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Seeing and hearing Hagar: An affective reading of Genesis 16

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Authors:
A. Rebecca Basdeo Hill[1,2] ®
Lee R. Martin[1,2] ®

Affiliations:
[1]Old Testament Department, Pentecostal Theological Seminary, Cleveland, Tennessee, United States

[2]Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Lee Martin,
imartin@ptseminary.edu

In the past, Hagar's significance in the Abrahamic narratives has been overlooked by biblical scholarship. Although recent studies have aimed to rescue and redeem Hagar from patriarchal interpretations, insufficient attention has been given to the emotive quality of Hagar's narrative. Therefore, this research aimed to fill this gap by examining the underexplored biblical character of Hagar. A literary critical methodology to analyse the rhetorical impact of the language was used in Hagar's narrative in order to illuminate the emotive aspect of her story as a marginalised character, which may resonate with modern hearers. By using this analytical framework, we unearthed a distressing narrative of mistreatment and manipulation that allowed hearers to empathise with Hagar's experiences of marginalisation, dehumanisation, and exploitation. This finding resulted in the conclusion that Hagar's story generated various affective responses of outrage, compassion, and hope from contemporary hearers.

Contribution: This article adds to the ongoing discourse surrounding the narrative of Hagar in biblical scholarship. It underscores the significance of this biblical story in influencing present-day ethical considerations. Additionally, it emphasises how this narrative presents conflicts that spark dialogue within the reading community, with an ultimate aim of moral formation (Christian affections), especially concerning women's rights.

Keywords: rhetoric; affections; hermeneutics; Abraham; Sarah; oppression; social justice; women.

Introduction

Until the works of feminist and womanist interpreters came along, the biblical character of Hagar was treated as a minor character, and her story was either glossed over, or viewed as one of the many conflicts that could be seen as a potential setback to the fulfilment of YHWH's promise to Abraham. Perhaps, this unkind treatment of Hagar could be traced back to Paul's allegorical interpretation of the Genesis story in Galatians 4:21–31. Paul argues that Sarah, Hagar, and their sons represent two covenants – Sarah and Isaac symbolise promise and freedom, while Hagar and Ishmael exemplify bondage and slavery to the law. According to Paul, the Galatian Christians 'are children of promise' (Gl 4:28); and therefore they 'must cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman' (Gl 4:30). Given Paul's negative use of Hagar, it is not surprising to hear John Calvin (1578:430, 438), without any warrant, characterise Hagar as a woman of 'indomitable ferocity', who 'had always been wild and rebellious'. Until recently, Hagar has not been seen or heard by biblical scholars. More recent studies have endeavoured to rescue, redeem, and rehabilitate Hagar's character from the iron fists of patriarchy, but these studies have not examined the affective-rhetorical dimension of the narrative. To fill this gap, this study employs a literary critical methodology to analyse the often-overlooked emotive aspect of the biblical narrative of Hagar. Through analysing the rhetorical strategies used in Hagar's narrative, this framework aims to shed light on the affective dimension of her story as a marginalised character, which may resonate with contemporary readers. The goal of this research is to see and hear the affective dimension of the Hagar story and explore how the biblical text impacts and transforms the affections of the reader. In line with this goal, this article will elucidate the significance of affections within various religious traditions, analyse the mistreatment and dehumanisation experienced by Hagar at Sarah and Abraham's hands, as well as delve into Hagar's encounter with God, and explore her discovery of hope and freedom through that experience. This article will conclude by examining the emotional aspects of Hagar's story and their effects on modern readers. This exploration carries implications for discussions on women's rights, as well as the significance of empathy and compassion towards marginalised individuals in contemporary ethical debates.

