

## To Build or To Be: An Intertextual Exploration of Sarai's Scheme

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores Sarai's scheme in Genesis 16.2, in which Sarai proposes that she can “build” a family with Abram through Hagar. The term “to build” (בנה) is an unusual choice where one would expect Sarai's desire to be phrased “to bear” (ילד) a family. Typically, commentators have noticed this discrepancy but theorised that the term “to build” is used for its assonance with the word “son” (בן), as well as to describe the advent of the promised Abrahamic dynasty. However, through an intertextual reading with other verbal resonances of “to build” in selected Genesis texts, this paper argues that the term “to build” was chosen deliberately to subtly highlight the impetuous error of Sarai's actions to overcome her barrenness. Second, a consideration of how an intertextual approach of reading the biblical text aligns with Pentecostal readers was discussed, highlighting that it invites them into fresh encounters with the wider biblical text, not only exegetically, but also for personal transformative experiences.

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In Genesis 16, it is commonly held that the actions of Sarai in seeking to overcome her barrenness are impetuous. This view is typically drawn from the wider narrative, especially the subsequent conception and birth of Isaac, the true promised child. Yet, as Jon Levenson notes, “How we are to assess Sarai's attempt to circumvent her sterility is shrouded in ambiguity.”<sup>2</sup> An intertextual examination of Sarai's first speech in the canon (16:2), however, indicates that her motivations were distrustful and striving from the outset. Sarai states her aim is “to build” (בנה) a family (Gen 16:2) in response to the Lord preventing her having children, rather than using the more conventional term

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<sup>2</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 90.

“to bear” children (יָלַד).<sup>3</sup> This paper explores the verbal resonances of this unusual word choice against the backdrop of other Genesis narratives to highlight the error of Sarai’s ways, with consideration of how intertextual readings can have a special affinity for Pentecostal readers.

## 2. Building out of Barrenness

The central crisis of Genesis 16 is the barrenness of Sarai. The passage follows God’s covenant promise to Abram that “a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir” (Gen 15:4). The promise is not to be fulfilled so easily, with the narrator subtly conveying that Sarai despaired that the promise of God would ever eventuate in her having children. The tumult of this experience should not be underestimated. For women in the ancient Near East, “establishing such a relationship is compounded by the sadness, fear and anger concerning the possibility of being left out of the divine promise and familial status.”<sup>4</sup> Claus Westermann suggests that Sarai’s word choice of “build” reflects patriarchal anthropology, in which “the life of a woman is an integral whole (just as a building or a city is something integral) only when she is a member of a family in which she presents her husband with children.”<sup>5</sup> The interplay between nation and wife/mother creates a powerful undertone. In the ancient context, Abraham, as husband/father, is responsible for building his family, yet Sarai expresses this responsibility. Vincent Onwukwe notes that Sarai’s speech could also reflect her focus on her own self-worth, as mirrored by Rachel’s desire to likewise “be built up” through her maid, although Jacob already had sons (Gen 30:1-3).<sup>6</sup> Sarai seems to be burdened with her responsibility of providing a lineage for Abram, perhaps taking into account God’s promise to her husband of a dynasty or nation.<sup>7</sup>

Sarai’s desperation is tangible, when many years after the promise, she declares that “The Lord has kept me from having children” (Gen 16:2a). We should not skip past the significance of these as Sarai’s first words. As Robert Alter observes, the first words assigned by the writer to biblical persons can reveal pertinent insights into their character.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Sarai has been silent for four chapters, involving a move from her home country to a new land and interactions with foreign leaders in Egypt, with Abram taking central stage. Yet in Gen 16 the focus dramatically shifts to Sarai’s trouble, augmented by the near silence and submissiveness of Abram. Sarai is characterised as “being destroyed by and through barrenness, a tragedy that can ruin a woman as much as her marriage and tribal ties.”<sup>9</sup> More than this, there is concern that she will be left out of the divine promises God has outlined to Abram. Sarai, feels the burden of cursedness, as barrenness was viewed within the

<sup>3</sup> The verb יָלַד is used 170 times throughout Genesis, whereas בָּנָה is found 16 times.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Havrelock, “The Myth of Birthing the Hero: Heroic Barrenness in the Hebrew Bible,” *Biblical Interpretation* 16, no. 2 (2008): 159–60.

<sup>5</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 239.

<sup>6</sup> Vincent Chukwuma Onwukwe, “Characterisation and Plot(s) in Genesis 16: A Narrative-Critical Analysis,” *Scriptura* 119, no. 1 (2020): 5.

<sup>7</sup> David J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew: Beth-Waw*, vol. 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 166; 172–73.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 116–17.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Tsoffar, *Life in Citations: Biblical Narratives and Contemporary Hebrew Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 101.

ancient context as “the absence of relationship” between a woman and God.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the anguish of Sarai’s first speech in the canon is apparent where she contends to Abram, that it is the Lord who has prevented her from bearing children.

