Excerpted from

Genesis in Poetry

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This rendering of the main episodes of the Biblical book of Genesis into rhymed verse is a ground-breaking literary exercise. Its inspiration is Midrash, the folklore of Judaism, which supplements the Biblical narrative in a fascinating, engaging and informative manner, adding new insights into the text by entering into the minds of the main characters to reveal character, psycholo…

SARAI AND HAGAR

(Gen. 16:1- 16)

Sarai's heart could not rejoice,
Nor was there mirth in her voice;
For decades had passed and she knew that soon
Time would deny her
The fruit of her womb.

''Husband dear,'' she said one day,
''I know that there is just one way
To gain fulfilment in my old age,
And to calm my inner rage
That motherhood will not be mine—
Take Hagar, my maid, as concubine;
And the child she bears I'll embrace
As my own,
By God's good grace.''

Sarai brought her to Abram's tent,
And Hagar conceived;
But she mocked her mistress's barren state,
So that poor Sarai grieved.

''A friend of God, Sarai claims to be,''
Exclaimed Hagar contemptuously.
''For years with Abram she went to sleep,
Yet no reward did she ever reap;
But the night he took me as a mate,
I was blessed by God to procreate!''

Sarai was smitten with much self-doubt
When she heard that painful boast:
''I couldn't have lived a purer life;
I swear by the heavenly host!''

Beside herself, in deep despair,
Her stomach filled with bile;
She lashed out wildly at her maid,
Which made her feel even more vile!

Hagar fell to the ground,
And clutched her swollen belly;
As Sarai watched her writhing in pain,
Her feet turned to jelly.
Hagar fled in terror
From her mistress's home,
In the direction of the desert,
In search of her own;
Desperate for the protection
Of her kith and kin:
High-born Egyptians,
From the town of Qasr Ibrim.

But the sun beat down and her water was spent;
A sand-storm felled her make-shift tent.
Hagar wandered, for the entire day,
Bitter in spirit—
The wrong way.

She collapsed by a well on the road to Shur,
Then heard a voice she couldn't ignore.
About to give in to total despair,
It greeted her gently,
Caressing the air:

''*Hagar, my dear daughter,*
What has brought you to your knees;

Why are your eyes so red raw
With shedding salty tears;
And why stay here in this place,
Forfeiting your mistress's grace?''

Hagar related
How she'd been abused;
But the angel retorted,
''*I'm rather confused;*
When presented with
Such a one-sided view,
My instinct counters,
But, what about you?

''*Did you not commit*
The first offense,
When you hurt Sarai's feelings
And made her tense;
Lording it over her
As consort of that sage—
So why be surprised
At your mistress's rage?

''*There's no escape for you just yet;*
Return and bear their child;
Give him the name Ishmael,
And leave him to run wild.

''*For he shall be an outlaw,*
Hunting man and beast;
Embroiled in every skirmish,
And feared throughout the east.

''*But I shall avenge your suffering*
At the hands of mistress Sarai,
At a time when Ishmael's offspring
Shall make her descendants cry,
Claiming a higher heavenly grace
Which, to Isaac's seed, they'll deny.''

So, Hagar returned to her mistress's home,
And in time gave birth to a child
Whom Abram loved, though he knew
Would grow up rough and wild.

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