

Hagar: a hero for women oppressed and invisible
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“And she had nothing to fall back; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality, she may well have invented herself.”

Toni Morrison, Sula.

The quote taken from the novel Sula by Toni Morrison depicts the inexpressible pain that most women of color shoulder daily. Because of the absence of safety within the traditional societal constructs, which protect their peers, women of color have had to name and invent themselves in a culture where their presence remains relatively invisible. To this end, it is no wonder that so much theological scholarship written about Hagar by African-American female scholars. Hagar, a desert matriarch, symbolizes a freedom birthed in oppression and the reward of obedience to an unseen God.

Some scholars estimate that Hagar lived around 1800 BC. According to scripture, Hagar’s story begins when Pharaoh gives Hagar to Sarai. In Genesis 12:10-13, Abram requests that Sarai deceive Pharaoh by stating that she lying about her marital status and saying that Abram is her brother.¹ Pharaoh brings Sarai into his palace and extends his generosity to Abram by giving him various cattle and servants in verses 15-16. Theologians believe that Hagar was one of the female servants given to Abram and when Abram left Egypt, Hagar was a part of the caravan.

When reviewing the etymology of the name, the word Hagar means flight or stranger².

Dictionaries also state that the name means immigrant or to emigrate.³The name Hagar translates as the

¹ All scripture references are taken from the Today’s New International Version, unless otherwise indicated.

² M. G. Easton, "Hagar," *Easton's Bible Dictionary*. Blue Letter Bible. 1897. 1 Apr 2007. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Search/Dictionary/viewTopic.cfm?type=GetTopic&Topic=Hagar&DictList=2#Easton's>>

³ James Crichton, "Hagar," *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. Edited by James Orr. Blue Letter Bible. 1913. 1 Apr 2007. <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/Search/Dictionary/viewTopic.cfm?type=GetTopic&Topic=Hagar&DictList=4#ISBE>>

word forsaken also and shares a close resemblance to the word sojourner.⁴ What a fitting name for the woman who would flee from her oppressor twice, be forsaken by her impregnator, and sojourn through the desert to her homeland alone.

To truly understand the appeal of Hagar's story, the reader must examine her life through a feminine lens. Hagar's narrative is powerful and timeless because it speaks to many different women. She speaks to women living under oppressive political and religious regimes where females have no voice and women are treated as chattel. She speaks to prepubescent girls and budding young women who through no fault of their own find themselves working in the sex trafficking industry, often sold into this life of slavery by a family member. She speaks millions of women who have suffered sexual abuse by the hand of the very caregiver who was supposed to protect them. She speaks to single mothers who because of the hand of fate are single and alone, but too frequently ostracized by respectable married women. She speaks to women who were once slaves and yet still bear the burden of slavery. Moreover, she speaks to women who appear invisible to the world but live under the watchful eye of the Lord.

In Genesis 16: 1, the scripture identifies Hagar first by station as Sarai's servant, then by nationality, Egyptian, and finally by name. The description demonstrates to the reader how insignificant she was as individual. Her value to the Abram and Sarai rested in her ability to serve them effectively. One can surmise that she was chosen as the personal handmaiden to Sarai because of the education she received in Egypt. Perhaps she was a skilled and trained servant and therefore benefitted Sarai more as a personal attendant than an unlearned slave could.

One could imagine the relationship between Sarai and her servant Hagar. Sarai epitomized the rich, powerful beauty queen. Here was someone whose beauty was so breathtaking that her husband lied

⁴ Abarim Publications' Biblical name vault. "Meaning, origin and etymology of the name Hagar"; available from <http://www.abarim-publications.com/Meaning/Hagar.html> ; Internet; Accessed December 2009.

to protect his life because he believed that men would murder him to espouse her. Because of her beauty, Pharaoh enriched Abram with cattle and servants. In contrast, Hagar was given away inconsequentially to a foreigner. Her role was to serve namelessly and unobtrusively. It begs the question if Pharaoh even knew her name. Moreover, did Sarai know her name before the day that she decided to use her as a concubine?

The beginning of chapter 16 shows Sarai wrestling with her infertility and trying to bring her husband's vision to fruition. As the queen of her domain, she envisions everything within her reach as a tool, including the people under her authority. In verse 2, Sarai instructs Abram to lie with Hagar and produce an heir. Sarai behaves as only a woman of privilege could behave. She forces her servant to marry her husband and produce a child that would belong to Sarai. Hagar becomes the first surrogate mother. Scripture gives no account of Hagar's feelings about the arrangement. One would expect her to behave as someone who was both appalled and honored. It would appall her to learn of such a heinous assignment, to be betrothed to a man that was already married and several years her senior. Certainly, she has heard her mistress speak of the God who has blessed Abram and promised to produce a nation from his seed. While attending to her maid, Hagar has learned of the one true God and has observed how God has favored Abram. She probably observed them praying and sacrificing to Him and perhaps she has even come to believe in Him.

