CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Harvard Divinity School

Bodies and Bo(a)rders: Emerging Fictions of Identity in Late Antiquity
Author(s): Joshua Levinson
Source: *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 93, No. 4 (Oct., 2000), pp. 343-372
Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Harvard Divinity School
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/1510163
Accessed: 17/05/2011 10:26

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=cup.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Cambridge University Press and *Harvard Divinity School* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Harvard Theological Review*.

http://www.jstor.org

Bodies and Bo(a)rders: Emerging Fictions of Identity in Late Antiquity*

Joshua Levinson
Hebrew University, Jerusalem

> Looking at nation as text, as culture, questions the totalization of national culture and opens up the widely disseminated forms through which subjects construct "the field of meanings associated with national life." It offers a perspective that enables us to enter discourses beyond those fixed, static, "official" ones.[1]

Introduction

In the above passage, Anne Kaplan develops the notion of imagined communities as those "narratives and discourses that signify a sense of 'nationness.'"[2] This perspective, she contends, enables us to read against the grain of these dominant fictions of identity.[3] Since every story is predicated upon selection and exclusion, the notion of "nation as narration" encourages us to consider those marginalized or rejected by the narrative in the process of creating any given imagined community. Whose story is told, from whose perspective, who is silenced, and who is moved off-stage in order to tell it? Despite the powerful institutions through which dominant stories are main-

*I wish to thank Shaye Cohen for his insightful criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper.

[1]E.Anne Kaplan, *Looking for The Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 32.

[2]Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," in idem, ed., *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 2.

[3]Silverman, following Ranciere, defines the term "dominant fiction" as "the privileged mode of representation by which the image of the social consensus is offered to the members of a social formation and within which they are asked to identify themselves" (K. Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* [New York: Routledge, 1992] 30).

tained, hegemony is never monolithic. Since there are always competing narratives of exclusion and identity that vie for representation, the dominant fictions of ethnicity have to be continually renewed and defended in order to substantiate their claims to superior explanatory power. Their continued dominance depends on a processes of adjustment and reinterpretation in relation to oppositional and emergent cultural formations.[4]

Palestine of the first centuries of the Common Era was a period during which tension from competing narratives of identity was rife. Extended Hellenization, the growth and expansion of Christianity, and the emerging discourse of heresiology all exerted considerable pressures upon the rabbinic cultural formation and acted as a catalyst for that formation to redefine the parameters of its imagined community. It is by no means coincidental that this period saw the institutionalization and regimentation of the conversion process, the very ritual whose function was to police discourses of identity in the social formation of rabbinic Judaism by regulating the crossing of ethno-religious boundaries.[5]

When cultures feel threatened, they begin to tell tales. Sometimes these are retellings that strengthen the dominant fictions and sometimes they are new or revised narratives. Through these narratives, the imagined community guards its borders and defines for itself who is inside, who is outside, and why. If the Bible and Second Temple literature contain various and conflicting models of identity (covenantal, biological, historical, territorial, tribal),[6] in the period following the destruction of the Second Temple, this profusion was replaced by two dominant paradigms: the genealogical model of the sons of Jacob, and the covenantal model of Israel. According to the former paradigm, inside and outside are established according to biological descent; according to the latter, identity is established by the acceptance of a certain institutionalized belief-system.

While it is apparent that these two paradigms overlap, they are clearly not identical. "On the one hand," Gary Porton has observed, "Israelite culture was a religious system to which anyone who accepted YHWH and the Israelite system derived from his revelation could adhere. On the other hand, Israelites were Jacob's chil-

[4]R. Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: NLB, 1980) 40–42; Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics—Queer Reading* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) 25; idem, *Literature, Politics, and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 31.

[5]See Shaye Cohen, "Rabbinic Conversion Ceremony," *JJS* 41 (1990) 203.

[6]Shaye Cohen (*The Beginnings of Jewishness* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999] 136) remarks that "the redefinition of Jewish society in religious (and political) terms, as opposed to tribal or ethnic terms was a product of the second half of the second century BCE." See also: Peter Machinist, "Outsiders or Insiders: The Biblical View of Emergent Israel and Its Contexts," in L. J. Silberstein and R.L. Cohn, eds., *The Other in Jewish Thought and History* (New York: New York University Press, 1994) 35–60; H. Berger, "The Lie of the Land: The Text Beyond Canaan" *Representations* 25 (1989) 119–38; R. M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) 133–42.

dren who enjoyed a special relationship to YHWH, and their designation was limited to those who could trace their genealogy back to the last Patriarch."[7] The friction between these two models became especially acute in relation to the status of converts who,

> because they had once been gentiles, they were essentially different from the Israelites. On the other hand, because they had left their native society and entered the People of Israel by accepting its religious/cultural system, they were essentially different from gentiles. The rabbis thus had to include the converts without at the same time negating the uniqueness of the People of Israel.[8]

Dominant Fictions of Identity

I use the term fictive ethnicity[9] not only because it dovetails with Anderson's rich notion of "imagined community," but because the rabbis themselves seem to have been aware of the constructed nature of their narratives of identity, as we can see from the following text:

> These bring (the offering of the first fruits, *bikkurim*, to the temple) but do not recite (the declaration prescribed by Deut 26.5–10): the convert brings but does not recite, since he cannot say: "the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us." [Deut 26:3][10]

> It was taught in the name of R. Yehuda, a convert does bring [*bikkurim*] and recite. What is the reason, (because the verse says) *"for I make you the father of a multitude of nations"* (Gen 17:5), in the past you were the father of Aram [*av-ram*], and from now on you are father to all the nations [*av-hamon*]. R. Joshua ben Levi said, the law is like R. Yehuda.[11]

Working within a combined territorial and genealogical paradigm, the mishnah cites as law that a convert, though required to bring the first-fruit offering, may not recite the pertinent verses, since he cannot literally claim that "his father" was a recipient of the patriarchal promised land. This is a cameo example of the divided identity of the convert. In the Jerusalem Talmud, however, R. Yehuda dissents, citing the biblical etymology of Abraham as a "father to all the nations," thereby

[7] G. G. Porton, *The Stranger within Your Gates* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 195. See also idem, *Goyim: Gentiles and Israelites in Mishnah-Tosephta* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Sacha Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 90–95.

[8] Porton, *Stranger within Your Gates*, 219.

[9] This term is borrowed from E. Balibar and I. Wallerstein, *Race, Nation and Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 96.

[10] *m. Bikkurim* 1.4. For an extended discussion of this text, see Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 308–40.

[11] *y. Bikkurim* 1:4 (64a).

including the proselyte. Thus, through a pun, biological lineage becomes a matter of membership in a culturally determined imagined community.[12] The conversion process enables the gentile to acquire the necessary patriarchal pedigree, which is literally reinvented for this purpose.

It would appear that the genealogical paradigm is being reinterpreted and expanded as a result of pressure from the emergent discourse of conversion. However, R. Yehuda's realignment of the biblical paradigm undermines one of its chief attractions. By displacing the biological father with a mythological one, he gains inclusiveness at the price of relinquishing the grounding of ethnicity in a common genealogical origin. He is, in fact, collapsing the difference between the two paradigms. One could say that R. Yehuda is literally "looking at the nation as text," since it is the language of the text, the nature of rhetoric, and not the rhetoric of nature, that creates identity.

These two narratives of identity continued to contend throughout the amoraic period, as we can see from the following tradition brought in the name of R. Yochanan (ca. 280 CE):

> [A] Why are idolaters contaminated (*mezuhamim*)? Because they did not stand at Mount Sinai. For when the serpent came upon Eve he injected her with filth:[13] the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai, their pollution departed, the idolaters who did not stand at Mount Sinai, their pollution did not depart.
>
> [B] R. Aha the son of Raba asked R. Ashi, "What about converts"? He replied, 'Though they were not present, their guiding stars were present, as it is written: *I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day* (Deut 29:13–14).
>
> [C] Now he [R. Yochanan] differs from R. Abba b. Kahana, for R. Abba b. Kahana said: "Up to three generations the contaminating stain did not cease from our fathers: Abraham begot Ishmael, Isaac begot Esau, [but] Jacob begot the twelve tribes who were untainted." [14]

[12]See Porton, *Stranger within Your Gates*, 6. Porton quotes C. Keyes (*Ethnic Change* [Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981] 6), who describes kinship reckoning as one "which connections with forebearers or with those with whom one believes one shares descent are not traced along precisely genealogical lines. Americans, for example, predicate their national identity upon connections with the 'Pilgrim Fathers' and with the forefathers 'who brought forth upon this continent a new nation,' even though few Americans could actually trace genealogical connections with members of the Plymouth community or with those who wrote the Constitution or fought in the Revolutionary War."

[13]This motif is based upon a word play on Gen 3:13. Eve says "the serpent duped (*hasiani*) me" which can be read "the serpent married me." For the history of this motif, see Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975) 169.

[14]*b. Šab.* 145b.