Significantly, Sarai’s voice diverges here from the narrator who attributes the lack of children to Sarai (16:1), while Sarai attributes it to the Lord.<sup>11</sup> Then from this pent-up tension, of silence and resignation, Sarai bursts forth with a dramatic plan to orchestrate a solution for herself. As Sarai’s first canonical speech continues (Gen 16:2), Sarai directs her husband Abram to lie with her servant Hagar, so that “perhaps I can build (בנה) a family through her” (NIV). Thus, Sarai through Hagar would be “אִבְנָהּ,” transliterated *ibaneh*, reflecting a passive tone, “I may be built up.”<sup>12</sup> The humility of her request is not reflected in the almost bossy command of the English translation, “Go, sleep with my slave” (NIV). Yet, the Hebrew formulation is expressed by the emphatic “please” (נא) and the adverb “perhaps” (אולי), capturing Sarai’s doubt and the resignation of the situation, even as she proposes her solution. What is striking though, is Sarai’s plan is “to build” a family and not “to bear or birth” a family. Semantically, “to build” is used to describe the deliberate action of someone rather than organic growth or natural increase. In the biblical context, God is viewed as the master builder. Accordingly, what humans build is judged as to whether it conforms to God’s character or not. Thus, the significance of Sarai’s actions are amplified, in that she wishes to build through her maidservant; that is, by her own impetus, through her own devices and without God’s organic endorsement.

Traditionally, commentators have assumed “that the expression ‘I will be built’ has the idiomatic meaning of ‘I will become able to get pregnant myself and have my own child(ren)’, ...[and] felt no need to offer explanation for it.”<sup>13</sup> Especially, as Rivkah bat Meir suggests, “...the essence of building lies with the woman...” (Prov 14:1).<sup>14</sup> Or if they have commented, scholars relied on the assonance and pun between בנה and בן.<sup>15</sup> As the peculiar word choice may be a denominative verb related to the noun “son” or “child” (בן). So, the verse could be perceived to convey, “perhaps I can son through her.” In this way, scholars demonstrate that Sarai “wishes Hagar to serve as a surrogate mother for

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<sup>10</sup> Havrelock, “The Myth of Birthing the Hero,” 159.

<sup>11</sup> W. Lee Humphreys, “Where’s Sarah? Echoes of a Silent Voice in the ‘Akedah,’” *Soundings (Nashville, Tenn.)* 81, no. 3/4 (1998): 494.

<sup>12</sup> For example see, Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 77; Matthew P. Anstey, “Seeing Hagar the Theologian: The Interpretation of Genesis 16,” in *Into the World You Love: Encountering God in Everyday Life*, ed. Graeme Garrett (Adelaide, South Australia: AFT Press, 2007), 18; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis: 16-50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco Texas: Word Books, 1987), 7; Cynthia R. Chapman, *The House of the Mother: The Social Roles of Maternal Kin in Biblical Hebrew Narrative and Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 150; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 239.

<sup>13</sup> Ephraim Landau, “What Does ‘I Will Be Built From/Through Her’ in Genesis 16:2 and Genesis 30:3 Mean?,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (2020): 41.

<sup>14</sup> Rivkah bat Meir, *Meneket Rivkah: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women*, ed. Frauke von Rohden, trans. Samuel Spinner (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 95.

<sup>15</sup> For example see, Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 77; Anstey, “Seeing Hagar the Theologian,” 18; Wenham, *Genesis: 16-50*, 2:7.

what will legally be her child.”<sup>16</sup> Ruth Tsoffar observes that the “double reading underscores the profundity of her overwhelming, aching desire to undergo an internal *process of becoming* through Hagar’s conception of a son.”<sup>17</sup> Whilst, these are helpful commentaries, they don’t fully grapple with Saria’s unusual choice of words, in which she states “I will be built” as she proposes her strategy to overcome the Lord’s prevention of children.

Whilst these provide a glimpse into Sarai’s motivations and ancient context, it is still striking for a woman to phrase the desperate desire for children through the term “to build”. As an ex-midwife, I (Narelle) don’t recall any woman talking about their reproductive life in this manner, which is why its use is remarkable and requires a deeper look. Yet, even as we explore Sarai’s attempt at ancient Near Eastern surrogacy, her refusal to adopt or foster Ishmael, and her struggle with infertility, our application is about trust in any circumstance and not a commentary on how those desiring children should or shouldn’t behave. In fact, one midrashic tradition sees Sarah’s miraculous pregnancy as an eschatological healing for all people: “When Sarah bore her child, every blind man in the world was given sight; every cripple was made straight; every mute was given speech; and every madman was healed of his madness.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore, through an intertextual analysis of “to build,” we propose that insights into Sarai’s characterisation, motivations and actions can be discovered. Insights that the storyteller purposefully uses to assist to develop the moral commentary on Sarai’s actions. This is especially reinforced when one dynamically reads intertextually how the verb “to build” is used in other Genesis narratives.

### 3. Intertextuality as a Pentecostal Approach

First, a word on intertextuality and how the approach will be utilised. Intertextual readings have gained much interest in recent years within biblical studies.<sup>19</sup> Some scholars propose precise definitions, while others look for any relationship between two different texts.<sup>20</sup> As a result, the idea of developing a consensus “represents a battleground of differing emphases and claims, both linguistic and ideological.”<sup>21</sup> Despite this, at its foundational level intertextuality denotes a reading between different texts that are attuned to the literary relationships between them.<sup>22</sup> As S.D. Geire

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<sup>16</sup> Mark Goldfeder, “The Adoption of Children in Judaism and in Israel; A Conceptual and Practical Review,” *Cardozo Journal of International and Comparative Law* 22, no. 2 (2014 2013): 327.

