

“MORE THAN A SLAVE WOMAN”

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More Than a Slave Woman

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Dedicated to:

My sister, Danielle,
who also completed her thesis in the spring of 2015.
You are always near to my heart.

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Preface

In Galatians 4, Paul, using allegory, famously addressed those who were trying to earn their salvation. Abraham had two sons: one by a slave woman, and another by a free woman; he had one son naturally, and the other supernaturally. Hagar represented those who are born under the Old Covenant, those who live under the law are slaves to the law, trying to earn their salvation. Sarah, on the other hand, represented those who are born according to the Spirit and are free to be sons supernaturally redeemed by God's grace rather than by their own merit. The problem is not that Paul used Hagar and Sarah here as a metaphor. Before even starting this train of thought, Paul himself says: "These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants" (Gal 4:24). The problem is that Paul's metaphor has been used wrongly to take precedence in Christian interpretation of Genesis 16 and 21, creating a precedent for allegorizing her to the point where she no longer seems human.

Allegorizing differs from the use of allegory. Allegory, as exemplified by Paul in Galatians, is a method of communication. It is a means of expressing abstract ideas through metaphor. On the other hand, allegorizing is a method of interpretation. Allegorizing finds hidden meaning in text beyond that of its original purpose or sense. To understand an allegory, one must understand the original *authorial* intent. Allegorizing, on the other hand, is highly subjective and reflects the *reader's* interpretation.¹

What placed me on this path to attempt to reclaim the literal Hagar was the "fruit" of a message delivered at a Spring Arbor University chapel by Rob Link.² Pastor Link began the sermon asking if any of the students had heard about ISIS (The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). Switching gears he began discussing the promise of a son given to Abraham, saying "The

¹ David J. Zucker and Rebecca Gates Brinton. *"The Other Woman"—Perspectives on Our Father Abraham*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 368.

² Rob Link is a pastor from The River (Church) in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and he spoke on October the 15th, 2014, at SAU chapel.

promise in Abraham's story is followed up by the bad idea."³ Tracing this line of thinking throughout Genesis 16, this "bad idea" culminated in a stupid action, and this stupid action concluded in a child. "We cannot get too harsh on Abraham and Sarah because the reality is you and I make dumb choices too!"⁴ Pastor Link concluded that Hagar was the mother of all Muslims, and Abraham's one mistake caused ISIS. Was he trying to instill fear that our mistakes today could cause terrorism thousands of years in the future? "Our dumb choices have broader impact than we even know. His name was what? Ishmael! [Ishmael] according to Google, is recognized as an important prophet and patriarch, that's like the grand-daddy of them all, the founder...the patriarch of Islam."⁵ His concluding remarks were simply: "No bad idea, no stupidity, no ISIS, no Al Qaida."⁶

For two and a half years, I have graded Old Testament papers for Dr. Thomas Holsinger-Friesen's Survey of the Old Testament class. Dr. Tom is an Associate Professor of Theology at Spring Arbor University. During January term of 2015 (a two-and-a-half week intensive during the month of January) I graded "Survey Assignments" for around seventy students, and Genesis 12:1-17:27 was one of the texts used. As a grader since the fall semester of 2012, I have found students usually responded to Hagar in one of three ways: they either did not mention her at all, said she was "that slave woman who gave birth to Ishmael," or genuinely liked Hagar (sympathizing and empathizing with her). But a fourth answer showed up during January term of 2015 which I had never seen previously in almost 150 Survey Assignments: Hagar's role was

³ Rob Link. "Untitled." Sermon. Spring Arbor University Chapel, Spring Arbor Free Methodist Church, Spring Arbor, MI, October 15th, 2014. 27:20. <http://sites.arbor.edu/livestream/2014/12/05/chapel-october-15-2014-rob-link/> accessed on 3/28/2015.

⁴ Ibid. 38:00.

⁵ Ibid. 40:00. Scripture does not imply any such link between Ishmael and Islam. Furthermore, the historicity of this statement is just as debatable as Google is a credible source for making a rational argument. This essay will not try to prove the historicity of the Abrahamic narrative. This thesis is primarily focused upon bringing to light the cultural context of Abraham's day, giving a critical theological interpretation of the text, and a practical application for the modern world of why the story of Hagar matters today.

⁶ Ibid. 41:20.

to be the “mother of all the Muslims.” One does not have to be Sherlock Holmes to deduce where this thought entered the Spring Arbor intellectual stream: Pastor Rob Link.

I chose Rob Link to write about in this preface, not because he was “easy pickings” from the vine, but because the fruit of his sermon rotted in the minds of real students at Spring Arbor University. It negatively altered how they understood and interpreted a given passage of Scripture. Furthermore, as I was working on this research essay, not six months after Link’s sermon, another preacher spoke from that same pulpit about Hagar as well:

Everybody has a Hagar, what’s yours?...If you don’t trust that God is truly good enough or reliable enough you won’t wait and you’ll seek your own Hagar and you’ll settle for less and you’ll fall in with somebody [something] who will only bring you and everybody behind you heartache and pain... We all know God wants to fill our hearts only with Himself but if we don’t trust that He is good enough or reliable enough we will seek our own Hagar and we’ll settle for less, filling the whole in our heart with lesser things...food, and work, and money, video games, sports...alcohol, pornography, everybody has a drug of choice, everybody has a Hagar.⁷

Hagar was abused by Abraham and Sarah during her life, and now we continue this legacy of abuse by seeing her as the mother of terrorists and the physical manifestation of temptation!

Would Hagar name us today, as she named God in the wilderness, Christians who saw her? In starting out I discovered three major responses to Hagar made by commentators on Genesis 16 and 21: they justify, allegorize or spiritualize, or sympathize. Interpreting through a lens of justification, such as John Calvin did, attempts to prove that Hagar deserved what she got.

Interpreters that allegorize and spiritualize Hagar, such as the two speakers at the Spring Arbor Free Methodist Church, see her from the perspective of Abraham either as a temptation or as the consequences of disobeying God. This essay proposes a more sympathetic interpretation of Hagar’s narrative in the Bible. At points it may seem as though painting Hagar positively

⁷ Mark Van Valin. “So God Promised, Then Nothing Happened” Sermon, Spring Arbor Free Methodist Church, Spring Arbor, MI, March 1st, 2015. 20:00-21:10. http://springarborfm.org/sermons/view/so_god_promised_then_nothing_happened1 accessed on 3/28/2015

inevitably means slinging mud upon Sarah and Abraham. But arguably, Genesis itself paints Hagar as a suffering servant. Might we be uncomfortable with the fact that our Patriarch of faith was made righteous just as we are, by faith rather than works?

Some primary commentators on Genesis that will be cited for my research are Walter Brueggemann, John Calvin, Kenneth Mathews, Nahum M. Sarna, Gerhard Von Rad, Claus Westermann, the Midrash Rabbah, and, lastly, a compilation of essays on Hagar by Phyllis Tribble and Letty M. Russell: *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*.⁸ Finally, it is noteworthy that Hagar named God El-Roi, which means: “You are the God who sees me.”⁹ In this spirit of “seeing Hagar,” throughout this essay are included different artistic interpretations of Hagar’s story—from a Renaissance painting to modern sculptures, photography to lithographic art—all for the sake of equipping us as readers today to be readers “that see” Hagar.

⁸ Phyllis Tribble and Letty M. Russell. *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

⁹ Gen 16:13

Abram's Pre-Hagar Promises

Hindsight is 20/20. It is easy to see, from our vantage point, how a story should have unfolded when we read that story and witness a deviation in how we think it should have ended or was *supposed* to end. Problems can arise when we consider the story in totality rather than follow its sequence linearly, as will be shown with the consequential misrepresentation of the decision to use Hagar to fix Sarai's problem of barrenness. Arguably, we humans were never meant to have the viewpoint of knowing the whole story. The result of this "omniscience" is that Hagar, Sarai, and Abram are often seen as one-dimensional characters in a cheap novel rather than as multi-faceted real people living life at the same speed (moment by moment), having the same feelings, and worries about the future. With us they share many other concerns: like parenting issues, jealousy, the problems of planning ahead vs. having faith, abandonment, and finding salvation in God. The only real difference between Abram, Sarai, Hagar, and we as readers that makes us so unsuitable for this "God-like" omniscient view of their lives is that we are voyeurs. We peek into their life story never having journeyed with Abram, Sarai, or Hagar for even a second.

Given our unearned entitled vantage point outside of the context of Genesis 12-25, one of the easiest critiques about Abram and Sarai's using of Hagar we could make is simply that Abram and Sarai should have trusted God more. God had promised to give them a child, after all! While that statement is true about the entire story of Abraham spanning from Genesis 12-25, it is not true about Genesis 12-15. God only specifically promises Abram a child by his wife Sarai *after* Hagar is introduced into the mix in chapter 16. Up to that point, every promise only affirmed that Abraham would have a child, which leaves a considerable amount of leeway for Hagar to be introduced without breaking or lacking faith in the promise's truthfulness at all!

God's promises in Genesis 12:2-3, that Abraham would be a great nation and a blessing are just as vague as God's command to leave Haran for an unspecified land that God will show him. Genesis 13:14-17 is only given upon arrival to this mystery land God would show Abram. God simply tells him to explore Canaan because "I am giving it to you." In 15:1-6 Abram complains he is worried that his servant Eliezer of Damascus would inherit his wealth (which seems ironic in light of his willingness to have a child with Hagar who was also a slave and allowing their son to inherit), to which God responds by telling Abram to look at the stars. Before we get too hasty in our reading of verse six we need to remember that in context, the verse that states "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited to him as righteousness" refers only to Abram's trust that he would have an *heir*. Abram's faith is based only on the promise that he would have children, not on the fact that his children would come through Sarai. Jewish rabbis consider some of the contention between Sarai and Abram in chapter 16 to be due to the fact that Abram had the chance to ask God for a child directly through Sarai and was content to be given a promise of a child just for him.¹⁰ Just after this brilliant passage about Abram's faith being credited as righteousness, God reaffirms his promise to give Abram and his descendants the land of Canaan, to which Abram responds by asking God how he might be sure that this will take place. God responds in 15:17-20 by making a covenant with Abram, passing between the pieces of an offering as a smoking firepot with a flaming torch. The promise has now expanded into a full blown covenant. And this is where we meet Hagar.

¹⁰ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, gen.ed. *The Midrash: Midrash Lech Lecha*. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2010), 75-76.

Genesis 16:1-6: Sarai Presents Hagar to Abram

Chapter 16 begins with a recitation of the surface-level problem, “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children.” The real problem is not childlessness, but the fact that the promise has been stalled for quite some time,¹¹ especially because ten years have passed since God’s first promise to Abram.¹² Now before we think lightly of Sarai because she could not have children (in an age when childbearing was a necessity for status), barrenness was a problem for many of the matriarchs: from Rachel the mother of Joseph and Benjamin,¹³ to Hannah the mother of Samuel.¹⁴ Even in the New Testament, Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, was likewise very old when she gave birth to John.¹⁵ Even today, infertility is a problem that carries a stigma. Sarai is in good company in regards to her barrenness. In the Midrash, a Jewish commentary on the Torah,¹⁶ the rabbis felt the matriarchs so often struggled with barrenness “because the Holy One, blessed is He, yearned for their prayer and their supplication.”¹⁷ Strangely, however, the scriptures do not recount any prayers given by Sarai.¹⁸ In theory, one could argue that Genesis’ silence on the matter implies that Sarai thereby did not pray. But to assume that Sarai did not pray once for a child in her long life seems presumptuous in the least, especially as Genesis also recounts Rachel’s suffering for her childlessness. And while the text never mentions any prayers that begin with “Dear God” and end with “Amen,” praying is implied by the fact that Genesis 30:22 states “Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and enabled her to conceive.” Just as there is no reason to assume that Rachel did not pray even

¹¹ Gerhard Von Rad. *Genesis: A Commentary*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1972), 191.

