

WGUMC August 9, 2015 Heroines of Hope: Hagar  
Genesis 21:1-20; Galatians 4:21-5:1

When I was in seminary, I subscribed to a little magazine for women in the ministry. It was called *Daughters of Sara*, as a counterpoint to the "Sons of Abraham." But my African American classmates were quick to point out that Sara was none too nice to Abraham's other wife, Hagar, a slave. And so I discovered early on how loaded these stories in Genesis really are.

If you want to understand something about the intersection of race and religion in the world today, just read Genesis. It's a book that is chock full of ancient ethnography: stories that don't just tell us about individual heroes and heroines, but are intended to tell us about the relationships between different tribes and races of people.

The story of Hagar is known by the three Abrahamic faiths, but it is told from very different perspectives by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, all of whom have different motives in

telling it. The question is not "whose version is the right one?"

The question is whether the differences in these stories can still point to the same God and testify to the same hope. Is there Truth here that is not just tribal, but also universal?

To answer that question, let's look first at how the Hebrew Bible tells Hagar's story. And we'll try to read it as Jews, not as Christians. Hagar first appears earlier in the Book of Genesis, in Chapter 16. There, God has told Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation. But Abraham is not getting any younger and still has no child. It's pre-Viagra days, and his wife, Sara, knows that Abe's biological clock is winding down, so she gives him her slave girl from Egypt. Remember that. Hagar is Egyptian, and Hagar conceives a child for Abraham.

Now, the Bible says that Hagar looked with contempt upon her mistress when she got pregnant. But I wonder: was it Hagar's contempt or Sara's jealousy? Probably both. At any

rate, Sara could not bear the sight of Hagar's growing belly. She became so abusive to her slave that Hagar ran away.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to Hagar and told her to go back to her mistress, promising Hagar that the Lord would multiply her offspring and that her son would be a man to be reckoned with. Ishmael would be the first of the Ishmaelites.

Here's the ethnography: The Ishmaelites were, in fact, a loose confederacy of Arabic tribes in the ancient Near East. Remember that they are the ones later given the credit for selling Joseph into slavery in Egypt. So, you can see clear outlines of an ancient rivalry here. The Jewish view of the Ishmaelites is thus captured in the Bible's description of Hagar's son. The angel tells her that Ishmael will be "a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin." [Gen 16:11-12] And so the Book of Genesis uses the character of

Ishmael to explain a long history of conflict between the Israelites and the Ishmaelites.

Now back to our story. Following the angel's advice, Hagar returns and bears Abraham a son. Abraham calls him Ishmael, which means, *God hears*. Abraham is 86 years old, and it would appear that God has heard Abraham's prayer.

However, though Abraham now has a son, this isn't the son that God had originally promised him.

The child of the promise would have to wait until Chapter 21. Isaac was born to Sara when Abraham was 100 years old. By the time Isaac was weaned, his half-brother Ishmael must have been at least 15 years old. One day, Sara saw Ishmael playing with Isaac and decided something must be done. Now, Jewish commentary on this text says that Ishmael was mocking his younger half-brother and that's why Sara sent them away. But the more important reason seems to be that Sara wanted

to be sure that Ishmael, as the eldest son, would not get any inheritance.

As for Abraham, he was distressed at the thought of losing his firstborn, but he discovered that Sara had the Lord on her side. So Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away with nothing but some bread and a skin of water. No divorce settlements in those days.

Wandering in the wilderness, out of food and water, Hagar was all but out of hope. Finally, she left her son under a bush and went a bow's shot away to weep and pray. True to Ishmael's name, God heard the boy cry, and an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven: "Do not be afraid, go get your boy, I will make a great nation of him." And when she opened her eyes, she saw a well of water.

In this story, as told by the **Jewish** authors of Genesis, God intervenes to save the ancestor of the **Arabs**. Though the history of the enmity between these peoples is long and deep,

Jews know that God's grace is deeper still. Hagar is the outcast in this story. Hagar is the "other woman." Her son is the unwanted child. But God has compassion for the least and the lost. And when they cried out to God, the Lord gave them living water. Even for Jews, this mother of the Arabs is a heroine of hope.

Hagar is a heroine of hope for Muslims, too, of course, but she's a heroine of a slightly different story. You will find her tale in a collection of prophetic writings called the *Sahih Bukhari*, one of the most sacred texts in Sunni Islam. In the Muslim story, when his two wives couldn't get along, Abraham took Hagar, with her son, Ishmael, to Mecca. There was no water and no town there in those days. And when Abraham turned to go, leaving her there in the middle of nowhere, she cried out to him, "Has Allah ordered you to do so?" He said, "Yes." She said, "Then He will not neglect us," and she began to praise God.

