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Sarah the Princess: Tracing the Hellenistic Afterlife of a Pentateuchal Female Figure¹

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses Philo of Alexandria's and Josephus Flavius's interpretations of Sarah from the viewpoint of social and political power attached to her. Both ascribe the figure royal attributes (i.e. she is depicted as a princess or queen) and other features that promote her as a virtuous model and an individual of public standing. A variety of emphases, philological and philosophical interpretations alike, jointly serve to construct Sarah's exemplarity. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that different dimensions of biblical female figures may be revealed when their role as spouses and mothers is not taken as the starting point of analysis in studies concerning the reception history of biblical women.

Keywords: Sarah, Philo of Alexandria, Josephus Flavius, scriptural interpretation, biblical female figures

1. Introduction

The figure of Sarah has been recently analysed in the cultural context of the Greco-Roman era by Maren Niehoff and Atar Livneh in particular.² These

1. This work was supported by the Academy of Finland; under Grant 274924 and under Grant 285265. Many thanks to Joan Taylor and our colleagues in the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Helsinki for their astute feedback on earlier versions of this article.

2. See Maren R. Niehoff, "Mother and Maiden, Sister and Spouse: Sarah in Philonic Midrash," *HTR* 97/4 (2004), 413-444; Atar Livneh, "Jewish Traditions and Familial Roman Values in Philo's *De Abrahamo* 245-254," *HTR* 109/4 (2016), 536-549. See

studies demonstrate that Philo of Alexandria, a Hellenistic Jewish³ intellectual (ca. 20 BCE – 40 CE), praises the female figure in the light of ideals of their own cultural contexts: Sarah masters her emotions, as is apt of a person embodying the Hellenistic ideal of self-mastery (*enkrateia*).⁴ Sarah is also acclaimed for her spousal role, including the virtues of loyalty and love, which demonstrates the impact of Roman values on her portrayal.⁵ These and other analyses outline characteristics attributed to Pentateuchal females, specifically traits that qualify them for their domestic roles.⁶ At the same time, it remains questionable to what extent ancient interpreters viewed Sarah as an independent figure and attributed any social or political power to her.

This article examines Philo of Alexandria and Josephus Flavius as witnesses to ancient scriptural interpretation, concentrating on those passages that reflect Sarah's royal status (i.e. she is depicted as a princess or queen) and

also the pioneering studies of Dorothy Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women* (BJS 209; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), esp. 147-154; and Judith Romney Wegner, "Philo's Portrayal of Women: Hebraic or Hellenic?" in *Women like This: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; SBLEJIL 1; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991), 41-66, esp. 55-56. Finally, on Sarah's virginity and Hellenistic medical traditions, see Nicole L. Tilford, "'After the Ways of Women': The Aged Virgin in Philo's Transformation of the Philosophical Soul," *SPhiloA* 25 (2013), 17-39.

3. In this article, "Hellenistic Judaism" denotes Judaism in the first century CE. Judaism continued to be heavily influenced by Hellenistic ideas in this Roman era, and new writings were composed in Greek (regarding the works discussed here, Josephus's *War* was originally written in Aramaic, but it is preserved only in Greek).

4. See Niehoff, "Mother and Maiden," 420-421, on *Abr.* 248-250. According to this passage, Sarah overcomes her jealousy and attachment to Abraham, thus exhorting her husband to have a child with another woman. On the control of emotions, see esp. Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

5. Livneh, "Jewish Traditions," 536-549. On Sarah's wifely love, see also Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, 148.

6. Sarah has been typically studied as one of the Genesis "mothers" and as the ideal spouse of Abraham (on the latter, see Philo, *Abr.* 93, 245-246). She is described as the mother of Israel in Isa 51,2, but the term "mother" becomes more frequent in the rabbinic Jewish literature; e.g. *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Amalek 1, 43 II 6c-e; 43 III 9c-e; y. *Sanh.* 27d; b. *Ber.* 16b. Nevertheless, other kinds of interpretations emerged from early onwards (Gal 4,21-31; Heb 11,11). For the title "mother" and its implications, see e.g. Hanna Tervanotko, "Obey me like your Mother: Deborah's Leadership in Light of Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum 33," *JSP* 24 (2015), 301-323. The term "mother" is frequently used in scholarly discussions concerning the women of Genesis; see e.g. Tammi J. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008). While the attribution does not appear anywhere in the Pentateuch, many biblical women indeed appear on stage when they are marriageable and stay there due to their maternal positions, as pointed out by Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 75.

where she functions as an adviser or ruler, or receives public acknowledgement. Royal connotations are naturally linked with Sarah due to the etymological meaning of her name, which derives from Hebrew root שרר, “to rule” (Isa 32,1; Est 1,22), thus meaning a princess, queen, or noble woman (Judg 5,29; Isa 49,23).⁷ Subsequently, in what follows, we shall ask: How do Philo and Josephus depict Sarah from the perspective of her “royal” status? How is she portrayed as having or making use of power? It is argued that Philo and Josephus link Sarah with power in rather different ways. Furthermore, this analysis *per se* demonstrates that different dimensions of Sarah are revealed when her role as a spouse and a mother is not taken as the starting point of analysis.⁸

2. A Symbolic Woman: A Look at Sarah in Philo’s Texts

Several scholars have dealt with Philo’s ideas regarding gender in general and women in particular.⁹ It has been observed that Philo’s perception of gender is narrow on the one hand, while his female characterization has breadth on the other hand.¹⁰ As for Sarah, Philo’s interest in the figure is clearly based on the mere number of references to Sarai/Sarah (Σάρα/Σάρρα), 76 in total. In most cases, she serves symbolic purposes by representing wisdom and virtue.¹¹ Judith Romney Wegner highlights Sarah’s prototypical nature, pointing out that Philo appreciates masculine features in the character.¹² Similarly, Dorothy Sly emphasizes that Philo’s Sarah is either the subservient wife of Abraham or

7. The same root also lies behind the masculine noun שר (e.g. Num 21,18; Josh 5,14; Judg 9,30; Isa 32,1; Dan 10,13).

8. In this respect, our approach connects with the idea of “hermeneutics of suspicion,” a methodological principle advocated by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza for the study of ancient texts that lack explicit references to women. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that a scholar should not settle with the first impression presented by a text about women, but should proceed to ask critical questions about their presence or absence. The term “hermeneutics of suspicion” was coined by Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (trans. Denis Savage; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 28-36. For Schüssler Fiorenza’s employment of the hermeneutics of suspicion, see her articles “The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work,” in *From Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Letty M. Russell; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1985), 125-136; and “Remembering the Past in Creating the Future: Historical-Critical Scholarship and Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship* (ed. Adela Yarbro Collins; SBPCP 10; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 43-64, esp. 55-64.