This text has been used primarily to document the rabbinic reactions to the doctrine of original sin.[15] What I find equally interesting is the cultural logic that sustains and enables this polemic. The primary dichotomy between Jew and gentile is filtered through a further series of oppositions: male/female, revelation/nature, pure/impure. By employing the principle for the matrilineal transference of identity, the female body, which is the receptacle of sin, becomes the vehicle for its transference to all humankind. The body that is "naturally" tainted is gendered female, and it becomes the sign of the gentile political body. By default, the culturally constituted Jewish body is marked as pure and male. It is covenantal revelation, God speaking man-to-man with Israel as it were, that constitutes the dominant fiction of identity.[16]

According to R. Yochanan's narrative, Israel's ethnic fashioning was a result of the revelation at Mt. Sinai. This is the foundational event that constituted the imagined community, and this ideological model effectively supersedes biological pedigree. The dissenting opinion, brought in the name of Yochanan's student Abba b. Kahana (C), presents an opposing narrative of ethnicity whereby status is determined by the biological pedigree of patrilineal descent, rather than the ideological acceptance of a certain ethos. Here, cultural identity is situated within the tribal group, which grows through a process of self-cleaning.

There are a few additional points worthy of comment here. Firstly, while the Jerusalem Talmud passage that we saw above expanded the genealogical model, here, a late Babylonian sage (R. Ashi) expands the ideological model to include converts whose "guiding stars were present" at the moment of revelation. It may not be accidental that the Babylonian Talmud both does not record R. Yehuda's position and chooses to augment specifically the covenental paradigm. Likewise, Palestinian literature does not know of the application of Deut 29:13 to converts. As I. Gafni has remarked, Sasanian Babylonian Jewry defined itself by the purity of its pedigree, and "at some stage began to perceive of themselves as representing the purest, or least contaminated, Jewish stock in the world."[17]

[15]See Romans 5:12. and Urbach, *The Sages*, 427–29. In the common parlance of rabbinic polemic, R. Yochanan admits that humankind was infected with sin, which originated with Adam, but the revelation at Sinai removed the sin. Contrary to Paul, it is the acceptance of Torah that is the cure and not the cause of sin. On the ideas of contamination here, see A. Büchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement* (New York: Ktav, 1967) 316–17.

[16]See also, S. F. Kruger, "Becoming Christian, Becoming Male?" in Jeffrey Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler, eds., *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, (New York: Garland, 1997) 21–42.

[17]As the Babylonian sage Samuel (255 CE) said: "All countries are as dough in comparison with Palestine, and Palestine is as dough relative to Babylon" (*b. Qidd.* 69b). Gafni points out that only seven converts are mentioned by name in Babylonian literature which spans a period of three hundred years. See Isaiah Gafni, *The Jews of Babylonia in the Talmudic Era*, (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1990 [Hebrew]) 137–48; idem, *Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 54.

Secondly, R. Abba b. Kahana presents the biological model through a rhetoric of pure male descent. The female body is erased, or more correctly, its role as the purveyor of contaminated identity is not contested. Thus, according to both opinions presented here, as well as the position of R. Yehuda, the imagined Jewish community is gendered as male. This point warrants some elaboration. By the second and third centuries, the matrilineal principle—that Jewish identity is transferred through the mother—was firmly entrenched.[18] Despite, or perhaps because of this fact, all the narratives presented here establish identity through the male. While "natural" identity is matrilineal, cultural membership is patrilineal.[19]

Finally, and most surprisingly, it seems to me that both paradigms present identity as belated rather than indigenous. Whether the decisive moment is the revelation at Mt. Sinai or the birth of the twelve tribes, identity is achieved only through a detergent process, by the natural body purging itself of foreign elements. This belatedness, which stresses the acquired nature of identity, would seem to indicate a certain anxiety concerning the inconstancy of identity, which undermines the very distinctions these texts work so hard to construct. One sign of this anxiety is the attempt to anchor unstable cultural identities in the seemingly "natural" categories of gender. The resulting homology is used to produce and police discourses of identity in the social formation of rabbinic Judaism. It is against the background of these two converging and conflicting narrations of identity that I want to discuss the emergence of a new type of literary plot and character in the rabbinic literature of this period, whose cultural function, I believe, was precisely to negotiate the faultlines and tensions created by the collocation of these two paradigms of fictive ethnicity.

Hagar the Daughter of Pharaoh

I begin with a bit of tradition history, in order to observe the emergence and transformation of the plot and character that I mentioned above. The second-century BCE text known as the *Genesis Apocryphon* (1 QapGen) contains an extended revision of the tale of Abraham's and Sarah's sojourn in Egypt (Genesis 12). The biblical account is problematic on many levels. Certainly one obstacle that troubled readers for many generations was the impression that Abraham treated his wife as chattel or as a surety to guarantee his safety, if not his fortune; "he practically throws his wife into another man's harem in order to save his own skin."[20]

[18]See L. Schiffman, "At the Crossroads: Tannaitic Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Schism," in E. P. Sanders et. al., eds., *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* (3 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 2. 115–56; Shaye Cohen, "The Origins of the Matrilineal Principle in Rabbinic Law," *AJS Review* 10 (1985) 19–54.

[19]See *m. Qidd.* 3.12.

[20]For a convenient summary of the major responses to the tale, see J. C. Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge: Trinity, 1993) 148–69.

When Abraham "sells" Sarah, the verse says: "And because of her, it went well with Abram; he acquired sheep, oxen, asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels" (Gen 12:16). By transferring Abraham's acquisition of these gifts to the end of the story, the author of the *Apocryphon* attempts to soften the impression that the patriarch became wealthy by pandering his wife. The exchange thus becomes a matter of indemnity, rather than payment for services rendered.[21] At this point, the author adds a small, inconsequential detail:

> And the king gave her much [silver and gold]; many garments of fine linen . . . and also Hagar.[22]

This is a totally new motif, and it seems reasonable to assume that it did not originate from any narrative necessity in this context (Genesis 12), but from the problems posed by an entirely different verse. The first verse of Genesis 16 states that Sarah "had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar." Now, how could Hagar have come into her possession if not in Egypt, where it is recorded that Pharaoh gave Abraham many such maidservants? Thus we have a simple midrash that answers the question of how Sarah acquired an Egyptian maidservant.[23]

This tradition, which ostensibly began its career as a marginal exegetical gloss, is substantially transformed when we encounter it two hundred years later in rabbinic literature:

> *And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar* (Gen 16:1) R. Shimeon said: Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter. When Pharaoh saw the deeds that were done on Sarah's behalf in his own house, he took his daughter and gave her to Sarah, saying, "It is better for my daughter be a maidservant in this house than a mistress in another house"; thus it is written, *And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar*—here is your reward (*agar*).
>
> Abimelech, too, when he saw the miracles performed in his house on Sarah's behalf, took his daughter and presented her as a maidservant to Sarah, saying, "It is better for my daughter be a maidservant in this

[21]The author adopts this exegetical tactic from the sister-tale in Genesis 20. See, M. R. Lehmann, "Q Genesis Apocryphon in the Light of the Targumim and Midrashim," *RevQ* 1 (1958) 260; Geza Vermes, "Biblical Interpretation at Qumran," *Eretz-Israel* 20 (1989) 188; M. Bernstein, "Re-arrangement, Anticipation and Harmonization as Exegetical Features in the Genesis Aprocryphon," *DSD* 3 (1996) 40.

[22]*The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave I*, 20:31–32, (trans. J. Fitzmyer; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971) 67.

[23]It should be noted that one of the rhetorical techniques of the *Genesis Apocryphon* is to summarily introduce characters which will have a narrative function later on in the text. Thus the author introduces Lot and Hirqanosh (20.8, 11). If the narrator is consistent, this technique may enable us to reconstruct the missing columns and surmise that the original text continued at least till Genesis 16.

> house than a mistress in another house." As it is written: *daughters of kings are your favorites*—the daughters of [two] kings. *The consort stands at your right hand decked in gold of Ophir* (Ps 45:10)—this refers to Sarah.[24]

In contrast to the Second Temple tradition, this midrash contains two interesting developments. First, the Egyptian maidservant has been transformed into a princess. Second, beyond the metamorphosis of a Cinderella to a Cleopatra, the motivations of her transference have changed: in the biblical narrative, the servants are part of the bride-price; in the Qumran text, Hagar is bestowed as remuneration for Sarah's distress or Abraham's ministrations. Here, in R. Shimeon's midrash, Pharaoh makes a gift of his daughter because of a unique religious experience—"when Pharaoh saw the deeds that were done on Sarah's behalf in his own house." This encounter caused him to prefer for his own daughter a servile and subordinate station as Sarah's maidservant over the privileges of her birth. What is illustrated here, in R. Shimeon's midrash from the middle of the second century CE, is the emergence of a new type of character and plot, wherein a religious experience brings about a double transformation: the crossing of religio-ethnic boundaries coupled with the acceptance of a subservient social status.