<sup>17</sup> Tsoffar, *Life in Citations*, 100–101.

<sup>18</sup> *Pesikta Rabbati*, *Piska* 42.4, as cited in Steven A. Hunt, *Perspectives on Our Father Abraham: Essays in Honor of Marvin R. Wilson* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2012), 238.

<sup>19</sup> H Ross Cole, “The Pros and Cons of Intertextuality,” in *Hermeneutics, Intertextuality and the Contemporary Meaning of Scripture*, ed. Ross Cole and Paul Petersen (ATF (Australia) Ltd., 2014), 3–16; Craig A. Evans, B. J. Oropeza, and Paul Sloan, eds., *New Studies in Textual Interplay*, First edition., Library of New Testament Studies 632 (London: T&T Clark, 2020); Geoffrey D. Miller, “Intertextuality in Old Testament Research,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 9, no. 3 (2011): 283–309.

<sup>20</sup> Miller, “Intertextuality in Old Testament Research,” 283; Patricia Tull, “Intertextuality and the Hebrew Scriptures,” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 8 (2000): 59–90; Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 6–8.

<sup>21</sup> Tull, “Intertextuality,” 59. See also Miller, “Intertextuality in Old Testament Research”; David I. Yoon, “The Ideological Inception of Intertextuality and Its Dissonance in Current Biblical Studies,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 12, no. 1 (2013): 58–76.

<sup>22</sup> S. Nikaido, “Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures: An Intertextual Study,” *Vetus Testamentum* 51, no. 2 (2001): 220.

argues, intertextuality is less a methodology than “an observation of relationships between texts that places the generation of meaning in the dynamic conversation between text/intertext/reader.”<sup>23</sup> Despite analysing similarities in language, content and themes in texts, this reader-orientated approach offers a plethora of possible interpretations, so evaluating the significance of these relationships is less defined or measurable, making it more an art than science.<sup>24</sup> For the purposes of this article, we approach the text through a synchronic reading to examine the linguistic, cultural, aesthetic, ideological connections, whether intended by the original author or not. This “synchronic, reader-orientated, semiotic-method” is an approach sympathetic to Pentecostal interpretations, compared to the diachronic approach, where identifying chronology of sources and who borrowed, cited or alluded to whom, is a significant issue with no simple resolution, especially within the Book of Genesis.<sup>25</sup>

An intertextual reading approach works especially for biblical scholars since the Bible functions as a literary whole. According to Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman, “In a vast interlocking system of allusions and echoes, writers keep referring to a common core of events, images and doctrines. ...It constitutes a unity of cross-reference that no other anthology even comes close to approximating.”<sup>26</sup> Intertextuality looks for patterns and intersections across various texts, rather than at how they are historically independent.<sup>27</sup> Michael R. Stead identifies three key textual relationships: creation, using direct quotations from other texts; meaning, creating an echo to dialogue between texts; and hermeneutics, which allows readers to draw out meaning.<sup>28</sup> In particular, we are interested in drawing out meaning through literary strategies, such as “lexical resemblances” or “verbal resonances.”<sup>29</sup> This looks beyond the immediate context of a verse, “enabling the reader of biblical narratives to find a peshat [“plain reading”] that can only be spotted by taking cognisance of other contexts where similar language is used. Such linkages may transform the significance of texts.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> S.D. Giere, *A New Glimpse of Day One: Intertextuality, History of Interpretation, and Genesis 1.1-5*, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft Und Die Kunde Der Älteren Kirche (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 3.

<sup>24</sup> As Miller states: “Like any work of art, beauty—or in this case—intertextuality—is very much in the eye of the beholder.” Miller, “Intertextuality in Old Testament Research,” 298. See also Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III, “Introduction,” in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993), 36; See also Gary E. Schnittjer, “The Narrative Multiverse within the Universe of the Bible: The Question of ‘Borderlines’ and ‘Intertextuality,’” *Westminster Theological Journal* 64 (2002): 233.

<sup>27</sup> Nikaido, “Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures,” 220.

<sup>28</sup> Michael R. Stead, *The Intertextuality of Zechariah 1-8*, T & T Clark Library of Biblical Studies (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 20.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, “Intertextuality in Old Testament Research,” 294–98; Jeffery M Leonard, “Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions: Psalm 78 as a Test Case,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 2 (2008): 241–65. In this paper the concepts presented by ‘lexical resemblances’ will be utilised without the adherent methodology of textual chronology.

<sup>30</sup> Gershon Hepner, “Verbal Resonance in the Bible and Intertextuality,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 96 (2001): 4–5.