9. See esp. Richard A. Baer Jr., *Philo’s Use of the Categories Male and Female* (ALGHJ 3; Leiden: Brill, 1970); Sly, *Philo’s Perception of Women*, esp. 91-178; Sharon Lea Mattila, “Wisdom, Sense Perception, and Philo’s Gender Gradient,” *HTR* 89 (1996), 103-129; Wegner, “Philo’s Portrayal of Women,” 41-66; Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Woman Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo’s ‘Therapeutae’ Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

10. Mattila, “Wisdom,” 104.

11. Tilford, “Ways of Women,” 31.

12. Wegner, “Philo’s Portrayal of Women,” 41-66.

removed of her womanhood.¹³ Niehoff complements these observations by demonstrating that Philo's literal exegesis of Sarah tends to be sympathetic, while she is extricated from the realm of femininity in the allegorical readings.¹⁴

How do Sarah's royal status and power emerge from Philo's scriptural interpretation? The following analysis is diachronic and focuses on two topics: Sarah as an advisor and a ruler. In so doing, a previously overlooked feature will be pointed out: the royal association of Sarah's portrayal as virtue, as well as its implications for depicting Sarah as a model. As will be seen, Philo's method in reading the Pentateuch is essential for understanding Sarah's power and royalty. Sarah is a biblical woman of high esteem, who in Philo's interpretation transcends the human boundaries of sex and gender by symbolizing virtue and wisdom.¹⁵ Allegorical interpretation grants the figure specific power and elevates her. Yet the technique may simultaneously "dissolve her," insofar as it transforms Sarah into a quality of Abraham's character. Meanwhile, Abraham is also dissolved in the course of allegorical reading; ultimately, Philo teaches his audience about the soul and human existence.¹⁶

2.1 *Sarah the Exemplary Advisor*

The figure of Sarah can serve as an advisor whose opinion is heard and appreciated. *Leg.* 3.244-245, for example, celebrates Sarah's virtue and explains that

being aware that he [Abraham] could not beget seed out of perfect virtue, she advises him to beget children out of the handmaiden, that is school-learning, even Hagar (*Gen.* 16,2ff.). ... And if he, filled with gratitude towards the education by means of which he was brought into union with virtue, thinks it harsh to reject it, he shall be brought to compliance by an oracle of God bidding him, "In all that Sarah saith to thee listen to her voice" (*Gen.* 21,12). Let that which seems good to virtue be law for each one of us; for if we choose to hearken to all that virtue recommends, we shall be happy.¹⁷

13. Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, 145-154.

14. Niehoff, "Mother and Maiden," 413-444.

15. On Sarah and wisdom, see *Cher.* 10; *Leg.* 2.82; on Sarah and virtue, see *Leg.* 3.217-218, 3.244; *Abr.* 206; *Sacr.* 59; *Fug.* 128; *Det.* 59; *Post.* 62; *Her.* 62. This does not mean that Sarah would be consistently prominent in Philo's interpretative texts. On the contrary, Sarah is rarely mentioned and sometimes even omitted from *De migratione Abrahami* on *Gen* 12,1-6. She enters the story only in section 93, which discusses the incident in Egypt (cf. *Gen* 12,11). See Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, 147-148.

16. See esp. *QG* 4.11: "Why does He again say in the singular, 'Where is Sarah, thy wife, and he answered, In the tent'? ... To this question he replies, 'Behold, virtue is not only in my mind but also in an empty and safe tent, in my body, extending itself and spreading as far as the senses and the other functional parts (of the body). For in accordance with virtue I see and hear and smell and taste and touch, and I make other movements in accordance with wisdom, health, fortitude and justice.'" For further references and discussion, see Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, 152.

17. All quotations from ancient Greek literature are from the Loeb Classical Library, unless otherwise noted.

This passage contains an allegorical interpretation of the Genesis narrative, where Abraham is portrayed as following Sarah's advice. Philo's exposition must be read in the light of his pedagogical views and ideals.¹⁸ When Abraham as a symbol of mind became aware that "he could not beget seed out of perfect virtue," i.e. Sarah, Sarah made a plan to produce a child via Hagar and advised Abraham "to beget children out of the handmaiden." In Philo's interpretation, which echoes ancient allegorical readings of Homer, Hagar is thus allegorized as the preliminary learning of encyclical studies.¹⁹ Such a training is necessary before one may proceed to the higher level of philosophy, the pursuit of wisdom.²⁰

In Genesis, Abraham is said to have become sad when Sarah wanted to drive Hagar and Ishmael away. Philo comments on Gen 21,12, which follows Sarah's decision and includes God's advice to Abraham, as follows: "Do not let the matter be hard in your sight on account of the child and on account of the slave-girl; whatever Sarra says to you, obey her voice, for in Isaak offspring shall be named for you."²¹ Acknowledging Abraham's difficulty in rejecting

18. Philo's pedagogical views have been analysed by Alan Mendelson, *Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria* (MHUC 7; Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1982). The figures of Sarah and Hagar also gave rise to other kinds of allegorical interpretations in early Christian literature; see e.g. Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Allegories of Hagar: Reading Galatians 4,21-31 with Postmodern Feminist Eyes," in *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (ed. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. McKnight; JSOTSup 109; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 228-250.

19. In Greek pedagogy, encyclical studies denoted a cycle of subjects that prepared the pupil to take his or her place in society, including grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy. They also came to serve as symbols for Greek culture and civilization. See Mendelson, *Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria*; Erkki Koskeniemi, "Philo and Classical Education," in *Reading Philo: A Handbook to Philo of Alexandria* (ed. Torrey Seland; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 102-128.

20. Sarah respectively stands for wisdom, virtue, and prudence; see *Congr.* 1-2, 6, 9, 11-12, 23, 71-73, 78, 139-142, 180; also *Mut.* 255; *Post.* 130. Since Abraham had to take the foreign Hagar before he could conceive a child with Sarah, Philo argues that Jews can attend encyclical training which ultimately serves the practice of true philosophy (*Congr.* 22-24, 74-76, 80). Cf. the Greek allegorical readings according to which Penelope's suitors could not win her and had to contend themselves with her maids (*Odyssey* 12). Like Penelope's suitors, those who cannot attain philosophy should still undertake *enkyklios paideia*, the time of pregnancy preceding proper philosophy (*Congr.* 145). See J.M. Rogers, "The Philonic and the Pauline: Hagar and Sarah in the Exegesis of Didymus the Blind," *SPhiloA* 26 (2014), 57-77. Regarding the Greek allegorical readings, see esp. Gorgias of Leontini from the fifth century BCE: "Those who neglect philosophy and spend their time on ordinary studies are like the suitors who desired Penelope but slept with her maids." The citation is from K. Freeman, *Anticilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 139. See also Plutarch, *De liberis educandis* 7D.