It is worth noting that, whereas Pharaoh is the beneficiary of this new religious experience, his daughter is the coin of its expression. The transfer of Hagar is the mechanism for creating a bond with Abraham and his God. Through this act, Pharaoh displaces his foreign otherness by effecting a type of kinship relation. "If women are the gifts," as G. Rubin has remarked, "then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage."[25]

It would seem that what we have before us is a common cultural fantasy, wherein "a subject people fantasizes the reversal of its subjugation: in which the very leaders of the dominating political power will become subject to the leaders of the dominated group."[26] From the point of view of the narrator, the religious experi-

[24]*Gen. Rab.* 45:1. The original tradition continued to circulate as can be seen in the Mekhilta *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon b. Yokhai* 1 and the previous section of this text which describes Hagar as a maidservant who was gifted to Sarah.

[25]G. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy of Sex,'" in R. Raiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975) 174. See also the remarks of Irigaray, "The trade that organizes patriarchal society takes place exclusively among men. Women, signs, goods, currency, all pass from one man to another. . . . Woman exists only in the possibility of mediation, transaction, transition, transference—between men and his fellow-creatures, indeed between man and himself" (L. Irigaray, "When the Goods Get Together," in E. Marks and I. Courtivron, eds., *New French Feminisms* [trans. E. Teeder; New York: Schoken, 1981] 107–108).

[26]Daniel Boyarin, "Homotopia: The *Fem*inized Jewish Man and the Lives of Women in Late Antiquity," *Differences* 7 (1995) 47.

ence of Pharaoh acts as a catalyst for the formation of a utopian hierarchy. Sarah, humiliated in Pharaoh's house, is returned to her rightful station as a consort, while Hagar, a princess in her own house, assumes a subservient status in her new one.[27] This reading naturalizes the ideological moment of the narrative and places it among a familiar thematic genre—conversion stories. In both biblical and Second Temple literature, we meet many non-Jewish characters who acknowledge the power and providence of God: Jethro (18:10), Rahav (Jos 2:11), Hiram (2 Chr 2:11), and Nebuchadnezer (Dan 2:47), or Achior (Jdt 14:10) and Heliodorus (2 Macc 3:35). In fact, as Shaye Cohen has observed, "Greco-Jewish literature is filled with stories about gentiles, usually kings and dignitaries, who witness some manifestation of the power of the god of the Jews and as a result venerate the god and acknowledge his power."[28] The narrative before us, however, has a twofold difference from these plots of conversion: on the one hand, in contrast to the case of Achior, there is no indication that Pharaoh or Hagar convert. On the other hand, while Hiram or Heliodorus express acknowledgment and deference for the God of the Jews, this acknowledgment does not entail a change in personal status, and certainly not the assumption of a servile or subordinate position. I would like to call this sub-genre of the conversion tale, after Arthur Darby Nock, a narrative of affiliation.[29]

One of the defining characteristics of this new plot, in the words of Nock, is "having one foot on each side of the cultural fence."[30] In this narrative, a character, usually of prominent social standing, crosses ethno-religious boundaries by virtue of a religious experience. This character, however, does not convert, but rather assumes some relationship of affiliation to the Jewish community. This relationship is composed of two characteristics: a familial affinity, coupled with a subordinate status. Through the transformation of the Hagar midrash, we can witness the emergence of the affiliation plot in the second and third centuries. Looking

[27]Y. Fraenkel, *Darkei HaAgadah veHaMidrash*, Givataiim 1991, 689, n. 28.

[28]Shaye Cohen, "Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew," *HTR* 82 (1989) 15; idem, "Respect for Judaism by Gentiles according to Josephus," *HTR* 80 (1987) 409–30.

[29]Arthur Darby Nock, *Conversion* (1933; reprinted Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1972) 6–7. Nock uses the term adhesion as distinct from conversion. In adhesion "these external circumstances led not to any definite crossing of religious frontiers, in which an old spiritual home was left for a new once and for all, but to men's having one foot on each side of the fence which was cultural and not creedal. They led to an acceptance of new worship as useful supplements and not as substitutes, and they did not involve the taking of a new way of life in place of the old." The crucial distinction between "adherence" and "conversion," as discussed by Cohen "is that the latter entails the exclusive acceptance of a new theological or philosophical system, while the former does not. In "conversion" the new replaces the old, in "adherence" the new is added to the old" (Cohen, "Respect for Judaism by Gentiles According to Josephus," 410).

[30]Nock, *Conversion*, 6.

at this tradition from the perspective of the two narratives of identity that I mentioned above, we encounter a problem. We seem to have some sort of anomalous conversionary experience: if identity is established through the genealogical paradigm, then Hagar does acquire familial affiliation, but only of a secondary and indirect type. However, although the narrative catalyst seems to be some type of revelatory experience, the anticipated denouement, the acceptance of a certain institutionalized belief-system, is absent. The rest of this essay focuses on the social forces that bring this narrative into play, and on the cultural work that the story is performing in the social imaginary of rabbinic Judaism.

Sarah as Mother of Nations

> *Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with/at me." And she said, "Who said to Abraham, 'Sarah has nursed sons,' yet I have borne a son in his old age"* (Gen 21:6–7).

> Our mother Sarah was extremely modest. Said Abraham to her: "This is not a time for modesty, but uncover your breasts so that everyone may know that the Holy One, blessed be He, has begun to perform miracles." He uncovered her breasts and they were gushing forth as two fountains, and noble ladies came and suckled their children saying, "We are not worthy to suckle our children with the milk of this righteous man." The Rabbis said, whoever came for the sake of heaven became a God-fearer.[31]

This exegetical narrative is a little more complicated than the previous texts we have discussed. It relates to a number of gaps and anomalies in the biblical text that catch the rabbinic eye. First of all, why does Sarah mention that she has nursed sons, in the plural, when, as she so painfully knows, she has only one son? Furthermore, there are two speech-acts recorded here: "she said" followed by "she said." This fact in itself would indicate to the rabbis that some event must have occurred between them (*b. Meg.* 16a). What is that event, and what is the relation between these two speeches? Any reader is aware of the fact that laughter is a leitmotif of these stories: Sarah laughs in disbelief upon hearing that she will bear a son in chapter 18 of Genesis, Lot's sons-in-law laugh at him in chapter 19, and Ishmael laughs with or at Isaac in the continuation of this chapter (Gen 21:9). What type of laughter is envisioned here—is it a laughter of mockery or of joy—and who is laughing with her or at her? Finally, the syntactical structure of these verses is

[31] *Gen. Rab.* 53:9. According to the Vatican 30 manuscript, only Abraham uncovers Sarah's breasts. Concerning the speech of the noblewomen, there is an interesting split in the manuscript traditions: while the better manuscripts speak of "the milk of the righteous man" others record "the milk of the righteous woman."

particularly convoluted, presenting a quote within a quote (she said, "Who said to Abraham, 'Sarah has nursed sons'"). Sarah seems to envisage an exchange with a hypothetical speaker. Who is this speaker and how does he or she relate to those who will laugh with or at her in the previous verse?

If we turn our attention to the rabbinic narrative, we can see that not only does it fill in these gaps, but the new semantic material that it uses to do so emanates from the biblical verses themselves. The plot occurs between verses six and seven, between the laughter of all who heard and the affirmation that indeed Sarah has suckled sons. What motivates Abraham's very unusual demand that Sarah expose herself? It would seem that there are nasty rumors concerning Isaac's pedigree. Not only is the purported mother herself known to be barren and of a rather advanced age, but she has just spent, in the previous chapter, a long night with Abimelech, the king of Gerar. In fact, the redactional context of this midrash is replete with sexual anxiety. It is remarked that while Abimelech's "tree" was faded and brought low, Abraham's was exalted,[32] or "the standing crop of our father Abraham had been dried up, but it now turned to ripe ears of standing grain."[33] This theme is explicitly developed in a parallel tradition, which states: "R. Berechiah in the name of R. Levi said: You find that when our mother Sarah gave birth to Isaac, the nations of the world declared 'Sarah did not give birth to Isaac, rather it was Hagar her servant who bore him.'"[34] And it is overtly rebuffed in the following text:

> 'Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham (Gen 21:2),' this teaches that she did not steal seed from another place; 'in his old age (Gen 21:2),' this teaches that his [Isaac's] appearance (*iqunin*) was similar to Abraham's (Gen. Rab. 53.6).

The noble women who speak here in the midrash are representative of those very voices that mocked her previously. They are the ones who laughed at Sarah upon hearing of Isaac's birth ("*everyone* who hears will laugh at me"). Therefore Abraham demanded that Sarah expose herself and nurse in public so that they should acknowledge the miracle birth ("so that *everyone* may know"). It was this display that prompted these same women to acknowledge the miraculous birth and enabled Sarah to claim to have nourished the multitudes.