When the water skin that Abraham had given her was empty, she left her son and climbed the nearest mountain to see if she could see anyone in the surrounding country who could help her. Then she climbed another mountain, but still no help to be found. In fact, she ran between the two mountains seven times, until she finally heard a voice. Stopping to listen, she saw an angel of the Lord digging his heel in the dirt until water began to flow from the ground. Hagar made a basin around the spring and filled her water skin.

Today, in Mecca, there is a well on that spot and it is called Zamzam. Hagar drank the water and suckled her child and the angel said to her: "Don't be afraid of being neglected, for this is the House of Allah which will be built by this boy and his father, and Allah never neglects His people." The story ends with the boy all grown up and Abraham returning for a visit and the two of them building the Ka'ba, the great pilgrimage site in Mecca, just a few yards from the well. [Hadith 4:583]

As Muslims tell the story, Hagar's faith in God never faltered, and she became the mother of a great people. Just as in the Hebrew Bible version, the Hagar we see in the *Sahih Bukhari* is a heroine of hope and the God she encounters is a God of grace.

How then do we explain St. Paul's take on this story in his letter to the Galatians? To be sure, he doesn't retell the story. Instead, he takes the story and turns it into an allegory. So, he isn't trying to be historical here, but his comparison of the two women has had a huge influence on history nonetheless.

From Paul, we get the idea that Hagar represents not the Arab, but the Jewish people, enslaved by Jewish law, and Sara represents not the Jews but believers in Christ, set free from the law by the promise. Now, too often, Christians have taken this to mean that they and not the Jews are the rightful heirs of Abraham. And they've taken too literally Paul's directive to "drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will



not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman."

[Gal 4:30]

As you may know, in the Middle Ages, Christians drove the Jews out of England and Spain. And with the tacit approval of the institutional church in Germany, Hitler almost exterminated the Jews from all of Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the same sad story applies to the real children of Hagar, to Muslims as well. The Crusaders drove the Muslims out of Jerusalem, more than once. The Spaniards kicked the Moors out of Spain. And today, European politicians are trying to figure out how to keep migrants from North Africa and the Middle East out of their countries. But don't think that the Europeans are the only ones who have abused this text. Christians in the South understood Hagar to be, not an Arab or a Jew, but an African, whose job it was, as Paul says, to bear children for slavery. [Gal 4:24]

Tragically, Galatians has been read by Christians to justify all kinds of religious bigotry and inhumanity over the centuries. But did Paul really mean all that? Did he mean that we should literally drive out the children of Hagar? Or are we missing the true meaning?

What is the situation that Paul is speaking to in Galatians? Most likely what is going on is that some Jewish Christians were telling the Gentiles that they had to first become Jews (be circumcised) if they wanted to follow Jesus. So, Paul wrote to the Galatians to argue against the circumcision party. So he was only using the example of Sara and Hagar to say that Gentile Christians who are not the biological descendants of Abraham are still children because of the promise. They don't need the birthright. They don't need the law. They don't need circumcision. They only need Jesus. In other words, Paul is telling them to drive out this notion that you have to be

Jewish, that you have to be circumcised in order to be saved.  
For freedom, Christ has set us free. End of story.

I don't know anyone who believes that you have to become a Jew before you can become a Christian these days. So the situation that Paul was addressing in Galatians is no longer an issue for us. But how we relate to Jews and also to Muslims is a very important issue. So we are going to have to set aside what Paul had to say to a bygone day, in order to hear what the story of Hagar means for us today.

For starters, I believe that the story of Hagar proves to Jews that God keeps promises, including those promises made to Abraham and all his descendants. But it also reminds Jews that God has regard for the ones they consider the last and the least, the children of Hagar, the Arabs. In other words, God cares about what the Israelis are doing to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. God hears the cry of their suffering, and God will come to rescue them.

For Muslims, the story of Hagar is a reminder that women can be great leaders and that by far the best weapon in any dire situation is prayer and perseverance. Most Muslims in the world today are living under horribly repressive regimes and many are dying of a thirst for peace and justice in their land. They need a heroine like Hagar to give them hope for deliverance.

For Christians, Hagar's story reminds us that we are not heirs to the promise by birthright, like Ishmael. We are not heirs to the promise as the chosen son of Abraham, like Isaac. We are heirs only by grace. Jews and Muslims are children of Abraham by blood. Paul says that Christians are children by adoption. [Gal 4:5; Rom 8:15] That means that we have no other claim on God than God's claim on us. But there is an advantage to that. We cannot rely on our tribe or our race. So we have to learn to rely on grace. And that gives us all the more reason to give thanks.

Three stories give us three different perspectives on the same woman and the same God and the same grace. Hagar reminds all of us that it is all about grace. And God's grace isn't beholden to Jews, Muslims or Christians. Grace isn't tribal property; it's a universal truth. And if all of us had a lot more grace in our attitudes and actions towards all sons and daughters of Abraham, wouldn't this world be an amazing place? So be it.