

Keturah / קטורה

Biblical Text

Isaac then brought [Rebekah] into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death.

Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan begot Sheba and Dedan. The descendants of Dedan were the Asshurim, the Letushim, and the Leummim. The descendants of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Enoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were descendants of Keturah.

Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac; but to Abraham's sons by concubines Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the East.

This was the total span of Abraham's life: one hundred and seventy-five years.

And Abraham breathed his last, dying at a good ripe age, old and contented; and he was gathered to his kin. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, facing Mamre, the field that Abraham had bought from the Hittites; there Abraham was buried, and Sarah his wife.

After the death of Abraham, God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac settled near Beer-lahai-roi. (Genesis 24:67, 25:1-10)

The sons born to Keturah, Abraham's concubine: Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak and Shuah. The sons of Jokshan: Sheba and Dedan (I Chronicles 1:32)

Ancient Source Text: Josephus

Abraham after this married Keturah, by whom six sons were born to him, men of courage, and of sagacious minds. ...the sons of Midian were Ephas, **Ophren**, Anoch, Ebidas, and Eldas. Now for all these sons and grand-sons, Abraham contrived to settle them in colonies: and they took possession of *Troglodytis* [land in East Africa, south of the Nile, on the western border of the Red Sea] and the country of *Arabia the Happy* [Arabian peninsula], as far as it reaches to the Red Sea. It is related of this **Ophren**, that he made war against Libya, and took it; and that his grandchildren, when they inhabited it, called it from his name Africa.

-Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (first century CE)



Text and Context:

1. What do we learn about Keturah from the Biblical text? What can we infer about her from what is *not* there?
2. What do we learn about Abraham and Keturah's descendants, both from what is, and is not, written?
3. What do we learn about Keturah and her descendants from the 1st Century account of Josephus?
4. What questions do you have about Keturah? What would you ask her if she were sitting right here?

Keturah in the Midrash

She was named Keturah because her deeds were as beautiful (sweet) as incense (*k'toret*). It is since she was fragrant (*m'kuteret*) with commandments and good deeds...an additional explanation gives this word the meaning of binding or sealing (*keshurah*). When a person secures his valuables with his seal, they are still shut when he opens his treasury.

B'reisheet Rabbah 61

Was Keturah actually Hagar? Sources disagree....what do you think?

YES! She was Hagar.

Rav said, "She is Hagar."

- B'reisheet Rabba 61

Keturah: This is Hagar. She was called Keturah because her deeds were as pleasant as *k'tora* (incense), and because she remained chaste (*kat'ra*, from the Aramaic for "restrained") and did not consort with another man from the day she separated from Abraham."

- Rashi

She is Hagar, who had been bound to him from the beginning.

-Targum Yonatan

Abraham again took: the word "again" has connotations of continuing a previous relationship, hinting that this was the second time he married her. - Kli Yakar

Abraham continued life as usual by taking a wife;" this is a reference to Hagar who now had another name, Keturah.

- Chizkuni

NO, she was NOT Hagar.

"And is it not written, 'And to the sons of the **concubines** that Abraham had?'" He said, "It is [actually] written, '**concubine**' - in the singular, such that there only be one concubine: Hagar. - B'reisheet Rabba 61

Keturah. This cannot be Hagar because in verse 6, Scripture refers to Abraham's concubines in the plural. -Ibn Ezra

For Hagar Sarah's maidservant, was his concubine; Keturah however he took as [a full-fledged] wife, for if she would have been a maid in his house and he then took her as a concubine the Torah wouldn't have said "and he took a **wife** whose name was Keturah." -Ramban

Keturah: the most ignored significant person in the Torah. Rashi follows an old rabbinic idea that she is Hagar. But there is no basis for this in the text, and other traditional commentators reject it. (Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Rashbam) - Richard Elliott Friedman

Why does Abraham take another wife?

If a man's wife dies, and he has grown children, he should first see that they are married before himself taking a new wife (Gen. Rabbah 60:16).

[Abraham] took another wife although he already had had two wives. He meant to continue siring children in his old age in order to comply with the blessing/command to increase the world's population. Seeing that the continuity of his own seed had been assured, he was not concerned with the antecedents of Keturah. We can be certain, however, that he selected a woman who personally possessed all the good qualities he would have desired also for a wife for his son...the essential difference between a wife and a concubine is that though both are exclusive partners of the men with whom they live, the former, when becoming wives, underwent the ceremony known as chuppah, and the union was celebrated with a wedding party, whereas a concubine was not accorded all this pomp and ceremony. - Radak (R. David KimHi 12th cent.)

And Abraham took another wife (Gen. 25:1). What is written previously concerning this matter? And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent (Gen. 24:67). You learn from this that if a man's wife should die, leaving him sons, he should not remarry until his sons are betrothed. Only then should he remarry. Abraham did so. After Sarah's death, he first betrothed Isaac and then took a wife for himself. Where do we learn this? It is written: Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and after: Abraham took another wife...
- Midrash Tanchuma Chayei Sara 8:1-3

Keturah's identity: wife or concubine?