So far, I have addressed only the exegetical work performed in this narrative. We know who laughed at Sarah and why, who acknowledged that Sarah suckled children, and why the plural form is used. In short, this rabbinic vignette has elegantly closed all of the gaps that I mentioned previously. Now I would like to

[32] *Gen. Rab.* 53.1.
[33] Ibid. 53.9.
[34] *Pesq. R. Kah.* 22; see also: *b.B. Mes.* 87a.

address the cultural work performed. Despite the fact that there seems to be no formal resemblance between the Hagar narrative and this one, I would suggest that they both exemplify the same "plot of affiliation." It does not seem to be fortuitous that both of the traditions mentioned concern Abraham, for there is an early and ubiquitous opinion that views the first patriarch as the first missionary.[35] Both narratives are composed of the narrative syntagma of a manifestation of the divine resulting in the acquisition of a type of subservient familial affinity. Abraham's demand that Sarah expose herself and nurse in public brought about a religious experience that "the Holy One, blessed be He, has begun to perform miracles." This statement is analogous to Pharoah's declaration that he "saw the deeds that were done on Sarah's behalf in his own house." As a result of this experience, the matrons who had previously mocked her acknowledged Abraham's and Sarah's special relationship with God. This is the motif of recognition.

Where do we find the motifs of familial affiliation and subservience? The noblewomen suckle their sons from the same milk as Isaac, thus becoming like sons of one mother.[36] Once again, it is clear that this familial relation is only of an indirect kind. When they declare, "We are not worthy to suckle our children with the milk of that righteous man," they acknowledge their subservience. We can see here, therefore, all of the above-mentioned motifs: a character of noble status experiences a manifestation of divine power and, as a result, expresses acknowledgment and assumes a form of familial affinity coupled with subservience.

This meaning becomes even clearer if we examine the cultural connotations of the expression "we are unworthy." This is almost a technical term for conversion, as is attested in the earliest rabbinic codification of this ceremony: "a potential convert who approaches to be converted, they say to him: 'Why have you decided to approach us to be converted? . . . If he says, 'I know and am unworthy,' they accept him immediately."[37] Another midrash, also attributed to R. Shimeon, demonstrates this meaning of affiliation:

> *And Timna was a concubine of Esau's son Eliphaz* (Gen 36:14). R. Shimeon b. Yohai taught: What purpose is served by the verse? It is to declare the praise of the house of our father Abraham, to what extent kings and rulers wished to become allied [through marriage] to him. For what was Lotan? He was a son of one of the chiefs, as it says, *The*

[35]See, *Sifre Deut.* 32; Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994) 144–45.

[36]As the Rabbis said in another context when attempting to appease the ruling authorities "are we not all the sons of one mother" (*b. Roš. Hač.* 19a). We should also note that like Galen (*UP* 2.639), the Rabbis held that a nursing mother's milk was produced from her blood (*Lev. Rab.* 14.3).

[37]*b. Yeb.* 47a; and see Shaye Cohen, "The Rabbinic Conversion Ceremony," *JJS* 41 (1990) 177–203.

> *chief of Lotan* (36:29). And it is written, *And Lotan's sister was Timna* (ib. 22), and yet, *And Timna was a concubine of Esau's son Eliphaz*! She said: Since I am not worthy of being his wife, let me be his handmaid.[38]

This text is most likely responding polemically to the success of the church in attracting gentile converts. Here too, a character of royal descent, a princess, does not convert but rather assumes a subservient familial status to Abraham, using the expression: "I am not worthy of being his wife, let me be his handmaid." The parallel tradition in the Babylonian Talmud closely resembles the story of Hagar when Timna says: "I would rather be a servant to this people than a mistress of another nation" (*b. San.* 99b). Thus, the noblewomen in our midrash, like Pharaoh, have a religious experience, and this experience causes them to take upon themselves a subservient familial position. As in the Hagar narrative, here too a woman's body is used to affect a crossing of ethnic boundaries.

It is important to stress the non-normative aspects of this vignette. Sarah's behavior contradicts the explicit halakhic ruling that "a daughter of Israel should not breast-feed the son of an idolater."[39] Not only does Abraham compel his wife to expose herself in public, but his demand can also be seen as contradicting the opinion that a woman who "suckled in the market-place must be divorced" (bGittin 89a). Furthermore, in a fragment published by L. Ginzberg, depicting the prophet Isaiah's tour of the various chambers of Hell (much like Dante's circles), the following description appears: "In the fourth [chamber] he saw daughters of Israel hanging by the nipples of their breasts, because they used to sit in the marketplace and suckle, thus leading men into sin."[40] Although this is a late source, Lieberman has attested to its use of early Palestinian materials.[41] We will return to this theme later; for the moment, it is sufficient to recognize that, paradoxically, it is Sarah's transgressive body that acts as the gateway for incorporation into the normative political body.

All of these narratives display a certain tension: they enact a recognition of the God of the Jews—but not a recognition that leads to conversion; they establish a certain status of affiliation—but only in an indirect fashion. These characters seem to situate themselves on the faultline between the two dominant fictions of identity: mixing inside and out, Jew and gentile. They acquire familial affinity to the sons of Jacob, but only of a inferior rank; and they recognize the power of the God of Israel, but do not convert. I suggest that they constitute a "faultline" narrative,

[38] *Gen. Rab.* 82.14.

[39] *m. ʿAbod. Zar.* 2.1; *t. ʿAbod. Zar.* 3.3; *y. ʿAbod. Zar.* 40b (2.1); *b. ʿAbod. Zar.* 26a.

[40] Louis Ginzberg, *Genzih Studies in Memory of J. Solomon Shecter* (3 vols.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1928) 1. 188, 205.

[41] See the discussion of this text in S. Lieberman, *Texts and Studies* (New York: Ktav, 1974) 37–51.

which, as defined by Sinfield, addresses the awkward, unresolved issues created by the hegemonic ideology; "they hinge upon a fundamental, unresolved ideological complication that finds its way, willy-nilly, into texts."[42] The question that now presents itself is this: Which particular historical constellation of events and pressures brought about the creation of this plot, and how does it navigate them?

Godfearers

The key to understanding the emergence of this narrative of affiliation in the second and third centuries lies in understanding the significance of the anonymous gloss: "whoever came for the sake of heaven became a God-fearer."[43] The Godfearers (*theosebeis*), or "Fearers of Heaven" (*yirê šamayim*) as they are called in rabbinic literature, have been the subject of considerable scholarly interest and argument over the past decade, and scholars have compiled and catalogued the various references to them in Jewish, Christian and Roman sources.[44] In the first centuries of the Common Era, numerous pagans felt a sufficient closeness to the Jewish community to adopt some of its beliefs and/or customs; but they did not convert, nor did they become an integral part of the Jewish community.[45] It is apparent, as Lieberman comments, that this was neither an organized nor a homogenous group.[46] The com-

[42]Sinfield, *Cultural Politics—Queer Reading,* 4.

[43]This same meaning is alluded to in the midrash on Timna that "kings and rulers wished to become allied [through marriage] to him."

[44]The bibliography is considerable and the following is only a partial list: Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-fearers at Aphrodisias* (Supp. 12; Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society 1987); A. T. Kraabel, "The Disappearance of the 'God-Fearers', *Numen* 28 (1981) 113–36; T. M. Finn, "The God-fearers Reconsidered," *CBQ* 47 (1985) 75–84; John J. Collins, "A Symbol of Otherness: Circumcision and Salvation in the First Century," in J. Neusner and E. Fredrichs, eds., *To See Ourselves as Others See Us* (3 vols.; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985) 2. 163–86; A. T. Kraabel, "Synagoga Caeca: Systematic Distortion in Gentile Interpretations of Evidence for Judaism in the Early Christian Period," in ibid., 2. 217–46; Tessa Rajak, "Jews and Christians as Groups in a Pagan World," in ibid., 2. 247–62; R. S. MacLennan and A. T. Kraabel, "The God-Fearers: A Literary and Theological Invention," *BAR* 12 (1986) 47–53; Robert Tannenbaum, "Jews and God-Fearers in the Holy City of Aphrodite," ibid., 55–58; Louis Feldman, "The Omnipresence of the God-Fearers," ibid., 58–69; idem, "Proselytes and 'Sympathizers' in the Light of the New Inscriptions from Aphrodisias," *REJ* 148 (1989) 265–305; Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 145–66. For a convenient review of the evidence and secondary literature, see Louis Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 342–82; L. Feldman and M. Reinhold, *Jewish Life and Thought among Greeks and Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 137–46; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (eds. G. Vermes, et. al.; 3 vols.; Edinburg: T. & T. Clark, 1996,) 1. 150–76.

[45]Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor,* 145.