¹² Genesis 12:4; 16:16

¹³ Genesis 29:31 It must be noted that Leah is also a slighted wife, like Hagar who conceived far easier than the favored wife Rachel in Leah’s case, and Sarai in Hagar’s case.

¹⁴ 1 Samuel 1:5

¹⁵ Luke 1:7

¹⁶ The Torah traditionally consists of the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They are all the books attributed to Moses.

¹⁷ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Lech Lecha*, 74.

¹⁸ See Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:1-20 for contrast.

though no prayers are ever recorded, there is no reason to assume Sarai did not pray either. In fact she likely prayed far harder and longer about this issue than Rachel simply because she had so many more years under her belt of living with the shame of barrenness. A red flag should fly up when one reads that Sarai recognized that it is the Lord who has prevented her from having children, but she does not recognize the Lord as being the one who will provide for her a child. While there are little grounds for an argument that Sarai never prayed, it would seem that Sarai stopped praying in this particular instance and ended up trusting on her own wit to provide, insofar as she goes to Abram to express her complaint, rather than going to God.¹⁹ It is understandable and natural that praying for a child (or anything we need for that matter) will become a burden as years of no results push even the strongest believer to despair. Yet this, arguably, does not excuse our or Sarai's forsaking of prayer. On the other hand, Sarai probably was at the point of accepting what she assumed was God's divine will. While Abram naturally had the ability to have a child with another woman, God gave no indication that it was His plan to *unnaturally* give Abram a child through Sarai.

Regardless of how Sarai put the facts together logically in her head (that she was barren, she wanted a child, she was not fulfilling her responsibility as Abram's wife to produce an heir, or even the thought that "We are in the promised land but still the promised heir has not come to even be able to inherit the land"), the realization came out the same: "I have an Egyptian slave woman who is as fertile as the Nile delta."²⁰ Some commentators point out the significant temptation going on here as being similar to Israel's wandering in the barren wilderness for forty

¹⁹ John Calvin. *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis, Vol I*. Trans. John King, (Grand Rapids: WM. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 425.

²⁰ Adele Reinhartz and Miriam-Simma Walfish. "Conflict and Coexistence in Jewish Interpretation." Pages 101-125 in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*. Edited by Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 106.

years before ever reaching the fertile Promised Land, always being tempted to return to Egypt.²¹

This story even further emphasizes the tense “tug of war” between Abram’s children and Egypt.²²

Selfishness is one of the main points of contention throughout the Abrahamic narrative in Genesis 12-25, especially as Sarai’s motivation and phrasing alludes back to Abram’s selfishness in Egypt. “The Lord has kept me from having children” states that the problem is not with Abram but with Sarai. The usage of the word “me” rather than “us” should be noted. The solution “Go, sleep with my maidservant” is followed by Sarai’s underlying desire that “perhaps I [rather than *we*] can build a family through her” (16:2). The whole focus of this passage is upon Sarai, and Sarai’s motives here seem less altruistic than selfishly desiring the honor of bearing a child.²³ Though the desire for a child was good, the means to achieving a child was sinful. This sinfulness was not due to a lack of faith, but due to a lack of love! Abram and Sarai were okay with using another person! Paul wrote to the Romans a message Abram and Sarai could have benefitted from hearing: “We must not do evil that good might come” (Rom 3:8).²⁴ Hagar was less of a slave in the modern understanding of the word, and more of a trusted and personal hand maid. Her trusted position in the family combined with her attempt to usurp her mistress made Hagar’s “treachery” great;²⁵ but Sarai’s betrayal of her maid’s chastity was far more appalling!²⁶

Sarai is not the only selfish person in the Abrahamic narrative however as Abram also had his bouts with egotism. When Abram was in Egypt (Gen 12) he tells Sarai the problem by

²¹ Exodus 13:17; 14:12; 16:1-3; 17:3

²² Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing, 2005), 184.

²³ John H. Walton & Victor H. Matthews. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Genesis--Deuteronomy*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 43.

²⁴ J. P. Lange, Trans. Philip Schaff. *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures-Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical: Genesis*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n/d), 419.

²⁵ Claus Westermann. *Genesis 12-36*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 238.

²⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 426.

first buttering her up: “I know what a beautiful woman you are,” and he then offers an outrageous request: “Say you are my sister, so that *I* will be treated well for your sake and *my* life will be spared because of you.” Note how Abram shows no concern for his own wife’s chastity, simply seeking what was right for him. So it should come as no surprise since Abram was willing to give Sarai another husband, that Sarai was willing to give Abram another wife.²⁷



Ironically, it was this very jaunt to Egypt where Abram and Sarai likely acquired Hagar (12:6).²⁸ We cannot begin to understand the effect that this humiliation in Egypt may have had on Sarai especially as the ruse that she was Abram’s sister only worked because there were no children running around to prove she was Abram’s wife.

While it can be easy to criticize Sarai’s decision because of how outlandish it would be today, this practice was not unusual in the time of the patriarchs. Polygamy was a common legal practice.²⁹ The ancient Mesopotamians had laws literally carved in stone to deal with issues such as: “What to do in the case of a barren wife?”; “How to manage multiple wives?” and, “How to treat a wife’s handmaid who was also a wife?” The Code of Hammurabi³⁰ specifically addresses barrenness in a primary wife and what to do about it in laws 145 and 146 while also defining the

²⁷ Lee Haines. *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary Volume One: Genesis and Exodus*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 68.

²⁸ Kenneth A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*. 184.

²⁹ Walter Brueggemann. *Interpretation: Genesis*. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 151.

³⁰ The Stele, pictured here, is made of diorite and contains Hammurabi’s Laws. It stands over 7 feet tall. The original artifact is maintained at the Louvre, in Paris. Photo courtesy of Franck Raux, 2009.

role of the wife acquired for the sake of children as a secondary wife, lesser in status than the first wife, stating:

145. If a man take a wife, and she bear him no children, and he intend to take another wife: if he take this second wife, and bring her into the house, this second wife shall not be allowed equality with his wife.

146. If a man take a wife and she give this man a maid-servant as wife and she bear him children, and then this maid assume equality with the wife: because she has borne him children her master shall not sell her for money, but he may keep her as a slave, reckoning her among the maid-servants.³¹

Genesis 30 recounts this practice most notably with Abram's grandchild Jacob with his wives Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, and Zilpah. They took the "take-your-wife's-maid" mentality to the utmost extreme in this pregnancy battle between the two sister/wives. They invited Zilpah (Leah's maid) and Bilhah (Rachel's maid) to Jacob's bed, reasoning that they were receiving pregnancy points through their maids. Though we today would be nauseated by such a love nest, God does not reprimand Jacob and his wives in their desire for children even given the extremes they took it. In the text, He likewise does not rebuke Abram or Sarai, either.

Though Abram and Sarai were within the bounds of the law³² as well as being within the bounds of the promise, the question still remains whether or not Abram and Sarai were lacking faith. Typically bringing in the ancient Mesopotamian Law has been used by interpreters to change the question from "Did Abram and Sarai sinned in using Hagar?" to "Did Abram and Sarai sin in not trusting God to provide?" This in effect spiritualizes the issue at hand. Calvin calls their faith "defective" because "they hastened to acquire the offspring which was to be expected from God."³³ On the other hand, Scripture seems to portray God as having a high approval rating for Abram, blessing him, even when he acts out in his "defective faith." For

³¹ L. W. King, trans. *Hammurabi's Code of Laws*. Accessed on 3/29/2015 <http://eawc.evansville.edu/anthology/hammurabi.htm>

³² Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*. 151.

³³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 424.

instance: Sarai's experience in Pharaoh's court³⁴ and later in Abimelek's court³⁵ seem to imply that God, behind the scenes, is far more complex than one who sees things as black and white, good and bad. They also seem to imply the two extremes that either Abram had a crazy amount of faith to the point of testing God in ridiculous ways or he was almost godless for what he was doing! Paul, however, argues in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 that God's blessing does not correspond to outward works righteousness, but rather flows from God by grace through faith. Abram was not righteous because he was an honorable person so much as it was that he believed and trusted God. Brueggemann finds Abram's actions faithless for good reason:

While he [Abram] reports that he acted because Abimelech did not fear God, it is evident that (1) Abimelech did fear God, and (2) Abraham feared many things more than he feared God. Thus the contrast is made that the one most directly called to faith and fear is the one who models faithlessness and fearfulness... The contrast between Abimelech and Abraham is not unlike the contrast Jesus makes between the trusting outsiders and the resistant insiders: "I have not found such faith in all of Israel" (Matt. 8:10). Here Abimelech models faith lacking in Abraham, the father of faith.³⁶

Brueggemann likewise puts his focus back on God stating "the preeminence of Abraham here rests not on Abraham's virtue, but on God's promise."³⁷

It is rather presumptuous to think Abram answered immediately with a definite yes to Sarai's plan (16:2). Our sympathy is especially needed here when reading their story because a few verses just cannot account for how heartbroken Sarai must have been to approach her husband telling him to marry someone else to get a child. It likewise does not account for how difficult a decision this would have been for Abram.³⁸ In saying this we should be careful not to fall to the opposite extreme of attempting to justify Abram and Sarai's actions, taking out our frustrations on the only person who did not have a choice in the matter rather than the

³⁴ Genesis 12:10-20

³⁵ Genesis 20:1-18

³⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*, 178.

³⁷ Ibid. 178.

³⁸ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*. 238.

perpetrators. Sarai's lack of care for anyone but herself is shown by how she refers to Hagar simply as "her slave," a nameless piece of property. Using a human bandage to heal a wound hurts everyone involved. Worst of all, when a bandage is used and no longer needed, it is ripped off and thrown away.



Werff, Adriaen Van Der. *Sarah Presenting Hagar to Abraham*. 1699. Oil on canvas. 30 in. x 24 in. Staatsgalerie Im Neuen Schloss, Schleißheim.

While Hagar was treated like a used Band-Aid, in the eyes of some, she has morphed into a dirty "forbidden fruit" and "temptation" due to because of striking parallels between the fall of Adam and Eve and the fall of Abram and Sarai.³⁹

Adam's wife, Eve, takes a forbidden fruit and gives it to her husband who eats it.

Abram's wife, Sarai, takes a slave woman and gives her to her husband to sleep with. The tree of the Knowledge of Good

and Evil is left with a stigma for being *the* temptation, but the reality is that it was not the tree but how the tree was used by its caretakers that made it sinful. Hagar likewise unjustly is left with the stigma of being "the temptation" rather than being a woman who was used improperly by those who were supposed to care for her. So why is Hagar made out to be at fault when she was

³⁹ Gordon J. Wenham. *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50*. (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1987), 8.

the only one without the power to choose otherwise? Henry Ford's wisdom is strangely applicable in this case, saying that "History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we made today."⁴⁰ Perhaps we sometimes use Hagar interpretively to serve *our* own purposes in the present (such as explaining the existence of ISIS or dehumanizing her into a porn addiction) rather than remain faithful to what the text *actually* says. We are no better than Sarai and Abram who used Hagar in their day to achieve a child. In many ways Christians today see the Bible *itself* as being more or less bunk!

