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Review of Joseph McDonald, *Searching for Sarah in the Second Temple Era: Images in the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, the Genesis Apocryphon, and the Antiquities*. Scriptural Traces, 24; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, 693. London: T&T Clark, 2020. Pp. xv + 272. £85.00/\$115.00. ISBN: 978-0-567-68912-2.

The book under review is an analysis of the character of the matriarch Sarah as depicted in the Second Temple literature. Joseph McDonald sets three primary goals to this study: first, to rediscover a female character that has been relatively neglected; second, to use a narrative-critical approach to do so; and third, to illustrate a profitable way of approaching rewritten biblical material (3-4; 247-48).

Chapter one serves as an introduction to the whole project. McDonald acknowledges the “otherness” of the texts, or the historical and cultural distance of the texts as viewed from the contemporary perspective. He chose to evaluate Sarah’s character by using the “‘mimetic’ view, which emphasizes the constructed reality of literary characters as human analogues with whom we may be acquainted” (14). Since McDonald admits that he has no personality-reading knowledge that is divisible from himself (18; 23), he describes his own identity as: “a man, fortyish, a practicing if critical Roman Catholic with a justice orientation, of northern European descent and North American origin with, however, significant cross-cultural experience and a love for old languages and stories, straight, able-bodied, married, a father” (24).

Chapter two discusses the characterization of Sarah in the Masoretic text (MT), where, according to McDonald, she is described as a complex but ultimately coherent figure. Sarah in Egypt is traded away by Abraham to the Pharaoh like a slave (45). This traumatic experience as a victim of sex trafficking has a serious impact on her personality: abused by her husband, Sarah now becomes an abuser in turn, forcing Hagar, her slave, to be a sexual surrogate (54). Having learned from Abraham how to wheedle and scheme, the “older, harder Sarah” (74) in Gerar comes to resemble him. Sarah’s hardening as a character reaches its extreme in the episode of her request of Hagar’s and Ishmael’s expulsion (80).

The subject of chapter three is Sarah as portrayed in the Septuagint (LXX), where she is a figure as complex as in the MT, but more erratic. She is always under pressure, which restricts her subjectivity. In the early stage of the narrative, accordingly, Sarah is almost entirely passive (94). Although the abuse of Hagar gives her temporary power, this is just an

imitation of Abraham (105).

Chapter four is dedicated to the Genesis Apocryphon, in which everything is narrated by Abraham. Here Sarah is depicted as a beautiful, strong female character who experiences significant emotions (156; 161-62). However, Sarah's primary value to Abraham is soon reduced to her beauty in a very narrow sense and her sexual receptivity (174). This kind of rapid change supports McDonald's doubt of Abraham's narratorial reliability (152-53).

Chapter five analyzes the *Jewish Antiquities* of Josephus. According to McDonald, Sarah in the text resembles Abraham in a number of ways, but her initiative is diminished. Although the narrator tries to portray the characters as positive as possible, his efforts are not always successful. In fact, the narrator even causes minor crises in characterization (204-5).

Chapter six offers two conclusions (246-47). First, one of Sarah's deep traits is her similarity to Abraham. This trait is consistently observed as an important trans-narrative link, although it functions differently in each text. Second, Sarah is a complex character whose traits are sometimes evolving and at other times competing, while at still other times, they are contradictory. Her ultimate utility is undeniably determined as a tool for fulfilling the divine promises to Abraham, but she is not always bound by this function.

As demonstrated, McDonald effectively approaches Sarah in the various texts and succeeds in drawing original conclusions. Above all, chapter two in which McDonald deals with the MT, is especially impressive. He skillfully elucidates the changes of Sarah's characterization in "a sorry cycle of use and cruelty where Sarah is sometimes the victim, sometimes the perpetrator" (86). It is interesting that this chapter can be read, in a sense, as McDonald's own retelling of the Bible. That is to say, retelling the MT from his perspective enables McDonald to stop considering the MT as a prioritized text and other texts as being merely derivative from the MT (247-48).

Yet there are some problems in McDonald's discussion. For example, a piece of his evidence that Sarah's passivity in the LXX is greater than that in the MT is somewhat questionable (95-97). According to McDonald, Gen 11:31 in the MT (וַיֵּצְאוּ אֹתָם ... וַיֵּבְאוּ עַד־חָרָן) "וַיֵּשְׁבוּ שָׁם", "they went out together ... and they went as far as Haran and settled there") communicates Sarah's subjectivity, because "they," the subject of the sentences, includes Sarah alongside her family members, whereas in the LXX (ἐξήγαγεν αὐτοὺς ... καὶ ἦλθεν ἕως Χαρραν καὶ κατώκησεν ἐκεῖ, "he led them out ... and he went as far as Haran, and he settled there") Sarah's passivity is reinforced, as is clear from the fact that the subject of the verbs is replaced with "he," namely Abraham's father Terah, and that Sarah is instead part of a

collective object “them.” However, the MT vocalizes the prepositional phrase *אתם* as *אִתָּם*, which literally means “with them,” not “together,” as in McDonald’s translation, probably depending on the Revised Standard Version (incidentally, the LXX seems to have read this as *אִתָּם*). Indeed, Rashi annotates this verse, saying: *וַיֵּצְאוּ תֵרַח וְאַבְרָם עִם לוֹט וְשָׂרַי*, “Terah and Abram went out with Lot and Sarai.”¹ In other words, Rashi does not consider Sarah to be included in the subject of the verb, and therefore, if we follow this reading, it is fair to say that Sarah’s passivity is not the specialty of the LXX.

Despite a few flaws, it is undeniable that this study sheds some light on Sarah as a relatively neglected character. I wonder what would happen if someone whose context is different from McDonald’s—for example, myself, namely, a non-religious man in his mid-thirties, of East Asian origin with significant cross-cultural experience and a love for old languages and stories—were to apply his mimetic approach to other characters of the Bible. In that sense, further research is called for.

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¹ M. Cohen (ed.), *Mikra’ot Gedolot ‘HaKeter’: Genesis* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1997), 1:118.