[46]S. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965) 77–90.

mon denominator of these "sympathizers," as Feldman calls them, seems to have been an admiration and possibly even a veneration of the God of the Jews, which sometimes expressed itself in the fulfillment of some of the commandments:

> The term God-fearers or sympathizers apparently refers to an "umbrella group," embracing many different levels of interest in and commitment to Judaism, ranging from people who supported synagogues financially (perhaps to get the political support of the Jews), to people who accepted the Jewish view of God in pure or modified form, to people who observed certain distinctively Jewish practices, notably the Sabbath. For some this was an end in itself; for others it was a step leading ultimately to conversion.[47]

The literary evidence for the existence of the Godfearers begins to appear in the first century and increases dramatically in writings of the second and third centuries. As we have seen, this period coincides with a perceived need on the part of the rabbis to institutionalize the conversion process. Martin Goodman has even proposed a connection between these events by suggesting that this renewed rabbinic legal activity in the second and third centuries "was spurred on by the existence of such sympathizers."[48]

The various traditions attesting to the sympathizers have been collected numerous times, and I will allude to only a few of them.[49] An early rabbinic gloss on a verse from Isa 44:5 ascribes each lemma to a different speaker as follows:

> *One shall say, "I am the Lord's," another shall use the name of Jacob, another shall mark his arm "of the Lord," and adopt the name of Israel*: and so you find four groups who speak before Him by whose word the world came into being: "one shall say, I am the Lord's and there is in me no sin; one shall call himself by the name of Jacob"—these are the righteous converts, "and another shall write on his hand to the Lord"—these are the repentant sinners, "these shall adopt the name of Israel"—these are the fearers of heaven.[50]

The midrashic reading of this verse clearly draws distinctions among indigenous Jews, converts, and fearers of heaven. R. Joshua b. Levi of the third century explains that the verse, "You who fear the Lord praise Him" (Ps 22:24), refers to the fearers of heaven, and R. Huna (fourth century) says: "The coastal cities are delivered from extermination by the merit of a single convert or a single fearer of heaven

[47]Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 344.

[48]See Martin Goodman, "Proselytising in Rabbinic Judaism," *JJS* 40 (1989) 184.

[49]See Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, for a more complete list. Though some of the evidence is questionable, the overall impression is correct.

[50]*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el* 18.

whom they produce each year."[51] When Abimelech defends himself before God, saying: "Lord, will you destroy an innocent people?" (Gen 20:4) the midrash states: "Even though I am a Gentile, I am a fearer of heaven."[52]

These Godfearers occupied a liminal position between Jewish and pagan identities. While the rabbinic attitude to these sympathizers is basically positive, we find among the church fathers and certain classical authors vilifications of "those half-Jews who wish to live between both ways."[53] They may be the target of Ignatius's jibe against the uncircumcised Gentile who advocates Jewish beliefs and practice,[54] and Tertullian's accusation: "By resorting to these [Jewish] customs, you deliberately deviate from your own religious rites to those of strangers."[55] Juvenal is particularly scathing when he denounces those "who have had a father who reveres the Sabbath (*metuentem sabbata*), worship nothing but the clouds, and the divinity of the heavens, and see no difference between eating swine's flesh, from which their father abstained, and that of man; and in time they take to circumcision."[56] Epictetus (ca. 50–130 CE) may be addressing these "venerators of God" when he states:

> Why do you act the part of a Jew when you are a Greek? . . . For example, whenever we see a man facing two ways (ἐπαμφοτερίζειν), we are in the habit of saying, "He is not a Jew, he is only acting the part." But when he adopts the attitude of mind of the man who has been baptized and has made his choice, then he both is a Jew in fact and is called one.[57]

Further evidence may be culled from several inscriptions such as that from Panticapaeum on the north coast of the Black Sea, which, if it has been interpreted correctly, reads, "the synagogue of the Jews and Godfearers," or the second or third century inscription on the seats of the Roman theater in Miletus, which may

[51] *Gen. Rab.* 28:5.

[52] *Pesiqta Rabbati* 42.

[53] Commodianus *Instr.* 1.24; 1.37. See also, *Cod. Theod.* 16.18.29 (quoted in: A. Linder, *The Jew in Roman Imperial Legistation* [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987] 256–62).

[54] "If anyone expounds Judaism to you, do not listen to him. For it is better to hear Christianism from a man with circumcision than Judaism from an uncircumcised one" (Ignatius *Phld.* 6.1). As Lieu points out, it is unlikely that Ignatius is referring to an uncircumcised Jew. On this passage see Judith Lieu, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996) 44; Stephen Wilson. "Gentile Judaizers" *NTS*, 38 (1992) 605–16.

[55] Tertullian *Ad nat.* 1.13.

[56] Juvenal *Satires* 14. 96–99 (ET: Menachem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (3 vols.; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974) 2. 102, and n. 96.

[57] Epictetus *Arrianus* 19–21 (ET: Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 1. 543). I follow here Cohen's translation (*Beginnings of Jewishness*, 60) of the word ἐπαμφοτερίζειν instead of Stern's "halting between two faiths." For fuller discussion of this text, see J. Nolland, "Uncircumcised Proselytes?" *JSJ* 12 (1981) 173–94; Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) 97–100.

mean "place of the Jews and those who are called Godfearers."[58] Perhaps the most intriguing and frustrating testimony emerged from the archeological findings from Aphrodisias in western Turkey, which were published in 1987.[59] A stone stele, dated to the early third century, contains two lists of contributors to the local Jewish community. One face may record actual members of the community and contains, in addition to native Jews, three converts and two Godfearers. The other face records fifty-two names listed under the heading "and those who are Godfearers (*kai hosoi theosebis*)." No less surprising is the fact that among this list appear not only typically Hellenistic or pagan characters, such as an athlete and boxer, but also the city counselors (*bouleutes*), who certainly participated in the pagan civic rites. As Goodman has remarked, "it seems likely that the God-fearers who attended the synagogue at Aphrodisias probably in the early third century, had no suspicion that continued adherence to paganism was reprehensible."[60] In spite of the eminent names mentioned, the order of the list iconically establishes their inferior communal status, just like the order recorded in the contemporary rabbinic list from the Mechilta.[61] As Treblico has stated: "The God-fearers are therefore different from, and inferior to, the Jews. This must be because they are not full members of the Jewish community in the way born Jews and proselytes are. They are a group of Gentiles who belong to the synagogue, although in an inferior way compared with proselytes."[62]

Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult even to estimate the extent of this phenomena, especially in Palestine, where, to the best of my knowledge, they are not mentioned in any archeological findings. Bamberger has noted that rabbinic literature rarely mentions these incomplete converts,[63] and in fact the number of explicit references is no more than a dozen. Kraabel has criticised what he sees as a "serious misreading of the evidence" that emanates from scholarly over-enthusiasm and under-interpretation of the entire phenomena, concluding that "the evidence presently available is far from convincing proof for the existence of such a class of Gentiles as traditionally defined by the assumptions of the secondary literature."[64]

[58]On these two inscriptions see Rajak, "Jews and Christians as Groups in a Pagan World," 258; Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 155–62; Reynolds and Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-Fearers at Aphrodisias*, 54; Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 361.

[59]Reynolds and Tannenbaum, *Jews and God Fearers at Aphrodisias*. The inscription, its interpretation, and significance has been the source of much debate; see J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Lots of God-Fearers?," *RB* 99 (1992): 418–24.

[60]Goodman, "Proselytising in Rabbinic Judaism," 177. However, as Cohen has pointed out, it is not clear that this building was actually a synagogue (oral communication).

[61]See above, n. 51.

[62]Trebilco, *Jewish Community in Asia Minor*, 153.

[63]B. Bamberger, *Proselytism in the Talmudic Period* (1939; reprinted New York: Ktav, 1968) 136.

[64]A. T. Kraabel, "The Disappearance of the God-Fearers," *Numen* 28 (1981) 121.

Undoubtedly, there have been exaggerated claims made by all sides, and the *sensus receptus* can and should be revised as the various types of evidence are continually reexamined. Skepticism is always a valuable and necessary corrective. As Thomas Finn has stressed in his rejoinder to Kraabel, "surely, if the God-fearers stood so close to the heart of Judaism and in such numbers as proposed, they would have left some clear footprint in the excavated buildings and some impress on stone, papyrus, and vellum." Yet he concludes that the "absence of God-fearers' footprints may not be quite so determinate as one may think nor their silence quite so complete."[65] We must never forget that in this period there existed a myriad of options and perspectives on the question of "who is a Jew."[66] I am suggesting that various texts may be implicitly grappling with the complex of issues here without mentioning them by name. In fact, Lieberman has suggested that some of the references to the resident alien (*gēr tôšav*) may in fact refer to gentile sympathizers.[67] This suggestion is especially attractive in light of the almost frantic and contradictory attempts by second- and third-century rabbis to define the status of the resident alien, with opinions ranging from a total gentile or "convert" who eats non-kosher food, to one who has rejected idolatry, to one who has accepted some, or almost all, of the commandments.[68] Likewise, there are a number of texts that highlight the transient status of the resident alien, giving him twelve months to decide whether to undergo circumcision before he automatically reverts to his gentile status. Particularly intriguing is the tradition in the name of R. Yochanan, which states that "a resident alien who delayed twelve months and did not undergo circumcision is like a gentile heretic (*min šebaoumôt*)."[69] This unparalleled term may indicate precisely their peculiar hybridity. This and related comments may reflect the same anxiety expressed by Epictetus, "Why do you act the part of a Jew when you are a Greek?" We see here a concerted attempt to contain the ambiguity of these "half-Jews who wish to live between both ways," thus re-establishing the binary logic that underwrites ethnic difference.