For Hagar, Sarah's maid servant, was his concubine; Keturah however he took as [a full fledged] wife...If she would have been a maid in his house, and he then took her as a concubine the Torah wouldn't have said "and he took a 'wife' whose name was Keturah" nonetheless she's called a concubine." In *Chronicles* it is written "And the sons of Keturah the '**concubine**' of Abraham"

[*Speculation/discussion about her lineage...*]...maybe she's called "concubine" because she descended from a family of slaves; so that if she 'was' a maidservant in his house and he had relations with her the Torah wouldn't mention her lineage. It is not the manner of the Torah to mention anything about maidservants, other than their names, as we see by Bilhah and Zilpah (Jacob's concubines). - Ramban on Genesis 25:6

What of Keturah's six children?

Anything the other sons received was in the nature of "gifts," not "inheritance....He gave them gifts consisting of silver and gold and livestock according to his own evaluation of who deserved how much. He most certainly gave even more valuable gifts to Ishmael and to the sons of Keturah even though the Torah does not specifically mention this. If he gave gifts to people towards whom he had no legal obligation at all, it is obvious that people towards whom he did have such an obligation would receive their due, in order

that they should not interfere with him after his death and could not quarrel with him about the inheritance. - Radak (R. David Kimchi 12th cent.)

The offspring of Keturah and of Ishmael came before Alexander [the Great] and argued against Israel: "Eretz Israel belongs to us *and* to you, for we also are the children of Abraham!"

Gebiha ben Pesisa came and said to the Rabbis: "Grant me permission, and I will go and plead against them before Alexander. If they defeat me, then say: You have bested the commoner among us; and if I defeat them, tell them: The Torah of our teacher Moses has defeated you." They authorized him and he went and disputed with the offspring of Keturah and of Ishmael.

He asked: "Where is the proof for your claim?" They replied: "From the Torah." Gebiha ben Pesisa retorted: "I, too, will bring a proof from the Torah. It is said [in Gen. 25:5-6]: 'Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac; but to Abraham's sons by concubines Abraham gave gifts.' If a father gave his children bequests in his lifetime and sent them away from each other, has any one a claim against the other?" The offspring of Keturah and of Ishmael immediately left behind their sown fields and their planted vineyards, and fled. That year was a Sabbatical year, and Israel enjoyed the fruits of the abandoned fields. - BT Sanhedrin 91a

Was Keturah was the mother of the African Diaspora?



Olaudah Equiano
OR
GUSTAVUS VASSA,
the African

Such is the imperfect sketch my memory has furnished me with of the manners and customs of a people among whom I first drew my breath. And here I cannot forbear suggesting what has long struck me very forcibly, namely, the strong analogy which even by this sketch, imperfect as it is, appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen and those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise, and particularly the patriarchs while they were yet in that pastoral state which is described in Genesis--an analogy, which alone would induce me to think that the one people had sprung from the other. Indeed, this is the opinion of Dr. [John] Gill, [an 18th century theologian] who, in his commentary on Genesis, very ably deduces the pedigree of the Africans from Afer and Afra, the descendants of Abraham by Keturah his wife and concubine (for both these titles are applied to her).

-Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself.* (London, 1789)

Is Keturah Hagar?

I'm not sure it matters. What encourages me is that some rabbis want to read Hagar back into the story and give her character new subtleties and possibilities. The word *hagar* means "the stranger." In her first appearance, Hagar functions for Sarah and Abraham as the oppressed outsider in their triangle of love and fertility.

The rabbis, however, stretch to connect Hagar and Keturah, creating a new arc to the story. Hagar as Keturah offers the possibility of healing past wrongs while raising new questions: How did Hagar and Abraham's reconciliation occur? How much about their relationship, in its various stages, do we not know? The linkage to Keturah widens the text, encouraging us to see a new side of Hagar. This offers a model for reading text which has creative possibilities beyond traditional biblical exegesis.

...traveling with AJWS service and education delegations, I met people who showed the fullness of their lives, a fullness that transcended the serious deprivations they struggled to overcome. But now, raising young children, my traveling days are on hold. I find myself struggling to connect to global issues and to prevent statistics from masking the humanity of people around the world.

I have found something that works – I read novels written by indigenous authors. While no substitute for travel, literature is a powerful tool to understanding more than the newspapers' chronicles of disaster....fiction invites us into the lives of people in the developing world. Novelists such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Monica Ali, and Khaled Hosseini make the foreign familiar and immediate. They expand our ability to understand the stranger, and, significantly, to care. They personalize, without compromising complexity, politics, or readability.

Is this not the project of the interpreters of Torah? Is Hagar Keturah? The Torah, by itself, won't say. With midrash, our tradition of dynamic reading of these texts, the silence of the Biblical verse fills with alternatives. Both midrash and literary fiction expand our sense of possibility and encourage us to identify with the stranger.

Can the way we read make a difference? By more fully imagining another and her world, our advocacy and action will be more effective. As the 19th-century novelist George Eliot wrote, "appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made...but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into attention." - Rabbi Dorothy Richman