21. The English translation from the Septuagint follows the NETS.

Hagar and his need to listen to Sarah, Philo writes that “for if we choose to hearken to all that virtue recommends, we shall be happy (εὐδαιμονήσομεν)” (*Leg.* 3.245).²²

Sarah is thus imagined to advise her husband, which implies an association with power and authority. Philo exposes that listening to her brings about the state of welfare and happiness in the mind, εὐδαιμονία, which is regarded as the highest human good in Aristotelian ethics.²³ Sarah is not treated as inferior to Abraham, but her opinion is valued and even influences Abraham’s decision-making. Intriguingly, the same idea of Sarah’s authority appears in the later rabbinic literature. According to *Genesis Rabbah* 47:1, the rabbis acknowledge that while the husband usually gives orders to the wife, Sarah was her husband’s ruler on the basis of Gen 21,12.

2.2 Sarah the Ruler

Philo mentions the royal associations of Sarah’s name on several occasions. Etymology provides him with another opportunity to justify Sarah’s superiority.²⁴ He refers, for instance, to “Sarah the virtue whose nature is to rule” (*Her.* 258). To explain the change in Sarah’s name from Sarai (Σάρα) to Sarah (Σάρρα), which, according to Gen 17,15, followed the covenant made between God and Abraham after Ismael’s birth,²⁵ Philo claims that the change has to do with her development as a royal woman. Along with this change she came to represent general virtue (*Mut.* 77-78): “Sarai means my sovereignty, Sarah sovereign. The former is a symbol of specific virtue, the latter of generic.”²⁶

The same process is explained in *Cher.* 3, where Philo first refers to the “sovereign virtue in the person of Sarah,” and then exposes the meanings of her names in detail (*Cher.* 4-8):

22. On listening to Sarah’s advice, see also *Cher.* 9; *Congr.* 63, 68-69. Another passage that is related to the triangle between Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham and might deserve attention from the viewpoint of implicit authority is *Abr.* 247-254. Here Philo praises Sarah for offering Hagar to Abraham and calls Sarah ἄνθρωπος, a designation that often has a masculine, sex-specific flavour in Philo’s vocabulary; see Sly, *Philo’s Perception of Women*, 68-69, 149. On Sarah’s exemplary self-mastery in this passage, see also Niehoff, “Mother and Maiden,” 421-422.

23. See e.g. Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 329-333, 364-384. For εὐδαιμονία in Philo’s thought and intellectual context, see David T. Runia, “Eudaimonism in Hellenistic-Jewish Literature,” in *Shem in the Tents of Japhet: Essays on the Encounter of Judaism and Hellenism* (ed. James L. Kugel; JSJSup 74; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 131-157. Regarding the Jewish groups of Philo’s time, Runia points out (pp. 139-140) that the Therapeutae living in the Mareotic Lake are described as attaining εὐδαιμονία in *Contempl.* 90 and the Essenes of Palestine are linked with a felicitous life in *Prob.* 91.

24. Sly, *Philo’s Perception of Women*, 151.

25. Sarai is probably a more archaic form, but the meanings of the Hebrew names are virtually identical.

26. See also *Mut.* 61, 130.

On the first occasion Abraham and Sarah had not yet received their change of names, that is, they had not yet been changed in character to the betterment of soul. ... Sarah was still Sarai, the type of personal sovereignty (her name means “my sovereignty”); she had not yet undergone the change to generic virtue; for all that is generic must be imperishable. She still had her place with the particular and specific virtues. She was still prudence, as shown in the “I,” and similarly temperance, courage, justice, all perishable, because the sphere in which they move is the perishable “I.” ... Sarai again quits personal sovereignty to become Sarah, whose name is “sovereign,” and this means that instead of being specific and perishable virtue she has become generic and imperishable.²⁷

According to Philo, Sarah’s first name, which literally denotes “my sovereignty,” meant personal sovereignty and stood for specific virtues. Yet, after the change of her name, Sarah came to represent sovereignty in general, which implies that her virtue also became generic. Intriguingly, the same idea concerning the meaning of the change of name—that Sarah’s power came to extend over a larger group of people—occurs in the later rabbinic interpretation: *Genesis Rabbah* 47:1 maintains that Sarah was first a princess over her own people, but then became recognized as a princess to all humankind.

Some passages in Philo’s oeuvre spell out that Sarah does not represent just any type of rule but royal power in particular. In *Congr.* 1-3, Philo argues that Sarah stands for a queenly status:

Now Sarah’s name is, by interpretation, 2 “sovereignty of me,” and the wisdom in me, the self-control in me, the individual righteousness and each of the other virtues whose place is confined to the “me,” are a sovereignty over me only. That sovereignty rules and dominates me, who have willed to render obedience to it, in virtue of its natural queenship (βασιλὶς ἐκ φύσεως). This ruling power Moses 3 represents as at once barren and exceedingly prolific, since he acknowledges that from her sprang the most populous of nations. A startling paradox, yet true. For indeed virtue is barren as regards all that is bad, but shews herself a fruitful mother of the good; a motherhood which needs no midwifery, for she bears before the midwife comes.

Here Philo explains the meaning of Sarah’s name and associates it with the performance of virtues. Sarah may have been barren in one regard, but she was a fruitful mother of the good. A similar interpretation concerning the change in Sarah’s name is again attested in the rabbinic literature: *Mekhilta de-Rabbi*

27. The same connection to sovereignty comes up in several passages. See e.g. *Abr.* 99: “[T]he wife, they said, was virtue, her name being in Chaldean Sarah but in our language a sovereign lady, because nothing is more sovereign or dominant than virtue.” In *Cher.* 41, Philo explains that the “helpmates” of the patriarchs “are called women, but are in reality virtues,” Sarah being, as elsewhere in his corpus, “sovereign and leader.” In *Abr.* 99, Philo refers to “some natural philosophers who took the passage allegorically, not without good reason.” These people can be identified as “Jewish allegorists of diverse philosophical backgrounds and various hermeneutical tendencies”; so, Niehoff, “Mother and Maiden,” 431.

Ishmael (Amalek 3.43-45) claims that “a larger letter” was added to Sarah’s name because she performed good deeds.

Philo’s reference to the “natural queenship” embodied by Sarah raises the question of what follows from Sarah’s association with wisdom. In fact, Philo’s mention might be influenced by the Stoic tradition that portrays the sage as a king.²⁸ In the Stoic discourse, there are classes of people by nature.²⁹ The wise person represents a model to be emulated by those who seek wisdom and aspire to become wise themselves.³⁰ Accordingly, Philo might even imply that this biblical female figure exemplifies the sage, the goal of aspiration in Hellenistic virtue ethics. Such a possibility is intriguing, for Philo typically links exemplary sagehood with Moses (esp. *Opif.* 8; *Virt.* 51; *Mos.* 1.158-159) and the patriarchs (esp. *Abr.* 3-4).³¹

In sum, Sarah is subordinate to her husband, yet she is presented positively as a model for virtue and wisdom, and even as a queen-like and powerful figure. In the light of Stoic views, her association with royalty might suggest that Sarah counts as an exemplary wise person, which is rare of a woman. This kind of praise is enabled, however, by Philo’s allegorical interpretation of the biblical narrative, which aims at unpacking the story written by Moses and thus grasping the soul’s migration from the material world towards the divine.