The consequence of Sarai's solution to use Hagar as a slave in the meanest of ways, as a procreative womb, created a bigger problem. Hagar became the second wife of Abram and is pregnant. It can be tempting to equate being a wife of lower standing to not actually being a wife or being a concubine, but Jewish interpreters uphold the authenticity of Abram and Hagar's marriage.⁴¹ Much of the confusion comes from the fact that Hagar's child would not be the child of the Promise. Hagar, the mother of the first born son, is interpretively pushed aside as an illegitimate wife to explain why Ishmael was an illegitimate child. But this cannot be farther from the truth as it is not that Hagar was not truly Abram's wife, but rather that Ishmael was not the child of the promise.⁴² The blessing of the promise did not transfer to Isaac through Abraham blessing him (unlike Isaac blessing Jacob mistakenly in Gen 27). Abraham never blessed *any* son for that matter. It was God alone who elected Isaac and God alone who bestowed blessing upon Isaac, and this only after Abraham's death (Gen. 25:11).⁴³ It should also be noted that Abraham only ever asked God to bless Ishmael rather than asking blessing for Isaac (Gen 17:18).

⁴⁰ Henry Ford. Interview in Chicago Tribune, May 25th, 1916.

⁴¹ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Lech Lecha*, 73.

⁴² R. R. Reno. *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Genesis*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 166.

⁴³ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, gen.ed. *The Midrash: Midrash Chayei Sarah*. (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 2010), 33.

Needless to say, determining Hagar's legitimacy as a wife through Ishmael's rejection as the first born son is immaterial to this discussion as God, rather than man, elected one over the other. But it needs to be noted that according to the Code of Hammurabi, Hagar as slave woman would have been a secondary wife, not surpassing the first wife. This is true even though Hagar the secondary wife was pregnant, and Sarai the primary wife was not. Furthermore had Hagar truly been a concubine: Why did Genesis call her a wife?⁴⁴ The Scriptures however are not made clearer by examining Abraham's other "questionable" wife Keturah. Genesis 25:1 says Abraham took another wife named Keturah, yet 1 Chronicles 1:32 refers to her as a concubine. Many commentators use 25:1-6 to prove Keturah was a concubine, not a wife, of Abraham because verses 2-4 list all the sons of Keturah and since no other sons are listed but hers in verses 2-4, when Genesis 25:5-6 says "Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac. But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his *concubines* and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east," these sons receiving gifts are usually seen as Keturah's.⁴⁵ The problem is that the word "concubines" is plural whereas Keturah is a singular woman. So either Abraham also gave a gift to Ishmael after the fact (which contradicts the entire point of sending him away with nothing but water and food) and therefore Hagar is the second person to make concubines plural, or Keturah and Hagar were actually wives and others are being referred to. Many rabbis even taught that Keturah was simply Hagar who had returned to her husband after Sarah's death!⁴⁶ In deciding how to see Hagar and Keturah's roles, three questions need to be answered. If Hagar and Keturah were concubines, why does Genesis 16:3 and 25:1 call them wives? Does the author of 1 Chronicles diminish Hagar and Keturah's status unfairly to elevate Sarah?

⁴⁴ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz. *Midrash Lech Lecha*, 73.

⁴⁵ Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 446.

⁴⁶ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Chayei Sarah*, 31.2.

Furthermore, do commentators diminish Hagar and Keturah's status to that of concubines rather than wives based on sound exegesis or based on our modern disgust with polygamy in an attempt to polish the patriarch's modern day blemishes?

Regardless of how one answers these two questions, one cannot deny that Hagar quickly "hijacked" the marriage and story of Abraham (an incredible feat for *just* a "lowly concubine"). While verse one began with "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children" verse four begins with "He [Abram] slept with Hagar, and she conceived." But upon Hagar's realization that she was pregnant, Sarai's plan to receive a child through her maid slowly unraveled as Hagar recognized that she, unlike Sarai, would be the mother of the heir, which was a position of incredible honor.⁴⁷ This caused Hagar to despise her mistress. Some Jewish commentators think half of the problem was that Hagar, upon realizing how easily she conceived (possibly on the first try), could have concluded that Sarai was actually an unrighteous woman being punished by God with barrenness. This could have fostered pride in her ability to produce an heir, something Sarai had failed to do for decades.⁴⁸

Though there are decent arguments for Hagar looking down upon her mistress because she was pregnant and now gained new standing,⁴⁹ Delores Williams argues against the "prideful Hagar argument" from an African American perspective. She pulls back the curtain on the smoke and mirrors many commentators use to explain this story. She acknowledges the Ancient Mesopotamian laws which allowed Abram and Sarai to use Hagar in this fashion. But instead of justifying their actions by the existence of these laws, Williams argues that the law *itself* was unjust!⁵⁰ Disgusted with attempts to shame Hagar and justify Sarai's abuse later on, Williams

⁴⁷ John H. Walton & Victor H. Matthews. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Genesis—Deuteronomy*, 43.

⁴⁸ Rashi, Trans. Chaim Pearl. *Commentaries on the Pentateuch*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company INC, 1970), 42.

⁴⁹ Claus Westermann. *Genesis 12-36*. 240.

⁵⁰ Delores Williams. "Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation." (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 181.

concludes that Hagar despised not out of pride, but rather that Hagar actually *despised* Sarai and loathed her for what was forced upon her.⁵¹ Hagar is not just being sexually used and physically abused. It is possible that Hagar feared her future child was going to be taken from her against her will.⁵² This also could explain why Hagar fled only to return upon receiving the promise that she, rather than Sarai, would be the mother of the child. It is easy for people who do not live in hardship to read and interpret the story of Abram in chapter 16 as being a temptation story. Hagar then becomes the seductive maid of her master causing problems because of her immorality and rebellion. But for those who are at the bottom of the social ladder, suffering injustices, Hagar is an emblem of hope. God cares about their daily struggles too! While some try to justify what happened to Hagar, spiritualize it, or even sympathize with her plight, many in the African American community *empathize* with Hagar because Hagar's story is their story.

A careful reading of Genesis 16:1-16 and Genesis 21:1-9 reveals that Hagar's predicament involved slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, homelessness, single parenting, and radical encounters with God. African American women's historic predicament in society resembles Hagar's in the biblical stories.⁵³

Needless to say, when interpreting Hagar's story, special care must be taken so that our interpretations of her oppression do not remain oppressive.

Though we cannot be certain exactly how Hagar's despising of Sarai played out, the fact that Sarai went to Abram to restore balance in the household rather than simply telling her slave

⁵¹ Delores Williams. "Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation." (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 181.

⁵² Sarai's motivation with Hagar is so that she might build a family through her, rather than Hagar building a family for Abram (16:2). It should be noted that Rachel used this same phrase to use Bilhah (32:3). Rachel then praises God for giving her a child and further names her "son" Dan (32:4). Though Rachel and Leah seem to be in full authority over their servants, Sarai is not under control of Hagar. Rachel and Leah both name their servant's children while also making statements about how *they* have received a new child and how God has heard *their* prayer for a child. Sarai never claims Ishmael as her own (though her intent in verse two seems to show that she had at one time wanted to do this very thing). God does name Ishmael, but when Abram officially names his son Ishmael, he had to listen to what Hagar said God named him (16:15). It is likely, though unprovable, that Sarai had the same intent with Hagar as Rachel and Leah did in using their servants for children, though Hagar clearly had other intentions.

⁵³ Delores Williams. "Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation." 177.

to “knock it off” shows that whatever it was Hagar was doing, she was no longer under the authority of Sarai (16:5). Hagar and Sarai were now locked in a divisive power play and this is shown clearly by the fact that Sarai does not confront Hagar, over whom she should have had authority, as wife and mistress. Instead, she confronts her husband. Pregnancy truly is power.⁵⁴ Some even suggest that this daytime soap opera taking place in Abram’s household may even have been the consequence of God disciplining Abram and Sarai for acting outside of His specified will. God was disciplining Abram and Sarai because of their plot to achieve by human means what God had wanted to give them through His grace⁵⁵ thereby making Hagar’s contempt for Sarai a divine judgment for appealing to works righteousness.⁵⁶ The last dynamic to this situation is simply that Sarai must have been incredibly jealous. Augustine acknowledges jealousy to be the “natural” emotion to feel in a situation such as this for a wife like Sarai.⁵⁷ To witness her beloved husband under her advice impregnate her personal maid who now is antagonizing her—this would seem to be enough for any woman to crack.

Sarai’s complaint in calling God to arbitrate between her and Abram is disturbingly extreme because of her irreverence and harsh rebuke of her husband (16:5). To read this as a literal and unbiased appraisal of the situation is to misunderstand the entire context of her statement. Sarai is thinking with anger, jealousy, and hurt. The wrong that she is suffering must have been perceived as a betrayal at the most intimate level: her plan for a son, her status, and her marriage are all in jeopardy now.⁵⁸ Why then would Sarai blame Abram for being responsible for the very thing that she had suggested he do? Why, like Adam and Eve in the

⁵⁴ Claus Westermann. *Genesis 12-36*. 240.

⁵⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 427.

⁵⁶ R. R. Reno. *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Genesis*. 166.

⁵⁷ St. Augustine. Oden, Thomas C., General Editor. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament II, Genesis 12-50*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 45.

⁵⁸ Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 186.

Garden of Eden, does she point fingers rather than taking responsibility for her actions?⁵⁹ Sarai acts out rashly in her anger and jealousy points the finger at everyone but herself. She even impertinently calls upon God to judge between them. This request is irreverent, suggests Calvin, because it is akin to calling down destruction on her head given that she is guiltier than Abram in this circumstance.⁶⁰

Sarai's complaint is juxtaposed with Abram's solution. Sarai had put her slave in Abram's arms and so Abram is placing her slave back into Sarai's hands (Gen 16:6).⁶¹ The intensity of Sarai's pestering of Abram is not fully evidenced by the one verse that it took to state her grievance, as reading this chapter without a sense of time makes it feel as though only a few moments passed from start to finish. In reality, all of chapter 16 spans a period of over nine months. First Sarai contemplates the problem of barrenness, then notices Hagar, and then speaks to Abram convincing him to do this. We also must account for the time it took for Hagar to realize she was pregnant and yet more time for her to get under Sarai's skin. This, finally, is followed by Abram's lengthy process of thinking about how to deal with his angry wife Sarai. It is an oversimplification of this story to think Abram would so easily hand over the woman bearing his child and potential heir, after just one two-sentence long complaint by his overly jealous wife. It is far more believable that verses five and six simply recount the culmination of all of Sarai's pestering. Otherwise it would be incredibly inconsistent for Abram to seek an heir through Hagar and then opt not to defend her.⁶² Either Abram truly was heartless in his readiness to sleep with and subsequently cast Hagar aside, or this situation had been festering for quite some time and he gave in to Sarai's demand. The latter also seems to be the case because

⁵⁹ Genesis 1:12-13

⁶⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 427-428.

⁶¹ Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 186.

⁶² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 428-29.

Abram's concession, "Do whatever you think best," does not imply he wanted Sarai to "Do as she *pleased*" to Hagar. Sarai was told to treat Hagar the "right" way and was wrong for mistreating her slave regardless of how "wronged" she felt. Her superiority should have been shown through benevolence rather than cruelty.⁶³ Whatever Sarai did, she responded harshly enough to push Hagar to the desperate measure of trying to strike out on her own while pregnant in an age when she as a slave was to be afforded protection and provision by her master's family.⁶⁴ In fact, the Hebrew word for "mistreated" and "flee" in Hagar's story are the same two words used in the Exodus to describe Israel's abusive slavery and their subsequent flight from Egypt. There is a strong parallel between an Egyptian slave being afflicted by Abram's wife, and years later the Egyptians afflicting with slavery Abram's descendants.⁶⁵ Westermann concludes ominously "The oppressed when liberated become the oppressor."⁶⁶

⁶³ Adele Reinhartz and Miriam-Simma Walfish, "Conflict and Coexistence in Jewish Interpretation," 113.

⁶⁴ Kenneth A. Mathews, *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 186-87.

⁶⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50*, 9.

⁶⁶ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 241.

