

Hagar: A Victim of Injustice¹

No doubt, the biblical figure called Hagar is controversial. First, several Jewish interpreters who interpret Genesis 16 and 21 are either indifferent to Hagar or side with Sarah against her.² On the other hand, several African-American interpreters are sympathetic with Hagar giving her a lot of attention.³ Second, artists participate in increasing the discord related to Hagar. For example, in front of the Cathedral of Strasbourg stand the thirteenth century sculptures of Sarah and Hagar. Many Christians throughout the centuries saw Sarah as the victorious queen who holds the cross and cup while Hagar is the defeated woman holding the tablets of the law. The former is the mother church while the later represents Judaism.⁴ This perception corresponds with Paul's arguments in Galatians 4: 21-31.



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Contrary to this depiction, in the seventeenth century Rembrandt “creates the beautiful, stately, and pregnant Hagar next to the bent over old crone, Sarah.”⁵ Third, several liberation theologians/feminists tend to focus on Hagar's oppression in an androcentric Patriarchal culture while several conservative Christians see Hagar as a mistake that brought trouble and reflected unbelief.⁶ Fourth, several prominent Arabic translations of the Bible differ with King James Bible, New International Version, as well as Revised Standard Version in translating Gen 16: 6.⁷ Unlike, the pertinent English translations, Arabic Translations describe Sarah's action against Hagar as oppressive and humiliating.⁸

Admittedly, these controversies reflect conflicting opinions that are shaped by different presuppositions and social locations. But they also point out the richness of the Hagar figure that continues to provoke the imagination of different peoples from different backgrounds. We hope to add to this rich spectrum of interpretations by reading the Hagar story from a Palestinian Christian Perspective hoping to see in Hagar a source of hope for both Jewish as well as Palestinian victims of injustice. Hagar represented both Judaism and oppressed Christians among different interpreters. In fact, Hagar is not only a part of the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish heritage but is also a source of hope and inspiration for all of us. This essay will first describe Hagar's difficulty then it will point out her transformation in the midst of her ordeal.

Hagar's Difficulty

Genesis 16 starts in the Holy Land and ends in it. In the first part (vv 1-6), we see the rise and fall of Sarah's maid. The first four verses delineate the elevation of Hagar in the following way: she is a maid with a known name (v 1); she has the potential of producing children (v 2); she is Abram's wife (v 3); she is a pregnant wife (v 4). Hagar's status has been transformed from Sarah's maid into Abram's pregnant wife. However, her joy did not last for Sarah alters her success into misery. Sarah insists that Hagar is her maid (v 5) and Abram responds by returning Hagar to his barren wife describing her as Sarah's maid (Gen 16: 6). However, this time she is not the maid that Sarah endorses but the one whom Sarah dethrones. The barren wife seems to be asking Abram for justice (v 5) but it is more likely that she is pursuing revenge. As soon as Abram releases Hagar into her hands, she oppresses her to the extent that made Hagar run away (v 6) and made the angel of the Lord describe Hagar's life before escaping as affliction or misery (Gen 16: 11). Obviously, Sarah's action convinced Hagar that it is better to risk her life and the life of her pre-born baby in the wilderness than to stay with her oppressive mistress.

Seeing Hagar from this perspective, oppressed Jews as well as Palestinian Christians can empathize with Hagar in their struggle against Sarah whether the latter represents the church or the first matriarch of the Jewish people. In the last century, the European church oppressed the Jews in the Holocaust and in this century some Israeli Jews are enforcing oppressive military measures against Palestinians. Both Jewish victims of the Holocaust and Palestinian Christians struggle with a group who claim divine rights based on their propinquity to Abram and Sarah. Interestingly, Hagar was in the Promised Land with the family that will be the means of blessing the whole world but she was miserable because of Sarah's sinful behavior and Abram's indifference. Sarah's oppressive actions might be seen not only in the Holocaust but also in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Just like Hagar, some are dethroned, oppressed, and are considered inferior.⁹ These difficulties have contributed to increasing Palestinian immigration. The numbers of Palestinian Christians, in particular, are dwindling very fast. Similar to Hagar, many victims of the Holocaust and Palestinian Christians decided to escape. The former escaped from Europe but the latter are leaving the Holy Land. The church rightly recognized the pain of the victims of the Holocaust and their right to live secure and in dignity. Now the church is expected to also comfort the Palestinian victims in their pain and to participate in lifting every form of injustice against them.

