

“Women of the Bible: Hagar”

She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her:

“You are the God who sees me,”

for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me (Genesis 16:13).

Genesis 16, 21; Psalm 139:1-12 ¹

The image shows the Hebrew words 'אֵל רֹאֵי' (El Roi) in a white box with a drop shadow. The text is written in black Hebrew characters.

Our survey of the wives of the Hebrew Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is nearly complete, but there's one more person who is actually quite important in this saga. In order to hear her story, we have to return once more to “Father Abraham” and his relationship with his wife's slave, Hagar, but there are several important things we need to note before we begin our work.

Perhaps most importantly, we need to be aware that the Arab and Bedouin tribes of the world—which are almost entirely Muslim—regard themselves as the direct descendants and the rightful heirs of Abraham through Ishmael, the son Hagar bore with Abraham.² Although Hagar is not mentioned by name in the Qur'an, she is a revered woman in the Islamic faith.

Muslims regard God's instruction to Abraham to banish Ishmael and his mother in Genesis 21 as a parallel test to God's telling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22, and the parallels are indeed striking.³ Muslims understand the Desert of Paran, where Hagar wandered with Ishmael, to be in what we know as Arabia, rather than on the Sinai Peninsula, where you'll find it in your Bible maps. This is more significant than may be immediately apparent.

This change in location means that Muslims see some of the events to which we will shortly turn taking place “in Muslim territory” rather than in “Jewish territory.” For example, Muslims believe that the well that was revealed by the angel to Hagar in Genesis 21:19 is but a few yards from the Kaaba in Mecca,⁴ and they believe that Abraham and Ishmael were the first builders of that shrine.⁵

This bears striking resemblance to the biblical tradition that Solomon's Temple was built on the place where Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac, and Muhammed's descent from Hagar obviously parallels Jesus' descent from Sarah. Further, many Muslims also believe that Hagar and Ishmael are buried within the Kaaba.

For modern Palestinians, Hagar's expulsion from the Land presages their own expulsion from that land in 1948. But for modern Jews in Israel, that same expulsion symbolizes God's endorsement of the use of force to defend and protect the divine patrimony, for they argue that to this very day the descendants of Hagar have never ceased demanding the right to inherit “Abraham's land.”⁶

On the other hand, some Israeli parents have recently begun the controversial practice of naming their daughters “Hagar” as symbol of their support for reconciliation with the Palestinians and the larger Arab world. In our own land, some African-Americans have appropriated Hagar, impregnated by her master and then cast out into the desert, as a symbol of

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on July 17, 2016. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture is from the *New Living Translation* (Tyndale, 1996).

² www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112053/jewish/Hagar.htm

³ <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hagar>

⁴ This is known as the Zamzam Well.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hagar_in_Islam

⁶ <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/hagar-midrash-and-aggadah>

the plight of the slave woman.⁷ Others argue that the relationship between Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham is a classic example of “ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and social exploitation.”⁸

There’s obviously a lot going on in this story, so let’s turn now to the story itself, which is found in Genesis 16, 21, and 25. It seems to me that this is a story in four scenes: (1) Sarai proposes the use of Hagar as a surrogate mother to Abram (Genesis 16:1-6); (2) Hagar runs away, meets the first angel, and Ishmael is born (Genesis 16:7-16); (3) Ishmael taunts Isaac, after which he and his mother are sent away for good, being rescued by the second angel (Genesis 21:8-21); and (4), some say Abraham may have remarried Hagar after Sarah’s death (Genesis 25:1-18).

Scene 1. I’m sure you remember the background to this story. God had promised to make Abraham into an exceedingly great nation, but more than a decade had passed since that promise was made, and Abram and Sarai still had no children. In a somewhat surprising ploy that was creative, if not faith-filled, Sarai suggested that Abram take her Egyptian slave, Hagar, and attempt to father a child through her.

Such an arrangement was actually not unusual in those days, and such a child would have been legally reckoned as Sarai’s own. We hear more and more of such surrogacy in our own day . . . and we also know something about the conflicting claims and demands that are frequently born out of such arrangements.

There is no evidence that Hagar had any say at all in the matter; but once she had become pregnant by Abraham, we can easily imagine some of the things that may have followed. Although it appears that Hagar was Sarai’s slave, not Abram’s (perhaps a part of her dowry), it would have been natural for Abraham to experience increasing affection for the woman who would now be the mother of his oldest child.