Hagar is a woman, a slave, and a foreigner whose account occupies only 29 verses (Gn 16:1–16; 21:9–21) in the 14 chapters devoted to Israel's first patriarch, Abraham (Gn 12–25). It is no wonder we easily overlook Hagar's story. It is possible that this is the objective of the book's narrator – to quickly usher us away from this troublesome part of Abraham's story, or to even direct us to view Hagar as a villainous slave woman who threatens to sabotage YHWH's promise to Abraham and Sarah. However, for those of us who resist a hurried narration and choose to linger in the 29 verses of Hagar's narrative, we quickly discover a horrendous story of abuse and exploitation committed by our heroes of faith.[1] It is in the lingering that we experience the emotive quality of the narrative, and we feel the full affective weight of the text. Accordingly, we are compelled to wrestle with Abraham's and Sarah's inhumane actions toward Hagar – an immigrant slave woman.

Interpreting Scripture is not a mechanical or sterile procedure that anesthetises the hearer's passions, feelings, and senses; nor does it require the interpreter to dull the sharp blade of the 'living and active' word of God that is 'sharper than any two-edged sword' that pierces the 'soul and spirit, … joints and marrow, and is able to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart' (Heb 4:12). Rather, hearers of Scripture should allow the affective dimension of the text to have its full transformative force (Martin 2014:339–348). S. Land (2010:31–34) observes that orthopathy (right affections) is the centre that integrates orthodoxy (right doctrine) and orthopraxy (right practices) of Christian spirituality. Affections should not be confused with ephemeral feelings that arise for an instant and then quickly fade as a new feeling takes place. Rather, according to Land (2010:11), affections are 'the abiding, decisive, directing motives, and dispositions which characterize' spirituality. Orthopathy is therefore the underlying motivation of all behaviour.

The role of affections, is significant for many faith traditions, as evidenced by the attention given to the affections by John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, and the Eastern Orthodox tradition. The continued interest in the affective reading of Scripture is demonstrated by the Society of Biblical Literature's approval of the 'Bible and Emotion' section, that focuses on the study of emotions throughout the Bible (Hockey 2019; Mermelstein 2021). An affective approach to the Scripture, requires the hearer to: (1) 'identify and acknowledge the affective dimensions of the text'; (2) 'acknowledge his or her own passions that are brought to the interpretive process'; (3) 'the hearer … must be open to the emotive impact of the text'; and (4) 'the hearer must allow himself or herself to be transformed by the affective experiencing of the [text]' (Martin 2018b:28–29; also Runck 2022:39–77).

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1.It is not unusual for the biblical story to reveal the egregious flaws of its leading characters (i.e., cf. David, Gideon, and Samson). Christian believers should avoid the temptation to ignore or to justify the biblical heroes (see Martin 2018a:135–153).

For the Christian, affections originate in Christ and are effectuated by the power of the Holy Spirit (Castelo 2004:40); therefore, the Christian's mind, will, feelings, and deepest desires are radically transformed by the affections. This radical transformation enables believers to experience and express the pathos of God. To read Scripture affectively is to encounter God in the text (cf. Davies 2009:219), even in difficult texts such as Hagar's story.

Sarah and Abraham afflict Hagar the slave

The bipartite story of Hagar occurs at critical points in the Abrahamic narrative, with each part following YHWH's promise to give Abraham a son. The first part of Hagar's story begins with a sharp reminder of Sarah's barrenness (Gn 16:1). At this juncture in the Abrahamic narratives, Sarah's barrenness is an unexpected announcement for hearers, because we have just heard YHWH reassuring Abraham that he will indeed have an heir (Gn 15:4). YHWH's unfulfilled promise and Sarah's persistent barrenness heighten the narrative's tension.

As soon as the text recalls Sarah's barrenness, the narrative introduces us to Hagar (Gn 16:1). Hagar is firstly identified in terms of her gender, enslaved social status, and ethnicity. Significantly, her name – the most important element of her identity that signifies her individual personhood and distinguishes her from other biblical characters – is the last word in the Hebrew text (Gn 16:1). By mentioning her name last, the text draws attention to Hagar's identity as a woman, a slave, and an immigrant.

