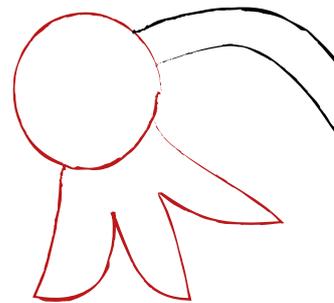
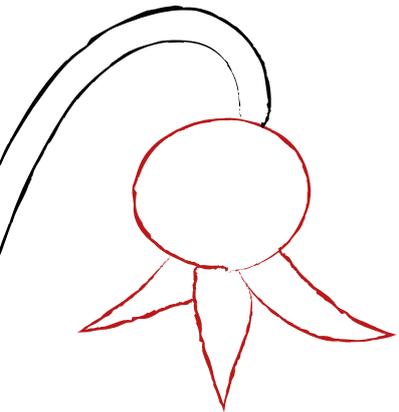


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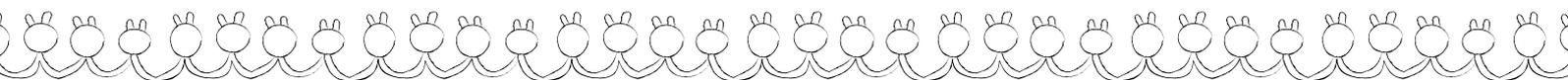
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**WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL IS GOOD?
EXAMINING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SARAH'S
BEAUTY IN GENESIS APOCRYPHON 20:2-9**

Hanna Tervanotko

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research*
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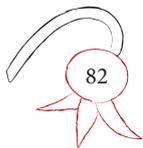
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Keywords: aesthetics, beauty, gender, Genesis Apocryphon,
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Abstract

The description of Sarah in *Genesis Apocryphon* 20:2–9 may be the only narrative containing a woman's physiognomic description that has been preserved in ancient Jewish texts. First, by reading the references in light of physiognomics, which assumes that physical aesthetics reflect inner qualities, I analyze the beauty preferences expressed in this text. I make use of physiognomic descriptions in ancient Near Eastern and Greek texts to uncover what the aesthetic preferences may have indicated in antiquity. Second, whereas others have proposed that the physiognomic examination concerns Sarah as a spouse, I argue that the description of Sarah's appearance does not concern her relationship with Abraham. Rather, the passage speaks of Sarah's own qualities, which the Egyptians are able to recognize thanks to their physiognomic examination; they examine Sarah as a possible spouse for the king and find her suitable. Also, based on Sarah's looks, the Egyptians conclude that she possesses wisdom.



La description de Sarah dans l'Apocryphe de la Genèse 20:2–9 est peut-être le seul texte juif de l'antiquité qui illustre la physionomie d'une femme. En lisant cette description à la lumière des études physionomiques, qui supposent que l'esthétique physique reflète les qualités intérieures, j'analyse les préférences de beauté exprimées dans le texte. Dans mon analyse, j'utilise des descriptions physionomiques issues de textes anciens du Proche-Orient et de la Grèce pour explorer ce que les préférences esthétiques auraient pu indiquer dans l'antiquité. Deuxièmement, alors que d'autres ont proposé que l'examen physionomique concerne Sarah comme épouse, je propose que la description de Sarah ne concerne pas sa relation avec Abraham. Le passage parle plutôt des qualités propres de Sarah, que les Égyptiens sont capables de reconnaître grâce à leur examen physionomique. Ils examinent Sarah comme une épouse possible pour le roi la trouvant convenable. De plus, sur la base de l'apparence de Sarah, ils concluent qu'elle possède la sagesse.



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WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL IS GOOD? EXAMINING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SARAH'S BEAUTY IN GENESIS APOCRYPHON 20:2–9¹

Hanna Tervanotko



Introduction

This article focuses on Sarah's portrayal in Genesis Apocryphon 20:2–9, a composition found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. I analyze the description of Sarah's beauty in light of physiognomics, a practice that assumes that physical aesthetics reflect inner qualities. Whereas scholars have previously suggested that Sarah's description reflects the author's physi-

¹ I have worked on this article for many years, and several people helped me to develop my ideas. I want to thank Francis Borchardt, Helen Dixon, Katharine Fitzgerald, Rob Jones, and Elisa Uusimäki for their help. I also discussed the article's theme with the Helsinki-McMaster research seminar in Winter 2021 and at the SBL annual meeting in 2022, where I benefitted from the feedback of the other speakers, Anne Katrine de Hemmer Gudme and Atar Livneh and the participants of the session. Irene Quach-Soquier polished my French. Thank you also to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

ognomic awareness (Popović 2007, 286–87), the text’s correlations with physiognomic practices have not been examined in detail. Further, by making use of the physiognomic descriptions in ancient Near Eastern and Greek texts, my goal is to uncover what the aesthetic preferences expressed in the Genesis Apocryphon may have indicated in antiquity.