Although the narrator of the text does refer once to Hagar as Abram’s “wife” (Genesis 16:3), neither Abram nor Sarai nor either of the angels ever refers to her so. Indeed, the first angel addressed her as “Hagar, slave of Sarai,” not as “Hagar, wife of Abram” (Genesis 16:8).⁹

All of this notwithstanding, human nature being what it is, it would not have been surprising for Hagar to begin to regard herself as “the main wife, the one who is able to bear children,” and she behaved insensitively at best with respect to her barren mistress. And this brings us to Scene 2.

Scene 2. Sarai objected strenuously to the behavior she began to receive from Hagar, and, fairly or unfairly, she blamed Abram for this development. Abram told Sarai that she could do whatever she liked with “your slave” (Genesis 16:6), and Sarai then mistreated Hagar to such an extent that the pregnant woman ran away to the desert, where she encountered the angel of the LORD.¹⁰

This encounter is described in Genesis 16:7-14, and you may wish to look at this passage while I comment on it. This passage is an excellent illustration of our text in Psalm 139: “*Where*

⁷ <http://www.usnews.com/news/religion/articles/2008/01/25/why-scholars-just-cant-stop-talking-about-sarah-and-hagar>

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hagar>; see also <https://hagarinternational.org>.

⁹ It is perhaps also significant in this regard that when God renames Abram and Sarai in Genesis 17:15-16, Hagar does not receive a new name.

¹⁰ Some believe that “the angel of the LORD” in the Old Testament is actually the pre-incarnate Christ. The strongest case could perhaps be made for Abraham’s negotiation about Sodom in Genesis 18.

can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast” (vv. 7-10).

Hagar has run away into the desert, a lonely, forbidding and dangerous place, and God’s messenger was sent to her as she rested forlornly beside a spring. The angel asked her where she has come from and where she is going, even though these things, were, of course, already known to God.¹¹

There are several beautiful things to notice here. Not only did God know where Hagar was, even “lost” in the wilderness, but the angel also called her by name. This is the first time that anyone has spoken to Hagar by name in this text.

Abram and Sarai thought of Hagar as a slave, a foreigner, a possession, someone to be used, abused, mistreated and neglected. But God looked at her as a person. God knew her name. God spoke to her gently. Abram and Sarai may have looked at her as expendable, as an expedient way to have children, but God saw her differently. God knew her true needs. God cared for her as a person—indeed, as a beloved daughter.¹²

Hagar’s encounter with this angel was the first recorded occasion since the Garden of Eden in which God or God’s agents spoke directly to a woman, and the angel made a promise to Hagar that was very similar to the promise God gave to Abram: “*I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count*” (Genesis 16:10).¹³ This is, in fact, the only place in the Bible where such a promise is made to a woman. Further, the angel pronounced a blessing that Hagar’s descendants continue to affirm today: “He will be wild, fierce, and free” (Genesis 16:12).

After the angel left her, Hagar described the One she had met, not as an angel, but as the LORD Himself: “*You are the God who sees me, for I have now seen the One who sees me*” (Genesis 16:13). The spring or well at which this encounter took place became known as Beer Lahai Roi, or “The Well of the Living One who sees Me,” and it would later become home to Sarah’s not-yet-born-son-of-promise, Isaac (Genesis 24:62, 25:11).

Scene 3. Although God would later forbid returning runaway slaves to their masters (Deuteronomy 23:15-16), the angel told Hagar to return to her mistress for the time being, because the time for freedom had not yet come. Scene 3 takes place in Genesis 21, after more than a decade has passed. Ishmael, Hagar’s son and Abraham’s firstborn, had become a teenager before Sarah miraculously conceived a child at the age of ninety.

Perhaps similarly to the unpleasant realities of our own history (such as Thomas Jefferson’s children by slave Sally Hemings¹⁴), strong rivalries quickly developed not only between Abraham’s “first wife” and his “slave wife,” but also between their children. At Isaac’s weaning celebration, Sarah saw Ishmael, now probably about seventeen years old, making fun of little Isaac. We can well imagine how painful that celebration must have been for Ishmael, and how jealous Sarah must have been for her young son.

¹¹ See also John 10:1-18.

¹² https://redeeminggod.com/sermons/genesis/genesis_16/

¹³ See Genesis 15:5.

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sally_Hemings

Sarah saw Ishmael mocking Isaac, and although she had tolerated Hagar and Ishmael's presence for many years, this was the last straw for her. She told her husband to get rid of them, and quickly.

This demand distressed Abraham enormously, because he really did love Ishmael as his firstborn son. But God told Abraham to do as Sarah wished: "*I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring*" (Genesis 21:13).

