

Abraham, Sarah, and Hammurabi Code

by [Petr Chylek](#) (December 2024)



Abraham and Sarah (Marc Chagall, 1956) 1956

Many of you are probably familiar with the Old Testament story about Abraham, his wife Sarah [\[1\]](#), a young Egyptian girl Hagar, and her son Ishmael. Chapter 16 of Genesis [\[2\]](#) describes the event we will consider:

Now Sarah, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. And Sarah said to Abraham, "See, now, God has restrained me from bearing; consort, now, with my maidservant, perhaps I will be built up through her." And Abraham heeded the voice of Sarah. So Sarah, Abraham's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maidservant – after ten years of Abraham's dwelling in the land of Canaan – and gave her to Abraham her husband, to him as a wife. He consorted with her and she conceived ... (Genesis 16:1-4)

You may wonder why Sarah gave Abraham her maidservant Hagar as a second wife. God did not tell her to do it. However, it was a custom at that time in that part of the world. The Babylonian Hammurabi Code from about 19th century BC was inscribed in basalt steles [\[3\]](#) and distributed over the empire by King Hammurabi. The law relevant to the described situation said if a wife was unable to give a husband a son, the husband was supposed to take the wife's maidservant for a second wife. When a child was born to the maidservant, it was considered to be a child of the husband and the original wife, with all the associated rights including the law of inheritance. It seems that Sarah and Abraham were familiar with the tradition and proceeded accordingly with their decision. This was a kind of surrogacy at those times. To this day, scholars still argue

about the possible influence of the Hammurabi Code on the development of the Jewish law.

Abraham was eighty-six years old. Hagar's age is not revealed in Torah. Hagar went through some difficult times with Sarah and after some unfriendly encounters she left Abraham's household and walked into the wilderness. The angel of God appeared to Hagar and asked her to return to Sarah. He also delivered to her a prophecy concerning her future son Ishmael (Genesis 16:9-12):

*Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her domination. I will greatly increase your offspring, and they will not be counted for abundance. Behold, you will conceive, and give birth to a son; you shall call his name Ishmael, for God has heard your prayer. **And he shall be a wild-ass of a man: his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him, and over all his brothers shall he dwell.***

The part of the last sentence in the above citation is problematic; suggesting a conflict between the descendants of Ishmael and everyone else. Ishmael is traditionally considered to be a father of Arab people. His descendants settled on the Arabian Peninsula.

The crux of matter is the translation of Hebrew words PARA (translated as wild ass) and BKOL (translated as against everyone) in the above citation. I have checked over 40 different English translations of this verse of the Old Testament (Torah). Although individual translations differ in exact wording, the meaning remains the same, carrying a clear negative connotation.

The Strong's Concordance of the Bible [\[4\]](#) suggest translation

of PARA as a zebra, wild donkey, wild ass, or just wild. Other translations include: brigand, plunderer, warrior, or rebel. The King James Version translates PARA as: wild.

BKOL is composed of preposition B (bet in Hebrew) and the word KOL. KOL is translated as everyone. However, the preposition B has many different meanings. The meanings found in the Torah include [\[5\]](#): in, among, before, within, with, according to, into, together, without, against, away from, more than, by, because of, and when. Thus, the translator had many different choices. The fact that the translator chose the meaning “against” reflects the ideology prevalent at his time. Ishmael was supposed to be an ancestor of Arab tribes. Jews had some negative experience with Arab tribes at that time, and therefore the choice “against” seemed appropriate. Later translators followed the earlier example.

Thus, the last sentence of the above citation can be translated as:

And he (Ishmael) shall be a wild man (a rebel): his hand in everyone and everyone's hand in him, and over all his brothers he shall dwell.

This translation is in its spirit similar to Onkelos (35-120 CE) [\[6\]](#) translation of Torah from Hebrew to Aramaic. Onkelos paraphrased the meaning of the verse as [\[2\]](#):

He (Ishmael) would be dependent on other nations, and they, in turn, would be dependent on him.

Today, with peace in mind we would probably prefer the

preposition BET to mean 'in,' leading to collaboration instead of conflict. A similar attitude is expressed in the opening paragraphs of recent Abraham Accords [\[7\]](#):

We, the undersigned, recognize the importance of maintaining and strengthening peace in the Middle East and around the world based on mutual understanding and coexistence, as well as respect for human dignity and freedom, including religious freedom.

We encourage efforts to promote interfaith and intercultural dialogue to advance a culture of peace among the three Abrahamic religions and all humanity.

Like in many other places in Torah, we have a choice either to repeat centuries old translations that may carry the old ideology and militaristic traditions, or to look for an alternative meaning of verses more attuned with our souls and our current cultural atmosphere.

[\[1\]](#) Although Abraham and Sarah are named as Abram and Sarai at this point of the story, to prevent confusion we will call them by the names which later God gave them, namely Abraham and Sarah.

[\[2\]](#) The following citation are from: *The Chumash*, The Stone Edition, Mesorah Publications, Brooklyn, NY 2005.

[\[3\]](#) One granite stele about 7.4 feet tall with the Hammurabi code inscribed is preserved in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.

[\[4\]](#) J. Strong, J. Kohlenberger, and J. Swanson, *The Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2001.

[\[5\]](#) W. L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, the Netherland, 1988.


[6] According to the Jewish tradition Onkelos, who translated Torah to Aramaic, lived during the period in between the first and the second century CE. He was a Roman nobleman who converted to Judaism. He studied supposedly with Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurcanus, who was later removed from the Sanhedrin and excommunicated by Rabbi Gamliel.

[7] <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>

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