Physiognomia (Gr. φυσιογνωμία) was a method of ancient science known throughout the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean. This technique of divination, which observes people, their physical appearance, and their behavior, was used to judge a person’s qualities and intentions. According to the physiognomic examinations preserved in ancient texts, an examiner would carefully analyze an individual’s entire body, moving from the head to the toes. Through this analysis, the examiner would also discover “hidden” information about his or her inner life. Scholars have proposed that Mesopotamian and Greco-Roman physiognomic texts differed in the types of hidden information revealed through such examinations. For example, Mesopotamian physiognomic texts are more concerned with predictions for the future, whereas Greco-Roman physiognomic texts focus more on the nature of the individual—that is, revealing the individual’s inner life.²

Scholars have argued that people turned to physiognomics in different circumstances. It is possible that physiognomic practitioners were consulted to gain information on matters regarding individuals’ private lives, such as health, wealth, and happiness in antiquity (see below). Moreover, physiognomic examinations could also have had a political function. For instance, these types of examinations may have been used to control people’s entry into different restricted spaces. Ulla Koch (2015, 283) has proposed that physiognomics was exercised in the Mesopotamian courts in an effort to help kings find trustworthy people. Jews of the Greco-Roman era were also familiar with this method. The



² In Greco-Roman contexts, this technique “promises that it examines and perceives the quality of the mind from the quality of the body” (Swain 2007, 556–57). See Barton 1994, 100; Chandezon, Dasen, and Wilgaux 2014, 302. Aristotle established physiognomy as a science in Greek classical literature by explaining how different body parts and their sizes, shapes, and marks corresponded with various moral characteristics. See Cohen 1981, 42.

Dead Sea Scrolls contain texts in which physiognomic examinations are referenced.³ Mladen Popović (2007, 237–39) has suggested that these texts attest to physiognomic examinations of individuals who wanted to enter the Qumran community.⁴

Sarah’s description in Genesis Apocryphon 20:2–9, which analyzes her beauty from head to foot, I argue, aligns with the style of a physiognomic description, even though there are some differences between this and other physiognomic descriptions.⁵ The connection between Sarah’s description and physiognomics has been observed by a number of scholars. For example, Popović (2007, 286–77; see also Cohen 1981) has argued that the text demonstrates “physiognomic awareness,” meaning that the writer of this passage would have been somewhat familiar with the technique of ancient physiognomics (e.g., its method of examining the body from the head to the toes). Popović concludes that, although the author may have had physiognomics in mind while composing the passage, the passage is not a physiognomic description of Sarah. Sarah’s description in the Genesis Apocryphon differs from the other Jewish physiognomic texts preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls, because the examination does not lead to an explicit divinatory prediction concerning Sarah’s future.⁶ While I agree with this starting point, I argue that the Egyptian officials appear to discern Sarah’s inner qualities, especially her wisdom (1Q20 20:7) from her physical appearance.



³ In ancient Jewish literature, this style most explicitly appears in 4QZodiacal Physiognomy (4Q186) and 4QPhysiognomy^{ar} (4Q561). Popović 2007 is the most comprehensive study on physiognomics in ancient Jewish texts. See also, e.g., Scholem 1969; Schäfer 1988; Alexander 1996; Schmidt 1997; Catastini 2010.

⁴ Note that the nature and function of this community are debated. For a recent discussion, see, e.g., Schofield 2008.

⁵ Fitzmyer 2004, 193–97; Falk 2007, 80–100. For a summary of previous research, see Atar Livneh 2020a. Scholars have highlighted the tradition of ancient Jewish interpreters who used the name “Sarah” (e.g., Kugel 1997, 133). In this paper, I follow that practice. I will use “Sarai” only when citing the biblical text or other scholars.

⁶ An example of such a prediction is found, e.g., in 4Q186, which provides a forecast for the individual’s future at the end of its descriptions, such as “he will be poor” (עני יהיה; 4Q186 1 2:9).

Thus, in my view, the text's connection with physiognomic practices is stronger than has been previously believed.

Several scholars have previously paid attention to Sarah's beauty in this passage. For instance, its affinities with ancient Near Eastern poetry, which celebrates beauty from head to toe, have been highlighted. While Sarah's description aligns with that poetic discourse, it lacks several features typically found in ancient love poetry. Furthermore, the celebration of Sarah's wisdom is atypical for that style.⁷ The text's affinities with Hellenistic literature have also been an avenue of examination. Shaye Cohen (1981) has compared the description of Sarah to Philodemus's praise of Flora's beauty, and situates both passages in the context of Hellenistic writers' interest in the human body. Building on Cohen's work, Atar Livneh (2020a) further highlights the passage's Hellenistic interests and details how the author of Genesis Apocryphon 20:2–9 seems to have been aware of the descriptive conventions of femininity and feminine beauty espoused by Greco-Roman literature. The author of the Genesis Apocryphon also utilizes the style of classical Greek rhetoric in the form of exclamations when referring to Sarah's body parts. Thus, Livneh argues that the author consciously portrayed Sarah with Greco-Roman aesthetic conventions in mind.⁸

Meanwhile, numerous scholars have also highlighted the other qualities possessed by Sarah as she is described in the Genesis Apocryphon. For example, Anthony Lipscomb (2019) has argued that Sarah's description is inspired by the portrayal of the figure of Lady Wisdom in ancient Jewish texts, concluding that its author was in dialogue with the broader corpus of wisdom literature.⁹ Moreover, Jacqueline Vayntrub (2020) discusses detailed and systematic descriptions of female fig-



⁷ Goshen-Gottstein 1959; Nickelsburg 1996. Meanwhile, various compositions in the Song of Songs follow this style by comparing various body parts to, e.g., an animal, tree, flower, and fruit. See Song 4:1–7; 5:10–16; 6:4–7; 7:2–8.

⁸ Livneh 2020a argues especially Sarah's hair, fingers, and breasts are portrayed in accordance with the prevalent beauty conventions in the author's own world. I will engage with Livneh's observations in more detail below.

