

Women of the Jewish and Christian Bible: A Four Session Series

Session I: The Conflict Between Sarah and Hagar

“Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, ‘Look the Lord has kept me from bearing. Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her. And Abram heeded Sarai’s request. . . . He cohabitated with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem. . . . Abram said to Sarai, ‘Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right.’ Then Sarai treated her harshly, and she ran away from her. Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. She said to Abraham, ‘Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac’. . . . God said to Abraham, ‘Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you. As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed. Early next morning, Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheva. When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under one of the bushes, and went and sat down at a distance, a bowshot away; for she thought, ‘Let me know look on as the child dies.’ And sitting thus afar, she burst into tears.” (Genesis 16:1 ff., 21: 9 ff.)

“The content of the story [of Sarah and Hagar]. . . revolve[s] around a man, head of the household, who has all the authority. As always in these biblical stories, names count. The man is *‘abram*, exalted father, the wife is *sarai*, ‘the princess,’ and the other woman is *hagar*, which sounds like *haggēr*, ‘the outsider.’ The two women are dependent on the man’s will, but their shared situation does not bind them together. On the contrary, far from uniting them, oppression turns them against each other. Hagar and Sarai are not allies; they vie for status in the household. . . . The rivalry between Sarai and Hagar is particularly acute and dramatic because all advantage seems to be Sarai’s. Sarai is the full, free wife; Hagar is a slave. . . . Justice would demand that Sarai treat Hagar well. When she does not, we are bothered. Several *midrashim* try to resolve this ethical issue by finding fault with Hagar, by assuming that she must have done something wrong. They explain that Hagar let everybody see the contempt in which she held her mistress, ‘You think my mistress is righteous? She puts on a righteous face, but clearly god knows that she is not righteous: she has been barren all these years and I pregnant the first night!’ In contrast, readers today tend to be angry at Sarai, to castigate her for being insensitive to the plight of someone for whom she should have felt both compassion and solidarity.” (Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories*, 2002), pp. 334

“The paradigmatic nature of the ancestor stories of Genesis has long been recognized. The development of the family of Abraham into the nation of Israel is both history and parable. . . . Nachmanides coined a maxim, *Ma’ase abot Siman labbanim*, ‘the deeds of the fathers are signs

for the children,' thus the temporary descents of the patriarchs to Egypt are seen as foreshadowings of Israel's enslavement and emancipation from Egypt. The stories of the matriarchs share this paradigmatic quality, though the rabbis took no note of it. Hagar's slavery, emancipation, and annunciation manifest the pattern of Israel's own slavery in Egypt and her second captivity in Babylon. . . . Sarah's sojourn as a slave in Pharaoh's house and later in Gerar foreshadows Israel's slavery in Egypt and her second captivity in Babylon. Rivka's captivity in Gerar reinforces the hint that there will be more than one captivity for Israel. And the Dinah story demonstrates the intricate difficulties of Israel's destiny among the nations, focusing on the essential question of how Israel should form alliances and how it should grow." (Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of their Stories*, 2002), pp. 334

"The stories of Sarah and her Egyptian slave Hagar (Gen. 16, 21) are intimately intertwined and desperately conflicted. . . . [a conflict which] is never resolved. . . . The shadow of their conflict lingers in the history of interpretation. . . . Theological and aesthetic representations alike tend to polarize the two characters and to understand them as symbols for other things. . . . Most significant among these is Paul's Christian typological interpretation in Galatians 4:22-31. He describes their story as an allegory. . . . [God's] promise [is] through Sarah's son Isaac, who represents birth in the Spirit, and Hagar and her son are condemned 'according to the flesh' and driven out. For Christians, this reading strategy legitimized their ascendancy over Jews and later over Muslims. . . . Early [Christian] readers, though, are not entirely without sympathy for Hagar. For [the early Church father] John Chrysostom, she exemplifies God's compassion and care for the lowly, and the angel's visitation dignifies her abject situation. . . . Rabbinic discussions tend to highlight the ethics of the story. . . . Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai argues that Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter (*Gen. Rabbah* 45:1), which both elevates Hagar's status and is occasionally taken as a sign of Hagar's idolatry (*Pirque d'Rabbi Eliezer*, 'Horeb,' 29). . . . Famously, Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman (Nachmanides, Ramban) accuses both Sarah and Abraham of sinning in their mistreatment of Hagar. . . . In Muslim tradition, Hagar has an esteemed position as the mother of Ishmael and the foremother of the Arab followers of Muhammed. . . . Hagar's story is included in the *hadith* (the oral traditions of the prophet Muhammed) . . . Here, Hagar's tireless pursuit of water for Ishmael, and the angelic promise that Allah's people will come from herself, ennoble her character. . . . Sarah too has a place of esteem. . . . in [Muslim] stories [as] she successfully defends her sexual purity when Abraham gives her to other men by pious invocation of the name of Allah. In the modern era, readers focus increasingly on the injustice of Hagar's rejection, and she becomes a representation of oppressed peoples. Perhaps the best example of this is her adoption as a representative figure by African Americans, who note her position as a racial outsider, her slave status, and her theophanic wilderness experience. . . . Contemporary feminist and womanist theologians too have been keen to rehabilitate Hagar. . . . [exploring] the story's potential to illustrate women caught in malignant distortions of power, especially with respect to patriarchy and race. This discussion often emphasizes Hagar's suffering and her final achievement of liberation and divine recognition. . . . The rift that lingers between Sarah and Hagar continues to speak powerfully to unhealed wounds of all kinds. Poet Alicia Suskin Ostriker imagines each woman articulating a yearning for solidarity that remains unfulfilled" (Elaine James, "Sarah, Hagar, and Their Interpreters," in Newsom, Ringe, and Lapsley eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, Third Ed., 2012), pp. 51-52, 54-55)