

# Hagar: I Am Seen

*John Pople*

It's a crippling thing to feel invisible. A demeaning experience. A feeling Hagar knows all too well.

Hagar is an immigrant, a slave, and a concubine; she is as far outside the preferred social clique as one can be. It's a well-known Hebrew paradigm to infer connections via similar-sounding words and her name, Hāgār, is clearly reminiscent of the Hebrew for outsider: *Haggēr*.<sup>1</sup> Hagar's life is presented as a constant battle with her mistress – and owner – from the opposite end of the social spectrum: the socially well-placed, highly-treasured wife of the community leader, whose name is Princess (*Šāray*). 'Outsider' versus 'Princess': Hagar never stood a chance.

She occupies the lowliest, least visible, layer of society. No-one sees a slave.

In fact, Hagar's oppression extends well beyond her death. In the New Testament, Paul looks to encourage the Jews to embrace their Messiah, of whom their scriptures had long spoken, for them to realize that the covenant of Christ released them from their enslavement to the covenant of Law by which they were condemned. To that end, Paul draws analogy of the contrasting circumstances of Hagar and Sarah.<sup>2</sup> Hagar – and her son – were born into slavery; Sarah – and her son – were born free. Paul emphasizes that the hope of the gospel is characterized by the state of freedom, as offered by Christ's covenant of grace, not slavery to any law.

Tragically, it is common for Christian commentators to misinterpret Paul's argument for the supremacy of freedom over slavery to be a divinely authorized *ad hominem* denouncement of Hagar herself. This is likely based on the original error by Augustine, who over-extended Paul's

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<sup>1</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "Reading the Women of the Bible," 2002, p226

<sup>2</sup> Gal 4:21-31

metaphor to say Hagar represented the state of sin,<sup>3</sup> a mistake inherited by Wycliffe,<sup>4</sup> which later became a standard for Christian commentary. Similarly, historians report that “the standard Christian interpretation of the text” is to view Sarah’s mistreatment of Hagar as “necessary,”<sup>5</sup> which is frankly obnoxious in the light of God’s care and favour towards the oppressed. Thus Hagar’s mistreatment rolls on to this very day, as those over-keen to identify as “Team Sarah” pile on by heaping deprecating comments on Hagar under the misconception that they are faithfully duplicating the Pauline view. They do not see Hagar either.

But God sees her.

## Nameless Concubine

Hagar’s story opens in a manner consistent with her status. Sarai, wife of Abram, is struggling to conceive, and decides to employ Hagar, her slave, as a surrogate womb. Sarai says to Abram:

*“You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.*

*(Gen 16:2)*

Sarai controls herself better than Rachel will; she doesn’t angrily blame her husband for her infertility, as Rachel does;<sup>6</sup> instead Sarai sculpts a plan to solve her problem. That said, her words do not excel either. Hagar isn’t important enough in Sarai’s eyes to be worth mentioning by name, she is merely “my slave-girl.” Sarai doesn’t see the person Hagar, she just sees an additional womb by which she may obtain a child. These comments also reveal a lack of faith: Sarai speaks as if God won’t deliver on His promise that Abram will have a natural heir,<sup>7</sup> and thus she needs to compensate for God’s shortcomings. There’s a subtle echo of Eden here. The Woman has taken the lead – again unadvisedly so, since this plan, as Eve’s, countermands God’s promise – and the husband, in this case Abram, is as uselessly silent and capitulatory as Adam.

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine of Hippo, “On the City of God Against the Pagans,” ~400 AD, 15:2

<sup>4</sup> David L. Jeffrey, “A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature,” 1992, p326

<sup>5</sup> Deeana Klepper, “The Jew as Hagar in Medieval Christian Text and Image,” Church History 2015, 84, 2, p310

<sup>6</sup> Gen 30:1

<sup>7</sup> Gen 15:4

Hagar conceives with Abram. This is a wonderful example of how God favours the downtrodden. For all that the firebrand Deborah emblemizes the “Mother in Israel” role more keenly than any other, the first Mother in Israel is Hagar the immigrant slave, as others note.<sup>8</sup>

Hagar, elevated to equality with Abram’s wife (arguably above her, via her fertility) subsequently despises Sarai. This seems genuine misconduct on Hagar’s part, and Sarai vents her anger on Abram. Abram, in a manner worryingly reminiscent of Pontius Pilate, abdicates any responsibility.