⁹ I will address this study in more detail below when discussing Sarah's wisdom in the Genesis Apocryphon.

ures, calling them “totalizing descriptions.” Comparing Proverbs 31 to the description of Sarah in the Genesis Apocryphon, Vayntrub points out that both texts reflect an interest in bodily perfection. However, whereas the author of the Genesis Apocryphon does not, according to Vayntrub, explain the connection between wisdom and beauty, the author of Proverbs 31 rejects aesthetic beauty in favor of deeds and acquired wisdom.

In sum, scholars have demonstrated that the description of Sarah in Genesis Apocryphon aligns with numerous Hellenistic concepts, but the actual description of Sarah’s beauty as a physiognomic examination has not been sufficiently addressed. In particular, despite the conclusion that the author of the Genesis Apocryphon was aware of physiognomics, the connection between Sarah’s beauty and her inner life, including her wisdom, has remained unaddressed in detail. The question remains, how do aspects of Sarah’s visible beauty correlate with her inner character?

In this article, I first analyze how Sarah’s beauty in this text reflects ideal characteristics and capabilities attributed to her in the Genesis Apocryphon. Although some scholars are not sure about the purpose of this portrayal, similar to Popović I argue that it reflects a physiognomic description that connects traits of her beauty with her other qualities. Therefore, while analyzing how Sarah’s aesthetic traits may refer to her qualities and skills, I make use of ancient Mesopotamian and Greek texts that preserve references to women’s physical appearances.¹⁰ Although there was no universal concept of beauty in antiquity and individuals surely had their own preferences, the purpose of this comparative analysis is to offer some clues of what kind of qualities Sarah’s beauty could have symbolized when analyzed through the lens of physiognomy. This analysis has a particular importance because the Genesis Apocryphon is the only known Jewish composition of the Greco-Roman era that narrates a woman’s physiognomic examination. Its portrayal of Sarah’s beauty in this way demonstrates that Jews were aware of women’s physiognomic examinations.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Barton 1994, 115–18; Swain 2007, 646–47; Chandezon, Dasen, and Wilgaux 2014, 297–313; Koch 2015, 283.



“Yet, with all This Comeliness, She Possesses Great Wisdom” (1Q20 20:7): Sarah’s Aesthetics in Light of Physiognomics

The Genesis Apocryphon is an Aramaic text found among the Dead Sea Scrolls that was composed during the third to the first century BCE (see Machiela and VanderKam 2018). Genesis Apocryphon 20:2–14 contains an expansion of Genesis 12:15—“When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh”—where the Egyptian officials see Sarah for the first time and praise her beauty to the king.¹¹ In this context, the author of Genesis Apocryphon elaborates Sarah’s beauty, and has the three councilors discuss her looks in much more detail:



- 2 How splen[did] and beautiful is the aspect of her face, and how [...]
- 3 [And] h[ow] supple is the hair of her head. How lovely are her eyes; how pleasant her nose and all the radiance of
- 4 her face [...] How shapely is her breast, how gorgeous all her fairness! Her arms, how comely! Her hands,
- 5 how perfect—how [lovely] is every aspect of her hands! How exquisite are her palms, how long and delicate all her fingers! Her feet,
- 6 how attractive! How perfect are her thighs! Neither virgins nor brides entering the bridal chamber exceed her charms. Over all
- 7 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
- 8 is beautiful. (1Q20 20:2–8)¹²

The officials’ account of Sarah is effective. After hearing them describe Sarah, the king desires Sarah and has her brought to him immediately.

¹¹ Following the Genesis Apocryphon terminology, I refer to “the king” throughout this article. Note that Genesis 12 refers to “Pharaoh” (פרעה). In addition, in this paper I analyze the Genesis Apocryphon independently from its connections to Genesis. For the relationship between the two documents, see, e.g., Machiela 2009.

¹² Translation by J. T. Milik in Accordance 12. All translations follow the Qumran Non-Biblical Manuscripts translation of Accordance 12 unless otherwise indicated.

When the king sees Sarah, he is amazed at her beauty and takes her as his wife. By analyzing the officials' portrayal of Sarah's beauty in light of ancient physiognomics, where physical appearance can indicate various personal abilities, my goal is to uncover what kind of qualities the description may suggest. I will now make use of some cultural generalizations in order to offer some ideas about the significance of this literary portrayal of Sarah's beauty.

Hair

The portrayal begins with a description of Sarah's head and hair in lines 2–3. This aligns with the physiognomic text of 4Q186 1:4–6, where the author begins the description of the individual paying attention to the shape of the head and includes details of his hair and eyes.¹³ Concerning Sarah in the Genesis Apocryphon, the audience learns that her face is splendid and beautiful (ושפיד לה צלם אפיהא), and that her hair is supple. First of all, inasmuch as the viewers are able to see Sarah's hair, she does not appear to cover her hair. Whereas there is no certainty about how often women covered their head, Atar Livneh (2020b: 461) argues that “the way hair is arranged and covered is also related to the control of female sexuality.”¹⁴ Uncontrolled female figures, for example demons, are depicted with disheveled hair (TSol 13:1). In contrast to such wild and messy haired women, women whose hair is cut and/or shaped in ritualistic contexts are portrayed as being calm and in control as a result of such actions. And the opposite is also true: a priest dishevels a woman's hair as a part of a ritual, which determines her guiltiness for unfaithfulness in Numbers 5:18, and Deuteronomy 21:12 stipulates that the hair of a beautiful captive woman (אשת יפת תאר) has to be cut. In both contexts, cutting the woman's hair signifies a change in her status (Livneh 2020b).

