

## Reinterpreting Hagar's Story

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*Der Beitrag untersucht die Ebenen der Herrschaft innerhalb des biblischen, patriarchalischen Systems, an dem Hagar als Sklavin, Frau und Ausländerin leidet. Aus der Perspektive postkolonialer feministischer Kritik symbolisiert Hagar sowohl den Kampf einer kolonisierten als auch einer ehemals kolonisierten Person. Die Autorin verwebt Hagars Geschichte mit derjenigen Saras und Abrahams und entlarvt so den augenscheinlichen Dualismus zwischen denen, die Kolonisierung erleiden und denen, die sie ausüben, als falsch, indem sie das Leiden Saras und Abrahams herausstellt. Sie macht darauf aufmerksam, dass Hagar an ihrem Glauben festhält, obwohl sie und ihre 'Herren' den Willen Gottes ganz unterschiedlich verstehen. Sie zeigt auch, wie die Illusion der Macht auf den Unterdrücker zurückfällt und sowohl die Verwundbarkeit des Unterdrückers als auch seine/ihre Abhängigkeit von den Unterdrückten enthüllt.*

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Themes of excluding and choosing, privileging and denying are signs that the story of Hagar is not just about a surrogate mother whose desires are being denied. This story is about an enslaved woman who symbolizes the struggle for survival of colonized people because she experiences subjugation and freedom, twice. Her story serves as a commentary on people who are deemed as formerly colonized. The difference between a colonized and a formerly colonized person is that the colonized person is overtly oppressed demonstrated in a hierarchical relationship based on power and dis-empowerment where the colonized is a slave or a servant whose humanity is not recognized by the colonizer who acts as the master. The formerly colonized person is someone who is a part of an ethnic group, which was formerly enslaved or subjugated and is now considered liberated and full citizens. Although this rather tenuous distinction suggests that the formerly colonized person no longer suffers from oppression, this is not the case. The formerly

colonized person feels the ramifications of a segregated society struggling with the way in which her ancestors were treated and while overcoming the more subtle forms of oppression such as being made to feel alien or inferior because of one's ethnicity. This essay utilizes the ideology postulated by postcolonial theory, that area of study interested in excavating the voices of previously colonized people by exploring Hagar's story.<sup>1</sup> Hagar is a colonized person in the sense that her identity and humanity are not the primary concern of her masters. My use of postcolonial criticism is best described by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Like Marxist feminism, it tends to work with a dual-system analysis that uses patriarchy and imperialism as two parallel systems of oppression."<sup>2</sup> I am not just interested in raising awareness regarding the ways in which Hagar was colonized, oppressed, and misrepresented but in the way in which her story transcends her colonized position; the way in which her story can be read for liberation and not trapped in the perpetual cycle of domination. I utilize this methodology to argue that there is liberation for the formerly colonized person, just as Hagar experiences liberation in her former colonized position, once she is dismissed.

### **Hagar and Sarai depend on each other**

Hagar enters the story by default, as a colonized person, her story is the subtext of Sarai and Abram's<sup>3</sup> story. In Genesis 16:4, the narrator describes Sarai, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children."<sup>4</sup> The emphasis of the text is on Sarai not bearing Abram children, implying that Sarai feels pressure to fulfill the covenant that God promised to Abram. After establishing

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<sup>1</sup> Keith Green and Jill LeBihon, *Critical Theory and Practice: A Coursebook* (New York: Routledge, 1996) 293. There are voluminous amounts of material regarding postcolonial theory and contentions about what postcolonial theory really is. The authors allege that the term itself is ambiguous but generalize that post-colonial refers to all "the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day" (292). They are interested in how the colonized is represented in literature by the colonized and how the formerly colonized represents herself in literature and the divergence between the dominant discourse and the discourse of the other collide. My interest elides with examining the way Hagar as a colonized is portrayed.

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001) 63.