Early the next morning, Abraham gave Hagar and Ishmael some food and one skin of water and banished them into the desert. As a nomad himself, Abraham surely knew that such banishment was tantamount to murder. Abraham was a wealthy man. He should have sent them back to Egypt, Hagar's original home, with a whole caravan of provisions. But he did not.

Even worse, Jewish tradition is that Ishmael was ill at the time of their banishment, so his death was even more likely.¹⁵ Along this line, some Jewish commentators regard God's later requirement that Abraham sacrifice Isaac when Isaac had attained roughly the same age Ishmael had been at his banishment as "like-for-like" justice.¹⁶

In any event, Hagar did set out in the general direction of Egypt, but with no map and no GPS, she just wandered aimlessly in the desert until their one skin of water was gone. Whether he was sick when they were banished or not, Ishmael was in bad shape at this point, and Hagar put him in the shade of a bush and sat down some distance away, crying. She thought to herself, "*I cannot watch the boy die*" (Genesis 21:16), knowing that her own death would not be long after his.

In this moment of desperate crisis, the angel of the LORD suddenly appeared again. Muslim tradition is that this was Gabriel, but our text does not tell us that.¹⁷ In a striking parallel to what would later happen with Abraham and Isaac on the mountain of sacrifice, the angel "*opened her eyes*" and she saw a well of water (where Abraham would see a ram for sacrifice).¹⁸

According to most accounts, this is more or less the end of Hagar's story. We're told that she and Ishmael continued to live in the Desert of Paran, and that she was able to secure a wife for him from her own people, the Egyptians (Genesis 21:21). We're told that "*God was with the boy as he grew up,*" that his descendants became traders who would later sell Ishmael's great-nephew, Joseph, into slavery in Egypt (Genesis 37:28), and that Ishmael's daughter, Mahalath, would marry his brother's son, Esau (Genesis 28:9). But there's more.

Scene 4. The last scene in our story is an interesting one. After Sarah's death is recorded in Genesis 23, Genesis 25:1 notes that "*Abraham had taken another wife, whose name was Keturah.*"

Although Hagar and Keturah are treated as separate individuals in the biblical genealogies (1 Chronicles 1:29-33), most of the Jewish midrashim identify Keturah with Hagar.¹⁹ The idea is that "Keturah" was Hagar's given name, while "Hagar" was her "slave name."

¹⁵ <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/hagar-midrash-and-aggadah>

¹⁶ http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Articles/Hagar_and_Sarah/hagar_and_sarah.html

¹⁷ <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hagar>

¹⁸ Genesis 21:19; cp. Genesis 22:12-14. According to Muslim tradition, this was/is the Zamzam well near the Kaaba.

¹⁹ <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/hagar-midrash-and-aggadah>

Some of the traditions hold that Abraham sent for Hagar after Sarah's death. Some hold that Isaac sent for her; and some hold that Ishmael brought his mother back to his father. While the whole thing is strictly conjectural, it does make a nice end to the story.

Well, **so what?** What do we make of all this? We could draw many lessons, perhaps, but I just want to focus on one. Pastor Neville's motto for our Backyard Bible Club was both simple and memorable, and it's the point of Hagar's story, too: "*Jesus Sees. Jesus Knows. Jesus Saves.*" Would you say that with me?

"Jesus Sees. Jesus Knows. Jesus Saves." If you remember nothing else today, remember that. **"Jesus Sees. Jesus Knows. Jesus Saves."**

Sometimes—indeed, maybe fairly often—you and I may wonder whether God knows the troubles we've seen. We wonder where God is in our suffering and in the offenses committed against us. We wonder whether God hears our prayers or even knows our name. The message of Hagar's story is that **"Jesus Sees. Jesus Knows. Jesus Saves."**

You'll remember that this was essentially the name Hagar gave to the well at which she met the first angel, and that's the message of our text in Psalm 139. Hagar thought her situation was hopeless until she cried out to God and God "opened her eyes." Elisha's servant despaired when he saw that they were surrounded by enemy forces, but Elisha prayed that his servant's eyes might be opened, and he saw that the hills around them were full of horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:17).

So it is with us. **We don't ever know the truth of our situation until we have heard from God and until God has opened our eyes to the unseen realities of the Spirit.**²⁰ My friends, when you are inclined to say, "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by God," remember these words from the Lord:

²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. ²⁹ He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. ³⁰ Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; ³¹ but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint (Isaiah 40:27-31).

Say it with me one more time: **"Jesus Sees. Jesus Knows. Jesus Saves."**

Amen, and Amen.

²⁰ Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God: Knowing & Doing the Will of God* (Nashville: LifeWay, 1990), p. 99.

אל ראי