From ancient images of women, it seems that long hair was preferred on women. Woman's hair is referred to as “a flock of goats, moving

¹³ For 4Q186, see note 3.

¹⁴ See also Myerowitz Levine 1995. Some texts, such as Isa 3:17, refer to uncovering as a punishment and as an act of humiliation. There is no command that women should cover their hair in the Hebrew Bible. See Bonner 1993.



down the slopes of Gilead” (Song 4:1). As the author appears to describe the movement of the hair, it is probable that the hair was assumed to be long. Further, Job’s wife sells her hair to Satan for bread (T. Job 23:1–11). Hair had to be somewhat long to be sold. In addition, hair appears to play an important role when women beautified themselves. For instance, Judith is portrayed as combing her hair in Judith 10:3 in preparation for her seduction of Holofernes, and 3 Maccabees 4:6 refers to a bride perfuming her hair with myrrh.

For the authors of the Hebrew Bible, thick hair was one of the signs of male beauty (e.g., 2 Sam 14:26).¹⁵ Meanwhile the authors of the texts of the Hebrew Bible do not associate it as evidently with women. Rather, Livneh (2020a, 401–3) has explained that the reference to Sarah’s supple hair aligns with the polarized conception of gender in the Greek physiognomic writings, where masculinity is associated with firmness and femininity with softness. Hair is a noted interest in the works of the second-century sophist author Polemon, who writes in his physiognomic treatise that for men thick hair implies strength, energy, and great-heartedness. Soft hair creates a contrast to this image and is found on women and weaker men (Barton 1994, 126–27).¹⁶



Eyes

The author of the Genesis Apocryphon emphasizes that Sarah’s eyes are lovely (כמא יאין להון לה עיניהא). Ancient Jewish texts seldom discuss the aesthetics of the eyes. One example we do have of such an interest in a woman’s eyes is Genesis 29:16, where the author describes Leah’s eyes with the term רכוח. As this term can be rendered, for instance, as “weak,” “tender,” or “soft,” the exact significance of the term in this context re-

¹⁵ Saul M. Olyan (2008, 17) suggests that Song 4:1 (“Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead”) could suggest that thick hair was also preferred for women. The quotations from the Hebrew Bible follow the NRSV translation unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁶ Note that hair is often of interest in the Jewish physiognomic texts, and thus played a role when an individual’s inner life was assessed. See, e.g., 4Q561 3:1: “[and the hair of his head]”; 4Q561 3:4: “and the hair of his beard [will be] black, (and) his lips];” and 4Q561 7:2: “[... (his hair/his beard?) will be between ...] to reddish a[nd ...].”

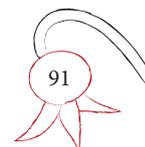
mains ambiguous. The LXX translators render the term “ἀσθενεῖς,” assuming the underlying Hebrew referred to Leah’s short-sightedness. But it is also possible to understand the term as indicating the aesthetics of Leah’s eyes or, in particular, the romantic look in her eyes.¹⁷

Ancient writers paid attention to eye movements in their descriptions, a quality that was believed to reflect a person’s character. Such an interpretation is present, for instance, in depictions of allegorical female figures of the book of Proverbs and 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman (= 4Q184) in which the protagonist women lead men astray. In Proverbs, the eyes of the strange woman, of whom the author warns the audience, are portrayed as “winking” (קָרַץ בְּעֵינָיו; 6:13) and “haughty” (עֵינָיו רְמוּת; 6:17). Moreover, Proverbs 16:30 explains that “one who winks the eyes plans perverse things,” and Proverbs 21:4 states that “haughty eyes and a proud heart—the lamp of the wicked—are sin.” In a similar vein, 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman describes how the eyes of the protagonist female figure “dart here and there,” saying that “she flutters her eyelids lewdly.” Joan Taylor (2011, 175) explains that the woman’s eyes here are described as being “manipulative.” Similar to the woman of Proverbs, she “looks around for a man she can run after and trip up.” While the women’s descriptions in Proverbs and 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman are highly allegorical, the writers suggest that their eye movements can betray a distrustful inner life.¹⁸

Evidence from cognate cultures supports the importance of eyes in physiognomic discussions. Polemon includes a discussion on the eyes and claims that “eyes which move quickly indicate distress, low

¹⁷ See Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Leah,” in *Jewish Women’s Archive Encyclopedia* at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/leah-bible>. Note that several translations of Genesis do not clearly follow either of these avenues to interpret the text. For example, the NRSV translates the term as “lovely.”

¹⁸ On the female figure in 4Q184, see Goff 2006; Lesley 2012; Quick 2020. Popović (2007, 5 n. 13 and 287–88) emphasizes the author’s interest in the female figure’s body parts in 4Q184, and according to Popović, 4Q184 may be another example of a text that reflects physiognomic awareness. Also other texts of the Qumran collection include the idea of distrustful eyes. See, e.g., the Damascus Document 2:16: “not turning away through thoughts caused by the sinful urge and lecherous eyes.”



suspicion, lack of sincerity and something between cowardliness and bravery ... but an eye whose gaze darts everywhere indicates love of sexual crimes and shamelessness” (Barton 1994, 108). In contrast to the eyes that predict troubles, Sarah’s eyes are declared lovely, and those who observe her do not detect anything untrustworthy in them.