For Pentecostal readers, what does an intertextual exploration of Scripture bring to our attention? First, to even ask this question is typically Pentecostal, as Pentecostals look for “a pattern of experience”<sup>31</sup> in the biblical story and intertwine their experiences (cognitive, affective and behavioural) into the divine-human narrative.<sup>32</sup> Lee Roy Martin notes that intertextuality has been utilised by Pentecostals since the early twentieth century as “a way of tracing Pentecostal themes from Genesis to Revelation...so that for them the event of scriptural interpretation was itself always a kind of exodus, a pilgrimage, a journey into God.”<sup>33</sup> Pentecostals cannot be content with a pure reader-response hermeneutic. As Ellington observes,

In the broadest sense all texts are open and indeterminate because meaning is derived by joining the text and the reader. But in the particular sense the biblical text itself is not static because its author is living and remains actively involved in the hermeneutical process. The Spirit reads with us and we discover that our own story connects with and flows from the biblical story.<sup>34</sup>

There is an expectation that God speaks through the words and message of the Bible, within a passage, but also more broadly, to bring clarification, inspiration and transformation by the Spirit.<sup>35</sup>

There is a natural fit between Pentecostal hermeneutics and intertextuality’s focus on written and spoken communication.<sup>36</sup> Where intertextuality reads Scripture “inner-biblically,” Pentecostals read texts against “extratextual” experiences.<sup>37</sup> Pentecostals particularly weave the biblical text into “testimony” to demonstrate that the story “is no longer simply past but which in immediate and transformative ways has been owned anew by the individuals and communities that first tell them, then inhabit them, and then finally seek to live them.”<sup>38</sup> In testimony, Pentecostals use the common motifs or verbal resonances, particularly of God’s presence as the “active agent”,<sup>39</sup> as the link

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<sup>31</sup> Janet Everts Powers, “A ‘Thorn in the Flesh’: The Appropriation of Textual Meaning,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18 (2001): 89; 98.

<sup>32</sup> Jackie David Johns, “Pentecostalism and the Postmodern Worldview,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1, no. 7 (1995): 85.

<sup>33</sup> Lee Roy Martin, *Pentecostal Hermeneutics: A Reader* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Scott A. Ellington, “Locating Pentecostals at the Hermeneutical Table,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 22, no. 2 (2013): 212.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Davies, “What Does It Mean to Read the Bible as a Pentecostal?,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 18 (2009): 221; Scott A. Ellington, “Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 4, no. 9 (1996): 20–23.

<sup>36</sup> Tull, “Intertextuality,” 60; Scott A. Ellington, “The Reciprocal Shaping of History and Experience in the Psalms: Interactions with Pentecostal Testimony,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 16, no. 1 (2007): 262; Ellington, “Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture,” 27.

<sup>37</sup> Davies, “What Does It Mean?,” 225.

<sup>38</sup> Ellington, “The Reciprocal Shaping of History and Experience,” 29.

<sup>39</sup> Scott A. Ellington, “History, Story and Testimony: Locating Truth in a Pentecostal Hermeneutic,” *Pneuma* 23, no. 2 (2001): 262. Specifically, Ellington discusses in another article that testimony is what Pentecostals do “in dialogue with Scripture, the church community and the Holy Spirit”. Ellington, “Pentecostalism and the Authority of Scripture,” 27.

between their lives and the text, and incorporate this commonality into the wider “narrative tradition” of the Pentecostal community.<sup>40</sup>

Through intertextuality, Pentecostals uphold a hermeneutic that Kenneth J. Archer describes as “the ‘threefold framework’ of the Holy Spirit, Holy Scripture, and a holy community of faith... .”<sup>41</sup> In this respect, intertextuality resonates well for Pentecostals with its text/intertext/reader focus, as it mirrors this threefold framework—Spirit/(inter)text/reader(s). As Andrew Davies states, Pentecostals “allow God the Spirit to say to us whatever he might want out of the words on the page. If he should choose to rearrange them into different concepts and reapply them into different contexts as he impresses them on to our spirits, than that is perfectly fine by us.”<sup>42</sup> Applying intertextuality as Pentecostal scholars, our aim with this article is to examine Sarai’s desire “to build” in Genesis 16:2 with verbal resonances earlier in Genesis to suggest a reading of her motivations and character.

#### 4. Building an Intertextual Reading of Genesis 16

Before presenting our analysis, there have been several key intertextual readings of Genesis 16 that are worth outlining to highlight the helpfulness of this method of reading.<sup>43</sup> First, Gordan J. Wenham highlights how Sarai and Abram’s actions parallel those of Eve and Adam in Genesis 3, with similar verbs being used: listen (שמע), took (לקח) and gave (נתן).<sup>44</sup> Adam and Abraham are portrayed as passively *listening* to their wives without question (Gen 3:17; Gen 16:2). Then, following an “identical sequence of key nouns and verbs,”<sup>45</sup> both Eve and Sarai *took* and *gave* something tempting, be it fruit or Hagar, to their husbands (Gen 3:6; Gen 16:3). Through this rendering of the narratives with identical nouns and verbs, the repercussions of Sarai’s actions are read considering the consequences faced by Adam and Eve, both accounts cast as fall accounts.