3. Sarah the Ancestral Queen: A Look at Josephus’s Historical Narratives

Several scholars have analysed Josephus’s treatment of biblical female figures. Many have paid attention to the rewriting of women particularly in his *Jewish*

28. See esp. Arius Didymus 2.7.5-12; Cicero, *Fin.* 3.75; *Rep.* 1.28; Diog. Laert. 7.122; John Sellars, *The Art of Living: The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 60. See also René Brouwer, *The Stoic Sage: The Early Stoics on Wisdom, Sagehood and Socrates* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 59-60. For the kingship of a wise person in Philo’s texts, see *Migr.* 197; *Mut.* 152; *Somn.* 2.244; cf. 4 Macc 2,21-23.

29. See e.g. I. G. Kidd, “Stoic Intermediates and the End for Man,” in *Problems in Stoicism* (ed. A. A. Long; London: Athlone, 1971), 150-172, esp. 164-165, 172. On classes of people in Philo’s texts, see Mendelson, *Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria*, 47-51.

30. See Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* (trans. Michael Chase; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 220, 224; Julia Annas, “The Sage in Ancient Philosophy,” in *Anthropine Sophia* (ed. Francesca Alesse et al.; Naples: Bibliopolis, 2008), 11-27, esp. 13.

31. See Wayne A. Meeks, “Moses as God and King,” in *Religions in Antiquity* (ed. Jacob Neusner; Leiden: Brill, 1968), 354-371; Mendelson, *Secular Education in Philo of Alexandria*, 47-65; David Winston, *The Ancestral Philosophy: Hellenistic Philosophy in Second Temple Judaism* (BJS 331; SPhilo 4; Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2001), 171-180; Erkki Koskeniemi, “Moses-A Well-Educated Man: A Look at the Educational Idea in Early Judaism,” *JSP* 17/4 (2008), 281-296. On Jewish sages, more broadly, see Elisa Uusimäki, “The Rise of the Sage in Greek and Jewish Antiquity,” *JSJ* 49/1 (2018), 1-29.

Antiquities.³² Betsy Halpern-Amaru and Athalya Brenner point out Josephus's tendency to downplay Pentateuchal women in his account of Jewish history.³³ He reshapes characters to better fit his narrative; for instance, women's direct speeches, present in the Hebrew Scriptures, are not included at times. In a similar vein, Louis Feldman states that Josephus seems to mention women only when their presence becomes absolutely necessary for his narration.³⁴ These elements have often been identified as "Hellenistic influences." Recently, Tal Ilan has questioned the usefulness of such a comparison that juxtaposes the Hebrew Scriptures and *Jewish Antiquities*. The portrayals of female figures and features that characterize them may not always reflect Josephus's own ideas. Rather, Ilan claims that Josephus remains faithful to his sources and aims at reproducing a genre with which he is familiar: the Hellenistic romance.³⁵

Josephus's view of Sarah is most explicitly expressed in his *Jewish Antiquities*. The following analysis will mostly focus on it, yet Josephus's other compositions are taken into consideration when relevant for the discussion. By focusing on those passages that connect Sarah with royalty and power (i.e. Sarah's residing in Pharaoh's court, her offspring, and her death), we shall demonstrate that Josephus's portrayal of biblical women is more complex than previous studies would suggest. Despite the author's tendency to play down

32. See Betsy Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Biblical Women in Josephus' *Antiquities*," *JJS* 39 (1988), 43-70; Sheryl Anne Brown, *No Longer Be Silent: First Century Jewish Portraits of Biblical Women. Studies in Pseudo-Philo's Biblical Antiquities and Josephus' Jewish Antiquities* (Louisville, KY: Westminster & John Knox, 1992); Bärbel Mayer-Schärtel, *Das Frauenbild des Josephus: Eine sozialgeschichtliche und kultur-anthropologische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1995); Athalya Brenner, "Are We Amused? Small and Big Differences in Josephus's Re-Presentations of Biblical Female Figures in the *Jewish Antiquities* 1-8," in *Are We Amused? Humour about Women in the Biblical Worlds* (ed. Athalya Brenner; JSOTSup 383; London: T&T Clark, 2003), 90-106. For Josephus's general attitude towards women, see Louis H. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 188-190; Tal Ilan, "Josephus and Women," in *A Companion to Josephus* (ed. Honora Howell Chapman and Zuleika Rodgers; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 210-221, esp. 217-218.

33. Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Biblical Women," 44; Brenner, "Are We Amused," 92. Similarly, Eileen M. Schuller, "Women of the Exodus in Biblical Retellings of the Second Temple Period," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy L. Day; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 178-194.

34. Louis Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (JSJSup 58; Leiden: Brill 1998), 162.

35. Ilan, "Josephus and Women," 213; eadem, "Flavius Josephus und die Frauen der Bibel," in *Frühjüdische Schriften: Die Bibel und die Frauen. Eine exegetisch-kultur-geschichtliche Enzyklopädie* (ed. Eileen Schuller and Marie-Theres Wacker; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2017), 156-173. Elsewhere Ilan argues that Josephus's portrayal of women in general, and that of the "historical" female figures of A.J. that are depicted as demonic and evil in particular, predominantly reflects ideas found in his source, Nicolaos of Damascus; see Ilan, *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* (TSAJ 76; Tübingen: Mohr, 1999; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 85-126.

biblical women in *Antiquities*, selected passages concerning Sarah reflect a more nuanced reception of the female figure.

3.1 Sarah in Egypt (*Ant.* 1.162-165; *War* 5.379-381)

Sarah features prominently in Genesis 12. In this passage, which happens soon after the Lord had called Abraham, Abraham and Sarah move to Egypt due to famine and enter into a royal setting, the Pharaoh's court. Josephus tells about the stay there as follows:

He took Sarra with him and, hearing the Egyptians' frenzy for women, lest the kind should slay him because of his wife's beauty, he devised the following scheme: he pretended to be her brother and, telling her that their interest required it, instructed her to play her part accordingly. On their arrival in Egypt all fell out as Abraham had suspected: his wife's beauty was noised abroad, insomuch that Pharaoh, the king of the Egyptians, not content with the reports of her, was fired with a desire to see her and on the point of laying hands on her. But God thwarted his criminal passion by an outbreak of disease and political disturbance, and when he had sacrifices offered to discover a remedy, the priests declared that his calamity was due to the wrath of God, because he had wished to outrage the stranger's wife. Terrified, he asked Sarra who she was and who was this man she had brought with her. On learning the truth he made his excuses to Abraham: it was, he said, in the belief that she was his sister, not his wife, that he had set his affections on her; he had wished to contract a marriage alliance and not to outrage her in a transport of passion.