*“Your slave is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.”*  
(Gen 16:6)

Abram’s language matches his wife’s: he won’t see Hagar as a person either, she is ‘the slave’ in his speech too.

## Abused Slave

Sarai’s demeaning of her Egyptian slave has a particular poignance, and guilt. Famine had once forced Abram and Sarai to flee to Egypt,<sup>9</sup> where Sarai had been taken into Pharaoh’s palace because she was beautiful – Abram had lied that Sarai was single, fearing he would otherwise be killed. Thus, Sarai had been a helpless foreigner in a powerful Egyptian household. It must have been a terrifying experience, and God ultimately freed her. But, we might expect to see Sarai display empathy for the powerless immigrant precisely because of her experience in Egypt.<sup>10</sup> Not a bit of it! Sarai disdains Hagar as less than fully human from the outset and mistreats her at the first opportunity. It’s a grim insight into the human soul.

There’s a wider parallel too. The harsh treatment (*‘ānā*) Hagar receives as an Egyptian slave in an Israelite household mirrors the harsh treatment Israel will receive as slaves in Egypt.

*Then Sarai **dealt harshly** (*‘ānā*) with her, and she fled from her. (Gen 16:6)*

Then the Lord said to Abram,

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<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Trible, “Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives,” 1984, p17

<sup>9</sup> Gen 20

<sup>10</sup> As Tikva Frymer-Kensky expounds, Op. cit., p232

*Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be **afflicted** ('*ānā*) for four hundred years. (Gen 15:13, also Ex 1:11)*

Was Sarai's mistreatment of Hagar part-trigger for God to educate Israel by later placing them in Hagar's role, to be mistreated by her nation? We can't know. Either way, Hagar flees into the desert from her oppression, just as Israel will and, heightening the parallel, they both flee to the same place: Shur.<sup>11</sup>

## God of the Oppressed

At this point the biblical account does a surprising thing: the focus stays on Hagar. We might expect to see Hagar's flight to the desert as her exit from the text, while scripture follows Abram and Sarai's lives. Instead, the 'camera crew' of Bible focus leaves Abram and Sarai, and follows Hagar's eviction.<sup>12</sup> Carol Newsom comments:

*The moral sympathy of the story seems to be with Hagar and Ishmael, even though the author knows our primary identification has to be with Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac.<sup>13</sup>*

Hagar is the Leading Lady here, not Sarai; this is Hagar's story.

Why? Again, because God is primarily the God of the oppressed, as Israel often have been. God will go with the Israelite slaves into the wilderness of Shur when they flee the affliction of the Egyptians. Consistently, therefore, God also traveled with the Egyptian slave-woman into the exact same desert as she flees the affliction from the household of 'Israelite' Abram.

This educates us as to the identity of "God's people." On surface level, we might say God's people are the children of Abraham, physically and spiritually, which is true.<sup>14</sup> Salvation is of the Jews in that context and thus Sarah is an important matriarch. But the subtly richer truth is God is primarily *the God of the oppressed*. The poor are always in His sight, as Hagar's story, the precedent of myriad others, aptly demonstrates.

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<sup>11</sup> Gen 16:7, Ex 15:22; Bruce Feiler, "Abraham," 2002, p6500; Phyllis Tribble, Op. cit., p14

<sup>12</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Op. cit., p229

<sup>13</sup> Carol Newsom & Sharon Ringe, "Women's Bible Commentary," 1992

<sup>14</sup> Gen 12:1-3, Gal 3:15-29, Jn 4:22

The idea that God doesn't discriminate by nationality doesn't originate in the New Testament, but in the Old.<sup>15</sup> God says "You are My people" to Abraham, yet without contradiction Hagar's story clarifies that there is no discrimination by race or bloodline. Abraham and Hagar were both pinnacles of faith, which is how God's people are identified.