In a similar vein, Phyllis Trible has shown how Sarai’s actions foreshadow the actions of Egypt in the Exodus account and, ironically, how Hagar’s actions prefigure Israel’s experience.<sup>46</sup> This is stressed through the common words: afflicted (ענה), fled (ברח) and cast out (גרש). Sarai *afflicted* Hagar, who *fled* from her (Gen 16:6), foreshadowing Israel, who were *afflicted* when they were slaves in Egypt (Exod 1:11-12) and eventually *fled* from Pharaoh (Exod 14:5a). Later, in Gen 21:10 when Sarah wants

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth J. Archer states “the narrative tradition of a community becomes an essential part of any hermeneutical strategy, for the making and explaining of meaning is inherently communal”. Kenneth J. Archer, “Pentecostal Story: The Hermeneutical Filter for the Making of Meaning,” *Pneuma* 26, no. 1 (2004): 39.

<sup>41</sup> Archer, Kenneth J., “Pentecostal Hermeneutics and the Society for Pentecostal Studies: Reading and Hearing in One Spirit and One Accord,” *Pneuma* 37 (2015): 328.

<sup>42</sup> Davies, “What Does It Mean?,” 221.

<sup>43</sup> For a succinct summary of a reader-response methodology applied to the Pentateuch see, Terence E. Fretheim, *The Pentateuch*, Interpreting Biblical Texts Series (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 34–35.

<sup>44</sup> Wenham, *Genesis: 16-50*, 2:7–8.

<sup>45</sup> Wenham, 2:7.

<sup>46</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 13 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 13; 21.

to protect her firstborn son Isaac, she instructs Abraham to *cast out* “that slave woman and her son,” just as Pharaoh *casts out* Israel for what happened to his firstborn (Exod 12:39). Through these connections, Hagar becomes a pivotal character of faith, who ironically foreshadows Israel’s journey instead of Sarah and Abraham.

Third, Scott K. Nikaido details literary parallels between Hagar, Abraham and Hannah, as well as between Ishmael and Joseph, to portray Hagar and Ishmael as heroic characters and not just background figures to the Patriarchs.<sup>47</sup> Nikaido observes how Hagar received a promise of a son from God but, like Abraham, had to endure the trial of almost losing that child (Gen 21:14-19; Gen 22:1-19). Like Hannah, Hagar is persecuted, yet both find hope through a messenger of God, showing them that God is aware of their situations and will act on their behalf (Gen 16:1-16; 1 Sam 1:1-20). After this divine encounter, Hagar and Hannah give birth to sons who are given names reflecting the mother’s experiences with God (Gen 16:11; 1Sam 1:20b).<sup>48</sup> Through these intertextual readings, Nikaido concludes how important it is to view Hagar and Ishmael as independent figures who are central and not circumstantial to the narrative, because of their “positive literary associations.”<sup>49</sup>

These three examples highlight the value intertextual readings have in drawing out meaning beyond the immediate passage, as well as supplementing meaning in the passages intertextually read with. In this manner, additional insights and depths are gleaned which develops a dynamic reading of literary patterns. But in our research, no intertextual readings have looked at the verbal resonance with “to build”. It is to this task we now turn. There are 16 references to “building” in the book of Genesis, indicating four types of constructions: cities (4:17; 10:11; 11:4-5, 8), altars to the Lord (8:20; 12:7, 8; 13:18; 22:9; 26:25; 35:7), a house (33:17) and generations (2:22; 16:2; 30:3; see also Ruth 3:11; Deut. 25:5-10). For this study, we intertextually read Gen 16:2 with the 10 verbal resonances preceding it: (1) God builds a woman (Gen 2:22), (2) Cain builds a city (Gen 4:14-17), (3) the people of Shinar build the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9; see also 10:10-11) and (4) Abram builds altars (Gen 12:7; 12:8; 13:18; 22:9; see also 8:20).

## 5. Building a Blessing

The first verbal resonance links the common root בנה with Gen 2:22, “God made [built] a woman from the rib...” (NIV). This is the first use of the verb in Genesis, attributing building with God’s character. Up to this point, God’s creative acts have been described through the verb ברא, “to create, make.” In Gen 2, God’s building efforts create not only a woman, but a wife (2:24), a mother and, by extension, all people (3:20). God builds to overcome the “not good” (2:18) and initiates the building of generations in the Garden of Eden. God builds the woman from the man, and the man is returned to the woman. This circular process of what God builds, portrays a picture of completion, unity of

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<sup>47</sup> Nikaido, “Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures,” 219–42.

<sup>48</sup> Nikaido, 230.

<sup>49</sup> Nikaido, 241.

relationship and goodness in the Garden. God, is the master builder, and as mentioned previously, sets the foundation for ancient Israel's understanding of how "to build".

God's actions set a precedent for Sarai's desire to fulfil her role as a mother and, as the first barren woman mentioned in the Bible, creates a pause. How will God continue to be a master builder, fulfilling his promise to Abram, if Sarai his wife cannot fall pregnant? In Gen 16:2, before God's plan is unveiled, Sarai orchestrates her own proposal to overcome her "not good" situation and her actions of building, are portrayed as out of step with the master builder. Further, the strife and opposition that arises between Hagar and Sarai ironically fulfil the curse given to Eve in the garden: "...in pain you shall bring forth children" (Gen 3:16 ESV). Instead of trusting the Promise-Giver, Sarai tries to become her own "master builder." In so doing, she usurps the role of God.