The section displays various alterations vis-à-vis the Genesis narrative.³⁶ First, Josephus emphasizes that the Egyptians have a frenzy for women. While the *Genesis Apocryphon* presents Sarah's beauty in erotic terms,³⁷ such a description is not present in Josephus's *Antiquities*. Rather, the possible "danger" created by Sarah's beauty is because of the Egyptians and their frenzy for women.³⁸ Josephus underlines that the blame is entirely on the Egyptians; Sarah remains the target of other people's uncontrolled desires without any role of her own. Sarah's passive nature further emerges as Josephus highlights

36. Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Biblical Women," 145-146.

37. See 1QapGen^{af} 20:2-8 detailing aspects of Sarah's body (trans. Michael O. Wise, DSSSEL): "[]how and beautiful is the aspect of her face, and how[] [pl]easant and how supple is the hair of her head. How lovely are her eyes; how pleasant her nose and all the radiance of her face. How shapely is her breast, how gorgeous all her fairness! Her arms, how comely! Her hands, how perfect—How [lovely] is every aspect of her hands! How exquisite are her palms, how long and delicate all her fingers! Her feet, how attractive! How perfect are her thighs! Neither virgins nor brides entering the bridal chamber exceed her charms. Over all women is her beauty supreme, her loveliness far above them all. Yet with all this comeliness, she possesses great wisdom, and all that she has is beautiful." Regarding this passage, see William Loader, *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Sexuality: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Sectarian and Related Literature at Qumran* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 294-296.

38. Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Biblical Women," 145-146.

Abraham cautiously making a plan that he pretends to be Sarah's brother in order not to be killed; Abraham also instructs his wife on this plan.

Moreover, Josephus elaborates on Sarah's encounter with the Pharaoh. He emphasizes both Sarah's beauty and the emotions it evokes, i.e. Pharaoh's desire to see Sarah and to touch her.³⁹ A divine intervention happens at this point of the narrative, suggesting that the Pharaoh did not have any opportunity to make his advances to Sarah. Sarah's chastity appears to differ from Genesis.⁴⁰ Josephus stresses Sarah's integrity and thus Abraham's honour, emphasising that the purity of the lineage was not threatened by the Pharaoh's desire, but all that happened was part of a divine plan.⁴¹

Halpern-Amaru and Feldman have identified Hellenistic features in this passage. Halpern-Amaru detects them in Sarah's character: she is depicted without any trace of assertiveness or independence, which are inappropriate in the Hellenistic portrayal of a woman.⁴² Feldman notes that Josephus's version contains elements that resemble Hellenistic novels.⁴³ The romantic motifs, in particular, would have been appreciated by readers.⁴⁴ These include Josephus's praise of Sarah's beauty, which is known abroad, and Abraham's suspicion that something bad will happen, which creates an expectation in the audience.⁴⁵

39. Emotions and their mastery play a significant role in many early Jewish texts. Notably, Hellenistic philosophers devoted much attention to the topic; see note 4 above.

40. Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Biblical Women," 145. Cf. *Genesis Apocryphon* 20:9-31 which narrates that Pharaoh took Sarah as his spouse and that she remained with him for two years; the author points out that sexual intercourse did not take place during this time. On female beauty and the danger it creates in biblical narratives, see Hanna Tervanotko, "Gendered Beauty: Observations on Portraying Beautiful Men and Women in the Hebrew Bible," in *So good, so beautiful: Brothers and sisters holding together - Wat goed is het, wat mooi! Broers en zussen sluiten zich aaneen* (ed. Peter Tomson and Jaap de Lange; Gorichem: Narratio, 2015), 41-52.

41. Philo also aims at outlining the "purity" of the lineage as he discusses the story of Abraham and Sarah in Pharaoh's court (esp. *Abr.* 90, 98); Niehoff, "Mother and Maiden," 423-424.

42. Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Biblical Women," 146n12.

43. Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Bible*, 218; idem, *Judean Antiquities 1-4*, 61. A new type of literature—simple adventure stories on "love, travel and violence"—emerged in middle or late Hellenistic times. These fictive narratives, which gained popularity rather soon, typically concentrate on the experiences of individuals, though the setting may be historical; see Tomas Hägg, *The Novel in Antiquity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 3. See also Gareth L. Schmeling, ed., *The Novel in the Ancient World* (2nd ed.; Leiden: Brill, 2003); Tim Whitmarsh, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Greek and Roman Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

44. See also Maren R. Niehoff, "Desires Crossing Boundaries: Romance and History in Josephus's *Antiquities*," in *Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls: John Collins at Seventy* (ed. Joel Baden et al.; JSJSup 175; Leiden: Brill, 2017), 973-990, though Niehoff does not discuss the figure of Sarah.

45. Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Bible*, 218; idem, *Judean Antiquities 1-4*, 61.

Pharaoh is even willing to marry Sarah, a notion not found in Genesis where he is rather furious about the whole encounter.⁴⁶ Also, Sarah herself announces to Pharaoh who she is as soon as the opportunity raises, while in Genesis it is not clear how he comes to know her identity.⁴⁷ This detail highlights Sarah's fidelity to Abraham: there is no suspicion that Pharaoh would have uncovered it in a way that could place any suspicion on her.

Josephus's fondness of this story is apparent since he also tells the episode in his *War* as he recounts lessons of how God has delivered the Israelite people:

Nechaos, also called Pharaoh, the reigning king of Egypt, came down with a prodigious host and carried off Sarah, a princess, and the mother of our race. What action, then did her husband Abraham, our forefather, take? Did he avenge himself on the ravisher with the sword? He had, to be sure, three hundred and eighteen officers under him, each in command of a boundless army. Or did he not rather count these as nothing, if unaided by God, and uplifting pure hands towards this spot which you have now polluted enlist the invincible Ally on his side? And was not the queen, after one night's absence, sent back immaculate to her lord, while the Egyptian, in awe of the sport which you have stained with the blood of your countrymen and trembling at his visions of the night, fled, bestowing silver and gold upon those Hebrews beloved God?

This passage betrays Josephus's interest in specific elements of the narrative, especially Sarah's chastity. Halpern-Amaru argues that Sarah's condition—that she was not harmed in any way—made Josephus return to this narrative.⁴⁸ This version portrays a striking difference vis-à-vis *Antiquities*: instead of being connected only to Abraham, the *War* maintains Sarah's connection to the broader population. Josephus presents the etymology of her name (i.e. princess or queen) twice. Moreover, he refers to Sarah as “the mother of our race” (*War* 5.379). As pointed out above, the attribution “mother” appears to be an honorific title.⁴⁹ It suggests that Sarah is not only Abraham's spouse, but a character with some public recognition of her own to the Jewish people (cf. the first person plural pronoun in the phrase “our race”).