Genesis 16:7-15: Hagar and the God Who Sees



Verse seven begins with an account of Hagar fleeing, but the account comes from the perspective of the angel of the Lord searching for Hagar, who finds her near a spring in the desert beside the road to Shur. As pictured on the map to the left,⁶⁷ Hagar would have been traveling on the Way to Shur, from Hebron,⁶⁸ the last place Abram pitched his tent as recorded in Genesis 13:18 before sleeping with Hagar. While the exact location of Beer Lahai Roi (the well which she

was at as named in verse fourteen) is unknown, the general location is somewhere at the tip of southwestern Israel as this verse specifies that it is near Kadesh. The location of Bered is also not known, but it has been suggested that it lay west of Kadesh Barnea.⁶⁹ This is a considerable distance for Hagar to have traveled from Hebron by herself on foot while pregnant with little to

⁶⁷ Geography and the Bible. <http://www.bible-history.com/maps/images/Map-Israel-Old-Testament-Times.gif>. Accessed on 4/10/2015.

⁶⁸ Gerhard Von Rad. *Genesis: A Commentary*, 192.

⁶⁹ G. Charles Aalders. Trans. William Heynen. *Genesis Volume I: Bible Student Commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 303.

no supplies. It is likely that Hagar was attempting to return to Egypt⁷⁰ as the wilderness of Shur is located between Canaan and the northeastern border of Egypt.⁷¹

Upon finding Hagar, the angel of the Lord addressed her as the slave of Sarai (Gen 16:8). In saying this, the angel of the Lord affirmed that Hagar is a slave woman under the authority of Sarai and that her status as a fugitive and the secondary wife of Abram does not change that fact. Though some rabbis see the angel affirming Abram's proclamation of Sarai's authority over Hagar,⁷² Calvin argued that God declared her a slave under Sarai because true freedom does not come from fleeing one's master but rather through being manumitted, or freed, from slavery.⁷³ In addressing Hagar as the slave of Sarai, the angel of the Lord is not just calling out who she is, but also reminding Hagar who she should be. The specific issue God is dealing with here is less the problem of a runaway slave and more so the issue of her running away from her problems. Incredibly, Hagar's actions show an unbelievable amount of independence for a woman in her position and day.

So when asked by the angel "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" Hagar simply responds: "I'm running away from my mistress Sarai" (16:9). Again this story is not about a runaway slave who was abused, so much as it is a slave who thought she was free, not just from slavery, but from suffering as well. Augustine first and foremost finds Hagar's motives for fleeing wrong because he interpreted Sarai's abuse of Hagar more along the lines of deserved discipline for wrong behavior rather than the jealous abuse of a first wife. Hagar's suffering is not the same as David's suffering under Saul's persecution (so concludes Augustine) as Hagar suffered on account of her sin of pride in thinking herself better than she was whereas

⁷⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 430.

⁷¹ Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 188.

⁷² Nossou Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Lech Lecha*, 78.

⁷³ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 430.

David suffered unjustly. This was similar to how Christ suffered on the cross, who though having suffered with two thieves, suffered for the sake of righteousness rather than unrighteousness.⁷⁴ While for Augustine, the question boiled down to whether or not Hagar was suffering for the sake of righteousness, Rabbi David Kimchi found Sarai's response out-of-line. A person should never do all that is within one's power to do to those under their authority.⁷⁵ Regardless of how one justifies or condemns Sarai, the Bible never addresses Sarai as being in the wrong. Though the argument from silence may truly have the last word in this matter as it is impossible to know how disciplinary these actions were or how vengeful. The question still remains, however, "Why did the author of Genesis 16 intend the audience to understand Sarah's treatment of Hagar as discipline (which implies correcting) in choosing the Hebrew word for mistreated (which implies abuse)?" It has even been suggested that Sarai intentionally abused Hagar so much so as to force her to flee, ridding Sarai of her slave's baggage entirely.⁷⁶ This perspective might seem hard to swallow were it not for the fact that Sarai pushes for this very thing, getting rid of Hagar, in chapter 21.

Later in the wilderness Hagar was given the opportunity to unleash her complaints and grievances against Sarai, but instead of pointing the finger and trying to justify her actions, Hagar takes responsibility for what she is doing. Didymus the Blind, a church father from fourth-century Alexandria, found this response to be evidence of Hagar's nobility and zeal for God,⁷⁷ two traits not often associated with Hagar. The angel of the Lord does not rebuke Hagar for fleeing but rather gives her the opportunity to correct her wrong by telling her to "Go back to

⁷⁴ Augustine, *Letter 185*. 2.9

⁷⁵ Adele Reinhartz and Miriam-Simma Walfish. "Conflict and Coexistence in Jewish Interpretation." 113.

⁷⁶ George Herbert Livingston. *Genesis: Beacon Bible Commentary, Volume I*. (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1969), 77.

⁷⁷ Didymus the Blind. Oden, Thomas C., General Editor. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament II, Genesis 12-50*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 46.

your mistress and submit to her.”⁷⁸ Since Hagar’s had in some way usurped Sarai’s authority, and she fled upon being confronted about it, the only solution to this problem was humility. Hagar exemplifies true humility because she does not return to Sarai her master because she *has* to but submits because she *chose* to. Hagar is no longer a slave woman who is being humbled by her mistress; Hagar now is empowered to choose for herself if she will submit to God and if she will submit to Sarai. Hagar shows independence by fleeing from Sarai.⁷⁹ But God does not re-enslave Hagar by telling her to return and submit to Sarai. Though Abram and Sarai did not give Hagar a choice, God Himself empowers her to choose to return or continue fleeing.⁸⁰ In a sense, Hagar returns socially a slave, but spiritually returns of her own free will.

It might be argued that Hagar just submitted to God and Sarai because she was going to be blessed because of it, and that it was out of a desire for wealth, prestige, and power that she submitted rather than out of piety. Yet those who doubt Hagar’s piety might then ask themselves: Why then did Abram submit to God? Out of piety or out of a desire that God’s promise might be fulfilled? Is God’s promise given as a bribe to those who will not obey unless tempted His way? Or is the promise given by the grace and love of God? Scripture, however, states in Genesis 15:6 that “Abram believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness.” Since Abram can believe in the promises of God and have that faith credited to Him as righteousness, likewise Hagar’s faith that God’s word was true also *could* have been credited to her as righteousness as well.

That Hagar received a promise from the angel of the Lord is incredibly significant making Hagar actually stand out among other women in the Bible. Hagar is the first person in

⁷⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 432.

⁷⁹ Cuthbert A. Simpson and Walter Russell Bowie, *The Book of Genesis: The Interpreter’s Bible*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), 605.

⁸⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe. *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Genesis-Deuteronomy*. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2001), 85.

the Scriptures to have an encounter with the angel of the Lord. Though Abram had encounters with the Lord previous to Hagar's encounter in 16, Abram did not encounter the angel of the Lord specifically until chapter 22 when Isaac was about to be sacrificed. Even then, the angel only called out to Abraham rather than revealed his physical presence him. That Hagar received a promise from God through the angel of the Lord is even more shocking, given that one would assume that Sarai, the first and free wife of Abram, would be the first woman to receive a promise since her husband was the father of the promise. Instead, God chose to reveal himself to Hagar, the Egyptian slave, the first woman to receive a promise from God in the Bible. More specifically Hagar, a woman, is promised descendants (Gen 16:10). This sort of a promise, to a woman, is unheard of biblically! The angel of the Lord does not say "Abram's descendants" as one would expect but rather "your" descendants specifically ascribing a line to come through a woman rather than a man, which is an astounding statement, let alone a divine promise! Similarly as with Abram in 15:1-6, Hagar is promised innumerable descendants. The only difference from the promise of Abram to the promise of Hagar is that Abram is promised that he would be given land⁸¹ and that all nations on earth will be blessed through him.⁸² It is debatable (especially in light of future promises regarding God blessing Ishmael on account of Abram)⁸³ as to whether or not God is giving a promise to Hagar for her sake or for Abram's sake, and whether or not the blessing of numerous descendants is simply a spillover of the one given to Abram. But while God's motives are debatable, the fact still remains that God's promise of *anything* to an Egyptian slave woman is astounding. The emphasis in this chapter is far less upon the reason the promise is given and rather focuses on the fact that this incredible event is happening at all. To question the reason for the event is to miss the significance that the event

⁸¹ Genesis 13:14-17

⁸² Genesis 12:2

⁸³ Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 189-190.

took place in the first place, especially as the other wives of Abram: Sarai and Keturah, did not receive promises from God. According to some, the longevity and might of the Arab nation, the traditional descendants of Ishmael and Hagar today, is insurmountable proof that even after thousands of years God still keeps His promises, even unto slave women.⁸⁴ The angel of the Lord then gives Hagar the first annunciation, or birth announcement, in the Bible (Gen 16:11). And while the pregnancy is not new information, the announcement of the child's gender is.⁸⁵ God naming her son Ishmael is also noteworthy as it is the first time that God named a child directly.



Adi Nes. *Untitled (Hagar)*. 2006. C-print. 56 in. x 56 in. Biblical Stories Collection. Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY

To shift gears for a moment, it is easy to get hung up on the significance of all that is happening to Hagar here in the latter half of Genesis 16, and miss out on the fact that Hagar was suffering immensely. From our perspective looking back, amazement is the proper response and, in fact, when reflecting upon what happened, Hagar too was amazed (16:13). Any interpretation of the text that fails to sympathize with the absolute agony of

Hagar (so much so that God heard Hagar's cry without a recorded prayer being offered)⁸⁶ fails to grasp the very nature of the name that God gave Hagar's son. Ishmael means El [God] hears,⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Adam Clarke. *Clarke's Commentary, Vol. 1*. Eaton & Mains, New York, NY. n/d. 109.

⁸⁵ Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 189-190.

⁸⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 433.

⁸⁷ Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 189-190.

having been given because “the Lord has heard of your misery.” This has parallels again with God’s response to the Israelite’s bondage in Egypt: “The LORD said, ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering’” (Exod 3:7).

The angel of the Lord finally elaborates on who Ishmael would be by making three statements about him: “He will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand will be against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers” (Gen 16:12). Some could understandably read this promise as being more of a curse than anything else and see this hostility as a mark of all of the non-elect such as Cain and Esau who were “wild and belligerent.”⁸⁸ Though this could be used to “prove” ISIS came from Hagar, Calvin sees this “curse” actually as a promise, a secondary promise to the promise given to Isaac, but a promise nonetheless. Since God withholds the desirable promise of peace he gives a lesser promise to Ishmael stating that even though he will be repeatedly attacked in the future, Ishmael as well as his descendants (like the promise of Isaac and how it applied to his descendants) will be strong enough to resist those forces that rise up against him. The blessing is not that he will be surrounded by enemies but rather that he will be able to stand up even in the face of enemies.⁸⁹ Ishmael in many aspects is following in his mother’s independent footsteps.⁹⁰ Though some might find reason to understand the “hostility” mentioned here to refer to Ishmael’s “mocking” in Genesis 21:9, suffice to say for now, this suggestion stands on incredibly shaky ground as will be shown later on.⁹¹ After all, Ishmael and Isaac would later work together without hostility to bury their father Abraham (25:9).

⁸⁸ Ibid. 191.

⁸⁹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 434-35.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 438.

⁹¹ For more on this topic of mocking, refer to page 41 of this essay.

But who is the angel of the Lord who can make these promises that stand the test of time for millennia? As for the angel of the Lord himself, Genesis 16:10-14 is the first place in Scripture where *mal'ak Yahweh* is mentioned.⁹² It might seem the angel of the Lord is a sideshow to the main thesis on Hagar. However, her address to the angel of the Lord is rather a stunning claim and one of her few spoken lines in the entire Bible. To not look into the matter further would be an injustice to Hagar's own response to this theophany.⁹³ While the Bible seems to say that the figure she saw was just an angel, Hagar seems convinced she is actually seeing God and names the Lord whose voice she heard accordingly, El-Roi,⁹⁴ meaning: "'You are the God who sees me,' for... 'I have now seen the One who sees me.'" What an incredible claim to make! Was it God Himself poorly described as an angel (such as a pre-incarnate Jesus) since the angel of the Lord declares in first person promises only God could guarantee? Or was it simply a messenger of God speaking with the authority of God as an emissary for the Lord, mediating between God and Hagar?