## 6. Building a Heritage

Second, in Genesis 4:17, Cain "builds a city" and names the city after his son, Enoch. This occurs after Cain murders his brother Abel. At this time, he is condemned as a wanderer, as the relationship with his brother Abel was violently cleaved, so too was his relationship with the earth and the Lord broken.<sup>50</sup> He is driven from the land and becomes a restless fugitive who is removed from the presence of the LORD. He is depicted as unable to put down any roots into the soil that once provided for him. However, by the next scene, Cain is dwelling "in the land of Nod, east of Eden" (Gen 4:16). Notably, this city's name derives from the Hebrew word נוד, meaning "wander," and the movement east suggests separation from the presence of God and even judgement. Like Cain, Nimrod is also evidently a wanderer, since he "builds the city not in his own kingdom but after he enters Assyria from his kingdom."<sup>51</sup> Arie C. Leder notes that Cain, Nimrod and, as we will see, the people of Shinar, are all portrayed as humans who build cities "without the divine instruction the ancient world thought crucial for the welfare of its temple cities."<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Sarai does not wait for God's instructions, and indeed laughs when she, at last, hears them (Gen 18:13-14).

Further, as in Gen 16, there is a pun on the words "build" (בנה) and "son" (בן). In this passage, a father is literally building a city and a family and overlapping both by naming the city after his son.<sup>53</sup> Niels E. Andreasen observes that the Old Testament attitude towards cities is somewhat ambivalent, writing:

It offers protection is the seat of cultural development and the arts of civilisation, and even of worship, but unfortunately so often it represents the worst of human traits; arrogance,

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<sup>50</sup> As Swenson has detailed, Gen 2-4 should be read as one unit with the creational links perfectly displayed in Gen 2 between the *human* and *humus*, God and humanity, and the man and woman. Yet these inter-relationships are broken in Gen 3 but are positioned to be overcome in Gen 4. However, the Cain narrative displays them as re-broken in Gen 4. See Kristin M. Swenson, "Care and Keeping East of Eden: Gen 4:1-16 in Light of Gen 2-3," *Interpretation* 60, no. 4 (2006): 327-84.

<sup>51</sup> Zhenshuai Jiang, *Critical Spatiality in Genesis 1-11* (Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 167.

<sup>52</sup> Arie C. Leder, "'There He Built an Altar to the Lord' (Gen 12:8) City and Altar Building in Genesis," *Old Testament Essays* 32, no. 1 (2019): 66.

<sup>53</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2001), 179.

social irresponsibility, tyranny and inequality, in concentrated form, and therefore it must be viewed critically and skeptically despite the good things it can produce.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, in this passage, Cain is portrayed as doing all that he can to overcome the curse of restlessness. He is creating permanence, by bearing children and building a city in which to be set free from the burden of wandering. The coalescence of the themes of building, bearing a child and trying to overcome the curse, combine well with Sarai's own actions of building and trying to bear a child to overcome her own cursedness.

Whilst it is difficult to articulate whether the building activities of Cain and Nimrod were endorsed by God, or not, it is generally concluded that Cain, at least, was trying to secure his own protection, and not trusting that God's mark would provide this for him.<sup>55</sup> These two narratives are typically seen as a foreshadowing of the events of the Tower of Babel,<sup>56</sup> framed by the phrase קרא שם ("to call a name," Gen 4:17; 11:9). According to Leder, through the repetition of this phrase "and the climactic function of the Babel story it is also possible to construe Cain's city-building as anticipating the ancient world's temple cities, such as Aššur and Nineveh in the Nimrod account."<sup>57</sup> The verbal resonances linking these three passages suggest further insight into Sarai's motivations, augmented by the account of building Babel. And it is to this passage that the discussion will now turn.

## 7. Building a Reputation

In Genesis 11, the people dwelling in Shinar desired "to build" a city and a tower so that they could make a name for themselves and not be scattered across the earth (Gen 11:4). John H. Walton and Tremper Longman argue that the tower was a ziggurat, representing sacred space, and therefore the passage is primarily theological. The people were trying to promote themselves by controlling God, but God "rejected the builders' flawed strategy and embarks on his own initiative."<sup>58</sup> The people's action of building ultimately becomes a challenge to God's rule and care. Intriguingly, the wordplay continues in this passage as the people were trying "to build" (בנה) with "brick for stones (לבנה לאבן)." There may be an allusion<sup>59</sup> here between Sarai's desire, אבנה ("that I may build") and the building materials used by the people of Shinar. Islwyn Blythin comments that there is a profound dimension to "be found in the fusion of the idea of a city whose structure is built of stones (Heb. *yabanîm*) and that of a woman whose psychical integration is built by her children."<sup>60</sup> It further echoes the word plays of Sarai and Cain who wish "to build" (בנה) via "son" (בן).

<sup>54</sup> Niels E. Andreasen, "Town and Country in the Old Testament," *Encounter* 42, no. 3 (1981): 269.

<sup>55</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, vol. 1, NICOT (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990), 238.

<sup>56</sup> David Fouts M., "Bnh," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 678.

<sup>57</sup> Leder, "'There He Built an Altar to the Lord' (Gen 12)," 71.

<sup>58</sup> John H. Walton and Tremper Longman, *The Lost World of the Flood: Mythology, Theology, and the Deluge Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 138.

<sup>59</sup> Stead, *The Intertextuality of Zechariah 1-8*, 20.