Hagar's Transformation

After Hagar escapes from the Holy Land, the angel of the Lord meets her and speaks to her four times (Gen 16: 8, 9, 10, 11). Hagar is instructed to face her difficulties differently. Instead of escaping from the Holy Land and the harsh holy family, she should choose to go back. The angel of the Lord said to her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her" (Gen 16: 9). This is not an endorsement of Sarah's oppression but an encouragement to transform our situations by changing our expectations and strategy. Hagar is informed to adopt the same strategy advocated in the Sermon on the Mount i.e. the oppressed one is challenging the oppressive system in nonviolent ways. The victim of injustice is becoming the messenger of God. The oppressed is responding to violence by

opening the channels of dialogue. Hagar is called to resist evil with good. She is called to bless the barren Sarah whose seed is supposed to bless the whole world. Sarah might reject Hagar but cannot reject her testimony that points to a just God.

Indeed, Hagar is called to obey God and be a blessing. The blessing that is entrusted into the hands of Hagar can be summarized in two divine attributes: the God who hears and the God who sees. First, the angel of the Lord informed Hagar that her child shall be called Ishmael (yishmā‘-’ēl) which means God hears. Ishmael is the answer to Hagar’s affliction (Gen 16: 11). He shall be a living sermon that reminds Hagar of her value in the eyes of God. In Genesis 16, God chooses to speak not to Abram or Sarah but to the “inferior” Hagar for no one can monopolize God. Every time, Hagar and Abram call the name Ishmael they will affirm that God hears the cry of the oppressed ones. God heard Hagar’s aspirations for freedom by giving her Ishmael who shall be a free nomad who is not bound by slavery.¹⁰ Through the birth of Ishmael and his numerous seed Hagar will be transformed from a slave into a matriarch. Hagar’s self understanding is no longer defined by how Sarah views her but by the promises of God. Similar to Hagar, victims of injustice can affirm that God hears their cries.¹¹

The second attribute is the God who sees. Seeing is a clear concern in Genesis 16.¹² When Hagar was in the Promised Land (Gen 16: 1-6) her eyes were focused on Sarah. She compared herself to Sarah. On the other hand, Sarah’s eyes were on Hagar. She made her the object of humiliation. However, God helped Hagar to stop looking at herself or at Sarah. Instead, the object of Hagar’s eyes is ’ēl-Ro’î i.e. the God who sees or provides. Hagar’s experience of God qualified her to be God’s messenger. Hagar goes back to Abram and Sarah telling them about ’ēl-Ro’î and the angel of the Lord. Consequently, Abram names his first born son Ishmael (Gen 16: 15). Many years later, the angel of the Lord appears to Abram who remembers the lessons that he has learned from Hagar. He tells his son Isaac that God will provide (yir’eh) the sacrifice (Gen 22: 8). When God does provide it, Abram calls him: Yahweh who provides (yhwh yir’eh) using a divine epithet that is so similar to the one that Hagar used.

Stated differently, victims of injustice must turn their eyes from focusing on the difficulties they encounter to the God in whom they believe. Like Hagar, they can be transformed and become a blessing even to their oppressors. This does not mean endorsing oppression but it is fighting evil with good. It is also affirming that the election of Abram and Sarah does not justify the oppression of Hagar. The church needs to demonstrate the love of Christ towards the Jews. Concomitantly, Israeli Jews must love their Palestinian neighbor and vice versa. In light of this understanding, I urge the Catholic church and Israeli Jews to consider not only the Hagar of the Holocaust but also the Hagar among Palestinian Christians who need to stop their demographic hemorrhage and be empowered as they strive to be the light of Christ and the yeast of his love in a country that is marked by darkness and hatred. Help us to work on mending the painful wounds of Jews, Christians, and Muslims by fighting all forms of injustice and by recognizing not only the injustices of the Holocaust but also the need of oppressed Palestinians for a just peace.