The idea that the angel of the Lord is *actually* God, rather than a messenger of God, is an interesting one especially in light of Jesus being God incarnate (physically manifest). The major evidence is that the angel is speaking with an authority that only God alone could guarantee,⁹⁵ such as found when the angel says in the first person: "I will increase your descendants" rather than "The Lord will increase your descendants"(Gen 16:11). The text further reveals that Hagar associates the angel not as being from God but as being God. The one who spoke to her was the one she was naming El-Roi.⁹⁶ Leupold's five point argument highlights the reasoning behind understanding the angel of the Lord as God:

⁹² Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 188.

⁹³ A theophany is a divine encounter with God.

⁹⁴ Gordon J. Wenham. *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 16-50*, 19-20.

⁹⁵ Gerhard Von Rad. *Genesis: A Commentary*, 193-94.

⁹⁶ Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 188.

1. He explicitly identifies Himself with Yahweh on various occasions.
2. Those to whom He makes His presence known recognize Him as divine.
3. The Biblical writers call Him Yahweh
4. The doctrine here implied of a plurality of persons in the Godhead is in complete accordance with earlier foreshadowing.
5. The organic unity of Scripture would be broken if it could be proved that the central point in the Old Testament revelation was a creature angel, while that of the New is the incarnation of the God-Man.⁹⁷

The word for “angel” simply means “messenger.” It does not necessarily imply a created spiritual being, and since the text states that it was *the* angel of the Lord, rather than just *an* angel of the Lord, it would seem that this messenger is the Messenger of *all* messengers.⁹⁸

On the other hand, some Jewish rabbis see the angel of the Lord as being just an angel of the Lord and not God Himself.⁹⁹ But this is not because Jewish theology does not believe in Jesus as God’s incarnation but rather because the text specifically calls the visitor to Hagar “the angel of the Lord” rather than calling Him “the Lord” as was done elsewhere in the story of Abraham. When the Lord appeared to Abram to promise him the land of Canaan it states: “The Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him” (Gen 12:7). This principle also applies to the time when the Lord appeared on a detour to visit Abraham with two other visitors to promise Abraham and Sarah a son, en route to Sodom and Gomorrah: “The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day” (Gen 18:1). The rabbis do not have a problem with God appearing in person but they would have an issue—as should Christians—of deliberately misreading the text to fit a Christian agenda. Many Christian commentators agree with their perspectives, arguing that just because

⁹⁷ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, n/d), 500-501.

⁹⁸ James Montgomery Boice. *Genesis: An Expository Commentary: Volume 2 Genesis 12:1-36-43*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 125.

⁹⁹ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Lech Lecha*, 80.

Hagar thinks she saw God does not then mean that she saw God.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, if God can speak through a mediator in the first person to reach Hagar, as if He were physically present, Hagar should be able to speak to that same mediator as if she were standing before God, directing her praise to Him with the same ease.

This debate, though interesting, may serve as a distraction for what is actually happening between Hagar and God. God knew Hagar's name before Hagar knew God's name and in naming God she wanted a way in which to know God in the future.¹⁰¹ Hagar is marveling at a gracious God who takes pity on someone who was not a prophet like Abraham—a personal God who sees *me* individually. The rabbis revel in Hagar's spirituality through other encounters in the Scriptures with the angel of the Lord, such as what takes place in Judges 13:20-22, juxtaposing Hagar's amazement with Zorah and Manoah's terror. Samson's parents, encountering an angel announcing his birth, act terrified in fear of death for having seen God. Yet Hagar shows no sign of fear and leaves the encounter praising God showing she was spiritually more mature than many of Abraham's descendants.¹⁰² The point is not how or in what manner this encounter occurred but rather *that* this encounter occurred in the first place and in the ways in which it reflects on the relationship God has with humanity. God is a God who hears and sees the suffering of even the lowest of people and cares for people who are outside of God's chosen line of Isaac. This principle is similar to the one expressed in Amos 9:7 which proclaims of God's caring hand in nations other than Israel: "Did I not bring Israel up from Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" "God's concern is not

¹⁰⁰ John H. Walton & Victor H. Matthews. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Genesis--Deuteronomy*. 43.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 43.

¹⁰² Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Lech Lecha*, 80.

confined to the elect line. There is passion and concern for the troubled ones who stand outside that line.”¹⁰³

In fact, rather than trying to find Christ in the text physically, a better Christological lens for this passage would be to explain the angel’s word to return and submit to Sarai through Christ’s teaching in Matthew 5:43-48:

You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The question here is not: “Will Sarai repent and forgive Hagar?” but rather, “Will Hagar repent and forgive Sarai?” “Go back to your mistress and submit to her” communicates this balance because while Hagar did no wrong she also was wronged.¹⁰⁴ Without repentance Hagar would not choose to go back and submit to Sarai. Without forgiving Sarai, Hagar could not go back and truly submit with a grudge against her mistress. It is a mistake to think that Hagar only needed to repent and return without actually having to forgive her mistress as well, just as it is wrong to look for Christ physically present while overlooking Christ spiritually present in the words being spoken.¹⁰⁵ True submission can only come through love.

It can be difficult, from a modern, western mindset, to understand how God could command someone to go back into abusive slavery after gaining their freedom. But we should likewise be wary of interpretations, like Calvin’s, that apply this one situation—of God telling a slave who was abused to submit to her mistress—to all slaves in all situations throughout time

¹⁰³ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*. 153.

¹⁰⁴ What is meant by the words “repent” and “repentance” in this section is that which is implied by the Greek word *metanoeo* translated repentance in the New Testament, which implies a deeper turning around in her mentality than just a simple apology, a dramatic change from a mentality that caused her both to despise and flee Sarai to one that returns and submits to Sarai. Here it is not used to imply that Hagar was guilty of wrongdoing. That Hagar had sinned is not implied by this command to return.

¹⁰⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 433.

regardless of the context of the slavery. Deuteronomy 23:15-16 forbids forced reconciliation. “If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand them over to their master. Let them live among you wherever they like and in whatever town they choose. Do not oppress them.” In light of this it must be emphasized that God is not strong-arming Hagar. God does not coercively force Hagar to return to slavery, He gives her the free will to choose for herself. God is not promising Hagar descendants if she submit to Sarah, so much as He is promising Hagar descendants if she give up her most valuable possession, her freedom, by submitting to God. He is promising Hagar that though Sarai planned to steal the child away from her, she instead would be Ishmael’s mother. Thus, Hagar freely obeys God and returns to Hebron, submitting to Sarai and giving birth to Abram’s firstborn son, whom he names Ishmael (Gen 16:15). Abram was 86 years old when Ishmael was born (Gen 16:16).

The story of Hagar in chapter 16 is difficult to interpret without bias. Since Genesis 12 through 21 is about Abraham and Sarai’s struggle to have a child, it can be all too easy to interpret from the perspective of trying to defend the actions of the protagonists to the point they can do no wrong. This is not to say the opposite should be true either, that bygone heroes and heroines should be shot out of the sky and brought back down to earth to show we were wrong in lifting them up in the first place. Much of the difficulty of answering the question “Who is persecuting whom?” comes from the fact that both sides in some cases are guilty while also being simultaneously innocent. To condemn Sarai while uplifting Hagar lacks God’s sense of justice for Sarai and an understanding of why He would tell Hagar to submit. On the other hand, to condemn Hagar while uplifting Sarai lacks God’s sense of compassion for Hagar. He sends His angel out into the wilderness to find her, promising her blessing in the future if she endures

hardship under Sarai in the present. While it is true that not everyone who suffers is a martyr,¹⁰⁶ we should, however, be wary of walking down the slippery slope of choosing who suffers justly enough in our eyes to earn our sympathy rather than our scorn. It cannot be said that God did not hear Hagar's suffering as God spoke to Hagar and gave her grace, but it likewise cannot be said that God did not hear Sarai's suffering as Hagar was told to submit. It is all too easy when faced with the suffering in Genesis 16 to ask "Did she earn my sympathy?" rather than "Does she need my grace?"

¹⁰⁶ Augustine, *Letter 185*. 2.9.

The Post-Ishmael, Pre-Isaac Promises



Marc Chagall. *Sarah and Hagar*. 1956. Colored Chalks, ink wash, pen, brush on paper. 25 in. x 10.5 in. Private Collection Leslie Sacks Fine Art, Los Angeles, CA

After the birth of Ishmael, the Bible is silent for thirteen years while Ishmael grows under the care of Abram. Beginning in chapter 17:1-8, God confirms His covenant with Abram renaming him Abraham, which means the father of many nations. God also promises him an “everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for generations to come” (17:7). The land of Canaan would be a possession for his descendants if they remained faithful. The condition of the covenant comes in 17:9-14: circumcision. All males who are in Abraham’s household, sons and slaves alike, from the age of eight days old must

be circumcised if they are to partake in the covenant of the Lord. If someone were to refuse to cut off his foreskin then he would be cut off from God’s people. In fact, Ishmael’s obedience to God and Abraham is shown here because being age 13, he had to choose (unlike Isaac) to submit to circumcision, and likewise is a son under the covenant.¹⁰⁷ It is only after the conditions for the reconfirmation of the covenant that God renames Sarai, Sarah. This is the first time God promises Sarah will be a mother saying that kings and many nations will come from her. Abraham laughs in response to this promise and interjects showing love for his firstborn Ishmael, “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!” (17:18). God, unperturbed, continues, thus creating two bookends for verse 20 in the promise of Isaac (17:19, 21). Verse 19 states that

¹⁰⁷ Rashi, *Commentaries on the Pentateuch*, 43.

Sarah will give birth to Isaac who will bear the covenant for his descendants. Verse 21 states that Sarah will give birth to Isaac in one year. This encloses the promise that God gives to Ishmael in verse 20 which reassures Abraham that He has heard his prayer for his son Ishmael: “I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation.” It was on that day that Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised, Abraham at age 99 and Ishmael at age 13.

Abraham meets the Lord with two angels and has his wife Sarah prepare a meal for them as they were on route to Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18). The Lord in person promises Abraham again in 18:10 that Sarah will have a child. Sarah overhears this promise for the first time and laughs as Abraham had, but unlike Abraham, she is confronted for her laugh. This is the only time recorded that Sarah has an encounter with God and it was not flattering to say the least. She is caught eavesdropping on her husband’s conversation, laughs at what was being said, is called out for laughing, and subsequently is reproached for lying that she did not laugh. Even so, Abraham again receives a further confirmation of the blessing through the Lord’s thought process as to whether or not He should discuss His plans for Sodom and Gomorrah with Abraham. God states that He will remain faithful to Abraham so that Abraham will teach his children to remain faithful to the Lord. Genesis 18:18-19 states, “Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” This is the final promise Abraham receives before the announcement of Isaac’s arrival one year later (21:2).