Underscoring that, Hagar is the first person ever to receive a visitation of *the angel of the Lord*.<sup>16</sup> Indeed it's the first mention of the word angel (*mal'āk*).<sup>17</sup> Hagar's angelic visitation is many years prior to Moses' experience at the burning bush, or the angelic visit to Lot in Sodom or even to Abram at the oaks of Mamre.<sup>18</sup> Hagar is first.

God also promises Hagar that she will have innumerable descendants. Abraham is rightly renowned as the father of the faithful; he is the focal source of three major religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Viewed through that lens, there is no greater patriarch. But the key promise on which Abraham's greatness lies, the promise of countless descendants, was also made to an immigrant slave-woman named "Outsider" (Table 1).

<b>Blessing</b>	<b>Hagar</b>	<b>Abram</b>
Called by name	"Hagar... where have you come from, and where are you going?" (Gen 16:7-8)	"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." (Gen 15:1)
Promised innumerable descendants	"I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count." (Gen 16:10)	"Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them... So shall your offspring be." (Gen 15:5)
Promised a son, whom God names	"You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery." (Gen 16:11)	"Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac." (Gen 17:19)

Table 1: Identical blessings to Abram and Hagar

<sup>15</sup> Gal 3:28, Gen 17:8

<sup>16</sup> Gen 16:7; Martin Buber, "On the Bible," 1968, p39; Phyllis Trible, Op. cit.; Claus Westermann, "Genesis 12-36," 1985, p289-291

<sup>17</sup> Robert Alter, "Genesis," 1996, p69

<sup>18</sup> Ex 3:4, Gen 19:1, Gen 18:1

## The God Who Sees

*The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?” (Gen 16:7-8)*

The first blessing is that God speaks to Hagar by name, as bestowed on Abram and Moses.<sup>19</sup> But for Hagar this meant so much more, because it contrasts so starkly with how her owners treated her. Neither Sarai nor Abram will call her by name. She is ‘the slave’ to both of them. But then she is seen. Yet who could be so lowly as to show respect to a female, immigrant, slave – culturally the lowest of the low – to address her by name?

Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth. That’s who.

Hagar is triumphant:

*She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me (‘Ēl-Rō’î),” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” (Gen 16:13)*

How poignant her response: she just needed to be seen. It’s reminiscent of Gandhi’s observation: “There are people in the world so hungry God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.” God is immutable, but intense need can shape one’s view of Him. In Hagar’s case, her oppression of being constantly overlooked is countered; God meets her need to be seen. “You are El-Roi”! This can translate as ‘the God I have seen’ or ‘the God who sees me’; I feel the context of Hagar being unseen by Abram and Sarai strongly favours the latter. She is seen.

Hagar strides into new territory: she has **named God**. She is the only human in Bible history ever to do so.

There’s more. Hagar was bold enough to behold the angel.

*Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. (Ex 3:6)*

Moses hides from the angel, but Hagar boldly looks, and sees. Hagar excels in courage, even beyond that of Moses, and is duly rewarded with a closer experience of the Living God.<sup>20</sup>

Hagar’s second blessing is to be promised innumerable descendants. This promise isn’t delivered to Hagar’s father, her husband (she doesn’t have one) or her son. It’s gender equality at

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<sup>19</sup> Gen 15:1, Ex 3:4

<sup>20</sup> Later, Moses catches up and learns to interact with God “as a man speaks to his friend” Ex 33:11

the most profound level: Hagar is **herself** promised to have multitudinous descendants; the same promise as for Abram.

Hagar's third promise is a son, whom God names.

*Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction. (Gen 16:11)*

This equates her with Mary, the only other woman to directly receive a divine promise of a son named by God. (Sarah never received this promise directly, only indirectly through God speaking to Abraham.)

