

In the verses we read today from Parshat Va'Yerah, (and again tomorrow) we are presented with evidence of God's skill in dramaturgy. In two very different scenes God intervenes in threats to the lives of Abraham's sons. In tomorrow's it is His supreme set piece while today's is an archly domestic drama turned and tooled in such a way that we see what the craftsman can do when He steps out of eternity creating linear time and dimensioned space, and contrives to create a people beginning with Avram, who expecting nothing and having neither ambition nor figurative illumination is constrained by faith alone to leave his country, his family, his home to be enclosed now in God's grace and infinite power and majesty.

Where we begin is with Sarah, at last with a living child, remembering the sting of her servant's derisive smile and now the twice banished Hagar, the Egyptian consort become abhorrent to Sarah by dint of her jealousies and protective fire for her son over against the potential rival, foretold to be a "wild ass of a man" ...

והוא יהיה פרא אדם ידו בכל ויד כל בו ועל-פני כל-אחיו ישכן

"And he shall be a wild ass of a man: his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him: and he shall dwell in the face of all his brethren" (Genesis, 16: 12)

Against the overlay of this harsh prophecy writ to companion a genealogically fated and determined plot as iron as any in Aeschylus, are the presumptive assertions of a righteous and civilized people over those deemed creatures of nature; wild, stupid, sexually licentious and violent. And yet ... the plot line devolves into something far beyond the dichotomies of fate and divine decree. For the gift of this dramatist is the dictate of sublime compassion and in our empathies and imaginings which surpass the biblical textualization of the story and the economies of its language there is Hagar, at last the stranger and other and simply a mother bereft and nearly insensate with grief, alone in the desert with her son dying of thirst under the white blankness of the searing sky; and unable to bear his perishing before her eyes but equally unable to leave the boy to die alone, she places him under the willow shrubs still visible but at the distance of a bow shot... there to cry and supplicate at the half circle. Our hearts are rent. And God attends with mercy because he can do no other.