Once Hagar conceives, she begins to recognize her power. In her womb, she carries the chosen seed and she must be cared for in a special way. Now she has become the mistress, her needs must be attended to, and she needs a servant to assist her. As a nameless servant was transforming into the vessel for an emerging nation, she must have realized the power that she now wielded. Her identity as an oppressed person became the lens through which she saw the world. The most critical decisions in her life up to this point, where she would live, what she would do for a living, whom she would marry,

when should would begin a family, were made by someone else. She learned to swallow the abuse like a bitter pill and accept her station in life. She knew she was voiceless and that her offspring would share that fate. Unlike the Hebrew slaves who had to be released every fifty years, non-Hebrew slaves were passed down as an inheritance from generation to generation.⁵ One could postulate that she dreamt of a life where she could define her life according to own wishes as desires. Perhaps she imagined a life where she could repay all of those individuals who had mistreated her. When she became pregnant, the balance of power in Abram's household shifted in favor of Hagar.

Power in the hands of the oppressed will be cruel to the oppressor without the presence of forgiveness. Like the abused child who becomes an adult and abuses their children, Hagar did not end the cycle of abuse with her mistress; instead, she perpetuated it. Hagar began to realize that her open womb represented all that Sarai ever desired and she began to despise her. She began to despise her shallowness, her indifference to the servants and maybe her beauty. Hagar recognized her power and she began to inflict pain upon her mistress. It would appear that Hagar saw herself in a station above Sarai because she was carrying Abram's child – the one thing Sarai could not do.⁶

Sarai greatly troubled at the behavior of her servant asks Abram for counsel and Abram grants her carte blanche to deal with the situation. Sarai utilizes her unconditional authority to put Hagar in her place and according to the scripture in Genesis 16:6, Sarai began to mistreat her. Other translations say that she dealt with her harshly.⁷ The aggregate understanding is that Sarai dealt so cruelly with Hagar that she fled their tents and headed for the desert.

Interestingly, in the desert we observe a foreshadowing of God's voice speaking to his people, providing them with hope and courage. Hagar is alone and pregnant. The power that she thought she had becomes meaningless once Sarai receives Abram's blessing to deal with her in whatever manner

⁵ Leviticus 25:46

⁶ Genesis 16:4

⁷ New American Standard Bible 1995, New Living Translation 2007

Sarai sees fit. Here in the desert, Hagar will speak to God personally and receive a promise of hope that will sustain her for several years.

Verse 7 finds the desert matriarch on her way back to her homeland of Egypt using the road to Shur. The wilderness of Shur was between the camp of Abram in Kadesh and Egypt.⁸ The direction tells the reader that Hagar responded to the challenge of mistreatment in a very common manner – she left the place of pain in search of the familiar. The query arises how a Christian should respond to a crisis. Hagar’s response was understandable. She was running to her past. When the present does not make sense, people find security in their past. Hagar was no different.

The symbolism of her desert theophany brings a powerful message to women who believe that God does not see them. Hagar rested by a spring in the desert.⁹ Springs are a symbol of new life, new beginnings and refreshing. Deserts represent barrenness, unfruitfulness and hopelessness. Therefore, in the midst of a hopeless situation, we can expect that Hagar will be refreshed by the presence of the LORD. The first aspect of this encounter that signifies a change for Hagar is the manner in which the angel addresses her. Unlike the first mention of her name in verse 1, the order of address changes in verse 8. The angel begins by calling her name and then he refers to her role as Sarai’s maid. By stating her name before her position, the order of words indicate that the LORD saw Hagar’s worth as an individual, not just in her position.

A critical question will begin the healing process for Hagar. The angel asks her “Where have you come from and where are you going?” One could rephrase the question to say, “Where did you begin and where will you end?” To begin the process of renewal and refreshing, Hagar would need to redirect herself. The process of reorientation required that she examine the route that led her to this present place and that she identify a future destination.

⁸ BibleAtlas.com http://bibleatlas.org/shur_desert.htm

⁹ Genesis 16:7

The purpose of psychological therapy is to identify the decisions and events that have shaped a person's identity and determine the root causes of the individual's pain. The purpose of life coaching is to help a person identify a goal and help them recognize the obstacles they need to overcome to achieve these goals. The angel served as Hagar's therapist and life coach. As it often happens in a first session with a therapist or coach, Hagar was so consumed with her present situation she failed to address the relevant question posed to her by her therapist. In her response to the angel, Hagar did not state her direction but she stated her present activity. She explained that she was running from her mistress.¹⁰ The present crisis of fleeing her oppressor consumed her mind and she did not have the strength to consider any other options.

During the cold war, many Russians defected and requested political asylum in America to escape a tyrannical, oppressive government. Democratic citizens respected and celebrated their choices to live in a free state. Given the brutal history of slavery in America, the northern states and Canada celebrate the story of runaway slaves traveling to freedom in the north. In contrast to traditional Western expectations, the angel did not encourage Hagar to continue her journey to freedom. Instead, the angel told her to return to her mistress and submit to her.¹¹ Christians desire to hear the voice of God during stressful situations but we do not want to hear him contradict the desires of our heart. One must believe that the angel's command discomfited Hagar initially. She had run into the desert to flee her mistress's cruelties and now the angelic sent to comfort her instructed her to return to a life of slavery. However, the angel did not leave her without a hope.