Breasts

Moving away from Sarah’s face, the narrator describes her breasts (חֲדָיִה) in line 4 (“how shapely is her breast”). Breasts are a sign of female beauty, sexual pleasure, and fertility in ancient Jewish texts. The beauty of breasts appears especially in Song of Songs 4:5; 7:3, 7–8.¹⁹ Ancient Jewish authors describe breasts as objects of sexual pleasure. For instance, Proverbs 5:19 writes about the addressee’s “wife of youth” (5:18): “May her breasts satisfy you at all times, may you be intoxicated always by her love.”²⁰ Further, the breasts are typically referred to as providing for children (e.g., Ps 22:9; Lam 4:3; *contra* Hos 9:14, which mentions a miscarrying womb and dry breasts) and are thus, at least to some extent, a symbol of fertility and prosperity. In ancient Greek medical texts, well-formed breasts indicate good female health, especially women’s ability to feed their infants (Iavazzo 2009). Thus, an idealized description of female breasts can be read as a promise of family offspring, which in turn may signal prosperity for the family.



Hands

Next, the description moves on to Sarah’s arms (דַּרְעֵיהָ), hands (יָדֶיהָ), palms (כַּפֵּיהָ), and fingers (אֶצְבָּעֹת) in lines 4–5, pointing out their beauty. Livneh (2020a, 398–401) suggests that Sarah’s long and delicate fingers are another sign of her femininity and attractiveness. While I agree with Livneh, I further suggest that apart from the aesthetics the shape of Sarah’s fingers could attest to her capabilities. Long and thin fingers are also mentioned in the physiognomic text 4QZodiacal

¹⁹ Song 7:3: “Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle.” For references to breasts in Songs, see Gault 2019, 7–8, 103–10.

²⁰ For breasts and sexual connotations, see also Ezek 23:3; Hos 2:2. See Brenner 1997, 32, 40–41.

Physiognomy, where they are a sign of a good future.²¹ Significantly, in the collection of Mesopotamian Šumma Alu omen texts, a woman who had big fingers was seen as being less capable of doing handiwork than one with small fingers: “If a woman’s fingers are unusually big: Her handiwork will not succeed,” “If a woman’s fingers are small: Her handiwork will succeed” (Koch 2015, 284). It is unclear if handiwork refers to textile work or to a broader range of domestic skills in this context. Regardless, the description of Sarah’s long and delicate fingers in the Genesis Apocryphon aligns with the dominant beauty ideal, and suggests that she will succeed in her handiwork—unlike a woman with unusually big fingers.²² Women’s ability to master handiwork was considered very important in the ancient sources: Proverbs 31:10–31, for example, celebrates such a skill. Proverbs 31:13 reads: “She seeks wool and flax and works with willing hands.”

Feet and Thighs

Finally, the description of Sarah’s body continues moving down and addresses her feet (רגליהא) and thighs (שקיהא) in lines 5–6. This connection between feet and thighs appears to follow a specific rule that



²¹ 4Q186 2 1:4–5: “whose fingers are thin and long.” Lines 7–8 of the text conclude that this individual has “eight parts [from the House of Light] and o[ne] [in the House of Darkness].” Similarities are also noted by Livneh 2020a. 4Q186 also mentions an individual who has thick fingers and has the majority of his “parts” in the “House of Darkness.” 4Q186 1 3:3–6: “whose fingers are thick, whose thighs are thick and extremely hairy, and whose toes are thick and short: he possesses a spirit with [ei]ght parts in the House of [Darkness] and one from the House of Light.”

²² Note that a connection to Sarah’s handiwork is already suggested by Takamitsu Muraoka (1993, 39–48), who emphasizes Sarah’s domestic skills and translates lines 7–8: “With all this beauty she has plenty of skill and all her handiwork is pretty.” On the relationship between beauty and handiwork, see also Vayntrub 2020. No ancient Jewish author writes about Sarah’s handiwork. Her cooking is mentioned in Gen 18, where the three men visit Abraham: “And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, ‘Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes’” (Gen 18:6). This could indicate that the ancient authors assumed Sarah participated in some chores.

is also included in 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman, which describes its protagonist female figure with these body parts one after the other.²³ It is possible that round-shaped thighs were preferred because Song of Songs 7:1 praises a woman's thighs: "Your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand."²⁴ The rest of the passage in Song of Songs also emphasizes round shapes, perhaps indicating that a bigger body type was preferred over a skinny one.²⁵ The author of 4QZodiacal Physiognomy writes that long and slim thighs were undesirable for a man. They, together with other signs, indicate that the examined individual belongs to the "house of darkness," and they are interpreted as visible signs of future poverty.²⁶

It is possible that the thighs also have a sexual connotation in Genesis Apocryphon, as Benjamin Wright and Suzanne Edward (2015, 92) associate Sarah's thighs with the wedding chamber. The author of the text mentions the wedding chamber immediately after the reference to thighs in line 6. Moreover, Athalya Brenner (1997, 38) has argued that the term ירך ("thighs") can be understood as a euphemistic reference to female genitalia. Brenner suggests such a symbolism in Song of Songs 7:1–7. Such a connotation may also be present in Judith 9:2.²⁷ While



²³ 4Q184 3: "are befouled with perversity, her hands grip corruption tight. Her feet come down to do evil, and to walk in the crimes of [... Her thighs are] pillars of darkness, a horde of sins is under her hem..." I acknowledge that the term "thighs" is a reconstruction, but given the literary context, it appears likely. Quick 2020, suggests that the reference to the feet may have a sexual connotation in this text. Brenner (1997, 37) discusses the euphemisms connected to the term רגל.

²⁴ For the similarities between the Genesis Apocryphon and Song of Songs, see Cohen 1981, 46–47. Barton (1994, 115) points out how Polemon mentions "very fleshy hips" as the ideal female type.