Ishmael is to be father of a great nation, the same promise given to Abram. Ishmael is to be a “wild donkey” (*pere*) of a man. This isn't the insult it may sound like to Western ears; expositors translate it “onager,” an indigenous species of wild donkey.<sup>21,22</sup> More importantly, biblically a wild donkey is an animal which can't be tamed. God gives a list of untamable animals to Job, for reasons explained elsewhere, and the wild donkey (*pere*) is among them.<sup>23</sup> Bruce Feiler interprets this similarly, seeing this as prophecy that Ishmael's people will become untamable Bedouins.<sup>24</sup>

Having received blessings placing her on a par with Moses, Abram and Mary, Hagar is instructed to return to her oppressor and suffer affliction for a time, which she duly does.

For one named “Outsider,” those who live by faith will surely recognize how many traits Hagar displays which place her so profoundly **inside** the family of the faithful.

## A Sight Too Far

About twenty years later, after the birth of Isaac, tension between Sarah and Hagar is reignited. Ishmael had been ‘laughing’ at Isaac, ironically a word derived from Isaac's own name, ‘to laugh,’<sup>25</sup> which behaviour could be interpreted many ways,<sup>26</sup> most probably mocking. It's

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Alter, Op. cit., p71

<sup>22</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Op. cit., p230

<sup>23</sup> Job 39:5; John A. Pople, “To Speak Well of God: An Exposition of the Book of Job,” 2009, p205-248

<sup>24</sup> Bruce Feiler, Op. cit., p66

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p73

<sup>26</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Op. cit., p234

translated “joking” when Lot’s sons-in-law didn’t believe Lot was serious when he urgently warned them of the impending destruction of Sodom.<sup>27</sup>

Again, Sarah is angered and demands Hagar and Ishmael’s expulsion. Again she won’t humanize them by using their names, saying to Abraham:

*“Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” (Gen 21:10)*

Once more, there’s deeply implanted irony in the language. We’ve already seen Sarah’s first oppression of Hagar described with the same term (*‘ānā*) by which the Israelites are oppressed by Egypt. Here a similar match applies. Sarah evicts Hagar with the imperative “cast out!” (*gāras*), the exact term by which Pharaoh will later ‘cast out’ her children, the Israelites, into the wilderness.<sup>28</sup> Sarah, Mother of Israel, is again cast in the role of the oppressive Egyptians, while Hagar the Egyptian again plays the Israelite part. Phyllis Tribble succinctly notes: “Irony abounds.”<sup>29</sup>

Hagar is dispatched into the wilderness with Ishmael and some meagre supplies from Abraham. Again, the biblical storyline follows Hagar, not Abraham and Sarah. When the water expires, Hagar places her son under a bush and retreats from him. Once again, Hagar expresses herself in visual language:

*Let me not look on the death of the child. (Gen 21:16)*

Let me **not see** my son die. It’s a heartrending reversal to her once triumphant celebration. Hagar, who was not seen by Sarai, who was not seen by Abram, and rejoiced wholeheartedly when seen by God – “El Roi!” – this same Hagar is now forced to reverse her request. She pleads for blindness: “let me **not see**...” because the sight would be too dreadful.

## The God Who Hears

God’s answer is gentle and clever. Once again, He calls to her by name to comforts her. He says:

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<sup>27</sup> Gen 19:14

<sup>28</sup> Ex 12:31

<sup>29</sup> Phyllis Tribble, Op. cit., p21



*What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; **God has heard** the boy crying as he lies there. (Gen 21:17)*

God comforts the one who no longer wants to see by showing her that He has other faculties also, other means by which His children can connect with Him. God also hears. In fact, this has been gently prophesied in God's naming of Hagar's son in the first place; Ishmael means 'God hears.' God is enlarging Hagar's experience of Him: the God who sees her is also the God who hears her son. This also teaches Hagar that she is not alone on Earth: her son Ishmael has evidently shown faith enough to pray when in trouble.

Finally, El-Roi, the God who sees, returns to the visual motif as He "opens Hagar's eyes,"<sup>30</sup> and Hagar is enabled to see the well of water that saves both her and her son.

Hagar sees the water. Sees her resurrected life. And through it, once again, sees the God who sees her.

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<sup>30</sup> Gen 21:19