit Grímr. And Grímr grabbed him and threw him down very hard, and treated him rather roughly.

The consequence is that Egill kills him. His parents differ on the meaning of this when he returns home, with Skalla-Grímr's response decidedly muted: 'En er Egill kom heim lét Skalla-Grímr sér fátt um finnask, en Bera kvað Egil vera víkingsefi' ('And when Egill came home, Skalla-Grímr didn't have much to say about it, but Bera said that Egill had the makings of a Viking'). In this type scene, apparently innocent children's games are taken as a sign of their future destiny.

We are clearly dealing with complex intertextual relations here, and in cases like these, it can be very difficult to decide in which direction the influence goes: is Isaac and Ishmael's playing the source of this type-scene in the sagas, or has the translator-compiler, in full knowledge of an existing type-scene, framed the Biblical story in a familiar mode, by using the idioms *leika sér* and *leika illa*. Since the earliest manuscripts of the Icelandic sagas are older than the earliest manuscripts of *Stjórn* I, it is difficult to prove that the saga authors drew on the stories at the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, although it is not at all beyond the bounds of probability. These stories would have been well known: in the Icelandic Homily Book, from c. 1200, Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael are referred to as if they are common currency.[68] In the case of *Laxdœla saga*, it certainly seems unlikely that the conjunction of rivalry between wife and mistress, and future conflict between foster-brothers, owes nothing to the biblical story of Hagar and Ishmael. For a saga preoccupied with

[67] *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, ed. by Bjarni Einarsson, p. 53.

[68] *Íslensk Hómilíubók*, ed. by Sigurbjörn Einarsson *et al.*, pp. 57, 78, 199, 224, 237.

lineage, inheritance, and family relations, the stories in Genesis have much to offer. Just as probably as the saga authors had biblical stories in mind, so the translator-compiler of *Stjórn* I may have had saga narratives in mind, especially if we posit that he was working in Iceland under the influence of the Victorines. In this case, he may well have shaped the stories in his translation of Genesis into scenes his readers would recognise from the sagas: rivalry between women, a mother's anxiety for her son, strife between brothers, childish playmates who will fall out as men. These are universals, one might argue, but the key thing is that they are narrated in a similar way in the sagas and the biblical translations: the Norse translator-compiler is able to capture the psychological depth and implied meanings in the Hebrew narrative, even through layers of translation and interpretation, precisely *because* this is how stories are told in the sagas. The likeness or convergence between the two tradition allows for an unusually sympathetic reception of Hagar's story as a complex drama of family relationships, rather than an abstract allegory. It shares with its biblical souce an understanding not only of the opacity of human motivation and complexity of moral judgement, but also, crucially, how this can be conveyed through narrative art.

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