<sup>60</sup> Islwyn Blythin, "Note on Isaiah 49:16-17," *Vetus Testamentum* 16, no. 2 (1966): 229-30.

The result of this attempt is that God scatters the people of the city, babbling their language, and putting a halt to the building progress. The literary themes within this passage and Genesis 4 are again nicely juxtaposed with Genesis 16. Sarai and Abram are the ones who have been promised by God that he will make a name for them in Genesis 12:2. However, Sarai is unable to wait trustingly. So just like the people of Shinar, she designs a plan for “building” a family to fulfil God’s promise on his behalf. Sarai is trying to overcome the disparity of her experience – that of childlessness, cursedness, and no name – with whether she can truly trust God. Ultimately, mirroring the narrative of Babel, God rejects Sarai’s flawed building strategy to continue with God’s own initiative. And through her plan, Ishmael, becomes a wilderness people.

### 8. Building a Covenant

Finally, Sarai’s reference to building is brought into stark contrast with the five remaining building actions, which refer to altars dedicated to the Lord. In gratitude for salvation from the flood, Noah builds an altar (Gen 8:20). Johannes Brenz, a Reformation theologian, observes that after leaving the ark, Noah “does not proceed to build a tower or a house, or to plow the fields...Noah’s concern is first of all to restore public rites and to establish the teaching of religion again.”<sup>61</sup> Like Noah, Abram’s intention for building altars is “for YHWH” (ליהוה, Gen 8:20; 12:7, 8; 13:18). In the previous building efforts, Cain and the people of Shinar sought “to call a name” (Gen 4:17; 11:9) for what they constructed for themselves, whereas God promises Abram to “make your name great” (12:2).<sup>62</sup>

The occurrence of Abraham’s building activity before and after the birth of Isaac forms an *inclusio* around Sarai’s building efforts. Each of the altars Abram proceeds to build commemorates an encounter with God: at the oak of Moreh after receiving God’s promise to give the land to his offspring (12:7); east of Bethel where Abram calls on the name of the Lord (12:8); near Hebron after God reaffirms the covenant (13:14-18); and at “the place of which God had told him” to sacrifice Isaac, replaced instead by a ram (22:9). While Sarai endeavours to build a name for herself, and is ultimately unsuccessful, Abram build altars in anticipation of the promise and in the face of his reward being taken away.

Her absence in the account of Abraham’s test (22:1-8) is conspicuous. Her vivacious desire “to be built up” as a mother and to protect her husband’s heir contrasts remarkably with her silence in other key points of the narrative and is especially profound here. While Abraham has, through Ishmael, an heir to his name, a family supernaturally birthed by Sarah rests with Isaac, whose life is now at risk, yet Sarah’s response to this encounter is omitted. The pleasure as a mother that she at first despairs of ever experiencing (16:2) is fulfilled in and preserved by Isaac’s survival in this account, without any striving or orchestrating of events by Sarai, even though the focus is on Abraham and the nation God

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<sup>61</sup> Johannes Brenz, *Opera 1: Commentarii in Genesis...* (Tübingen: Gruppenbach, 1576), 105, as cited in John L. Thompson, ed., *Genesis 1-11*, vol. 1, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 282.

<sup>62</sup> Leder, “‘There He Built an Altar to the Lord’ (Gen 12),” 74.

has promised him. Through this intertextual analysis of “to build”, we cannot but hear an implicit commentary being made regarding the differences between Sarai’s actions of building through her own schemes contrasted with trusting God, as displayed in Abram’s faithful building of altars.

### 9. Spirit-Text-Life: To Build or To Be?

In summary, there are insightful thematic connections by bringing these passages in conversation with one another, linked through the verbal resonance of “to build.” Just as Cain in his cursedness built a son-civilisation, and the people of Shinar in their proud effort of self-preservation built a stone-city, Sarai’s cursed barrenness drove her to build a son through Hagar. Even after her actions result in division and conflict, she doubts when God draws her directly into his promise: “Sarah your wife shall have a son” (Gen 18:10). She has seen her own plans fail, and now this new word seems impossible. Yet, “this moment of weakness...occurs, necessarily, only after Sarah has been promised offspring. And Sarah’s doubt does not jeopardize her fertility, but instead reinforces Yahweh’s determination to bring about what he has promised.”<sup>63</sup> Sarai, like Cain, Nimrod and the people of Shinar, attempted to build something separate from God’s instructions, yet God brought blessing out of chaos, settled those who were wandering, and ultimately fulfilled his promises. All in all, the text subtly develops a thesis within the opening chapters of Genesis which contrasts God’s way with humanity’s self-seeking way. And thus, Sarai becomes a case study of the question “to build or to be?” The conclusion is that throughout Genesis 16, Sarai is an example of “building” in her own way, rather than trusting in God’s ways and “being.”

Thus the challenge for Pentecostals is how to “commute between these interconnected narrative worlds”<sup>64</sup> – of the Biblical text and our lives – to appropriate meaning, as well as to encounter transformative narratives.<sup>65</sup> It is natural though that if the intertextual meaning commenced with the reader then likewise the appropriation should commence here.<sup>66</sup> Accordingly, this prompts us as Pentecostal readers to ask, how does the verbal resonance of “to build” in the narratives of Adam and Eve, Cain, the people of Shinar, Abram, Hagar and Sarai echo in our own lives which is shaped by an overarching Pentecostal expectation? How does this link to the wider biblical message, the words of the Spirit and the community of faith?

