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Hagar

Women in the Bible have been understood in a general ambiguity under an ancient patriarchal lens. Often their stories are overshadowed by themes of male heroes or disguised by redemptive suffering, as is the narrative of Hagar. Having been objectively victimized by the Hebrew household she was appointed to; we can understand her portrayal in the contexts of nationality and ethnic identity, class struggle juxtaposed to immense privilege, and the exploitation of sex regarding not only Hagar's but Sarah's reproductive abilities. All aspects considered, Hagar can be understood in either a proud or submissive context, and her story paired with interactions with Sarah can generally speak towards the way privileged women treat the women that serve them. Attempts to segregate women of privilege and oppression can be acknowledged through the absence of women's voices in instances where their response required no influence of a man.

Knowledge of the story of Hagar is the first part to understanding the themes portrayed. It begins with a specified statement of the issue at hand regarding Sarah's barrenness. Sarah, in attempts to resolve the issue, offers her Egyptian handmaid Hagar to her husband Abraham in order to produce an heir and carry on the prophecy of the foundational family name. In Genesis 16:2 Sarah says, "and Sarai said 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" (NRSV). Sarah interprets her situation in a theological

context, raising issue that God has kept her from having children. Through taking the surrogate route however, she recognizes that human agency is important. Thus, Abraham sleeps with Hagar for an unspecified number of times, and consent is not revealed. The absence of any interaction coming from Hagar discloses her lack of choice in the unravelling of the story. Status plays a huge role in her vulnerability; she has no power under those in authority. Immediately following this, Hagar becomes pregnant, and the pivotal dispute between her and Sarah is unfurled. Given the heightened role associated with motherhood in biblical culture, the status of Hagar and Sarah seemingly reverse, in Genesis 16:4 stating that, “He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress” (NRSV). Hagar looks down on Sarah which causes a reaction in attempts to reclaim justice from Abraham. Taking a passive stance towards the responsibility of the issue, Abraham simply gives Hagar to Sarah, who leads her remaining reaction with abuse and violence. Class difference presents itself stronger than the solidarity between the two women. Such harsh treatment results in Hagar fleeing into the wilderness, only to encounter a divine messenger. In this account, she is the first person – not just woman – to be visited by God and the first to name him. In this action, she shows that she has an independent relationship with God. This scene serves to present immense significance given her status as a slave girl because she is the one with the divine opportunity, not someone of higher standing within ancient societal climates. God prompts her to enter back into her abusive situation because, while unfortunate – this would result in her best outcome. Going back would prove Ishmael was the first born in the house of Abraham, guaranteeing him participation in his salvation and the rights of inheritance. This interaction acts as God’s testimony towards Hagar’s affliction; by treating her with respect, she is equipped with inner strength to return to Abraham’s house. Yet, her redemption is only met through waiting.

This event serves to foreshadow the exodus prophesized in the previous chapter of the bible, using Hagar as an active metaphor in the salvation of a grander storyline.

Upon returning, Hagar gave birth to Ishmael. Following this, in Genesis 21:1-2 it is stated that, “The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.” they named this son Isaac. Presenting a conflict in the context of prophecy, Sarah’s cruel treatment carried on when she saw Ishmael playing with Isaac one day, casting both him and Hagar out into the wilderness. God instructed Abraham to follow Sarah’s instruction, stating that Ishmael will also create a large nation despite losing his inheritance. Thus, Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away with slim provisions, consisting only of bread and a skin of water. After inevitably running out of sustenance, Hagar cried out in fear for their lives. God responded to Ishmael’s cry and directly addressed Hagar, prompting her to open her eyes to see the well he had produced for them to drink from. Having been saved, Ishmael was able to grow up further, become an expert with a bow, and sustain a great nation – all while granting Hagar a stable remainder of her life.

A huge contributor in Hagar’s oppression is due to her nationality. The fact that she is Egyptian is heavily stressed in contexts of her story and is one of the first aspects stated about her identity. She is immediately coined an outsider. In Genesis 12-23 we learn about the narrative of Abraham and the promise God has made about the fulfillment of his prophecy. After having learned Sarah is to birth a son, there is a great famine in the land and Abraham and his household are to migrate to Egypt. (At this point in the narrative, Abraham denies that Sarah is his wife in order to protect his identity in turn denying hers.) This is potentially where Hagar is adopted into the story and first becomes their slave. It is believed within Jewish canons that Sarah may have acquired Hagar as a wedding gift paid to her husband Abraham by the Pharaoh

in Egypt. According to the Genesis Rabbah, (a midrash collection of ancient rabbinical interpretations of the Book of Genesis) “he [the Pharaoh] took his daughter and gave her to him, saying, 'better that my daughter by a maidservant in this house than a mistress in another house'" (Gen. Rabbah 45:1). Given this, Hagar is defined as both a foreigner and slave, diminishing her status further. Jumping forward, the abuse Sarah puts Hagar through following the conception creates a direct metaphor towards Exodus texts that describe Israel's oppression towards Egypt. Both women's ethnic identities invite this comparison; Sarah representing Israel and Hagar representing Egypt. Hagar's nationality juxtaposed to her authority serves as a metaphor regarding the split societies and the women's battling classes.