A Utopian Solution: "Only Imaginary Communities Are Real"[70]

Even this brief summary is sufficient to highlight the problems such a group could cause. Unlike converts, whose ability to traverse ethnic boundaries actually strengthens and accents the boundaries themselves, the Godfearers refused to settle on either side. As J. Lieu has recently remarked, "this then is another aspect of the

[65]Finn, "The God-fearers Reconsidered," 78.

[66]As amply demonstrated by Cohen, "Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew."

[67]Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 81.

[68]*y. Yeb.* 8.1 (8d); *b. ʿAbod. Zar.* 64b; *b. Qer.* 9a; *b. San.* 96b.

[69]*b. ʿAbod. Zar.* 65a, according to *JTS*–44830. See also Lieberman, *Midrash Teman*, (Jerusalem, 1970) 8.

[70]Balibar, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, 93.

God-fearers; a world of fuzzy boundaries where exclusive commitment was an anomaly."[71] Following Kristeva, I would say that the Godfearers constitute a cultural *object*, whose very proximity threatens to undermine the dominant fictions of ethnic identity. They are "what disturbs identity, system, order, what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[72] The lack of consensus concerning the definition of the resident alien is in itself a strong argument in favor of this connection.[73] It could very well be that this confusion is an expression of the "the different groups of semi-converts, each of whom adopted different parts of the ceremonies and rituals of Judaism."[74] I suggest, however, that we view this general confusion as a symptom of the anxiety aroused by the inability of halakhic discourse to mediate these tensions satisfactorily. The very surplus of definitions is "an ideological displacement of much deeper fears."[75] It is not sufficient to observe that the Godfearers "had no legal status in the Jewish community, whether in Palestine or outside. They were not converts, regardless of the extent of their loyalty. Only the fulfillment of the requirements of conversion would allow entrance to the Jewish people."[76] I believe that it is precisely this inadequacy of rabbinic legal discourse that acted as a catalyst for midrashic literature to attempt to negotiate these faultlines and literally to "put these people in their place." The problem was that they had no place, straddling the very borders of "us" and "them," Jew and gentile, insider and outsider.

Kaplan has remarked that "consciousness about nationality only arises in a time of disturbance of the unconscious links to the imagined community."[77] As I noted at the beginning of this paper, the rabbinic social formation during the first centuries of the Common Era was under immense pressure to redefine itself in relation to various emerging communities. I view these midrashic narratives of affiliation as fundamentally problem-solving devices, symptomatic readings of these fractured narratives of identity. In the words of Moretti, "they are the means through which the cultural tensions and paradoxes produced by social conflict and historical change are disentangled (or at least reduced)."[78] I suggest that the "plot of

[71]Judith M. Lieu, "Do God-Fearers Make Good Christians," in Stanley Porter et al., eds., *Crossing the Boundaries* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 344.

[72]J. Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 4.

[73]See Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 356; David Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: An Historical and Constructive Study of the Noachide Laws* (New York: Mellon, 1983).

[74]Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 81.

[75]J. Dollimore, "Transgression and Surveillance in Measure for Measure," in idem and A. Sinfield, eds., *Political Shakespeares: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 80.

[76]Schiffman, "At the Crossroads," 138.

[77]Kaplan, *Looking for the Other*, 30.

[78]F. Moretti, "Crisis of the European Bildungsroman," in R. Cohen, ed., *Studies in Historical Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992) 57.

affiliation" is an attempt to create a mythical biography for the Godfearers,[79] to give them a name and to tell their story so as to neutralize their alterity and assert narrative control over them and their threatening liminality.

The ideological challenge presented by the Godfearers was their ambiguous identity, which threatened the hegemonic fictions. How could they be incorporated into the political body, even peripherally so, without undermining the very distinctions which permit the creation of identity? It is readily apparent that neither the genealogical nor the covenantal paradigms could accommodate the Godfearers. Conversion could enable a gentile to see himself as a metaphorical descendent of Abraham or beneficiary of revelation, but a new fiction of identity was necessary to accommodate those who straddle both worlds. This narrative of affiliation seems to be a combination of elements derived from both dominant paradigms. It contains the motif of recognition and acknowledgment as well as biological affinity. However, both of these components undergo a transformation: The recognition is only partial and the affinity is indirect. It would seem that the dominant fictions of identity drawn from the cultural repertoire are being recast in order to accommodate a new reality. The affiliation plot is an attempt by the cultural imaginary of rabbinic Judaism to create a narrative of identity for these Godfearers, an identity whose cultural job is to explain how they can be both inside and out, both the same and different.

As we saw above, one of the strategies used by the fictions of identity was to create a homology between gender and ethnic identities. A consequence of this rhetoric is the creation of a semiotic imbrication between women and gentiles, between the woman as other and the other as women. I suggest that Sarah's body is being used literally as food for thought, to work out and display this discourse of self-fashioning. Therefore there could not be a more appropriate site to embody the attempts of the rabbinic imagination literally, to regulate the boundaries of their imagined community. The key to the cultural work performed here is her transgressive character. I have already remarked that the very act of nursing gentiles and Sarah's promiscuous public display were an enactment of a woman's body not in place. But there are deeper aspects to this trope. Caroline Bynum has observed that "to religious writers, the good female body is closed and intact;

[79]Contra Porton, who remarks that "while we can imagine individuals replacing one system of belief with another or one legal system with another, it is clearly impossible to change one's line of descent. . . . The most one can do is join a socially constructed descent group, which need not be biologically based; but there is no evidence that the rabbis in late antiquity sought to create such a socially constructed descent group, which converts could join . . . as far as can be determined, in late antiquity, the rabbis did not attempt to create this artificial lineage" (Porton, *Stranger within Your Gates*, 6).

the bad woman's body is open, windy and breachable. Such a notion identified woman with boundaries, with openings and exudings and spillings forth."[80] It is precisely Sarah's breachable body that provides access for the gentile Godfearers.

Following the lead of Mary Douglas, we can see an imaginative correlation between the boundaries of the body and the boundaries of society. The body is one of the semiotic spaces wherein social concerns are symbolically enacted, where issues of identity are represented and displayed, and anxieties are addressed and contradictions resolved:

> The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened and precarious. . . . We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.[81]

If we can see Sarah's body as "a symbol of the relationship between parts of society, as mirroring designs of hierarchy which apply in the larger social system,"[82] then it is most apt that her permeability signals the means for the "in-corporation" of the Godfearers into the Jewish political body.

The matriarch's body is literally transgressive (*transgredi* = to step across) in that it enables the outsiders to come in. If, under normal circumstances, "the threatened boundaries of the body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity, and purity of the physical body,"[83] here, the necessity to justify a breach in the social structure is mirrored homologically in Sarah's open and breachable body. A similar, though reversed, cultural logic was used by the church fathers of this period to represent Mary's closed and virginal body as the agent for redeeming Eve's open and transgressive one.[84] By this same logic, if Tertullian

[80]Caroline Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone, 1991) 220, 384, n. 107. See also: T. Coletti, "The Paradox of Mary's Body," in Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury, eds., *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) 65–95; J. Salisbury, *Church Fathers, Independent Virgins* (London: Verso 1991) 29.

[81]Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Praeger 1966) 115. See also H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990) 178–79: "Since threats to society are reproduced symbolically in conceptions of the human body we should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its specially vulnerable points. . . . The fluids of the body turn out to be a kind of language in which various religious themes find their voice. These themes do speak to concerns generated by the social structure."

[82]Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 13.

[83]Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 124.

[84]As Irenaeus said: "And just as it was through a virgin who disobeyed [namely,Eve] that mankind was stricken and fell and died, so too it was through the Virgin [Mary], who obeyed the word of God, that mankind, resuscitated by life, received life. . . . And Eve [had necessarily

can denigrate the transgressive woman as "the devil's gateway, the unsealer (*resignatrix*),"[85] then the open and trangressive Sarah can be portrayed as the gateway to a new type of identity.

The narrative of affiliation thus dramatizes the transgression of cultural boundaries as mirrored in the body, confirming Susan Suleiman's insight that "the cultural significance of the female body is not only (not even first and foremost) that of a flesh-and-blood entity, but as a symbolic construct."[86] The homology between Sarah's porous body, with its "exudings and spillings forth," and the permeable social body both enacts the faultline and provides its imaginary resolution. The matriarch's body, transgressing in place and purpose, enacts the inability of the dominant fictions of identity to cope with the Godfearers. By transforming Sarah's body into food, those who imbibe become part of the social body.

Previously, we observed that both of the dominant fictions of ethnicity establish identity through the father. This in itself is not surprising; as Anne McClintock has observed: "all nations depend on powerful constructions of gender."[87] However, if the metaphor of the family "offers a 'natural' figure for sanctioning national hierarchy within a putative organic unity of interests,"[88] then the narrative of affiliation offers a counter-discourse of identity through the body of the matriarch. In other words, if both of the dominant fictions provide narratives for "members" only, here, the secondary and inferior woman's body[89] provides a subordinate and subservient status for the Godfearers. Sarah's breasts may not be the "devil's gateway" but they are the backdoor entrance.