<sup>3</sup> *HarperCollins Study Bible*, 25. Their names change from Sarai to Sarah as well as Abram to Abraham in another repeat of the covenant, Genesis 17:5,15, and the new ones are used further on.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne A. Meeks, ed., *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989) 25. All biblical citations are taken from the *HarperCollins Study Bible, NRSV*.

the status of Sarai, the author mentions Hagar as the slave-girl of Sarai, linking her to Sarai's dilemma. In verse two, Sarai informs Abram that she is barren because God has "prevented her from bearing children". Sarai distances herself from blame for not bearing children by emphasizing that God has caused her barrenness. Although the text does not state that Sarai is bitter towards God for her condition, her anger is implied by the fact that in verse three the author informs the reader that she has lived in Canaan for ten years without success. Now, Sarai is doing what God has not done, she creates an heir without God's aid. No where does the writer suggest that Sarai consults God about her barrenness or her decision to use Hagar as a surrogate. The text states that she tells her husband that her barrenness is because God has made her this way. Thus it is reasonable to argue that after ten years of frustration, Sarai has resorted to rectifying the situation without God's help. The narrator constructs Sarai as a suffering woman offended by God. The way that she speaks to her husband shows how subtly she persuades him to believe that God is responsible for the fact that they have no children. She remarks "You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children" as if to argue that he has been a witness to what God has done, justifying her actions by asking him to create an heir with Hagar. She argues that this type of surrogacy may provide her with children. By describing Sarai as the one who makes decisions, the narrator establishes her with power.

Hagar becomes involved in the story because Sarai sees her as the answer to the problem of bearing children. Sarai chooses Hagar to provide a child, reversing God's inaction. Since God has not chosen to reverse her barrenness, she plans to appropriate the child as her own. In Genesis 16:3b Sarai "takes Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gives her to her husband Abram as a wife". Sarai informs her husband that the purpose of getting a child is not just to provide him with an heir but she makes the issue of obtaining a child, personal, "It may be that I shall obtain children by her" (Genesis 16:2). She does not state that *they* will have children although arguably she would have had this in mind, she states that the child will be hers. Sarai reveals that she felt personally slighted, desiring vindication. Sarai assumes control of the promise believing that Hagar would rectify the situation. Thus, Sarai seems willing to ignore Hagar's status in favor of obtaining a child. Only later does she use Hagar's status against her. Sarai does not mention Hagar's race as something negative.

## Hagar's denial to share her masters' interests

Hagar's reaction to this new commandment from her mistress is never explored. The conception of the child is described as Abram initiating the intercourse then Hagar conceives. When she understands that she has conceived, the text mentions Hagar's first action unmediated by Hagar or Abram, she "looked with contempt on (or despised) her mistress" (Genesis 16:4). Sarai wants to control every aspect of the surrogacy because she could not control her barrenness. Sarai expects Hagar to act in a limited manner, to be an unemotional surrogate. Sarai's anger towards Hagar penetrates into her dilemma of being barren; Hagar has to remain an 'other' or a non-person in order for this transference of the child to work. As a colonized woman, Hagar is forced to adopt the customs of her mistress and suppress her desires. This adoption and suppression of the colonized serve the interests of the colonizers who assume that their interests are shared by the enslaved. Traditionally, interpreters assume that Hagar's response to Sarai stems from her change of status by accomplishing something that Sarai could not.

Wilma Bailey conjectures that Hagar looks on contempt because either she did not appreciate being used to breed or she felt self-worth because her status has changed. Renita Weems argues that Hagar's status changed and thus she felt self-worth.<sup>5</sup>

The narrator alludes to this interpretation by connecting Hagar's contempt of her mistress to her pregnancy. In fact the authors do not mask their interpretation of Hagar's actions. Hagar's contempt is more than just feelings superior to her mistress. Indeed this interpretation aligns with hierarchical and patriarchal assumptions that everything a person does can be traced to motivations that have to do with empowering and dis-empowering another. But the interpretation that Hagar found self-worth is inadequate and inconsistent with a postcolonial argument. Why would Hagar feel offended at being used as an animal and then rejoice over being pregnant with a child that would not be hers? While it seems to acknowledge the victimization of Hagar, this interpretation further victimizes her by interpreting Hagar's actions as though she were eager to be accepted into this oppressive-hierarchical system. It makes Hagar fit into the colonial ideology

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<sup>5</sup> Wilma Ann Bailey, "Hagar: A Model for an Anabaptist Feminist?" *The Menonite Quarterly Review* LXVIII (1994): 219-228. Renita Weems, "Do You See What I See? Diversity in Interpretation," *Church and Society* LXXXVII (1991): 28-43.

where the victim uses their victimization as an opportunity to be accepted, that through the idea of sacrifice and loyalty to the mistress, she can be accepted. Thus, this rather over-simplistic reduction of human motivation does not account for Hagar's contempt. She could feel contempt over the fact that she feels uncertain about her role after providing the child, thus feeling dehumanized at being used as a mere instrument because the child will not be hers and angered over the objectification of her body. She could blame her mistress for putting her in such a precarious situation. Hagar might be expressing a delayed response to her situation, that in addition to being a surrogate, she conceives, perhaps Hagar does not want to have another woman's child. Or, Hagar could be in shock that her mistress would be so desperate as to use her in this way. The narrator does not explain the status of the relationship between Hagar and Sarai before she becomes a surrogate, but now that Sarai has been offended it is clear that any relationship that they might have had has ended.

