

Will the Real Hagar Please Stand Up?

NAOMI GRAETZ

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Beer-Sheva

Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. ²And Sarai said to Abram, "Look, the LORD has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her." And Abram heeded Sarai's request.³ So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian—after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years—and gave her to her husband Abram as a concubine.⁴ He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem.⁵ And Sarai said to Abram, "The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom; now that she sees that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. The LORD shall decide between you and me!"⁶ Abram said to Sarai, "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her.
(Genesis 16: 1-6) REFERENCE NEEDED FOR BIBLE EDITION

The story of Hagar is one of the most poignant and disturbing tales in the Bible. Throughout history, sensitive readers have been perturbed by the cynical exploitation of Hagar and her expulsion. The attitude toward the "other", which already began in biblical times, continues to plague us today; thus, it is important to study problematic texts, such as this one, in view of the fact that Sarai and Hagar's discord have reverberated until the present day.

Why this concern with the fate of Hagar? Why is her story important to us—especially since after the expulsion we do not hear of her again, at least in the biblical story? We do know that her son, Ishmael, attends Abram's funeral where he meets up with the son of Sarai, Isaac. These concerns can be read into the Bible, the Hadith and various midrashim. Often the midrash and hadith tend to resist the story in the Bible by devising a different plot, with a happy ending, or by showing the evil consequences of a particular act.

The Bible does not tell us anything of Hagar's origins. In Genesis 12:16 it is mentioned that Abram acquired some maidservants when he was in Egypt. The Koran does not mention her at all. According to one of the

Muslim traditions,¹ Pharaoh gave Hagar, a Coptic slave-girl of his, to Sarai because he was impressed with Sarai's goodness and beauty. Rashi writes that Hagar was a daughter of Pharaoh (Rashi on Gen 16:1). The midrash also identifies Keturah (Abraham's new wife in Gen. 25:1 after Sarah dies) as Hagar. If Abraham had really divorced her (cast her out), he could not then have taken her as a wife, according to the *halakhah*. Thus, rabbinic tradition, in its positive reception of her, takes pains to show that Abraham did not "cast" her out; rather she was "sent" out. This would also apply to Ishmael. In redeeming Hagar, the rabbis trace her nobility and emphasize her qualities to justify her conversing freely with the angels and her attributing a name to God (*el ro'i*, God sees me). Following this same type of reasoning, Muslim tradition redeems Ishmael by telling how his father Abraham established the Kaaba in Mecca for him.

Some feminists depict Hagar as an object that is given by Sarai to Abraham. Although Sarai sees Hagar purely in terms of her breeding potential, like the handmaidens in Margaret Atwood's utopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985),² the breeder rebels, in keeping with her status as Abraham's wife, not concubine. Other feminists see Hagar the bondmaid [*shifhah*] and/or slave [*amah*], as an exploited (second) wife, abused by those who are the first of our forefathers and foremothers. According to Phyllis Trible, Hagar is "one of the first females in scripture to experience use, abuse, and rejection."³ She is a triple-fold alien: from her country, in her status and in her sex.⁴ She is an Egyptian maidservant living in Canaan; she is "single, poor and bonded."⁵ She is a powerless object whose status is contingent on that of her mistress, Sarai, the wife of Abram.

An angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur,⁸ and said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" And she said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai."⁹ And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Go back to your mistress, and submit to her harsh treatment."¹⁰ And the angel of the LORD said to her, "I will greatly increase your offspring, And they shall be too many to count." (Genesis 16: 7-10)

¹ Al-Tabiri, (1987) *The History of al-Tabari*, Vol II, *Prophets and Patriarchs*, trans. William M. Brenner, Albany: State University of New York Press, pp. 62-63.

² Margaret Atwood, (1985) *The Handmaid's Tale* Toronto, Canada: McClelland and Stewart.

³ Phyllis Trible, (1984) *Texts of Terror*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press pp. 9.

⁴ Bruce Rosenstock, (1992) "Inner-Biblical Exegesis in the Book of the Covenant," *Conservative Judaism*, Spring: 45, points out that the name Hagar may be a pun on *ger* [alien].

⁵ Pp. 10.