Genesis 21:1-7: The Promised Son

Twenty-five years have passed since the first promise to Abraham that he would have a child in Genesis 12, and now, in Genesis 21, “The Lord did for Sarah what he had promised.” Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him” (21:1-2). Interestingly enough, the verse that stands out as most significant in reference to the fulfillment of the promise comes from the juxtaposition of the last verse of chapter 20 with the first two verses of 21. In chapter 20, Sarah is taken by Abimelech as a wife under the “she’s my sister” ruse. It is especially astonishing that Abraham pulled this trick again in light of the fact that he was given a promise that a child would come through Sarah as well as the fact that the whole Hagar dilemma began with Pharaoh trying to take Sarai as a wife in the first place.¹⁰⁸ There is a definite correlation in the fact that Abraham had to pray to open the wombs of the women in Abimelech’s house, and, one verse after praying for Abimelech’s wives and female slaves, “the LORD does for Abraham and Sarah that which Abraham prayed might happen to Abimelech and his household. Sarah’s closed womb is opened.”¹⁰⁹

The difficulties that were spawned from Sarai’s first run in with another man (acquiring a child for Abram through Hagar) are remedied by her second run in with another man (acquiring a child for Abraham through God’s grace). Some rabbis thought that Sarah earned the right to be remembered by God because of her purity in leaving both Pharaoh’s and Abimelech’s household pure,¹¹⁰ thus refocusing this conversation away from Sarah or Abraham’s own actions or prayers. But here of all places it is apparent that works righteousness is not what “earned” Sarah’s “salvation.” Without God’s grace there would be no child. The word of God and the birth of

¹⁰⁸ Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 184.

¹⁰⁹ R. R. Reno. *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Genesis*. 190.

¹¹⁰ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, gen.ed. *The Midrash: Midrash Vayeira*. (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2010), 58.

Isaac are an inseparable truth.¹¹¹ It must be noted that in this society the woman is not the head of the family. She brings forth children for her husband.¹¹² In contrast with Hagar's promise that she will have numerous descendants (16:10), Sarah never receives a promise of descendants, though *Abraham* receives the blessing of descendants from a child through Sarah. Though it may seem to be overanalyzing the particular wording in the text, this distinction is what ends up separating Sarah and Hagar as mothers to their respective children.

Abraham names his new born son Isaac, which means "he laughs" (21:3).¹¹³ This alludes to both Abraham and Sarah's laughter that they would have a child in their old age, transforming the laughter of doubting to laughter of joy and faith.¹¹⁴ Abraham then takes Isaac and circumcises him on the eighth day in accordance with the command of God which shows how intimately related the promise and the command of God are (21:4).¹¹⁵ Though Ishmael is circumcised under the covenant at age thirteen, Isaac is the first recorded person to be specifically circumcised in accordance with the eight day command of God, which some argue highlights the spiritual superiority of Isaac over Ishmael to receive the promise.¹¹⁶ Isaac, unlike Ishmael, was also conceived after Abraham had been circumcised which further emphasizes Isaac as a child of the promise through and through. Abraham was one hundred years old when Isaac was born, thus making Ishmael fourteen years old (Gen 21:5).

The narrator of Genesis teasingly uses puns on Isaac and Ishmael's names in chapter 21, especially: Isaac in association with laughter and Ishmael in regards to hearing (21:6). Sarah's saying "God has brought me *laughter* [Isaac], everyone *who hears* [Ishmael] will laugh" shows a

¹¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*. 180.

¹¹² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 538.

¹¹³ Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 268.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* 267.

¹¹⁵ Claus Westermann. *Genesis 12-36*. 333.

¹¹⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publications Society, 1989), 145-46.

playfulness and creativity on the part of the author to weave the two sons' stories together through their names.¹¹⁷

The message that Isaac was born (21:7) is a proclamation of joy akin to Isaiah 9:6 saying “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given,” or Luke 2:11 announcing the birth of Christ “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” This is a joyous day because the dynasty of Abraham’s Promise has begun!¹¹⁸ Some rabbis even found the birth of Isaac to be such a miraculous event of God’s grace that grace was handed out to many to celebrate his birth. The blind were restored to sight, the deranged their sanity.¹¹⁹ And because the text says “Sarah would nurse children,” the rabbis had many stories of Sarah doing just this! Notably, given today’s debate on the issue of public breast feeding, Abraham told Sarah to remove all modesty and nurse in public to display God’s miracle in Sarah’s giving birth.¹²⁰ She went so far as to nurse other children from noblewomen who traveled to have their babies nurse from her, thus explaining the phrase “nurse children” as being plural rather than “a child” in the singular. This was all done to prove without a doubt she had given birth rather than simply adopt a child (such as was attempted to do through Hagar).¹²¹ Though Calvin found the Jewish “fables” to be invented and of little worth,¹²² the underlying point of the story remains the same: Great joy has come to the house of Abraham, especially Sarah, because God by his grace has fulfilled His promise and delivered a child supernaturally.

¹¹⁷ Kenneth A. Mathews, *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 268.

¹¹⁸ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 335.

¹¹⁹ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Vayeira*, 63.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* 63.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* 62.

¹²² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 540.

Genesis 21:8-13: The Sacrifice of Ishmael

The joy of the house of Abraham culminates in the weaning of Isaac (which would have occurred when he was about three years old).¹²³ Abraham throws a great feast and sadly it is at this great party that joy departs (21:8). Verse nine describes a tension at the party coming from Sarah noticing Ishmael (who, based upon the time of the weaning, was now about 17 years old) mocking.

But before the “jury” passes a verdict of guilty upon Ishmael in a case that seems relatively cut-and-dried, as Hagar and Ishmael’s “attorney” it may interest the jury that there is some evidence that has not been properly examined in regard to the credibility of the testimony at hand. The first problem with this case is that it hinges upon the testimony of only one witness at a crowded party, which should raise some red flags because no one else came forth to substantiate Sarah’s claims. Strangely, the witness also has the most to gain from Ishmael receiving a guilty verdict. The witness’ appeal to the patriarch for a swift exile of Ishmael and Hagar was, arguably, motivated not by a concern for her son’s safety, but rather the oldest motive in the book: greed. A hefty inheritance was at stake for her beloved son.¹²⁴ I ask the court: Does the punishment fit the crime of cracking a joke: exile without the possibility for leniency, for son and mother alike? Why is the defendant’s mother on trial as well, especially as no evidence has come forth to substantiate her having to do anything with this case aside from the fact that she is the defendant’s mother? While Ishmael does not have a prior history of aggression towards Abraham’s family, Sarah’s history of priors with the defendant’s mother dates back over fifteen years and suggests a festering grudge held against Hagar which has now transferred to her son as well. This grudge is none other than the fact that Hagar was at one time

¹²³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*. 338.

¹²⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*. 146.

a “lover” of Sarah’s husband, and the “affair” produced Abraham’s first born son and heir who is coincidentally the defendant on trial!¹²⁵ Needless to say, Sarah, the only witness, is a jealous first wife and her testimony is invalid since she is not a credible witness. The jury should be swift to disregard her statements in making a final judgment in the matter of Sarah vs. Ishmael. This way the jury can return to the facts of this case and review it in an unbiased manner.

Though the previous paragraph was satirical, the point nonetheless needs to be stated bluntly that Sarah was biased. Although Hagar thought she saw God (and the text recounts what she thought), she just saw an angel. Likewise, Sarah seeing Ishmael mocking, even though the text says she saw this event, does not necessarily mean she saw accurately. A perceived threat is not necessarily the equivalent of an actual threat just as a perceived insult does not imply an intentional insult. Were this argument simply based upon feelings and doubts about the validity of Sarah’s testimony, there would not be much ground to stand upon critically. But what makes this argument plausible in the first place is that multiple interpretations of the Hebrew word, translated mocking in the New International Version, are possible and are used by translators. Consider for instance, the English Standard Version’s interpretation of this verse which reads, “But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, *laughing*.” This interpretation changes the entire context of what is going on from Sarah’s witnessing Ishmael being crude to Sarah’s witnessing Ishmael having a good time. While some translations specify that Ishmael was mocking Isaac, such as the New Living Translation, the Masoretic (Hebrew) text only says Ishmael was ‘playing,’ unlike the Greek Septuagint and the Latin

¹²⁵ While the words “lover” and “affair” perhaps are too strong given the actual situation of Abram getting Hagar pregnant out of a desire for progeny rather than simply taking one of his maids to bed, even so, it seems as though emotionally Sarah was in similar straits. Perhaps the best modern comparison we have today of such a marital problem is that of a wife who just found out her husband has another son with a woman who is hostile towards her, seeking to become *the* wife.

Vulgate that add “with her son Isaac;” thus even the context of where this play/mocking is being directed is up for debate.¹²⁶

Exploring the Hebrew word translated “mocking” in the NIV does not clear the waters, but rather complicates them as scholars effectively argue both sides of the story. A word of caution is in order: the results of this discussion typically are used to determine whether Sarah or Ishmael is condemned for their actions, and further is used as either the justification for Hagar and Ishmael’s exile or their absolution as innocent people who got trampled upon. One must beware of falling into the trap of justifying whether or not Hagar and Ishmael “earned” their punishment (consider humanity’s insatiable thirst of an eye for an eye.) The two questions we need to sympathetically consider throughout are rather: “Does the punishment fit the crime?” and “How does God respond to this situation?” Quite honestly, a conclusive answer to the author’s intentions in how this Hebrew word should be interpreted in this context is no longer possible.¹²⁷ Though the exact action is unknown, the implication is that it revolves around Isaac in some way because the word in Hebrew צחק (*ṣḥq*) is a pun on the name Isaac יצחק (*yisḥāq*). This pun on Isaac’s name is also encountered when Abraham *laughed* that Sarah will give birth (17:17) and when Isaac *caresses* Rebecca (Gen 26:8). All commentators do agree that Ishmael was doing something but what he was what doing is up for debate. There are two camps in this discussion on צחק, either Ishmael was mocking Isaac or Ishmael was not mocking Isaac.

Matthews felt that צחק properly is understood translated “mocking” inferring that it is an aggressive persecution (Gal 4:29):

Some translations interpret mēṣaḥēq as benign, not harmful (e.g., NRSV, ‘playing with her son’) since the term ṣāḥaq (21:6, qal) and its bi-form (ṣāḥēq, piel) can refer to playful merriment (e.g., Zech 8:5; 2 Sam 6:5; Ps 104:26; Prov 8:30,31). The verb ṣāḥaq/ṣāḥēq in the piel stem describes a wide range of actions, including sexual caressing (26:8),

¹²⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, 78.

¹²⁷ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 232.

entertainment (e.g., Exod 32:6; Judg 16:25,27 [qal]; Job 40:29), celebration (e.g., 19:14; 39:14,17; 1 Chr 30:10). The word in our passage (mēṣaḥēq, piel), however, usually conveys a harmful nuance, and Sarah's stern and swift reaction agrees that some untoward behavior occurred.¹²⁸

Calvin found Ishmael's mocking reprehensible as he was despising God's grace by ridiculing Isaac, the son of the promise.¹²⁹ Since even the verb is a play on words with Isaac's own name, the context implies poking fun at Isaac.¹³⁰ It is ironic that Sarah, having said that "everyone who hears about this will laugh with me" (21:6), now is antagonized by Ishmael's laughing on account of Isaac. As the mother of a three year old who is being threatened she rightly takes offense to this insolence. It is likely that Sarah preemptively foresaw this as being only the tip of the iceberg of aggression between the two sons, similar to Jacob and Esau's conflict and Joseph and his brothers' conflict in the future,¹³¹ and she wanted to preemptively strike at the first opportunity which presented itself before Ishmael became too strong. The point of even discussing the party for Isaac's weaning was only that it was here that Ishmael was exposed as a mocker.¹³² Some rabbis went so far as to interpret Ishmael's actions to imply that Sarah caught him committing sexual immorality by "trapping married women, and ravaging them," or offering pagan sacrifices of grasshoppers on small altars, or aggressively in light of Ishmael's later archery skills in 21:20, shooting arrows at his half-brother Isaac.¹³³

The other perspective on צחק is that Ishmael was not aggressively "mocking" Isaac. It has been suggested that Ishmael was making a claim to be the first born of Abraham. He was not just claiming the inheritance, but also claiming nobly that Abraham is *his* father too. Abraham

¹²⁸ Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 268.

¹²⁹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 542.