²⁵ Olyan (2008, 17–18) explains how "plumpness" was the preferred body type for men in the texts of the Hebrew Bible. This quality is not connected with women as explicitly.

²⁶ 4Q186 2:5: "whose thighs are long and slender."

²⁷ "O Lord God of my ancestor Simeon, to whom you gave a sword to take revenge on those strangers who had torn off a virgin's clothing to defile her, and exposed her thighs to put her to shame, and polluted her womb to disgrace her; for you said, 'It shall not be done'—yet they did it."

I am not fully convinced that the author of the Genesis Apocryphon refers to female genitalia in line 6, it is possible that the ancient author was aware of the heightened sexuality of the term.

Apart from the aesthetic preference, round-shaped thighs, similar to breasts, may have been seen as an indication of Sarah's fertility. Jewish texts that refer to childbirth mention thighs: "She who is the most refined and gentle among you ... will begrudge food to the husband whom she embraces, to her own son, and to her own daughter, begrudging even the afterbirth that comes out from between her thighs" (Deut 28:56–57). Hence, it is possible that round thighs were perceived as healthy-looking, and were a visible sign of fertility. Whereas women's ability to provide offspring is of interest to the authors of the ancient Jewish texts, the irony in the passage is, of course, that audience of this text would assumingly be familiar with Sarah's barrenness elaborated especially in Genesis 16 and Genesis 18. The author of the Genesis Apocryphon also hints at this in 22:33–34, where Abraham addresses his own childlessness. Meanwhile, the king's officers would not have known about Sarah's difficulties conceiving when they praised her beauty.²⁸

Finally, after discussing various body parts, the writer of the passage concludes his description of Sarah in lines 7–8: "All that she has is beautiful" (ודלידיהא יאה). Tamar Kadari (2018) has recently argued that it is not sufficient in many cultures to have one beautiful body part or aspect, but that there must be a total harmony in beauty.²⁹ This idea resonates with Genesis 29:17, where the author states that "Leah's eyes were lovely, and Rachel was graceful and beautiful" (ועיני לאה רכות ורחל היתה יפת תאר ויפת מראה), suggesting that Leah's lovely



²⁸ Importantly, in the biblical narratives, the deity "opens" or "closes" the womb. Thus, childlessness does not depend on the human bodies but on divine agency. For fertility in the Hebrew Bible, see, e.g., Brenner 1997, 257–73; Havrelock 2008; Moss and Baden 2015, 21–69.

²⁹ Kadari makes use of Umberto Eco's (2004, 61–3) discussion. Also, Olyan (2008, 18–19) emphasizes symmetrical beauty and lack of defects as the ideal look in the texts of the Hebrew Bible. The concept of harmonious beauty was known already in ancient Greece. See, e.g., Stansbury-O'Donnell 2014.

eyes could not compete with Rachel's overall beauty. Significantly, Sarah's description meets this requirement of overall harmonious beauty.

Apart from celebrating Sarah's aesthetic beauty, it seems that the writer of the Genesis Apocryphon, who demonstrates an awareness of physiognomic principles, suggests a correspondence between some aspects of her aesthetic beauty and her personal traits and skills. By examining Sarah's body, the author is able to communicate that her eyes are beautiful and different from the description of untrustworthy eyes. Thus, Sarah should be viewed as a trustworthy figure. The shape of her breasts and thighs may be sexually desirable. However, they can also signal fertility and possible continuity of the family lineage in the future. Similarly, her delicate fingers may be aesthetically beautiful, and can make the audience think about the touch of those fingers. Yet, according to Mesopotamian divinatory texts, such fingers would make Sarah capable of handiwork. Therefore, it is possible that the description refers to multiple qualities simultaneously. Significantly, Cohen (1981, 46) points out that the term "wisdom" can also mean "skill."³⁰ These qualities make Sarah out to be an ideal character with different capacities that have the potential to make her and her family successful.



“Thereupon, He Took Her as His Wife” (1Q20 20:9): The Function of Sarah's Aesthetic Examination

Above, I briefly mentioned scholarship in ancient physiognomics that suggests that this method of examination may have been used to control people's entry into restricted spaces in antiquity. Whereas Sarah's beauty in the Genesis Apocryphon passage has received a lot of attention, the possible divinatory function of this description in its literary

³⁰ In Western culture, talking about a woman as a sexual being and as a mother do not belong to the same sphere. Meanwhile, we do not know how the ancients would have understood imagining female body parts, especially breasts used to feed children. However, I do not see a reason why one way to see the body, i.e., sexual, would exclude the other, i.e., pragmatic. I am grateful for Francis Landy, who drew my attention to these dichotomies.

context has not yet been explained. Previously, Popović (2007, 287) has suggested that the description of Sarah's beauty aims at demonstrating her "impeccable character as a wife." However, in my view, she is not viewed as Abraham's wife in the context where the Egyptians describe her. The Egyptians are not aware of Sarah's married status, as that is kept secret.³¹ Hence, their praise of Sarah is not at all connected to Abraham (see also Machiela 2018, 229–30). Rather, in my view, the councilors appear to evaluate Sarah as a potential wife for the king. They try to determine whether she can be allowed to enter the palace and whether she is well suited for marriage to the king.