3.2 Sarah and Procreation (*Ant.* 1.187-190)

Another passage where Josephus grants Sarah evident royal attributions concerns Ishmael's birth (*Ant.* 1.187-190). This narrative deals with Sarah's infertility and her desire to provide Abraham with offspring. While in Genesis it is Sarah who takes the initiative and proposes that Abraham take her own slave-

46. Cf. *Genesis Apocryphon* where Pharaoh actually marries Sarah. See note 40 above.

47. Feldman, *Judean Antiquities* 1-4, 62.

48. Halpern-Amaru, “Portraits of Biblical Women,” 146.

49. See note 6 above: while this title does not appear in Genesis, it was widely used in other texts from Jewish antiquity. Feldman, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*, 225, mentions that the author may be referring to Genesis 15, where God first promises Abraham that he will be the ancestor for the multitude of nations (Gen 17,5). Concerning Sarah, God says: “she shall give rise to nations.” Thus, Sarah is not directly called “mother” in this passage, nor is the promise given to her.

girl Hagar (Gen 16,1-2), the roles are reversed in the *Antiquities*. Josephus narrates the story from Abraham's perspective, highlighting his stress concerning the lack of an heir. After Abraham consults God on the matter, Sarah presents Hagar to him as a result of the consultation. While depicting Hagar's subsequent pregnancy and escape from her mistress (cf. Gen 16,4-15), Josephus employs distinctively "royal" terminology as he elaborates on the relationship between Hagar and Sarah:

Becoming pregnant (Hagar), this servant had the insolence to abuse Sarra, assuming queenly airs as though the dominion (βασιλίζουσα) were to pass to her unborn son ... but if she returned home she would become the mother of a son hereafter to reign over that country. Obedient to this behest she returned.

To some extent, the roles played by the characters in *Ant.* 1.187-190 resemble those examined above: Abraham clearly takes the lead, yet Sarah is depicted with royal connotations. Josephus explicitly refers to Sarah's "queenly airs." Similarly to the *War* 5.379-381, Josephus connects the royal attributes with the expected offspring. Using the term "royal dominion" (βασιλίζουσα), which Hagar seems to assume for her unborn child, Josephus hints that a special power was to be granted to Sarah's offspring: the future new-born son would rule over the country. All in all, various verses are interconnected, thus displaying Josephus's "royal" view of Abraham's family.

When Ishmael and his brother Isaac, Sarah's son, are born, Josephus narrates how Sarah makes Hagar and Ishmael leave (*Ant.* 1.215-216). He writes that Sarah was afraid that Ishmael would kill Isaac, and the author may have assumed a potential competition in leadership underlying this action (cf. Gen 21,11-12). Similarly to Gen 21,12-14, Josephus writes that Abraham did not approve of Sarah's idea at first, but seeing that it was the godly will, he agreed to make Hagar and Ishmael leave.⁵⁰

3.3 Sarah's death (*A.J.* 1.237)

Sarah's death is briefly mentioned in Gen 23,1-2, which tells that Abraham mourned and wept for his dead wife. Thereafter, Abraham searches for Sarah's burial place and buries her in a cave in Machpelah near Hebron (Gen 23,19). The section presents Sarah's funeral as a private matter that Abraham handles on his own. While Josephus's account on the same event is much shorter, it demonstrates some significant differences vis-à-vis the Genesis report:

Not long after Sarra died at the age of one hundred and twenty-seven years. They buried her in Hebron, where the Canaanites offered burial ground for her at the public expense (δημοσίῳ), but Abraham bought the spot for four hundred shekels of Ephraim, a native of the place. Here too Abraham and his descendants built their own tombs.

50. In the rabbinic literature, in contrast, Sarah is often condemned for her treatment of Hagar (e.g. *Genesis Rabbah* 45.4-8). See Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Biblical Women," 147.

Thus, Josephus notes that Abraham bought the place from a native habitant, Ephraim, with four hundred shekels. When mentioning that the funeral could have been arranged at public expense, he differs drastically from Genesis. Furthermore, such a remark does not generally align with Josephus's treatment of the funerals of female figures.⁵¹

The Greek term for public expense, δημοσία, denotes something that belongs to the public or to the state. It is widely used in various texts. In Herodotus's writings, for instance, the term stands for any public building, treasury or even a servant. Aristotle, in turn, uses the term to signify state-property or public cost.⁵² These examples are sufficient to suggest that Josephus depicts Sarah's funeral as a public matter, which could have been funded by common finances and perhaps attended by many people, as public funerals would be.

In Hebrew literature, a man's funeral is usually a more public event, while that of a woman is a private matter and family affair.⁵³ Sarah's funeral is also reported as a private event in Genesis, while Josephus refers to public expense, thus implicitly presenting Sarah as a person with some public recognition. Since the condition for a lavish public funeral was that one was a patriotic citizen and a political figure, Josephus's treatment of Sarah's death seemingly reflects Greco-Roman burial practices.⁵⁴

In so doing, Josephus may attempt to demonstrate that high-class Jewish customs do not differ from those of the ruling class. In the background could also be the Hebrew proclivity for emphasizing prominent women on their death, apparent in the cases of Sarah, Rachel, Leah, and Miriam (Gen 23,1-2, 19; 35,19; 49,31; Num 20,1).⁵⁵ Finally, it became more common to portray people on their death (or death-bed), as well as to describe their afterlife, in

51. Feldman, *Josephus' Interpretation of the Bible*, 225, points out that only selected individuals could receive this kind of treatment. Cf. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.34, who describes that a funeral of those who had died in a war was celebrated at public expense.

52. LSJ Greek dictionary.

53. Historical and archaeological studies also highlight different burial practices of men and women. Levi Yizhaq Rahmani, "Ancient Jerusalem's Funerary Customs and Tombs, Part Three," *Biblical Archaeologist* (1982), 43-53, esp. 44, writes that the city commission participated in the funeral procession of a man, but not in that of a woman. According to Léonie J. Archer, *Her Price is beyond Rubies: The Jewish Woman in Graeco-Roman Palestine* (JSOTSup 60; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 266-278, women's ossuary inscriptions often did not contain their names.

54. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible*, 356. As for other biblical women, Miriam is commemorated with a public funeral (A.J. 4.78). For funeral practices of Greco-Roman times, see Fernand de Visscher, *Le droit des tombeaux romains* (Milan: Giuffrè editore, 1963); Donna C. Kurtz and John Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971); Jon Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999).

55. In many instances women are the best remembered at death; see Rachel Hachlili, *Jewish Funerary Customs, Practices and Rites in the Second Temple Period* (JSJSup 94; Leiden: Brill, 2005), 317-319; Michael L. Satlow, *Jewish Marriage in Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 225-249.