¹³⁰ Joyce G. Baldwin *The Message of Genesis 12-50*. (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 86.

¹³¹ Kenneth A. Mathews. *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 269.

¹³² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 541.

¹³³ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Vayaira*, 65-67.

himself acknowledged Ishmael as a legitimate son.¹³⁴ One of the incredible things about Jewish Midrash is that, because it is a compilation of many rabbinical sayings and commentaries on the Torah, some interpretations can say that Ishmael was sacrificing grasshoppers, and yet others give other opinions that paint Ishmael in an entirely different light. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai found Ishmael's mocking positive because Ishmael was saying to everyone at the party making a fuss over Isaac "You are fools! I am the firstborn and I will receive a twofold inheritance!" This is positive because Ishmael is seeking to be identified with Abraham.¹³⁵ Westermann goes further to argue that Ishmael was simply playing with Isaac his new brother, writing:

It is a peaceful scene that meets Sarah's gaze; but it is precisely there that she senses danger for her own son, as v. 10 expresses it. A biased interpretation understands שחק negatively (Gal. 4:21-31, ". . . He who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit. . ." v. 29), an interpretation which is found among the reformers and Christian exegetes right down to the 19th century, and among Jewish exegetes to the present (e.g., B. Jacob). Such an interpretation is biased because it is looking for an explanation of Sarah's harshness (v.10). But this is to misunderstand the text. Even from the purely grammatical point of view שחק without a preposition cannot mean "to mock" or the like.¹³⁶

The Book of Jubilees, a book in the Pseudepigrapha, agrees with this perspective of Ishmael harmlessly playing by retelling this story: "And Sarah saw Ishmael playing and dancing, and Abraham rejoicing with great joy, and she became jealous of Ishmael and said to Abraham, 'Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman will not be heir with my son, Isaac.'" ¹³⁷ Von Rad acknowledges the difficulties associated with interpreting שחק (*shq*), admitting it is nearly impossible to know what the original word actually means in this context, though he does add in favor of this perspective, "The picture of the two boys playing with each other on an equal footing is quite sufficient to bring the jealous mother to a firm conclusion:

¹³⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 146.

¹³⁵ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Vayeira*, 67.

¹³⁶ Claus Westermann. *Genesis 12-36*. 339.

¹³⁷ Jub 17:4 (Robert H. Charles trans.), Accessed 4/15/2015 http://www.summascriptura.com/html/Jubilees_RHC.html#17:1

Ishmael must go! Every year he, the older one, becomes a stronger rival for Isaac, and at last he will even divide the inheritance with him.”¹³⁸ Had Sarah said that Ishmael was picking on their son Isaac, and needed to stop or be sent away, there might be reason to think that Ishmael actually was abusing Isaac either verbally or physically. But because Sarah’s concluding remarks to Abraham are: “that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac,” and Sarah never mentions to Abraham that Ishmael was “mocking” at all, it is clear to see the real reason for Sarah’s complaint. It had much more to do with her desire for Isaac to receive the inheritance rather than because Ishmael was acting aggressively towards Isaac.¹³⁹

Interestingly enough, Sarah’s demand that Ishmael and Hagar be exiled (21:10), is a clever use of a custom from that day found in the 25th law of the Code of Lipit-Ishtar: “If a man married a wife and she bore him children and those children are living, and a slave also bore children for her master but the father granted freedom to the slave and her children, the children of the slave shall not divide the estate with the children of their former master...”¹⁴⁰ Sarah was not simply arguing for Hagar and Ishmael’s exile, but rather in a strange twist, was advocating that Abraham free them and send them on their way. In gaining their freedom, Ishmael, who would have inherited along with Isaac, forfeits everything.¹⁴¹ It is important to note further that Abraham is not being stingy in only giving Hagar and Ishmael meager supplies (21:14), especially in contrast with his generosity to the children of his concubines (25:6). Abraham, in freeing Hagar and Ishmael, understands what he cannot give them: a share in the inheritance. Ironically though, while Sarah’s request may have been legal in her time, the Law of Moses took steps to ensure that the same loophole which allowed Isaac to receive the right of the first born

¹³⁸ Gerhard Von Rad. *Genesis: A Commentary*, 232.

¹³⁹ Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, 80.

¹⁴⁰ Duhaime, Lloyd. *1860 BC: The Code of Lipit-Ishtar*. Accessed 3/30/2015.

<http://www.duhaime.org/LawMuseum/LawArticle-1367/1860-BC-The-Code-of-Lipit-Ishtar.aspx>

¹⁴¹ Cuthbert A. Simpson and Walter Russell Bowie, *The Book of Genesis: The Interpreter’s Bible*, 488.

(as well as what happened to Esau in light of Jacob's cunning trickery in Genesis 25:27-34 and 27:1-40) was no longer legal in Deuteronomy 21:15-17:

If a man has two wives, and he loves one but not the other, and both bear him sons but the firstborn is the son of the wife he does not love, when he wills his property to his sons, he must not give the rights of the firstborn to the son of the wife he loves in preference to his actual firstborn, the son of the wife he does not love. He must acknowledge the son of his unloved wife as the firstborn by giving him a double share of all he has. That son is the first sign of his father's strength. The right of the firstborn belongs to him.

Though some argue Sarah's words were divinely inspired,¹⁴² it is more likely than not that Sarah's intentions were far more worldly in origin. Women in that day received honor and status in the family through their sons, and Sarah, in struggling for her son's position, is struggling for her place as well.¹⁴³

Abraham was distressed by this complaint because it involved his son, Ishmael (21:11). There is a definite parallel between Abraham's passivity in regards to Hagar in chapter 16 and Abraham's resistance on Ishmael's account here in chapter 21.¹⁴⁴ God knew Abraham's distress and intervened, telling Abraham to "not be so distressed about the boy and his slave woman" and to listen to Sarah because his true heir will be Isaac (21:12). Even here God downplays the issue by referring to Ishmael, whom Abraham in chapter 11 saw as his son, as, simply, "the boy," a term of inconsequential value in comparison to the word son. It is important to note that Ishmael is not the only son whom God tells Abraham to give up.¹⁴⁵ Abraham truly loved both Isaac and Ishmael,¹⁴⁶ and it is an understatement not to see that he was likewise called to sacrifice both sons.¹⁴⁷ The major difference between the command to expel Ishmael and the command to sacrifice Isaac in 22:2 is that God promises Abraham that he will take care of Ishmael. God does

¹⁴² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 543-44.

¹⁴³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 339.

¹⁴⁴ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 232.

¹⁴⁵ R. R. Reno, *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Genesis*, 191-92.

¹⁴⁶ Sybil Sheridan, "Abraham From a Jewish Perspective" Pages 9-17 in: *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conversation*. Edited by Richard Harries. (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 17.

¹⁴⁷ J. P. Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures-Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical: Genesis*, 461.

not promise Abraham anything in regards to Isaac, simply giving Abraham a command to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah.¹⁴⁸ It is only after the ram is offered that God tells Abraham he will be blessed with descendants on account of his obedience (22:15-18).

¹⁴⁸ It should be noted that Abraham trusts that he, and his son, will return. Abraham does tell his servants to wait, saying, “*We* will worship and then *we* will come back to you” (22:5), not “We will worship and I will come back to you.” Abraham does not hint at the possibility that Isaac might not actually come down the mountain alive. This illustrates Abraham’s great faith in God.

Genesis 21:14-21: Into the Wilderness



George Segal. *Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael*, 1987. Painted plaster. 107 in. x 54 x 54 in. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL. Courtesy of Oriol Tarridas

The setting of Genesis 21:14 is early the next morning after Abraham received his command from God to listen to Sarah and send away Hagar and Ishmael. There must have been a lot of mixed messages and feelings here as Hagar has just won the freedom by God's command which she sought so badly (Gen16), but it comes at the price of a divorce to Abraham.¹⁴⁹ The term "sent her away" (*šlh*) is used both for divorce as well as for the emancipation of slaves.

Serendipitously, it serves both purposes here.¹⁵⁰ Hagar becomes the first woman to be divorced

and the first slave to be freed in the Bible. She further finds distinction when Abraham sends her off with Ishmael, thus releasing all paternal authority over him. In many ways, she is the first "single mother" in the Scriptures as well. While Sarah does finally give birth to her long desired

¹⁴⁹ John Calvin. *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol II*. Trans. John King, (Grand Rapids: WM. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 33.

¹⁵⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 147.

child, Hagar in the end, arguably surpasses Sarah in prominence. Hagar, a slave, despised Sarah's plan for one reason or another and flees because of abuse and potentially a desire to keep her future child for herself. She then is promised by God that this child *will* be reckoned unto her. This promise is fulfilled when Abraham released his son Ishmael unto Hagar's care. Hagar furthermore is the one who gets Ishmael a wife, an incredible honor and responsibility (21:21). In contrast, it is Abraham, not Sarah, who commissions his servant to choose Isaac a wife (Gen 24), though by this time it must be noted that Sarah had long since died (Gen 23). Though Hagar had some of the lowest origins coming as a slave from Egypt, she becomes one of the most empowered women in the Bible. Unlike Sarah, the plotter, who ends up in the grave,¹⁵¹ Hagar's story does not end with death, but freedom.

But before one thinks that this empowerment was joyful and easy for Hagar, this empowerment only came years after she went through a "living hell." Having just been divorced and her son banished by his own father, she had to toughen up and lead her son through the wilderness. Furthermore, she now was responsible for getting them lost by not knowing the land. They had so few supplies that they last less than one verse of the Bible. With all their supplies spent, Hagar witnesses her only son collapse of heat exhaustion with no way to help him. Alone, she drags him under the shade of a tree as a makeshift grave and stumbles away weeping out the few water droplets left in her body believing she has lost everything. It is only after she reaches utter despair that God comes and rescues her and her son and promises to bless them—not before. Hagar was not empowered by Abraham's gift of freedom from slavery; Hagar was empowered by God's gift of freedom from hopelessness. Their anguish is made all

¹⁵¹ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Lech Lecha*, 76. Some rabbis attribute Sarah's early death in comparison to Abraham's long life to the fact that Sarah unjustly called down God's judgment upon herself in Genesis 16:5. The rabbis found that God acted accordingly.

the more prominent when juxtaposed with the party and laughter enjoyed by all but Sarah only a few verses before.

On a side note, returning back to a minor point of verse fourteen, some translations and commentaries of the Bible state that it was actually Ishmael who was placed upon Hagar's shoulders rather than the supplies.¹⁵² This however is absurd when one considers that Ishmael was conservatively 16 to 17 years old when this event took place.¹⁵³ Had Ishmael actually been placed upon Hagar's shoulders it would seem rather surprising that it was he who fainted first having been carried all throughout the desert! While some commentators find this an inconsistency in the Bible, it is more likely a simple mistranslation in ascribing to the son that which was said about the supplies.

After Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, Abraham moved from Hebron southwest to Abimelech's city of Gerar (20:1), which is located between the cities of Beersheba and Gaza.¹⁵⁴ The pressing problem Hagar and Ishmael encounter in the desert of Beersheba is that their water runs out (21:15). This either emphasizes that Hagar lost her way (as is implied by the word "wandering") and that had she not gotten lost her supplies would have been adequate to reach her intended destination, or Abraham had assumed she would have been able to find a well.¹⁵⁵ Their southeasterly trajectory from Gerar to the region around Beersheba is a shockingly small distance in comparison to Hagar's previous flight in chapter 16, and it seems likely that Hagar may have been critically disoriented due to the lack of a major highway to follow, and also the combined shock at what had just happened. Beersheba gets its name from when Abraham and Abimelech make a treaty over well rights in that area (21:31). This is only a few verses after

¹⁵² Kenneth A. Mathews, *The New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, 272.

¹⁵³ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 233.