The Bible's attitude towards Hagar is very sympathetic. In a story such as this, where Sarah calls the shots, Abraham displays ambivalence, God decides and Hagar behaves passively, the focus would not normally be on Hagar after she is expelled. Instead, this silent woman becomes the center of the story, which turns into a story about her strength and feelings of pain and love for her child. Moreover, the angel clearly "cares" about her and talks to her, for she is a victim who is given an unequivocal message to remain a victim. It is as if he says to her, "Go back to this oppressive situation. Stay, don't run away. Your reward will be a son who will be a strong warrior." She is like a battered wife who runs away, yet doesn't know what to do with herself, thus returning to her original situation of learned helplessness.⁶

Despite this abusive situation, the angel of the Lord speaks to Hagar on two occasions. The first is when she is pregnant with Abram's seed and Sarai is threatened by Hagar's new position. Sarai was tacitly allowed by Abram to do with Hagar as she pleased. "Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right." (Gen. 16:6)

The midrash, perhaps aware of the unfairness in this, reveals a shade of ambivalence on Abram's part:

Said he: "I am constrained to do her neither good nor harm [since she is now my wife]. It is written, Thou shalt not deal with her as a slave, because thou hast humbled her (Deut. xxi, 14): after we have vexed her, can we now enslave her again? I am constrained to do her neither good nor harm." (Genesis Rabbah XLV:6)

The midrash goes on to shift the blame to Sarai making her totally responsible for the physical and mental violence inflicted upon Hagar. R. Abbah said:

She restrained her from cohabitation. R. Berekiah said: She slapped her face with a slipper. R. Berekiah said in R. Abbah's name: She bade her carry her water buckets and bath towels to the baths. (Genesis Rabbah XLV:6)

In light of the fact that Hagar had the status of a wife, Sarah, in giving her menial work, both mistreated and humiliated her. Hagar is not encouraged to fight for her freedom; rather, it is assumed that she will remain in her servant status. She is advised to stay where she is and suffer for the sake of

⁶ Lenore Walker, a forensic psychologist, in *The Battered Woman* (Harper and Row, 1979) relied heavily on the concept of learned helplessness to support the view of battered women's syndrome.

her future child: Accept the abuse now, because your own life is of no intrinsic worth. You live for the sake of your son; you are the caretaker of his future.

When Hagar has her son, Ishmael, Sarah⁷ is again incensed and this time tells Abraham to “cast out that slave-woman and her son ...” (Gen. 21:10). This time, as Trible points out, “Hagar has lost her name Moreover; the absence of dialogue continues to separate the females. Inequality, opposition, and distance breed violence.”⁸

Although the matter distressed Abraham greatly, not because of Hagar, but because it “concerned a son of his” (Gen. 21:11) God tells him not to be

...distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says....As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed. (Gen. 21:12-13)

Thus, the “son” becomes “a boy” and “Hagar” becomes a “slave.” As Trible puts it, “if Abraham neglected Hagar, God belittles her.”⁹ In these biblical texts, God identifies with the oppressor, not with the oppressed. God and Abraham are accomplices in the decision to cast out the object, the slave-woman of no account. Abraham cares only about his seed, his son, not about the woman. It is Sarah who cares about being supplanted and who initiates the act. It would appear that the Bible also sympathizes with Sarah’s plight when it writes that it is a “loathsome” situation when “a slave girl supplants her mistress.” (Proverbs 30:23)

What does it mean that the Angel sees the suffering of the despised woman, the Egyptian stranger (*ha-ger*)? What are the parallels between his promises to her and to Abraham? Compare the fact that the Angel of God speaks twice to Hagar and only once to Sarah. The rabbis themselves wonder at the fact that God speaks to Hagar and explain it by saying that “Abraham’s household was used to seeing angels up close” because of his close relationship with God. Is God’s blessing of Ishmael a fair distribution of goods between Abraham’s two sons?

It is not only Hagar who is damaged; her child suffers as well, both physically and spiritually. Hints of this can be read in the blessing (or perhaps curse) given to Hagar by the divine messenger:

Behold, you are with child

⁷ Sarai gets her name changed to Sarah in Gen 17: 15 and Abram to Abraham in Gen 17: 5.

⁸Pp. 13.

⁹Ibid. Pp. 22.

And shall bear a son;
You shall call him Ishmael,
For the Lord has paid heed to your suffering.
He shall be a wild ass of a man;
His hand against everyone,
And everyone's hand against him;
He shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen. (Gen.16.11-12)

Ishmael has witnessed that God had not “paid heed to [her] suffering” and that, in fact, all those close to her had abused her. It is likely that he will grow up with a chip on his shoulder, perceiving that “everyone’s hand [is] against him” and that “his hand [will be] against everyone.” He will also become an oppressor, when he gets the chance, even against the people of Israel.

What does biblical law have to say about the expulsion of Ishmael?