Some scholars, such as Skinner (1969:258) and Drey (2002:179–195), argue that it is misleading to view Hagar as simply the legal property of Sarah. They assert that the Hebrew term שִׁפְחָה [handmaiden] distinguishes Hagar (and other OT handmaidens) from other ordinary slaves, because the handmaiden's primary duty was to serve her mistress (Reuter 2006:407); and therefore, she was a distinctive type of property who enjoyed a unique social standing with the family. Notably, these same scholars also recognise that a שִׁפְחָה, at the command of her mistress, might be expected to provide a sexual service to her mistress' husband. The argument that Hagar should not be understood as simply a slave, is incredibly preposterous. While the Hebrew term שִׁפְחָה might be differentiated from the Hebrew word אָמָה [a bondwoman who may function as a man's secondary wife, or as his concubine, or the wife of another male bondservant] (cf. Schultz 1997:212), the שִׁפְחָה was still a slave who could be forced to have sex with her master at the directive of her mistress. It is also noteworthy that Hagar's name is mentioned 11 times in chapters 16 and 21 (Gn 16:1, 3, 4, 8, 15 [twice], 16; 21:9, 14, 17 [twice]), but the messenger of YHWH is the only character to call Hagar by name. Abraham and Sarah, however, never utter Hagar's name, choosing instead to call her by the term that indicates her enslaved status (שִׁפְחָה), thereby denying Hagar her personhood (cf. Frymer-Kensky 2002:231; Hawk 2021:14; Pigott 2018:513–528).

Although the meaning of *Hagar* is ambiguous, it is possible that its etymology originates from the Hebrew verb הגר, meaning 'to flee'. Other scholars such as Tikva Frymer-Kensky (2000:86), suggest that the name sounds similar to הַגֵּר (*hagger*), which means 'the stranger', 'the foreigner', or 'the sojourner'; and others propose that the name could be a variant of the Arabic word *hajara*, meaning 'to migrate'. Sarna (1989:119) agrees that the name is connected to *hajara*, which means 'the fugitive'. However, Drey (2002:182) insists that the biblical name *Hagar* has no connection to the Arabic word *hajara*. These possible meanings of her name are not only suitable descriptions for Hagar, but they also accentuate the reasons for her exploitation, oppression, and rejection. After all, Hagar is an Egyptian sojourner who flees from her abusive mistress and is later thrown out by her masters.

Moving from Hagar's introduction, the text quickly reveals Hagar's role in the narrative. YHWH's delayed promise has prompted Sarah to propose her own plan for securing an heir through Hagar. After making YHWH responsible for her barrenness, she presents a solution to Abraham using imperative language:

> Go to my maidservant. Perhaps I shall be built up from her (Gn 16:2).[2]

Abraham does not object to Sarah's proposal, but rather 'Abraham obeyed the voice of Sarah' (Gn 16:2).

To contemporary hearers, Sarah's proposition may seem appalling; however, in ancient Israel, barrenness was rarely attributed to the male (in contrary, cf. Dt 7:14). Rather, barrenness was a problem unjustly imputed upon the woman. In the agrarian society of ancient Israel, procreation was essential for the perpetuation and preservation of society. Infertility threatened the survival of the society and was perceived as a manifestation of a divine curse, and it constituted a woman's failure to fulfil her primary role in society. Bird (1997:26–58) argues that a woman's fertility determined her usefulness and her power in her marriage and was inseparable from her identity (cf. De-Whyte 2018:2–3). Accordingly, a childless woman was often scrutinised, stigmatised, subjected to ridicule, and esteemed as less than a full human being in ancient Israel (Van Rooy 1986:225). Barrenness was a humiliating stigma for women in the ancient world, as illustrated by Rachel's despairing lament: 'Give me children lest I die' (Gn 30:1) and by Hannah's torment anguish (1 Sm 1:6–11). Goldingay (2020:260) notes the negative emotions Sarah suffered because of her barrenness. She undoubtedly experienced grief, shame, anger, anxiety, and an enormous sense of failure for her inability to bear children. Furthermore, because procreation was essential to the survival of ancient Israel, Sarah's proposition regarding Hagar was a conventional and legal practice to ensure the perpetuation of the family line. Elsewhere in the book of Genesis, Sarah, Rachel, and Leah give their שִׁפְחָה to their husbands, when delays in conception put them under pressure to produce (Gn 16:3; 30:4; 30:9).