Suggested Questions:

1. What is the role of the Roman Catholic Church in advocating Justice, Peace, and Security among Palestinians and Israelis?
2. What are the implications of affirming the wrong done against the Jewish victims of the Holocaust without pointing out the oppressive Israeli military measures executed against Palestinians?
3. How can the Roman Catholic Church empower the Palestinian church in their efforts to be the light of Christ as well as the bridges of peace and reconciliation between two nations and three religions in the Holy Land?

Further Readings

Awad, Alex. *Palestinian Memories: The Story of a Palestinian Mother and Her People*. Bethlehem: Bethlehem Bible College, 2008.

Chacour, Elias and David Hazard. *Blood Brothers*. Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 2003.

Katanacho, Yohanna. "Christ Is the Owner of Haaretz." *Christian Scholar's Review* 34 (2005): 425-441.

Sabbah, Michel. *Faithful Witness: On Reconciliation and Peace in the Holy Land*. Hyde Park: New City Press, 2009.

¹This essay is based on an earlier article that I have published. Yohanna Katanacho, "Hagar from a Palestinian Arab Evangelical Perspective," Roundtable (2008): 55-59.

²Sarah is the wife of Abram. Her name was changed from Sarai to Sarah. This essay will use the name Sarah unless it is a direct quotation from primary or secondary sources. It will also use the name Abram even though it was later changed to Abraham.

³Wilma Bailey and Renita Weems are two African American representatives of this trend while Susan Niditch, Aviva Zornberg, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky are Jewish interpreters. Wilma Bailey, "Hagar: A Model of an Anabaptist Feminist?," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 68 (April 1994): 219-228; Renita Weems, *Just A Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988); Susan Niditch, "Genesis," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol Newsom and Sharon Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992); Avivah Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses* (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1992). For further information see, Wilma Bailey, "Black and Jewish Women Consider Hagar," *Encounter* 63 (2002): 37-44.

⁴Irene Pabst, *The Interpretations of the Sarah-Hagar Stories in Rabbinic and Patristic Literature*, available from http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/03_1/pabst.pdf.

⁵Kathleen O'Connor, "Abraham's Unholy Family: Mirror, Witness, Summons," *Journal for Preachers* 21 (1997): 26-34 (26).

⁶See for example Tribble's feminist depiction or the typical evangelical conservative approach found in Hamilton or Campbell. Phyllis Tribble, "The Other Woman: A Literary and Theological Study of the Hagar Story," in *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honor of Bernhard W. Anderson*, ed. James Butler et al., JSOTSup 37, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 238; Victor Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 96-101; George Campbell, "Rushing Ahead of God: An Exposition of Genesis 16: 1-16," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163 (2006): 276-291.

⁷Some of the Arabic Translations are: *Van Dyck Bible* (Cairo: Bible Society, 1999); *El-Kitab el Muqadas* (Lebanon: Bible Society, 1995); Brian Walton, *Biblia Sacra Polyglotta: Tomus Primus* (Austria: Akademische Druck, 1963). It is worth noting that in Genesis 16 the living Bible is closer to the Arabic versions.

⁸The Hebrew word 'ānâ in Gen 16: 6 denotes oppression, violence, as well as physical and psychological torture. The pertinent verb occurs 80 times in the Hebrew Bible and has a range of negative meanings that reflects a strong oppressive nature. For further details, see Avraham Even-Soshan, *Konkordantsyah Hadeshah le-Torah, Nevi'im, u-Khetuvim* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1982), 901-902; Paul Wegner, "ענה," *NIDOTTE* 3:449-452.

⁹For further details, see Gary Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise?: What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2003).

¹⁰Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, JSOTSup 70, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, Bible and Literature series 17, ed. David M. Gunn (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 207.

¹¹The connection between Hagar and Palestinians might also be strengthened if we consider that Muslim tradition see Hagar as the mother of Ishmael who is the father of arabized Arabs. Although this connection cannot adequately be established biologically or etiologically, the association between Arabs and Ishmael cannot also be completely dismissed.

¹²In the Hebrew text of Gen 16: 1-6, we notice that the verb "see" is mentioned twice and the word "eye" is mentioned three times. Further, in the wilderness or in Gen 16: 7-14, the verb "see" or one of its related forms is repeated four times.