¹⁵⁴ W. H. Mare, "Gerar." Page 742 in: *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible: D-G, Volume II*. Edited by Tenney, Merrill C. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 742.

¹⁵⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 147.

Ishmael almost dies of thirst in that same region! A lack of wells in this region is not the issue here. The problem, rather is, a lack of knowledge regarding where to look for wells as well as a lack of clear thinking on Hagar's part. This is understandable given the circumstances. It is unclear where Hagar was planning on taking Ishmael, though they end up living in the Desert



August Wittig. *Hagar and Ishmael*. 1874. Plaster. Height 153.5 cm. Musees Royaux, Brussels, Belgium. Courtesy of Courtauld Institute of Art.

(wilderness) of Paran located centrally on the Sinai Peninsula bordering Egypt (21:21). It was from Egypt that Hagar gets a wife for Ishmael, similarly to how Abraham chose a wife for Isaac from his family in Ur.

Though Hagar's actions in verse 15 seem at first glance to border on child abandonment, this is far from the truth. Ishmael is so close to death and Hagar's despair so great that in putting "the boy under one of the bushes" Hagar was literally laying him in his final grave.¹⁵⁶ Hamilton writes in his commentary that:

Some mistakenly translate *šālaḵ* as cast or thrown which contributes to the misconception that Ishmael was a young boy. "When used with a human being as its object the verb almost always refers to lowering a dead body into its grave (2 Sam. 18:17; 2 K. 13:21; Jer. 41:9), or the lowering of a person into what will presumably be his grave (Gen. 37:24; Jer. 38:6). Obviously, carcasses are not hurled into their grave. They are deposited there with dignity¹⁵⁷."

¹⁵⁶ Phyllis Tribble and Letty M. Russel. "Unto the Thousandth Generation." Pages 1-32 in: *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 48.

¹⁵⁷ Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, 83.

That Hagar was preparing her son for death is evident by the fact that Hagar herself was trying to prepare for his death as well. She did not walk away out of abandonment as she did not leave the immediate area. Hagar removed herself from the death of her only son out of the deepest of agonizing griefs. She is a mother in the process of experiencing the loss of her only child.

Some like Calvin justify what is happening to Hagar and Ishmael because of their “pride” in Abraham’s household saying they earned God’s judgement through despair. But Scripture does not portray a disciplining God but rather a compassionate God who hears Ishmael crying (21:17). God has an angel call out to her from heaven to encourage Hagar saying “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there.” Hagar is no longer referred to as a slave but rather by her name, thus authenticating her freedom in God’s eyes.¹⁵⁸ God also alludes to Ishmael’s name saying “God has heard.”¹⁵⁹

On a side note, the rabbis bring up an interesting story in relation to Ishmael suffering from dehydration saying that the angels spoke to God when he was about to rescue Ishmael who was crying, saying: “The man who is destined to kill Your children by thirst—will You raise for him a well?!”¹⁶⁰ This is a reference to an event that happened to Israel during the Babylonian exile. According to the rabbis, the Jews were hungry and thirsty while traveling and passing some Ishmaelites whom they considered their brothers. They asked for some provisions to help with their arduous exile. The Ishmaelites responded by giving them incredibly salty food while providing canteens to appear full of water that were actually empty. The Jews ravenously consumed the food only then to realize the canteens were empty, and in the harsh conditions of the exile they died horribly. This, they suggest, is referenced in Isaiah 21:13-17:

¹⁵⁸ Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*, 489.

¹⁵⁹ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 233.

¹⁶⁰ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Vayeira*, 69-70.

A prophecy against Arabia: You caravans of Dedanites, who camp in the thickets of Arabia, bring water for the thirsty, you who live in Tema, bring food for the fugitives. They flee from the sword, from the drawn sword, from the bent bow and from the heat of battle. This is what the Lord says to me: “Within one year, as a servant bound by contract would count it, all the splendor of Kedar will come to an end. The survivors of the archers, the warriors of Kedar, will be few.” The Lord, the God of Israel, has spoken.

Kedar is listed as the second son of Ishmael in Genesis 25:13. The statement “the archers, the warriors of Kedar” refers to Ishmael being an archer,¹⁶¹ as alluded to in Hagar sitting a bowshot away from her son in sixteen, and the description of Ishmael becoming an archer in verse twenty. Even with God’s knowledge that Ishmael’s long distant descendants will “live in hostility towards all his brothers,” God’s grace shines through hearing his cry of despair showing once and for all that God’s grace cannot be earned or dissuaded by future sins made by one’s descendants. This further exonerates Ishmael from being stigmatized by those who would use this story to explain the existence of ISIS. When one interprets צחק (*shq*) as being harmless laughter, then there are no accounts of Ishmael personally being aggressive towards Isaac at all. Even if one interprets צחק (*shq*) as mocking, it is unreasonable to think that this teenage mocking is equivalent in magnitude to the hostility meant in the promise (16:12). Though it can be argued that God only heard Ishmael because he promised Abraham he would look after him,¹⁶² and that it was only through Abraham’s merit that this promise was even given in the first place,¹⁶³ this perspective loses sight of what the text actually says. God heard Ishmael suffering (not God remembered to check on Ishmael as if he was a pot on the back burner about to boil over which He had promised Abraham He would casually look after). That God *heard*, suggests an intimate God, Who cares about human suffering and Who cares for the outcast. God gave ear to even the

¹⁶¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, 148.

¹⁶² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis Vol I*, 549.

¹⁶³ Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Midrash Vayeira*, 69.2.

child of a maidservant.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, Jesus Himself addresses the issue of bad things happening, teaching against a justification mentality that tries to explain what someone did wrong to deserve the evil that happened to them, reminding his disciples that everyone sins:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”¹⁶⁵

The Apostle John goes further to rebut a justification mentality, telling this story: “As he [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, “‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”¹⁶⁶ Like the collapsed tower of Siloam, and the slaughtered Galileans, bad things do not happen to people on account of their being *more* sinful than another person. And like the man born blind, the works of God were displayed through Hagar and Ishmael’s suffering. To miss this point is not just to misunderstand the story of Hagar and Ishmael, but also to misunderstand God’s relationship to humanity and Jesus’ own teachings on the matter of suffering.

Though it has been argued that it was Abraham’s merit which earned Ishmael a spot in the promise, God when given the opportunity to tell Hagar that it was only on account of Abraham that He was showing her grace simply says “Lift up the boy and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation” (21:18). God graciously opens Hagar’s eyes to see a well full of water that she had overlooked. This same grace was shown to Abraham, when his second son Isaac was a knife blade away from death and God opened up Abraham’s eyes to see a

¹⁶⁴ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*. 333-334.

¹⁶⁵ Luke 13:1-5

¹⁶⁶ John 9:1-3

ram. It is foolish and just as blind to not see the parallel here that the same God who spares Ishmael also spares Isaac. The same God who opens up Hagar's eyes to see a well of water opens up Abraham's eyes to see a ram. This story is not about personally earning salvation. It is about God providing a way out when there is no hope. Scripture honors Hagar's son Ishmael by naming him as one of the few whom "God was with" (21:20). Though it could be said God was only with Ishmael as he was growing up, there is no indication that God left Ishmael after he got old. God Himself promised Abraham that He would be with Ishmael and his descendants (Gen 21:13). This demonstrates His active interest in Ishmael's family as well as Isaac's. God says, "I will make the son of the slave into a nation also" (21:13).

Conclusion: More Than a Slave Woman

Oftentimes Christians feel that we—because of Paul’s allegory in Galatians—are the true children of Sarah. Paul himself says, writing to Christians, that “we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman” (Gal 4:31). The problem is that when this allegory gets out of hand, as it often does, the Jews become children of Hagar instead of the Arabs being Hagar’s descendants. Hagar *is* the “mother” of the Arabs and Sarah the “mother” of the Jews. Though historically the genealogical roots are difficult to prove, traditionally, the Arabic and Jewish people come from Hagar and Sarah, respectively. The claims being made are theological rather than concretely historical. Therefore, what is to be challenged is any interpretation to the narrative that disregards the biblical account of who Hagar was.

Christians, furthermore, do not inherit the promise from a genealogical line of descent. Christians are adopted into God’s family. “But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal 4:4-6). With this in mind, being the adopted sons of Abraham by grace, we have a responsibility not to be arrogant by our “chosen” position of adoption as heirs:

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were

grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! (Rom 11:17-24).

Hagar is not the “mother” of all the Muslims; Hagar is the mother of Ishmael. Sarah is not the “mother” of Judaism; Sarah is the mother of Isaac. Though many of Sarah’s descendants may be Jewish, Christians would never paint *all* of Sarah’s descendants as being followers of Judaism. Though many of Hagar’s descendants are Arab, it is an incredible oversight to then assume that all of her descendants are therefore Muslim! Paul, in Galatians, explains that in Christ: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither *slave* nor *free*, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).¹⁶⁷ It is not a matter of distinguishing between the children of the slave woman and the children of the free woman, children of one race, or children of another race—or even the children by adoption—because in Christ we are all equals due to God’s grace in our lives. When we interpret Ishmael, and Hagar his mother, derogatorily as being temptations or the cause of terrorism, we burn bridges through bigotry that the Gospel could have used to reach the Arab people. Instead, the Hagar narrative should be used to build bridges with the same sort of compassion towards the Arab people that God Himself showed to Hagar and Ishmael. Augustine taught that “Anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbor, has not yet succeeded in understanding them.”¹⁶⁸ The two pastors discussed previously did not fully understand the scripture because they both failed to promote love of God and love of neighbor. Well-intentioned allegorization of Hagar can also be equally heartless.

¹⁶⁷ Soref, Erez. “Our father Abraham Sacrificed Two Sons! Literary Parallels that Challenge Two Sons to Live in the Middle East as the One New Man in Christ.” Evangelical Theological Society 66th Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA, 2014. 5:00.

¹⁶⁸ Augustine, trans. R. P. H. Green. *On Christian Teaching*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1999. 1.36.40-41.

Pastors rarely preach negatively on “favorite” characters in the Bible. Christians favor David, showing him as a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22), rather than an adulterer, betrayer, and murderer (2 Sam 11). Our bias towards David is such that even when his sinful exploits are mentioned, compassion for Bathsheba is rarely the motivation. Instead, Bathsheba also is sometimes viewed just as Hagar is, as a seductive temptation for a male leader.



Edmonia Lewis. 1875. Hagar. 52 5/8 x 15 1/4 x 17 1/8 in.
Washington, D.C. Smithsonian American Art Museum.
Courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Bathsheba likewise should be viewed as a woman who was grievously wronged by a man in authority over her—a man who impregnates her in a forced, and “questionably lawful” union. Does our quickness to justify biblical suffering imply that Scripture is ahistorical bunk?

God never justified what happened to Hagar. He did not allegorize or spiritualize her plight. He did not just stop at sympathizing with her. God *empathized* with her suffering—a compassion which moved Him to intervene. Are we Christians whom the oppressed and suffering could say after an encounter with us “You are the Christian who sees me?” Do we justify why people are suffering, thinking they

deserved what they got? Do we spiritualize or allegorize their suffering, thinking they just need Jesus? Are they merely symbols of American depravity? Do we sympathize with their suffering,

admitting their life is rough, all from a safe distance? Or do we empathize with their suffering, *seeing* them as real people, investing in them, and helping them get through their struggle?

Hagar was indeed still a slave woman and the “other” woman. She is still an allegory for the old covenant. But Hagar is more than just a negative label. Hagar was also a free woman—set free from slavery by God’s command. She was obedient to God, was a faithful mother in contrast with a distant father, and she shines as a beacon of hope to those who suffer and are oppressed. She bears the message that God sees them too. Hagar is so much more than just a negative label, just as people who suffer today are so much more than just the reason that they cry. Hagar is just like you and me: human beings who are loved and made in the image of God.

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