Due to manuscript deterioration, the exact context of Sarah's examination cannot be established. Genesis Apocryphon 19:27, which mentions eating and drinking, appears to refer to the councilors' meeting with Abraham. Yet, the end of line 20:8, "when the king heard Hyrcanos's words," assumes that the three councilors are back in the court. This could suggest that, according to the author, the councilors took Sarah to the court with them and would have examined her in detail there.³²

Line 6 adds to this possibility that the officials examine Sarah as a potential spouse, because immediately after observing Sarah, they mention the bedroom of a newly wedded couple: "Neither virgins nor brides entering the bridal chamber exceed her charms." Their praise of Sarah indicates she surpasses the king's other partners in appearance.³³ My proposal, that Sarah is assessed as a possible partner for the king, finds support in ancient Mesopotamian texts. Koch (2015, 284) has suggested that in ancient Mesopotamia physiognomic experts could have been consulted when appointments were made at court or when



³¹ In Genesis Apocryphon 19:20, Abraham instructs Sarah: "In every [place] where [we shall go, say] concerning me, 'He is my brother.' Thus I may live because of you and my life be spared owing to you."

³² Gen 12:15 says: "When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house." This supports my suggestion that Sarah was examined in the court before being introduced to the king.

³³ See Esth 2 for a description of girls in a king's palace where each is, in their turn, taken to the king.

weddings were prepared, in order to make sure candidates were not holding anything against the king.

Ancient Jewish texts do not include such narratives that report of such physiognomic examinations. Rather, physiognomy only appears explicitly in a few texts. Popović (2007) has demonstrated how only two texts from the Qumran collection provide technical forms of physiognomic descriptions, 4QZodiacal Physiognomy and 4QPhysiognomy, which I have referred to multiple times above. According to Popović (2007, 232–39), the purpose of these two technical texts was to provide additional information on individuals. Thus, such examinations could have been used, similar to the Mesopotamian texts, for social control. It is possible that these texts are witnesses to physiognomic examinations that were employed to scrutinize people entering the Qumran community and to prevent individuals from joining who were deemed dangerous or maleficent.



Apart from 4QZodiacal Physiognomy and 4QPhysiognomy that serve as witnesses to explicit physiognomic examinations, Popović highlights how other Jewish texts demonstrate an interest in the human body; these texts suggest that there was a growing interest in bodily signs in the Hellenistic era.³⁴ For example, Jewish awareness of physiognomic principles is present in Sirach (19:29–30): “People will be known by their appearances, and sensible people will be known when first met face to face. People’s attire and hearty laughter and the way they walk proclaim things about them.” Other ancient Jewish texts that, according to Popović, betray physiognomic consciousness include, for example, 4QBirth of Noah^{a,b}, 1 Enoch 106, 4QBarkhi Nafshi^{a,c}, and 4QWiles of the Wicked Woman. These texts are, like the Genesis Apocryphon, literary texts that have an interest in the connection between physical appearance and inner qualities.

As I have shown above, details about Sarah’s body parts could align with the physiognomic texts in numerous details. Further, the literary context of the Genesis Apocryphon may speak to the use of physical ex-

³⁴ Cohen 1981 also explores this growing interest for bodily signs in the Greek texts of the Hellenistic era. For more on divination in the Dead Sea Scrolls, see, e.g., Lange 1997.

aminations for social control. Notably, the Genesis Apocryphon's portrayal of Sarah highlights how her eyes do not betray any signs of being untrustworthy; she is not like a woman whose eyes betray plots against men or manipulation. Hence, the councilors cannot detect in her traits anything that would raise concerns about acting against the king.³⁵ As a result, they believe that they can allow Sarah to enter the court without preoccupations about the dangers she might bring.

Further, again according to Koch (2015, 283), physiognomic divination could have been practiced when marriages were being considered, possibly to check that the candidate did not have looks or behaviors that would prevent procreation.³⁶ Babylonian tablets that preserve physiognomic descriptions connect women's appearances to barrenness and possible labor difficulties (Popović 2007, 72–74). This background can help to explain the detailed interest in Sarah's looks. I demonstrated above that the description of Sarah's beauty especially highlights body parts that were deemed essential for fertility, such as her breasts and thighs. It is noteworthy that Sarah passes these tests and that she is deemed to be an ideal spouse for the king.

While Genesis Apocryphon 20:2–9 does not preserve any references to the exact context where the meeting occurs, the passage refers to councilors from the court who consult Abraham on goodness, wisdom, and righteousness.³⁷ Their interest in these topics suggests that they are professionals in the court who could have possessed some expertise in divinatory techniques. Many ancient Jewish texts portray court personnel, such as Daniel in the book of Daniel and Joseph and Pharaoh's



³⁵ Wright and Edwards (2015, 93–94) mention that the audience of the narrative has a different perspective on Sarah's trustworthiness, since they know that she lies about her relationship with Abraham.

³⁶ Also, the ancient Greek physiognomic texts show particular interest in women's ability to procreate (see Barton 1994, 115–18; Swain 2007, 646–47; Chandezon, Dasen, and Wilgaux 2014, 302–6).