### **Sarai's suffering increases the oppression of Hagar**

Sarai does not ask Hagar for further clarification regarding Hagar's alleged contempt of her. She assumes that it is because Hagar despises her for not being able to bear children. Could Sarai's interpretation of Hagar's contempt be a projection of a personal contempt for being barren as well as regret over her decision to use a surrogate? Renita Weems argues that women without children were scorned, but that usually when a person experiences scorn they internalize this and began to scorn themselves.<sup>6</sup> Sarai does not question Hagar about her actions but appears before her husband, self-righteous, assuming that her assessment of the situation is correct. She states in verse 5, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me". Prior to this time, the only mention of the Lord has been when Sarai explained that God prevented her from having children, now she invokes God's judgment on her husband, negating her responsibility for the situation. Just as the decision to make Hagar a surrogate excluded Hagar from the conversation, Abram does not consult Hagar, while Abram and Sarai discuss Hagar's

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<sup>6</sup> Renita Weems, "Do You See What I See? Diversity in Interpretation," *Church and Society* LXXXVII (1991): 33.

fate. Abram privileges Sarai's interpretation of Hagar's alleged contempt, presumably because she is his wife and does not want to cause further anger. He removes himself from the situation by reminding her that Hagar is her slave and that she can take care of the situation. However, he is not the only one to coddle his wife; Sarai does not see her hypocritical behavior. She emphasizes her offense and does not consider that she may have wronged her slave by making her become pregnant with her husband's child. She magnifies her offense and acts as though she has been the victim, denying her complicity in the situation. In colonial settings, only the privileged can complain of being offended and be vindicated while the subjugated, Hagar, has to resort to more subtle ways of protesting.

The narrator describes the treatment of Hagar as a person who is passed from Sarai to Abram and back to Sarai. She is considered useful because her body is an instrument to bring them their desires of having a child. However when she shows her humanity by expressing her opinion, she is quickly dismissed and silenced. Hagar does not have the opportunity to explain why she felt contempt for her mistress; the narrator is not interested in presenting an unbiased portrayal of both women. However, both women are neither angels nor villains, but women who are hurting albeit in very different ways. Sarai suffers from feeling inadequate augmented by the fact that her husband's alleged neutrality is easily construed as contributing to her suffering. When she asks him to take Hagar, he does not hesitate or even consult God about whether this is God's way of providing them the promise. The lack of hesitation on his part suggests that he pressured her into this situation. He does not encourage Sarai when she feels forsaken by God. In addition to feeling inadequate and believing that Hagar has seen her vulnerability, Sarai realizes that her way of getting a baby has failed because it does not diminish her barrenness but magnifies it. Hagar's suffering is assumed, even though the text does not describe it in detail. She has oscillated from being a slave to being a concubine and back again to being a slave. Even though her status might have increased from this new role, the text does not give evidence that Abram and Sarai treated her differently. If she believed to change her situation by having a child, that plan has failed because her mistress is unwilling to treat her humanely or consider her feelings. She may feel betrayed by Sarai because Hagar feels as a prostitute, abandoned and sexually abused. Not only does she feel betrayed by Sarai but also by Abram because he does not come to her aid even

though she has conceived a child by him. Hagar may be suffering because she feels their ungratefulness toward her, contributing to her feelings of dehumanization. Thus both women are hurting. As is the case with hurting people they resort to hurting each other not just because they feel rivalry towards each other for sharing the same man; their hurt goes beyond this simplistic interpretation of the so-called catty women. They hurt each other because it is difficult and dangerous to protest that they feel betrayed by the patriarchal society. Their anger towards each other reveals a real sadness and bitterness towards having to resort to unpleasant ways of getting their desires fulfilled. Showing anger towards another woman is the only acceptable type of anger in a patriarchal society.