This depiction of Sarah's transgressive body is reminiscent of Bakhtin's category of the grotesque. The grotesque is manifested precisely in its hybridity, in transgressing the purity of binary distinctions wherein the low invades the high, blurring the hierarchical imposition of order.[90] Likewise, Sarah's body embodies the grotesque, not only through its excessive abundance and profusion, but be-

---

to be restored] in Mary, that a virgin, by becoming the advocate of a virgin, should undo and destroy virginal disobedience by virginal obedience" (Irenaeus *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 33; ET: *Mary through the Centuries* [trans. J. Pelikan; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, 42–43]); see also, Irenaeus *Haer.* 3.22.4.

[85]Tertullian *On the Apparel of Women*, 1.1.

[86]Susan R. Suleiman, "Introduction," *The Female Body in Western Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 2.

[87]Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 353.

[88]Ibid., 357

[89]See R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 13–36.

[90]See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986) 58; S. Hall, "Metaphors of Transformation" in Allon White, ed., *Carnival, Hysteria, and Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 8.

cause it combines the concepts of in and out, Jew and gentile, us and them. Through a conjunction of the gender and ethnic codes of identity, Sarah as an "internal" other is both the guardian of the threshold and the locus of its subversion. Thus, the figure of the transgressive nursing mother challenges the purity of ethnic distinctions based upon either belief-systems or genealogy and becomes an ideological vehicle for the creation of a cultural biography of the Godfearers.

Isis: "What if the object started to speak?"[91]

There is another aspect of Bakhtin's thought that may provide us with an additional avenue of reading. I have argued that this emerging narrative of affiliation is remarkably suited to navigate the faultlines between the contesting fictions of identity, creating a utopian hierarchy that enables the incorporation of the Godfearers without undermining the dominant fictions of identity. I have also remarked that Kaplan's notion of nation as narration introduces the question of those marginalized by the narrative process of creating any given imagined community. It is important to understand that marginalization is created not only by non-narration, by not letting the subaltern speak, but also by speaking for him or her. In the text before us, the noble ladies are granted speech and subjectivity, but the important question is to what extent they could recognize themselves in this narrative.

Undoubtedly, this narrative is an effective cultural fantasy of reversal, but it would seem to remain precisely that. These images are created out of the anxieties of their own self-fashionings, and as such represent how a culture imagines itself in the act of imagining others. I would say that they enable a culture to avoid the dangers of imagining their other by endlessly repeating the act of imagining itself.[92] We therefore have to distinguish between what can be called ventriloquism and dialogism. In the former, the imagining voice speaks through another, so that it appears that he or she speaks, but the narrator is only using the other as a tactic of self-fashioning. Dialogism, in the Bakhtinian sense, is letting another speak through one's own voice; a type of possession, or, in narratological terms, a type of culture-free, indirect discourse.

The historians who have dealt with the various aspects of the Godfearers have ignored or disregarded what may have been one of its most salient characteristics. This phenomenon should be analyzed as an aspect of popular culture in late antiquity. By this term, I do not mean an occurrence that is prevalent in a certain economic or social stratum, but rather a phenomenon that arises and takes shape on the margins of hegemonic culture, and sometimes against its will. It is therefore all the

[91]L. Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (trans. G. Gill; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 135.

[92]See Jan Mohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," in H. L. Gates, ed., *Race, Writing, and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 78–106.

more threatening, vis-a-vis the normative mechanisms of control. If we look at culture as a whole, as a form of rhetoric for the creation and maintenance of preferred meanings and subjectivities, then the popular is the site of struggle and adaptation.

If hegemonic ideology works through "interpellation," soliciting self-recognition, then the popular consists of semiotic resistance and transformation, wherein texts and meanings are reemployed and reconfigured so as to alter or invert their intended meaning. This is what de Certeau has called the practice of *perruque* or "poaching," when "the reader invents in texts something different from what they 'intended.'"[93] Terry Eagleton has added an important corrective to Althusser's theory by stressing that interpellation must always be interpreted. "There is no reason why we should always accept society's identification of us as this particular sort of subject, and there is no guarantee that we will do this in the 'proper' fashion."[94] Ideological struggle takes place in relation to systems of representation, which are not the sole preserve of any one group. These systems that serve as the medium through which are constructed both our "reality" and "ourselves," also provide the site for ideological contestation.[95] "If the dominant ideology constitutes subjectivities that will find 'natural' its view of the world, subcultures constitute partially alternative subjectivities."[96] Therefore, if the popular is the area in which interpellation is negotiated among the dominant, subordinate, and oppositional, then we might expect to find traces of this dissent in the text before us.

Now, I seriously doubt if these noble women who represent the actual hegemonic culture, in opposition to the imagined hegemony offered by the text, saw themselves in such a servile and subservient position, just as I seriously doubt if the Godfearers saw themselves as liminal or marginal. Keeping in mind that all stories comprise within themselves the ghosts of the alternative stories they are trying to suppress,[97] can we detect in this text a dialogic voice, that does not erase otherness by the very act representing it? Let me clarify what I am asking. The question I would like to pose is whether we can discern a dialogic other that represents not only how the rabbis would like to be seen in the eyes of others in their construction of a utopian hierarchy, but also how these others actually saw them. Could the rabbis have viewed themselves "other-wise," or asked themselves the question, "what if the object started to speak?"

[93]See M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley 1988, 24; J. Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and Its Other* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 160–73; T. Bennett, "The Politics of the Popular," in Tony Bennett, Colin Mercer, and Janet Woollacott, eds., *Popular Culture and Social Relations* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1986) 19.

[94]Terry Eagleton, *Ideology* (London: Logman, 1991) 145.

[95]Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, 27.

[96]Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998) 149.

[97]Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 21.

When scholars consider why the various groups of sympathizers might have been attracted to Judaism in late antiquity, the proposed answers often resemble a paean of self-adulation, or a good report card from Sunday school.[98] Let us try and place ourselves for a moment with those women who witnessed the miracle and saw Sarah with her son in her lap suckling the multitudes. What did they see, what would have wrought such a religious transformation, and how would they have translated this religious experience into their own language? The image of the nursing matriarch is an extremely prominent one in late antiquity, particularly in relation to the goddess Isis. Her cult underwent a revival in this period because of its official adoption by the Flavian (late first century) and Severan (late second / early third centuries) dynasties.[99] It was especially popular among the Roman aristocracy, and it was in this period that "Isis enjoys the warmest imperial patronage."[100] As Stark has observed, in archeological findings from the second and third centuries, "Isis was one of the fifteen most frequently mentioned gods in the Roman empire, and in this period she becomes the most popular and most syncretic goddess."[101] Her cult continued to be popular even after the anti-pagan laws of Constantine; and in the fourth century, three Christian emperors bestowed their patronage toward the restoration of the Isis temple in the port of Ostia.[102]

Isis was first and foremost a mother, and her cult was notably popular among women.[103] She is called not only the "mother of kings," but the "the mother of all life" as well.[104] In an inscription from the third century she says, "I am she whom the women call God."[105] Because she was the divine mother, she was praised as Isis *lochia*, "as she who has brought forth the new-born babe."[106] In the Graeco-Roman world, Isis became the acknowledged founder of religious observances and the goddess of conversion.[107] Her followers saw her as the agent of initiation

[98]Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 369–82.

[99]Sari Takács, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World* (Leiden: Brill, 1995) 29. Josephus records that on Vespasian's return to Rome he and Titus spent the night in the temple of Isis on the Campus Martius before celebrating the next day his triumph over Judaea (Josephus *Bell.*, 7.123).

[100]R. E. Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971) 238.

[101]S. Stark, *Isis in the Arts of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* [Hebrew]. Doctoral Thesis (Jerusalem, 1988) 10–12. See also: Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) 6.

[102]Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 123.

[103]A. Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Middletown, CT: Weslyan University Press, 1987) 188.

[104]Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 135; Eva Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) 156.

[105]Ross S. Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessings* (New York: Oxford, 1992) 75.

[106]Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 148.