³⁷ Genesis Apocryphon 19:24–25: “Councilors from the Egyptian court [and advisers] of the Pharaoh of Zoan. They came having heard of [my] words and my wife, and kept plying me [with many gifts]. They as[ked] me [for knowledge] of goodness, wisdom, and righteousness, so I read to them the [Book] of the Words of Enoch.”

magicians Exodus, the latter being knowledgeable in divination. Thus, such figures may also have possessed some expertise in physiognomy. The Egyptian officials conclude their appraisal of Sarah's body with the exclamation: "Yet with all this comeliness, she possesses great wisdom" (20:7). The detail about Sarah's wisdom is significant, since the text does not preserve any reference to Sarah speaking with them. In fact, Sarah's own voice is heard only twice in the preserved text. First, Sarah is recorded speaking with Abraham in 19:14–23, where Abraham elaborates the contents of his dream prior to their arrival in Egypt. The author has Abraham discuss his dream with Sarah, who asks him: "Tell me your dream so I may understand" (19:18). According to Joseph McDonald (2020, 167), Sarah's inquiry about Abraham's dream may imply that she wanted to acquire knowledge. Instead, I read this detail as an example of the emotional support that the author describes Sarah offering Abraham throughout the text.³⁸ In sum, as Sarah does not speak with the court councilors, the praise of Sarah's wisdom appears to be a conclusion that the officials can deduce from observing Sarah's physical appearance.³⁹



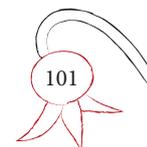
The connection between beauty and wisdom fits well with the descriptions of female figures in Hellenistic-era Jewish literature. The mention of Sarah's wisdom is significant because ancient Jewish authors only use a few adjectives to describe female protagonists in these texts. Whereas in the narratives predating the Hellenistic era a woman's

³⁸ Examples of Sarah's emotional support of Abraham become particularly noticeable during the second meeting, when Sarah communicates with the king. This is when she follows Abraham's instructions to her: "Notwithstanding, this is the kindness [that you can do for me]. In every [place] where [we shall go, say] concerning me, 'He is my brother.' Thus I may live because of you and my life be spared owing to you" (Genesis Apocryphon 19:19–20). Sarah lies about their relationship: "He is my brother" (20:10). It is striking that Sarah's only words in this passage aim at protecting Abraham; she does not speak on her own behalf.

³⁹ Lipscomb (2019, 335) raises the possibility that the king's advisors get to know some of Sarah's qualities during their visit to Abraham. Due to manuscript deterioration, Sarah's role in the meeting cannot be confirmed.

attractiveness determined her desirability,⁴⁰ authors of the Hellenistic Jewish narratives interpreted female figures in more complex ways. For example, female protagonists of the ancient Jewish novellas, such as Judith, Esther, Susanna, and Aseneth, are described as beautiful in the narratives. Yet, their attractiveness is not the only characteristic attributed to them, as these heroines are also portrayed, for instance, as resourceful and pious. They even distance themselves from their beauty in certain situations.⁴¹ Sarah's description, which expands the portrayal from the "beautiful" referred to in the Genesis narrative to wise, aligns with this style. Thus, it can be viewed as another example of a text where a woman's portrayal is not only reduced to her beauty (Cohen 1981).⁴²

The author of the Genesis Apocryphon creates a representation of Sarah by rewriting her physical presentation. Although broadly speaking I agree with Popović's theory that the physiognomic examination concerns Sarah as a spouse, I argue that the description of Sarah's appearance does not concern her relationship with Abraham and is not restricted to her childbearing traits. Rather, the passage speaks of Sarah's own qualities, which the Egyptian officials are able to recognize thanks to their physiognomic examination. Thus, their conclusion that she possesses wisdom is based solely on their examination of Sarah's looks.



Conclusion

While we know that ancient Jewish authors were aware of the physiognomic examination as a method, so far there has not been evidence of it being applied to women. As pointed out above, the Genesis

⁴⁰ Beauty (יָפִי) is an attribute frequently given to the female figures of the Hebrew Bible (Brenner 1997, 43–45). For beauty and female figures in the Hebrew Bible, see also Tervanotko 2015.

⁴¹ Judith is said to wear sackcloth in Jdt 8:5, and Esther takes off her splendid garments while praying, covers her head with ashes, and humbles her body (Add Est C) (Wills 1995, 13–16). See also Zsengellér 2015.

⁴² For Sarah's wisdom in the Hellenistic Jewish texts, see Tervanotko and Uusimäki 2018.

Apocryphon is the only ancient Jewish text reflecting a woman's physiognomic examination. Although it does not strictly follow the technical format of an examination as it is present for example in the 4QZodiacal Physiognomy and 4QPhysiognomy, it reflects a broad awareness of the method. I have argued that this awareness includes, apart from following the head-to-toe sequence, the author's knowledge of the relationship between the qualities of the body and the qualities of the mind. Similar to other texts where this technique is used to grant access to restricted spaces, I argue that the examination of Sarah serves a similar purpose in the Genesis Apocryphon. In my view, the king's councilors examine Sarah to assess her suitability as a spouse and conclude that she is an ideal spouse for the king for her beauty, abilities, and, most importantly, her trustworthiness. These matters, which concern health, wealth, and happiness, are key topics in the method of physiognomic analysis. More research on physiognomic awareness is needed in the future and will undoubtedly provide us with further insights into this interesting topic.



The style of physiognomic description, where idealized body parts are signs of internal and external positive qualities, generally aligns with Greco-Roman physiognomic texts. These texts also analyze correlations between an individual's looks and their nature. By highlighting this connection, the present study adds to the studies of Cohen and Livneh, who have previously demonstrated that Sarah's description was inspired by Greek literary traditions.

As "beauty is in the eyes of the observer," one cannot demonstrate that the author would have had one particular type of beauty preference in mind while composing the passage. Rather, my goal was to uncover some qualities in the text that could have indicated to its ancient audience Sarah's exceptionality and made her a desirable partner for the king. While the description celebrates aesthetic beauty, I argue that in the author's mind skills and beauty may be inseparable.

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