2.Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the Hebrew text are my own.

In light of these views, it is no wonder that Sarah hoped to be *built up* through Hagar. The Hebrew word בנה [*build*] is a discernible wordplay on the Hebrew term בן [*son*], because בן is derived from בנה. Therefore, Sarah's words, 'I shall be built up through her', could also be interpreted as, 'I shall build a family through her', or 'I shall have sons through her'. Wenham (2002:1, 7) translates the phrase אוּלַי אִבָּנֶה מִמֶּנָּה as: 'Perhaps I may have sons through her'. Alter (2004:77) proposes that the phrase, 'I shall be built up through her' means, 'I shall be sonned by her'. Furthermore, the term בנה is used metaphorically elsewhere in the OT to mean bearing children through surrogacy (Gn 30:3; Dt 25:9). Because of the shame associated with barrenness, interpreters such as Brueggemann (1982:151), Goldingay (2020:260), and Hamilton (1990:445) advise contemporary hearers not to cast moral judgement on Sarah's plan of action.

While it is understandable that Sarah's plan to perpetuate the family line might have been driven by her desire to remove the shame of barrenness, and while it might have been a legal practice in ancient Israel to obtain children through a maidservant, we also should not ignore the cruel exploitation of Hagar by Sarah and Abraham. Actions that are customary and legal are not always right or just. Social customs are often exploitative, and common practices are often abusive. Using maidservants to obtain children may have been legal in the ancient world, but the law did not protect these maidservants from the sexual abuse and dehumanisation associated with birth surrogacy. Therefore, citing the legitimacy of Sarah's proposition to use Hagar as a birth surrogate, does not justify Sarah's inhumane and immoral actions towards Hagar.

Sarah's plan is immediately accepted by Abraham. Hagar is never consulted about the matter. The text does not mince words: Sarah [*took*] (לקח) and [*gave*] (נתן) Hagar to Abraham to be his wife (Gn 16:3). Sarah's actions indicate that because Hagar is her servant, Hagar's womb is simply Sarah's property to be used and exploited for the sake of 'building' a family for Sarah. Gossai (2010), also notes Sarah's ownership of Hagar's womb. He writes:

> The use of Hagar underlines the premise that the entire being of the slave is legally at the disposal of the owner … By deciding that Abram will 'lie' with Hagar, Sarai makes clear her ownership of the womb of Hagar. (pp. 7–8)

As Sarah 'takes' and 'gives', Hagar is silenced, dehumanised, and demeaned as she is forced into coupling with Abraham for the sake of reproduction. Given our knowledge of the ancient world, it is almost certain that Hagar was a virgin; and therefore, Hagar's first sexual encounter was forced upon her. Ademiluka (2019:6–10) argues that Abraham's relationship with Hagar was not sexual exploitation; but rather, it was a legal and legitimate means of surrogacy. While I would agree that voluntary surrogacy may be accepted as a commendable solution to childlessness, Ademiluka ignores the fact that Hagar was not allowed to refuse this sexual arrangement. Therefore, the narrative underlines her position not as a person, but as a womb to bear Abraham's children. Hagar's coerced reproduction is

highlighted further by the phrase, 'and he went unto Hagar' (Gn 16:4). It is clear that Abraham is not seduced by Hagar. As a matter of fact, Hagar has not yet spoken or acted in the narrative. She has been a pawn used by Sarah and Abraham for their own purposes. Nevertheless, the goal of Hagar's forced sexual exploitation with Abraham is achieved as Hagar becomes pregnant with child (Gn 16:4).