Another apparent theme in the story of Hagar is the struggle of class segregating both women. As a slave, Hagar is presented as the outsider and Sarah as the ‘good wife’ of the household who is held to an elevated societal standard and associated with the higher class. Given the general situation, Hagar's servant status presents her lack of choice and the ability for authority to exploit her identity. When she becomes pregnant and the abuse ensues, this phenomenon of class privilege is demonstrated. On another vein, Sarah as a woman is also exploited by Abraham previously in the book of Genesis when he denied her as his wife and called her his sister. When Sarah has the opportunity to have power, she becomes the example of the liberated becoming the oppressor – further relaying into the metaphor of this story relating to the Exodus and the politics associated with Israelites and Egyptians.

Further regarding class structure, there are boundaries between God and humanity, men and women, and more narrowly the class organization between the women in this story. God creates class struggle by separating himself from his creation, yet by seeking the oppressed (as by example with meeting Hagar,) he sets an example of how insiders are to interact with outsiders. When Abraham and Sarah provoke exclusion, God exhibits that the chosen people

cannot confine what he has in store and that he is not solely committed to Sarah and Abraham. By seeking Hagar when she first flees the house of Abraham, God engages in theological formation in the foundation of her class. Ultimately this serves to create the narrative that the oppressed having a heightened identity through God. However, questions are still raised as to why Ishmael is not considered the prodigal son – God still stresses that Sarah is to birth a son, and that Isaac is the favored blood line. Is this an issue of ethnic interest or class difference in having relation to Hagar? Ishmael is the firstborn, yet rules are bent to accommodate to God's plan. The reiteration of the promise made to Abraham becomes narrowed in the context of the larger narrative. Ishmael is still to have a great nation, but not one involving the prophecy at hand. Hagar's narrative coupled with Ishmael's is troubling in that they never become a part of the chosen people. In the end, they were cast out, and remained out; paying for the cruelty and negligence supplied by Sarah and Abraham.

Another reference of oppression in terms of the split classes of women in this story is regarding sexual exploitation relating back to the objectivity of reproductive abilities. The theme of barrenness is particularly prevalent in this story and continues to be within other stories for the remainder of the bible. When this is revealed, the story quickly moves to Sarah's action in resolving the issue (not Abraham). The shame associated with childlessness put on women in ancient culture is not mentioned in this portion, nor does Sarah raise concerns regarding such. Human agency is recognized despite the belief that God prevented her from having children. She knows God granted Abraham a child, but not necessarily her. Which is interesting when later the seed of Abraham is not enough to create the favored bloodline, as the mother had to be Sarah. She makes a self-sacrificing move in offering Hagar to Abraham, despite the later implications and the absence of control in Hagar's hands. The handmaid role was a customary practice as parallels are presented in the ancient near east, so Sarah would not have been condemned for this

strategy. The fault lies in Abraham's hands due to his exploitation of trust in the marriage and potentially sleeping with Hager more than the intended agreement. When he is later blamed, his complacency adds to the division between the 2 women, allowing Sarah room to abuse. Thus, Abraham tips the balance in favor of Sarah, having no interest in the effect it may have on Hagar. He already shows no regard toward her wellbeing through the consent-less act but contributes to the oppression by being a passive figure in the narrative. However, given the reversal in favor regarding reproductive ability, Hagar diminishes Sarah's status in her new role of mother-to-be. The women are pitted against each other, being left alone to their feelings of contempt towards one another. Both are victimized in their limited choices in power, voices (and the absence thereof), and the passive role of Abraham.

All in all, Hagar is a narrative of refuge and incredible faith – her story deserves to be told and retold, as to keep the hardship of her testimony alive, and shed light on the outcasts of society. Ultimately her character is revolutionary in terms of God's attention towards her, engaging in a newfound theological formation in terms of her class. This serves to create a heightened identity through God toward the oppressed. Phyllis Tribble speaks on Hagar's character stating, "All sorts of women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, etc." and rather notably she is, "the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others" (Kroeger, 490). She is the matriarch of a nation that also claims Abraham as a descendant, as nearly one billion Muslims call him father too. Both Hagar and Sarah symbolize the way in which God's world may be conceived; the means of slavery and law as demonstrated by Hagar, juxtaposed by Sarah who represents the way of promise in the conception of Isaac.