The angel gave her a matriarchal promise in the desert akin to the promise given to Abram. He said that her descendants would grow to an amount that would be too numerous to count. The text indicates in Chapter 20 that because the child was the progeny of Abram that the promise made to

¹⁰ Genesis 16:8

¹¹ Genesis 16:9

Abram was extended to his child. However, because the Lord only provided such reasoning for Abram's comfort and not to Hagar, it seems as though there is an additional explanation. It appears that the promise of multiplication was given to comfort Hagar so that she could endure the hardship that she faced upon her return to Sarai.

In addition to the promise of the survival of her lineage, she received a prophetic word regarding her son. She learned of his name and his temperament. The name Ishmael means "God hears."¹² The unborn heir receives this name because God heard of Hagar's misery. The name Ishmael reaffirms that God hears Hagar's prayers and that He pays attention to her pain. It indicates that although her station remains one where her voice exists powerless, her voice can reach the ear of God and move Him to action. The angel describes her son as wild, free-spirited and untamed. The prophecy states that Ishmael will live in opposition to his brethren and them to him. Some commentaries identify such behavior as indicative of an independent spirit.¹³ Certainly, a slave girl would rejoice to know that her son would live a life of freedom, even if it meant that he would have to fight continuously to keep it.

The promise became the hope a future for her children and her grandchildren. Due to her new self-image, she would feel empowered enough to name her Consolator. She named God. Verse 13 states that because of her desert theophany, she realized that although she lived as a nameless slave girl, numbered among Abram's possessions, that God saw her. As a result, she named God as the One who sees me or El Roi.¹⁴ In her excitement of being fully recognized by the Lord, she proclaims that she has seen the One who saw her. The Lord sought her out, gave her a promise that only Abram had received, and blessed her with a future. How empowering it must have been for Hagar to have such an encounter with God.

¹² Footnote (a) in the TNIV in Gen. 16:11

¹³ Jamison, Fausset, Brown Bible Commentary, <http://bible.cc/genesis/16-12.htm>

¹⁴ Gen. 16:13

In Womanist and Mujerista theology, power for African women and Latinas derives from the ability to name oneself.¹⁵ Hagar became a forbear to the women who would come after her. Until the angelic encounter, Hagar allowed her circumstances as a slave, a concubine, and a surrogate define her identity. Hagar represents the oppressed woman God liberates while in slavery and as a result, she begins to define herself. She took her power from her encounter with the Lord and did the most powerful thing she could – gave Him a name. She would no longer see herself as a slave invisible and forgotten; instead, she would become a matriarch who would be remembered for generations.

Fourteen years after the birth of Ishmael, Sarah and Abraham give birth to Isaac, the promised seed. In chapter 21: 9-10, Ishmael mocks his half-brother and his stepmother commands Abraham to send the boy and his mother away. As the wife who bears the child of promise, Sarah returns to her previous status as the supreme matriarch and exiles her rival. Abraham meekly obeys his wife and sends Hagar into the desert, armed with bread and water. Once again, our hero finds herself persecuted harshly and now she struggles to protect her son from the sizzling desert sun. Hagar cries out to God in anguish, wondering if the God who saw her in her first wilderness experience could see her now. The text indicates that Ishmael offered up some sounds, because the scripture states that the Lord heard his voice. It should be expected that God would listen to the boy whose name meant God hears.

One could speculate that on this second journey she had no hope, in part due to the increase of her age and the direness of her circumstances. On the first journey, she ran away, but she knew that she could return to her place of bondage. As a person in exile, she recognized that she did not choose her second journey and thus, she knew that she had no home to which she could return. On the last journey, she found a resting place by a well of spring water. Unlike her last sojourn, Hagar could not see her place of refreshing until the Lord opened her eyes. Again, the angel of the Lord comforts Hagar and

¹⁵ Loya, Gloria Ines "Considering the sources/fuentes for a Hispanic feminist theology". *Theology Today*. FindArticles.com. Dec, 2009. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3664/is_199801/ai_n8798231/

reminds her of His promise to her and the boy. He opens her eyes to see the well and she and Ishmael are refreshed. Oppressed people often experience the same tragedies and offenses repeatedly. Believers find comfort in knowing that God will remind His people of His promise as often as necessary to keep them on task. Hagar, armed with the promise of God, returns to Egypt with her son and finds him an Egyptian wife to marry. God stays with Ishmael as he matures and Hagar witnesses God honoring His promises to a slave girl.

The story of Hagar resonates with people who have a cultural history of colonialism, oppression and bondage. Her life embodies the hope of one woman whose relationship with God contradicted societal norms. To women aspiring to live their dreams, no matter how incredulous that might seem, Hagar represents a different kind of liberty. Her liberty came through the faith that God could liberate a slave, even when she was still captive. She reinvented herself because of her conversation with the lord and she dared to invent a new name for God. Her boldness and her courage speak to 21st century women who dare to live free from bondage and in obedience to the call of Christ.

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