### **Hagar's independent reaction initiates her liberation**

Nevertheless, Hagar reacts to Sarai's decision to mistreat her by leaving, "Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her" (16:6b). This verse is unique because Hagar reacts to the provocation of Sarai by doing something of her own volition. She chooses to leave the situation and meets a divine angel along the way. This action is a strong statement against her situation because she is willing to risk her life as well as the baby's to find a better situation. Verse 7 states that an "angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness", this is the first time the narrator mentions Hagar encountering a heavenly being. It is unclear whether or not Hagar subscribed to the same religious ideas promulgated by Abram, but Hagar responds favorably, possibly because she is at the point of complete despair. The angel visitation is unique because prior to this, Hagar has not been officially incorporated into the divine plan, although Sarai tried to initiate her into the plan but then humiliated her. The way that the angel incorporates her into the plan is peculiar; after identifying her as the slave-girl of Sarai, the angel tells her to return to her mistress and "submit to her" (16:9). Why would this be asked of a young woman who is looking for justice, why would the angel ask her to do the thing that she most abhors? Some have argued that it was because this was the only way for God to fulfill the promise because it would have been impractical for her to be traveling in the wilderness pregnant, her baby's survival was important for the promise to be fulfilled; while others argue

that at the prospect of having revenge through her child she agreed to submit.<sup>7</sup> But little consideration has been given to the fact that since an angel gave her a promise of the survival of the child would it have mattered whether the child lived with its father or with animals? The survival of the child would be guaranteed. It has not been considered that Hagar was asked to go back because Abram and Sarai needed to take responsibility for her condition. It is not considered that Sarai would have to suffer as well because the very situation that she tried to get rid of has returned. Sarai would suffer from humiliation from the fact that despite her attempts to diminish Hagar's status, Hagar is blessed by God. It would have been difficult to see a child who was a constant reminder of the unfulfilled covenant with Abram because her womb was still not opened. Sending Hagar back might, arguably, been a more cruel punishment for Sarai than for Hagar. Even though the angel tells her to submit to Sarai, Hagar is coming back with the command of God behind her, which would have given her more authority. It is interesting that the angel told her to submit to a woman, especially in regard to the patriarchal society. The angel acknowledges the fact that the women have to work through their problems.

In verse 10, the angel tells her that her seed will multiply and does not include Abram in this promise. It is as though God is taking responsibility for this child's future. This theme of God's intervention and becoming responsible for the child is continued in the next verse when the angel tells her that this child will be called "Ishmael" meaning "God who hears".<sup>8</sup> The angel tells her that she "shall call him Ishmael, [because] the Lord has given heed to her affliction" (16:11). In verse 12 Hagar receives semi-vindication because God blesses Hagar by making her son into a nation; Abram and Sarai cannot ignore God's choice to use Hagar. However the prediction of his future seems odd. The angel tells her that her son will be in constant conflict with his family. The verse could be read as though the narrator is trying to insinuate that the later harried relationship between the Israelites and Ishmaelites originated with Ishmael. However the angel is consoling Hagar for the suffering she has endured. This verse means that unlike his mother, he will be a

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<sup>7</sup> Wilma Ann Bailey, "Hagar: A Model for an Anabaptist Feminist?" *The Menonite Quarterly Review* LXVIII (1994): 219-228. Wilma Bailey takes the position that God could fulfill the promise by her going back to oppression (223). Pamela Tamarkin Reis, *Reading the Lines: A Fresh Look at the Hebrew Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002). Pamela Reis argues that she only went back because God promised her that she would have revenge on her tormentors (71).



fighter and no one will control him. Thus the child is a vindication and salvation for Hagar, albeit vicarious and undoubtedly patriarchal. In fact even though the angel still calls her Sarai's slave, the fact that he blesses her permanently elevates her status in a similar way as Abram. Similar to Abram she is given a promise. Even though her mistress does not treat her as an equal, God does not ignore her by making her the mother of a nation. In fact she acknowledges God's favor by naming God as Elroi or the "God who sees" or the "God of seeing" implying that this God not only sees but understands her.<sup>9</sup> The chapter ends with the birth of Ishmael and with Abram claiming his son by his curious action of naming his son even though it is unclear how Abram knows the name of Ishmael.

### **Hagar experiencing more oppression**

It is surprising that after this vindication Hagar's situation goes from bad to worse. In Genesis 21:1, the narrator states "the Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised" (21:6,7). Isaac is born to Sarah and Abraham when they are past childbearing years, which underscores the miracle and the extraordinary nature of the promise. Finally, Sarai appears to be satisfied, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh me... Who would have ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." (21:8). However her satisfaction soon ends when she sees Hagar's son 'mocking' her son at a feast celebrating Isaac's being weaned. Once again Sarah is offended and quickly assumes that this means that the two children cannot live together. She does not simply rebuke Hagar's son or ask Hagar to deal with him. But she shows her grudge by the way that she identifies Ishmael as being the son of Abraham and Hagar, indicating that Hagar and Ishmael have never been truly integrated into the family because Sarah does not assume the responsibility of being a stepmother. She sees this misconduct as an opportunity to cast them out, "But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing [or mocking] her son Isaac" (21:9). In fact in verse 10 she calls Ishmael the son of a slave woman, highlighting the