The laws of the Torah do not permit parents, or even legal authorities, to expel a son or daughter from the home for any reason. According to the Torah, nobody can divest an offspring of his legal status in the household to which he belongs. This was not the practice among other peoples in the ancient Near East: Various codices and ancient legal documents, some even predating the time of Abraham, attest that expelling one’s offspring from the parents’ home, i.e., divesting a child of his legal status in his father’s house, was a legitimate legal procedure in cases of offenses committed against the parents. While the Torah was not lenient about the punishment of a child who committed an offense against his parents - a child who struck or cursed his parents could be sentenced to death, if proven guilty – nevertheless, he could not be banished for delinquent behavior.¹⁰

Hence, Abraham’s casting out of Hagar and Ishmael is problematic. Ishmael is a legal son of Abraham’s whom he circumcised at age thirteen. Sarah’s words, “Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac” (21:10), make it obvious that she thought he did have rights to Abraham’s inheritance by virtue of being Abraham’s son.

To make this illegality more palatable, traditional midrash demonizes Ishmael to illustrate how his action against Isaac was worthy of his being

¹⁰ Parashat Vayera 5760/1999, The Expulsion of Ishmael, Dr. Joseph Fleischman, Dept. of Bible (Bar Ilan University, Weekly Internet Sermons)

demoted as a legal heir and deserving of exile. The pretense that Sarah used to expel Ishmael was that he was making "sport" with (*metzahek*) Isaac. The midrash says that this refers to his immorality and Sarah's prophetic vision that he would, in the future, ravish maidens and seduce married women. (Genesis Rabbah 53:11) Maimonides comments that God saw Hagar's affliction and gave her a son who was destined to be a lawless person. This contradicts the biblical text that states that Abraham loved Ishmael too (Gen. 17:18; 21:11, 26) and that Ishmael was blessed in his ways (17:20) and God was with the lad (21:20). Surely the bible would not have said this about someone who was destined to be a lawless person.

There are those who identify the victimization of Hagar as a prefigurement of Israel's enslavement in Egypt. According to Trible, Hagar, unlike Israel,

...experiences exodus without liberation, revelation without salvation, wilderness without covenant, wanderings without land, promise without fulfillment, and unmerited exile without return. This Egyptian slave woman is stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted for the transgressions of Israel.¹¹

Following Trible's insights one step further, I would argue that Hagar, the suffering slave woman, serves as a prototype for the metaphor of Israel as the suffering, mistreated wife of God.¹²

In the Islamic versions of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, there are many expansions on the original biblical text to emphasize Ishmael's mother's extraordinary stamina and dedication as a mother. In one tradition, Abraham goes with them as far as Mecca and then returns home. When she asks, "To whom are you leaving us?" he replies "to Allah." When her water is used up she goes down a mountain and runs back and forth seven times between the mountains of Safa and Marwa, before she hears from the angel Gabriel. He causes water to gush forth from the earth (the sacred well of Zamzum) and this attracts first birds, followed by people who join her and form a community. After Ishmael's mother dies, Abraham returns several times to visit his son and the relationship continues. He checks to see if Ishmael has married a suitable wife by testing them with riddles (2.127 *Sahih Bukhari* 4.584). Muslim pilgrims traditionally imitate Hagar's distress by

¹¹Trible, *ibid.* Pp. 28.

¹² For an expansion of this point, see Naomi Graetz "God is to Israel as Husband is to Wife," in Athalya Brenner (1995) (editor), *A Feminist Commentary on the Latter Prophets*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 126-145

encircling these sacred spots. Abraham and Ishmael together build the temple in Mecca and place in it the black stone.

Conclusion

One father, two wives, two sons and two different traditions emerge from this original biblical tale. Why was Abraham destined to have the two sons? Wouldn't it have been much simpler if there were only one? Every child with a brother or sister fantasizes being an only child. What does it mean when our tradition tells us that one child is predestined to cause the other trouble? Moreover, why does God cause suffering to both their mothers? There are no real answers to these questions. Perhaps it is only an articulation of reality: this is the way of the world; very few of us are lucky enough to be an only child; we have to learn how to live with the other. The problem with this is that often we find "the other" too difficult to deal with and we end up demonizing him or her¹³ to keep them at bay and justify our treatment of those who are different.

Issues such as these get even more complicated when God is introduced into the discussion, and we are taught that the Deity has commanded us to behave in such a fashion, i.e., to cast out the one who is not the favorite son. Sarah and Hagar's enmity had repercussions that we, the heirs of Ishmael and Isaac, still suffer from. When one is asked, "where have we come from" and "where are we going to," I suggest being prepared with the following answer: Our mutual past history may have limited and enslaved us, but now it is time to move beyond the past.

¹³ For instance there was Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's sermon that compared Arabs to snakes that should all be annihilated. In this utterance, Yosef, once known as a political dove, denounced Barak for "running after" the Palestinians. "Why are you bringing them close to us?" he asked. "You bring snakes next to us. How can you make peace with a snake?" Dismissing the Arabs as "Ishmaelites," he added for bad measure: "They are all accursed, wicked ones. They are all haters of Israel. It says in the Gemara that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is sorry he created these Ishmaelites." *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles* (August 11, 2000).