[107]Ibid., 59.

into the mysteries, and in a hymn from the second century, she declares that she revealed the secrets to humankind and taught human beings the reverence of the gods.[108] Likewise, in his mid-second-century novel, *Metamorphosis*, Apuleius describes Isis as the mother who saves.[109] When he describes the celebration of her major festival, the *navigium Isidis*, probably witnessed in Carthage, he records that in the glorious procession there appeared a priest who "carried a small golden vessel rounded in the shape of a female breast, from which he poured libations of milk" (*aureum vasculum in modum papillae rotundatum*).[110] V. Tran Tam Tinh has remarked that milk from the divine breast was believed to grant life, longevity, salvation, and divinity.[111] "The divine milk is thus metaphorically the medicine of immortality through which not only kings and heroes, but the initiates of mystery religions, are given life."[112] It is therefore not surprising that in the material culture of this period, Isis is usually represented as sitting and nursing her son, or, according to the testimony of Macrobius from the beginning of the fifth century, as a figurine covered with breasts, similar to what is known as Artemis *multimammia*.[113]

It is precisely this image of Isis *lactans* that is represented in rabbinic literature. She is one of the few pagan gods mentioned explicitly and, in fact, is named "she who nurses" (*manikan*).[114] Moreover, in a discussion of forbidden images, the Talmud describes her as "nursing a child in her lap," and the tanna R. Yehudah, the very same who saw Abraham as a "father to all the nations," likens Isis to Eve, characterizing her as "she who suckled the whole world,"[115] just as Apuleius calls her the "cosmic mother."[116] All of these elements are very close to those in the narrative before us: the Roman noble women have a religious conversionary experience, one of initiation into the Jewish "mysteries," that pivot around the image of

[108]Gail P. Corrington, "The Milk of Salvation: Redemption by the Mother in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity," *HTR* 82 (1989) 400; Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 59.

[109]Apuleius *Metamor.* 11.25. See also the Hermetic text brought by Witt (*Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 219) wherein Horus is informed "Thy milk belongs to thee, which is in the breasts of thy mother," which echoes the exclamation "We are not worthy to suckle our children with the milk of this righteous man."

[110]Apuleius *Metamor.* 11.10. See also: Frederick Solmsen, *Isis among the Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) 208; Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 115. This rite may be alluded to in Tertullian *De baptismo*, 5.

[111]V. Tran Tam Tinh, *Isis Lactans* (Leiden: Brill, 1973) 1.

[112]Corrington, "Milk of Salvation," 400.

[113]Macrobius *Saturn.* 1.20, quoted in Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World*, 149.

[114]*t. ʿAbod. Zar.* 5:1; Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962) 136.

[115]*b. ʿAbod. Zar.* 43a. For additional references, see Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*.

[116]J. G. Griffiths, *The Isis Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)* (Leiden: Brill, 1975) 208.

Sarah, who sits with Isaac in her lap nursing the multitudes. It does not seem unwarranted to surmise that these women who saw Sarah translated this experience into one that was very familiar, Sarah/Isis the mother of all life.

Isis lactans: Karanis, fourth century CE [photo courtesy of E. J. Brill, Publishers]

This connection between Isis and Sarah may be strengthened when we remember that in our text, these very same noblewomen first accuse Sarah of promiscuous behavior. The goddess herself "was said to have been a prostitute in Tyre for ten years, and her temples were located near brothels, and they had a reputation for being meeting places for prostitutes."[117] Likewise, Lieberman has noted that the oath of a second- or third-century Palestinian prostitute ("by the love of Rome") should be understood as referring to Isis, "especially when we remember that Isis took the place of Venus by whom the courtesans had been previously swearing."[118]

[117]Susan Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (New York: Pimlico, 1995) 222. See also the tale of Paulina's adulterous seduction in the temple of Isis recorded in Josephus *Ant.*, 18.3.65.

[118]Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 140–41.

We should remember that not only was Isis one of "the most truly polyonymous of all gods in antiquity,"[119] but that the Isaic cult itself was known to be especially syncretistic. In fact, Shaye Cohen has compared the Godfearing sympathizers to the worshippers of Isis in that "Jews and Judaism were hardly unique in their ability to attract sympathizers and adherents. . . . In Rome in the first century BCE the goddess Isis exerted a powerful attraction on many poets and intellectuals who remained under her spell but did not undergo conversion."[120]

Is it possible that the matriarch is presented here as a figure of Isaic salvation? We may be able to find an analogous situation in the pagan figures and motifs that were used in Palestinian synagogue decorations in late antiquity.[121] Despite the explicit rabbinic prohibition of the use of images like "a scepter and a globe" (*m. ʿAbod. Zar.* 3:1), various synagogue mosaics have been discovered with representations of Helios or Sol Invictus holding these very symbols.[122] And this at the same time when Helios "was a live symbol that was being mobilized by emperor and church alike to represent the cosmocrator, with each tradition providing its own interpretation."[123] As the Jerusalem Talmud attests, "in the days of R. Yochanan they began depicting [figural representations] on the walls and he did not object; in the days of R. Abun [first half of fourth century] they began making such figures on the mosaic floors and he did not object."[124] Since these discoveries, scholars have debated the significance of these images. Were they merely decorative motifs, were their meanings "Judaized," or did they continue to convey "pagan" significance? However we answer this question, if it can be answered, the possible representation of Sarah as Isis adds a new voice to this discussion. If in the visual arts "the identification of a pagan cult image with a Jewish or a Christian messi-

[119]MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 90.

[120]Cohen, "Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew," 31; Solmsen, *Isis among the Greeks and Romans*, 83.

[121]There is a considerable and expanding literature on this topic; for a convenient summary see: Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archeological and Historical Facts," *IEJ* 9 (1959): 238–45; Lee I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998, 152, n. 13.

[122]R. Hachlili, "The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Art: Representation and Significance," *BASOR* 228 (1977) 61–77; R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archeology in the Land of Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1988); Joseph Gutmann, "Early Synagogue and Jewish Catacomb Art and its Relation to Christian Art," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, 2. 21.2, (1984) 1313–42. The prevalence of this motif is all the more striking when we take into consideration Josephus's description of the Temple curtains that "had also embroidered upon it all that was mystical in the heavens, excepting that of the [twelve] signs, representing living creatures" (*Bell.*, 5.214).

[123]Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 573; Macmullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, 84–86.

[124]*y. ʿAbod. Zar.* 3.3 (42d), according to the fragment published by Jacob N. Epstein, *Studies in Talmudic Literature and Semitic Languages* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1988) 256.

anic figure was very common in the syncretistic milieu of late antiquity and serves as but one example of the adoption by one cult of the pictorial symbolic language of another,"[125] the same may be said of the narrative tradition before us, which does the same in reverse. If King David could be portrayed as Orpheus in the synagogues of Gaza and Dura Europos, then Sarah could become Isis in the eyes of the pagan sympathizers.

Is this representation of Sarah as Isis a dialogical image? Are the rabbis presenting themselves "other-wise," or is this a case of contested interpellation? It could be that the rabbis are presenting themselves as they were seen in pagan eyes, an *interpretatio pagana* of Sarah. Or, it could be that they have not relinquished narrative authority and are merely recuperating one of the dominant cultural voices for their own use. I do not know the answer to this question. But we would do well to keep in mind Peter Brown's observation that late antique pagans of every class and level of culture "lived in many conflicting thought worlds and continued to enjoy a freedom of maneuver within the interstices of the many explanatory systems that jostled each other in the back of their minds." They were "hackers of the supernatural, quite prepared to cannibalise various beliefs and practices in order to find spare parts with which to enrich their own religious systems, and bring order to a supernatural world shot through with acute ambiguity, characterised by uncertainty as to the meaning of so many manifestations of the holy."[126]

Conclusion

> The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new "people" in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation.[127]

Societies reproduce themselves culturally by circulating stories of how the world operates. These narratives characteristically address contested aspects of our ideological formation, either by rehearsing the dominant fictions, or by proffering new ones.[128] It is a rare occurrence when we can witness the production of a discourse in the social imaginary. I have suggested that the plot of affiliation is such a "faultline" narrative, which attempts to address certain unresolved ideological com-

[125]B. Narkiss, "Pagan, Christian, and Jewish Elements in the Art of Ancient Synagogues," in Lee I. Levine, ed., *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987) 184.

[126]Peter Brown, *Authority and the Sacred* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 67–70.

[127]Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," 4.

[128]Sinfield, *Cultural Politics—Queer Reading*, 3.

plications that arose in the first centuries of the common era with the emergence of the Godfearers. The prevailing fictions of identity were incapable of accommodating these emerging identities. Therefore, a new or refurbished fiction had to be told in order to domesticate their ambiguities as a locus of subversion. In this new narrative, a utopian hierarchy was created through a collocation of the gender and ethnic codes.

However, as Bhabha has reminded us, tales that seek to tame the unruly often become themselves the site of renewed border skirmishes. It is through such stories that ideologies are contested, and subordinate groups struggle to make space for themselves. On these faultlines, otherness is always infiltrating sameness, and vice-versa. Ideological power, as John Thompson puts it, is not just a matter of meaning, but of making meanings stick.[129] The persistence of otherness becomes apparent with the rejection of ventriloquism as a strategy of containment, and the transformation of Sarah's transgressive body from a sign of subservience to one of Isaic salvation. Once again, Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia* is useful here, suggesting that literary discourse is often riddled with "unofficial" voices contesting, subverting, and parodying dominant discourses.[130] With this "circulation of social energy," Sarah's body becomes dialogic, enacting "a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages."[131]

[129]John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1984) 132.

[130]J. E. Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," in Arthur F. Kinney and Dan S. Collins, eds., *Renaissance Historicism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) 20.

[131]Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 325.