But more specifically, this inter/extra-textual reading asks us to consider, what am I building in my own life, and why? Is it the motivation to secure my own name and identity or to overcome a wandering, restlessness or barrenness? Will, what I am building last, like the altars of Abraham and Noah or will it be scattered like Ishmael, Cain and Babel? Or am I building in accordance with the master builder’s ways? That is, am I “being” with God or am I “building” apart from God? When God

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<sup>63</sup> Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Reconceiving Infertility: Biblical Perspectives on Procreation and Childlessness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 46.

<sup>64</sup> Schnittjer, “The Narrative Multiverse,” 248–49.

<sup>65</sup> Powers, “A ‘Thorn in the Flesh,’” 87–89. Powers argues that the appropriation of a text’s meaning has been a central issue for Pentecostal hermeneutics, especially in regards to how to locate the meaning in the text itself.

<sup>66</sup> Davies, “What Does It Mean?,” 229.

tells Abraham that Sarah will be his promised child's mother, she is sitting in the tent, listening (Gen 18:9-10). She was just "being." This is the first of God's speeches where Abraham responds in conversation, and God opens by talking about Sarai. Yair Lorberbaum notes the parallel between the changes in name and the promise of offspring, such that: "The third speech (about Sarah) is thus a continuation of the first one (about Abraham), as if to say that Abraham and Sarah enjoy a similar status and are as one unit."<sup>67</sup> In the end, Sarah didn't need to scheme her own plans to fulfil God's promise. She just needed "to be".

These reflections can be asked of the community of faith. Are we striving to build church buildings, programs, followers, which are for our own ego, greed, comfort and security? Or are we building sensitive to the seasons of the Spirit and the Spirit's promptings? Are we allowing God to build us together "on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone...[to] become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Ephesian 2:20-22, NIV)? That is, do we respect the history, wisdom and testimony of the generations? Do we build on the cornerstone of Christ, who is our Saviour, Sanctifier, Spirit Baptiser, Healer and Coming King?<sup>68</sup> Recognising that:

We praise the Lord who saves, sanctifies, heals, Spirit baptizes and is coming for us. The central narrative convictions of our story are doxological testimonies that shape our community. Thus the Five-fold Gospel is not a set of quaint platitudes but deep-seated, affectionate affirmations flowing from our worship of the living God who has transformed our lives. The Pentecostal story shapes our identity, guides our activity and reflects our understanding of salvation for all of God's creation.<sup>69</sup>

What could we hear the Spirit saying through this reading? Could the Spirit be desiring "to build" disciples from the "side" of other disciples, through their influence, witness and testimony of Christ? And in an act of completion, the new disciples come into the Body of Christ. Thereby, creating a redemptive community of connection and unity, as per the model in the Garden of Eden, where the woman was built from the side of the man, and returned to the man, in the fullness of communion. In actions that overcome the not-goodness of our situation. Building us into the community of the Spirit, and the body of Christ. As Archer states, a pentecostal hermeneutic that equally applies to this scenario is "In this way, our communities become living embodied letters and our communities become the sacramental redemptive presence of Christ in the world".<sup>70</sup> In which together we are "living stones being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5, ESV).

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<sup>67</sup> Yair Lorberbaum, "Yitshak and God's Separation Anxiety," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (January 1, 2013): 108..

<sup>68</sup> Donald W. Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1987).

<sup>69</sup> Kenneth J. Archer, "A Pentecostal Way of Doing Theology: Method and Manner," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9, no. 3 (2007): 312.

<sup>70</sup> Archer, Kenneth J., "Pentecostal Hermeneutics," 331.

Overall, these are but a few of the questions that this intertextual reading of Gen 16:2 asks us to consider as we “read” the passage against our own life and experiences, with the Holy Spirit who undergirds both the text and our life.

## 10. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has sought to provide an intertextual reading of Gen 16:2 to show that the depiction of Sari’s proposal “to build” a family through Hagar was subtly crafted to highlight an action motivated by autonomous striving. This lack of trust in God resulted in grief, pain, and scattering, analogous to the previous accounts of Cain and the Tower of Babel. However, when one allows God to motivate our building efforts, as detailed in Gen 2:22 where Adam’s aloneness was overcome by God building Eve, this is good and full of joy. By reading these Genesis passages intertextually, the similar motifs and verbal resonances highlight new insights and create a fresh meaning to Sarai’s speech in Genesis 16:2.

Secondly, this paper explored, the proposal that Pentecostals have an affinity for intertextual readings, specifically through their practice of testimony. Whereby Pentecostals read Scripture intertextually, plus appropriate this intertextual reading to their own life and experiences, extra-textually. This occurs through utilising the common motifs and resonances of the biblical text and a Pentecostal worldview to connect the readings. Finally, the overall theme that resounds through this intertextual reading of Genesis 16:2 both within the Bible and without, is this: “Unless the LORD builds...those who build labour in vain” (Psalm 127:1, ESV). We would do well to heed this reading.