Jewish writings from the Greco-Roman era.⁵⁶ All these factors may have affected Josephus's account of Sarah's death.

4. *The Figure of Sarah and Hellenistic Ideals on Women*

Both Philo and Josephus link Sarah with power and royalty. For Philo, she represents wisdom and virtue to be heard and followed by others. The idea of the figure as a queenly character is intriguing and highlights her exemplarity. Josephus also uses royal terminology while addressing Sarah. Sarah and Hagar fight over who gets to be the mother of the future monarch, whilst Sarah's funeral reflects her public recognition. Let us now elaborate on the possible Hellenistic influences that may lie behind these interpretations. To understand the cultural context in which Philo and Josephus wrote on women, Greek philosophical conceptions of gender should be briefly reviewed, since both authors had received Hellenistic education and were thus under the influence of such philosophical conceptions, at least to some extent.

Plato's and Aristotle's texts concerning the nature of humankind became widely influential in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Yet, the metaphysical and natural philosophies of these authors have fundamental differences.⁵⁷ Plato famously writes that men are superior to women and that men who have failed in mastering emotions will reincarnate as women (*Tim.* 42a-b).⁵⁸ Even so, the only natural differences between women and men are that women are weaker regarding natural strength and that the woman conceives, while the man fathers (*Rep.* 454D-E, 455E).⁵⁹ Nature provides equality to the extent that in the ideal state, gender does not play a role in the distribution of roles of state guardianship (*Rep.* 455D).⁶⁰ Humanity is treated as one entity; the human soul is essentially sexless and happens to be incarnated in sexed bodies temporarily.⁶¹

56. See e.g. Joseph Sievers, "Josephus and the Afterlife," in *Understanding Josephus: Seven Perspectives* (ed. Steve Mason; JSPSup 32; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 20-34; Davies, *Death, Burial and Rebirth*, 110-124.

57. Nicholas D. Smith, "Plato and Aristotle on the Nature of Women," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21 (1983), 467-478, esp. 478.

58. Plato continues with the same theme of evil men who become women in reincarnation in *Tim.* 91a. See Smith, "Plato and Aristotle," 473.

59. Smith, "Plato and Aristotle," 470. Tanja Ruben, *Le discours comme image: énonciation, récit et connaissance dans le Timée-Critias de Platon* (Collection d'études anciennes 153; Paris: Les belles lettres, 2016), 272-274, outlines women as the "second generation" who were made by the gods for the reproductive purpose of humanity.

60. Smith, "Plato and Aristotle," 467.

61. Smith, "Plato and Aristotle," 477. Francis MacDonald Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (London: Routledge, 1952), 292, states: "[T]he whole account of the human soul and body applies equally to men and women." See also Nicole Lorraux, *Les enfants d'Athènes: Idées athéniennes sur la citoyenneté et la division des sexes* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 75-91.

Aristotle was more concerned with biology and its implications on human nature, emphatically separating between men and women.⁶² He claims that the female state of being is a deformity, “though one which occurs in the ordinary course of nature” (*Gen. an.* 4.775a). Aristotle thus accepted Plato’s demand “that a difference in role or pursuit was because of difference in nature.”⁶³ Both claim that justice happens when social roles follow nature. Unlike Plato, Aristotle leaves no doubt, however, that men are better fitted to command than women. Women’s inferiority is not restricted to physical capacities. Instead, both souls and bodies of women are different (weaker) by nature, which results in men’s natural domination over women as well as in different social capacities: “Also, as between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject” (*Pol.* 1.1254b).⁶⁴

Philo maintains the Aristotelian contrast between the categories of female and male.⁶⁵ Women are inferior to men simply by nature.⁶⁶ As is typical of Greco-Roman authors, Philo usually links men with the rational mind or intellect (νοῦς) and women with the sense-perception (αἴσθησις).⁶⁷ Women remain subordinated to men since males should rule over females as the (superior) mind rules over the (inferior) sense-perception (*Leg.* 3.222).⁶⁸ Even so, the aforementioned passages that celebrate Sarah may not reveal this at first glance. It should thus be emphasized that Sarah receives her exceptional status as a result of specific interpretative choices which downplay her femininity.

Sarah represents wisdom and virtue in Philo’s allegorical reading of the Pentateuch, but Philo considers these virtues—grammatically feminine terms—to involve masculine powers (*Fug.* 51-52). To demonstrate Sarah’s excellence, Philo removes her from the women’s world by allegorically exposing the mention in Gen 18,11 that Sarah ceased to menstruate: this event made her body more male-like, masculinized her soul, and transformed it into that of an

62. The categories of male and female were identified along with several pairs of two principles; Stephen R.L. Clark, “Aristotle’s Woman,” *History of Political Thought* 3 (1982), 177-191, esp. 183.

63. W.W. Fortenbaugh, “Aristotle on Slaves and Women,” in *Articles on Aristotle 2: Ethics and Politics* (ed. Jonathan Barnes et al.; London: Duckworth, 1977), 135-141.

64. Yet, unlike slaves who lack the deliberative part of the soul, women possess it, though “without full authority.” Children have this part of the soul in an undeveloped form (*Pol.* 1260a12); Smith, “Plato and Aristotle,” 467-468, 475, 477.

65. Yehoshua Amir and Maren Niehoff, “Philo Judaeus (Philo of Alexandria),” *EncJud* 16:63-64, explain that while Philo was generally influenced by Plato’s thought, regarding women it was Aristotle’s biology, according to which men and women are physically different, that had an impact on him; see *Ebr.* 73, 211; *Abr.* 100-101.

66. See *Spec.* 2.124, 4.223; *QE* 1.7; Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*, 230.

67. See esp. *Opif.* 165; *Spec.* 1.201; *Leg.* 2.38; *QG* 1.25. For further discussion, see e.g. Baer, *Philo’s Use of the Categories Male and Female*, 39; Tilford, “Ways of Women,” 24. An exceptional male is the Pharaoh; see Sarah Pearce, *The Land of the Body: Studies in Philo’s Representation of Egypt* (WUNT 208; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), esp. 141-159.

68. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*, 231.

aged virgin.⁶⁹ Based on Abraham's claim that Sarah is his half-sister (Gen 20,12), Philo also describes Sarah the wisdom (*Sophia*) as being born from the Father, the cause of all that exists (*Ebr.* 59-61). This resembles the Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena, who was born out of Zeus.⁷⁰

In other words, Philo stresses that Sarah is a "virgin" (παρθένης), a category under which women can become manlike. Virginity does not apply to any biological state, sexual inexperience, or age. Instead, it is an honorific title, meant to accentuate women's separation from bodily womanhood.⁷¹ Ultimately, the virginal state of the soul is a necessary prerequisite for ascending towards a union with the divine.⁷² This idea becomes obvious when Philo discusses the notion that human souls can become "virgins."⁷³ According to him, virginity can be regained in the journey of the soul by casting off women's bodily concerns that are allegorized as sense-perception (*Cher.* 50).⁷⁴

Allegorical interpretation is fundamental to Philo's thought: it aims at revealing the essential meaning of the scriptural text, which for him represents the deep reality. Philo's admiration of certain biblical women is intertwined with his use of this method. He reads their post-menopausal state as virginal and uses it as a basis for an allegorical reading. The figures are not admirable as women but as qualities. This attitude is spelled out in *Cher.* 40: "For the helpmeets of these men [Moses and the patriarchs] are called women, but are in reality virtues."⁷⁵ In the case of Sarah, Philo interprets the aged virgin as

69. See esp. *QG* 4:15, but also *Cher.* 50; *Det.* 28; *Post.* 134. See Wegner, "Philo's Portrayal of Women," 55-56; Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*, 250; Niehoff, "Mother and Maiden," 433-434; Tilford, "Ways of Women," 18, 28, 33-34, 36-37.

70. See Hesiod, *Theogony* 924, and Niehoff, "Mother and Maiden," 438-443.

71. Various goddesses are called virgins which implies that the title is honorific (e.g. Athena in *Pausanias* 5.11, 10). In Philo's texts, the virgins are spouses and mothers of the Israelite leaders (Zipporah, Leah, Rebecca, Tamar, and Hannah), except for Dinah. In addition, Philo's use of the terms "woman" and "virgin" is not fully consistent in the cases of Rachel and Miriam. Most of the women named as "virgins" by Philo are adults and their age may be even emphasized (e.g. Sarah). See Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, 71, 73, 119-123, 145-178, 163-174.

72. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*, 250.

73. E.g. *Cher.* 50. See Baer, *Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female*, 51-53; Mattila, "Wisdom," 105-108.

74. Tilford, "Ways of Women," 17, 26. The motif serves a pedagogical purpose; virginity is a "guide" by which the souls of Jewish wisdom-lovers can be healed of their corporeal nature in order to unite with God (cf. *Cher.* 52); *ibid.*, 38.

75. When avoiding discussion on certain characters as "female" Philo is not alone. This feature is recognizable in other texts from the first centuries CE. See e.g. Elizabeth Castelli, "Virginity and Its Meaning for Women's Sexuality in Early Christianity," *JFSR* 2 (1986), 61-88; eadem, "I Will Make Mary Male: Pieties of the Body and Gender: Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity," in *Body Guards: The Cultural politics of Gender Ambiguity* (ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub; New York: Routledge, 1991), 29-39; Susanna Elm, *'Virgins of God': The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

wisdom and virtue, thus claiming that Moses is actually discussing the soul's journey by means of this female figure.

Like Philo, Josephus was well-educated and thus familiar with Hellenistic views of women. Josephus even mentions that he is addressing a Greek-speaking audience (*Ant.* preface). Unlike Philo, he does not, however, explicitly apply the twofold model of humanity known from Greek philosophical discourse. Rather, he is indebted to Hellenistic gender ideals in a more subtle way.

As discussed above, Josephus relies on scriptural and other sources, eventually building up a new narrative which has affinities with Hellenistic romances.⁷⁶ These kinds of elements are visible in those passages where Josephus discusses Sarah and her "royal" features. In particular, his account of Sarah's stay at Pharaoh's court is coloured with descriptions of emotions and new turns in the plotline that serve to create more suspense in the narrative. Meanwhile, Sarah's lack of independence and passivity may reflect a conception of women's inferiority, familiar from the Greek philosophical discussion.

Josephus's portrayal of biblical women has often been compared with their depiction in the Pentateuch, and such an analysis has been used to draw conclusions concerning his attitude towards women.⁷⁷ Consequently, Josephus's tendency to downplay female figures has been associated with negative claims on women's inferiority, known from Greek philosophical sources.⁷⁸ Such an approach does seem convincing in the light of certain features in Josephus's narration, but it does not reveal everything about the author's "Hellenistic" reception of biblical women, as the observed link between Sarah and romantic motifs shows. Sarah also receives some public recognition: Josephus addresses her as a royal figure and the mother of the whole nation,⁷⁹ and in addition Sarah's funeral account demonstrates signs of power.

Josephus may treat some women respectfully because of his perception of their individual merits. Alternatively, the positive outlook of his narration may simply better serve his purpose, showing, for instance, that prominent Israelite people had public funerals that can be compared to Greek customs. Both options remain possible in the case of Sarah who receives royal attributes and some public recognition. Intriguingly, Josephus's most striking Hellenistic influences may not point to Greek philosophical conceptions, but rather reflect the tradition of romantic story-telling.

76. See note 35 and the literature quoted there.

77. Halpern-Amaru, "Portraits of Biblical Women," 43-70; Brenner, "Are We Amused," 91; Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible*, 162, 537-538.

78. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible*, 564, argues that Josephus's comments would have reminded his audience of "misogynist comments in Homer (*Odyssey* 11.436-39), Plato (*Timaeus* 90E), and Aristotle (*De Generatione animalium* 775A)."

79. Cf. James L. Bailey, "Josephus' Portrayal of the Matriarchs," in *Josephus, Judaism and Christianity* (ed. Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata; Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 154-179.

5. *Concluding Reflections*

Philo and Josephus treat Sarah in accommodating ways and allow her space in their texts. Surely, this kind of positive interpretation is not surprising insofar as the literary traditions of Genesis mostly depict Sarah as a compliant figure; her character lacks polemical aspects and she is regarded as the ideal spouse for Abraham who mourns after her death. Even so, the accommodating treatment of Sarah is not self-evident considering Philo's and Josephus's other comments on, and portrayals of, biblical women.

Philo acknowledges Sarah's value in a more consistent and explicit way by identifying her with wisdom and virtue. Philo also takes up the royal connotation of Sarah's name on several occasions, thus highlighting her power, authority, and exemplarity. This interpretation of the figure results from his allegorical reading, which seeks to reveal the deep meaning of Moses's text, the soul's migration to God. Lurking in the background may also be the cultural model of some independent Ptolemaic queens, who were sisters of their co-rulers. Meanwhile, Josephus's appreciation of Sarah is clear simply because of her multiple appearances in his works—unlike many other biblical women. Even more so, Sarah's funeral account with an emphatic public association is exceptional and indicates the author's appreciation. Explicit royal attributes are further linked with the biblical woman in some passages.

All in all, both Philo and Josephus ascribe to Sarah royal attributes and other features that promote her as a virtuous model and an individual of public standing. A variety of emphases, philological and philosophical interpretations alike, jointly serve to construct Sarah's exemplarity. Different dimensions of the biblical female figure are revealed, therefore, when her role as a spouse and a mother is not taken as the starting point of analysis.