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<sup>8</sup> *HarperCollins Study Bible*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

status of Hagar as a negative characteristic and alienating Hagar and Ishmael. Sarah acts as though she believes Ishmael is competing for her son's inheritance. She does not hide her true motivation to eliminate the competition of having the inheritance. Thus when she commands Abraham to cast them out, she does not mention the offense, "the son of this slave woman shall not inherit with her son Isaac" (21:10). She de-emphasizes her involvement in creating the current situation by not mentioning the fact that Ishmael is the oldest son and thus entitled to the inheritance. What she highlights is that Ishmael is the son of a slave woman, deliberately not mentioning Hagar's name.

Once again Hagar has become a non-person along with her son. Ironically this seems to be a reversal of God's promise to Hagar because in the wilderness of Shur he indicates that through her child she will be saved. This is a reversal of events because already Sarah acts as though Ishmael is at odds with his kin. It is as though the blessing has a double edge to it because even though God promises her that she will be a mother of a nation; this is undoubtedly not the way she thought the blessing would occur. Hagar is further marginalized because she is economically dependent upon the goodwill of her mistress. For instance when Abraham sends them away he gives them bread and water, which is not sufficient for their journey. Consequently, when Sarah orders them to be sent away, Hagar's chances of having any sort of economic freedom are nominal.

### **Abraham's suffering**

However, Abraham does not acquiesce to Sarah's demands as he did before, "The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son" (21:11). This is the only time that Abraham expresses any feelings, albeit very conflicted, which are divergent from those of Sarah. The narrator portrays Abraham as being concerned for his son in a way that probably alarmed and disturbed Sarah. Abraham does not cast them out until God reassures him that Isaac is the promised son and that Hagar and Ishmael will be safe. The words that God speaks to Abraham are interesting because it reveals that Abraham's hesitation stems from his uncertainty about whether or not Ishmael was the promised child. However God's reassurance is disturbing because

it reinforces Sarah's behavior as divinely authorized. God tells him to follow Sarah, allaying his fears by telling him about the promise to bless Ishmael, "I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring" (21:13). This is the first time that God tells Abraham about the blessing; however the reason for the blessing differs from what Hagar is told. Ishmael was blessed because God heard Hagar's voice in affliction and was making her seed into a nation; this time God blesses Ishmael because of Abraham and not because of Hagar's affliction.<sup>10</sup>

### **Conclusion: The liberating aspects of Hagar's painful expulsion**

Hagar is sent away destitute, with a child, destined to perish. As a representative of how later colonized people were treated, she has been dismissed, dispossessed, humiliated and forced to live in a condition more miserable than before. Her situation is further exasperated by the fact that the dismissal is like experiencing divorce without any child support. Unlike before, Hagar has not chosen to leave. However Hagar does not remain quiet about her condition. Driven to despair, she feels grief for her son and prays to God upon realizing that her son will die without water, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." (21:16b). Again the angel appears but does not state that her prayers have been heard but that the voice of the boy has been heard by God and God will not let him die. The fact that the angel informs her that God hears the voice of the boy makes her further alienated and dehumanized. God favors others by changing the reasons for blessing Ishmael but also privileges her son's prayer over her prayer. Where is the God who saw her condition? As Wilma Bailey argues, these reversals indicate that there are two stories from different authors. The second author's polemical agenda is to silence and castigate Hagar while redeeming Sarah in order to emphasize the fact that Sarah is the mother of the chosen child.

But the story does not end without some hope. God opens her eyes, showing her water. Showing her the water diminishes the pain and suffering that Hagar experienced because this water is ahead, beyond the past. It is an indication that she is now free to leave the past behind and seek

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<sup>10</sup> Wilma Ann Bailey, "Hagar: A Model for an Anabaptist Feminist?" *The Menonite Quarterly Review* LXVIII (1994): 219-228. Wilma Bailey's agrees with me about this stark contrast, asserting that this difference occurs because chapter 21 may be a different version of the story (225,226).

her own way of living. It is a sign of hope that her life does not have to be mired in the past and that the only way to escape the past is to take responsibility of her life and become her own master; which she does by choosing her son a wife. This is Hagar's first choice as a free woman.

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