Despite the inexcusable actions Sarah takes towards Hagar, it is worth noting that she herself had been a victim of similar circumstance in a narrative that readers encountered earlier (Gn 12:11–20). When Abraham and his family are forced to leave Canaan because of a severe famine, they find refuge in Egypt (Gn 12:5–10). To save his life, Abraham instructs Sarah to pose as his sister rather than his wife (Gn 12:13). This act of deception leads directly to Pharaoh taking Sarah as his wife (Gn 12:15, 19). Like Hagar, Sarah found herself voiceless and deprived of agency as she was forcibly placed in a situation where another man claimed her as his wife. Sarah is compelled into an unwanted cohabitation simply for the sake of saving Abraham's life. It could be argued that it is precisely her own distressing experience that causes Sarah to make decisions that resulted in the use and abuse of Hagar.

Hagar's pregnancy, however, introduces a new conflict. Discerning that she has conceived Abraham's heir, Hagar becomes acutely aware that her pregnancy has elevated her status in the household; and therefore, Hagar sees Sarah as 'small', or 'lowered' in her function as a woman and a wife to Abraham (Gn 16:4). Notably, the Hebrew word קלל [*lowered*] appears earlier in YHWH's promise to Abraham (Gn 12:3). There, YHWH says, 'I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses (קלל) you, I will curse (ארר)'. While the word קלל is often translated as 'curse' in Genesis 12:3, scholars agreed that the verb קלל is not equivalent to ארר in meaning. The verb קלל means 'disdain', 'to diminish', 'to be of little account' (Holladay 2000:318), while the verb ארר means 'to bind with a spell', 'to restrict', 'to banish', 'to condemn' evildoers (Holladay 2000:28; see Gn 3:14, 17). If YHWH promises to pronounce a curse on those who disrespect Abraham, why is Hagar not cursed? It is possible that YHWH does not curse Hagar because YHWH knows that Hagar is mistreated and exploited by Abraham and Sarah. YHWH's promise to curse the people who disdain Abraham is bracketed by YHWH's promise to make Abraham a blessing so that the families of the earth will receive a blessing through him (Gn 12:2, 3). Hagar has not been blessed by Abraham and Sarah. Rather, she is the one who has been diminished, dehumanised, and abused.

Hagar's belittlement of Sarah reminds hearers once again of the shame and disgrace Sarah endured as a barren woman in ancient Israel. As Goldingay (2020:264) puts it, 'Sarah has the power, but Hagar has the functioning womb, she threatens to outrank her; Sarah becomes a nobody'. However, Sarah will not be overshadowed by her immigrant slave girl. Gossai (2010:9) argues that Hagar's pregnancy bestows on Hagar a kind of respect and power that 'cannot be equated with the power which comes through wealth

and ownership'. Therefore, enraged and humiliated by the realignment of the power structure between Hagar and herself, Sarah blames Abraham for Hagar's depreciation of her. Of special interest is Sarah's use of the word חמס [*violence* or *wrong*] in her lament to Abraham. Wenham (2002:8) observes that חמס is used previously to emphasise the corruption, acute wickedness, and depraved violence that precipitated the flood (Gn 6:11, 13). However, we should not interpret Sarah's חמס to mean that Hagar was violent to Sarah. Given that Sarah feels humiliated by her barrenness, and thus disrespected by Hagar, it is more likely that Sarah feels wronged by Hagar. In response to Sarah's accusation, Abraham gives Sarah the power to do with her as she sees fit: 'Behold, your handmaid is in your hand. Do to her the good in your eyes' (Gn 16:6). By attempting to appease Sarah's anger, Abraham's indifferent response results in Sarah's cruel treatment of the slave girl who is pregnant with his child. Sarah does not do 'good' to Hagar; but rather Sarah so ruthlessly oppresses Hagar that Hagar flees from Sarah (Gn 16:6). Significantly, the verb ענה [*afflict*] is the same term used to characterise the intolerable afflictions of the Israelites in Egypt (Gn 15:13; Ex 1:11–12), and it is the Israelites' cry of affliction that compels YHWH to deliver the Israelites from their Egyptian bondage (Brueggemann & Linafelt 2012:79–80). Trible (1984:13, 21, 28), Dozeman (1998:28), Daube (1963:23–38), Wenham (2002:9), Peterson (2018:90) and Goldingay (2020:265) also observe that Sarah's oppressive treatment of Hagar corresponds to the Israelites' bondage in Egypt. Tamez (1979) points out:

> [T]he affliction of the Israelites by their Egyptian slave owners touched … the transcendental part of their being, their dignity, their persons. It represented a degradation of the human being, a seizure as it were of the divine image in the person … [*Therefore, the*] oppression or exploitation [*conveyed by* הנע] is accompanied by human degradation and humiliation. It is precisely this oppression reaching to the innermost self that moves the God of the Hebrews. (p. 12)

Furthermore, ענה is the same verb used to describe Shechem's rape of Dinah (Gn 34:2), Ammon's rape of Tamar (2 Sm 13:22), and the rape of the Levite's concubine (Jdg 19:24). By using the Hebrew verb ענה, the text paints a graphic picture of Sarah's deliberate, brutal, and violent oppression of Hagar (Arnold 2009:164).

It is no wonder Hagar chooses to flee (ברח) and risk a perilous journey through the wilderness, rather than remain under the oppressive hand of Sarah (Tamez 1979:12). Williams (1993:19) notes that Hagar is 'the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures'. Goldingay (2020:265) points out that the word ברח [*flee*] is also used in the exodus narrative when the Israelites flee from Pharaoh (Ex 14:5). Furthermore, as Wenham (2002:9) points out, the Hebrew verb ברח is often used when individuals are fleeing from people who are endeavouring to kill them (Gn 27:43; Ex 14:5; 1 Sm 19:18; 22:17; 27:4). Therefore, it is possible that Hagar flees from Sarah because her life and the life of her child are in danger (Pigott 2018:516).

YHWH finds Hagar, the immigrant, runaway slave

In a sudden and shocking plot twist, we hear that the messenger of YHWH finds Hagar – the immigrant, pregnant, fugitive slave – 'by a spring of water in the wilderness … on the way to Shur' (Gn 16:7). Scholars such as Dozeman (1998:23–43) draw parallels between Hagar's and Moses' divine encounters in the wilderness and between Hagar's wilderness journey and the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. Shur was one of the southern routes that led to Egypt. Therefore, it is possible to assume that Hagar is making her way back home to Egypt.

The messenger calls her by her name, and 'invites her to speak' (Gn 16:8; cf. Williams 1993:20). I would point to three aspects of Hagar's encounter with the messenger of YHWH. Firstly, this is the first time in Scripture that the messenger of YHWH appears to a person. Thus, the fact that YHWH's messenger first appears to an Egyptian, runaway slave girl, makes this encounter even more striking because it would seem to signify that an encounter with YHWH is 'not based on nationality, ethnicity, or social status' (Gossai 2010:14). Secondly, it is instructive to note that YHWH's messenger is the subject of the verb מצא [find], indicating that 'Hagar was not running away in order to find God, but [the messenger] of Yahweh found her running' (Arnold 2009:164). Indeed, YHWH is always attentive to the stranger, the foreigner, the refugee, the marginalised, the abandoned, and the oppressed (Brueggemann 1982:152).

Thirdly, the divine messenger's treatment of Hagar contrasts sharply with Sarah and Abraham's treatment of Hagar. By calling Hagar by her name and inviting her to speak, YHWH's messenger does what Abraham and Sarah neglected to do: affirm Hagar's dignity, uphold her personhood, establish a relationship with her, and allow her to speak. Westermann (1995) observes:

> [B]y the greeting and inquiry, the messenger takes part in Hagar's lot; he accepts her into the realm of *shalom*. He enables her to make a trustful response and show herself ready to accept the word of this stranger. That this unknown one speaks her name indicates that he is an 'other', one who knows. (p. 244)

After calling Hagar by the name, the messenger inquires: 'Where have you come from and where are you going?' (v. 8). Clearly, the messenger already knows the answer to these questions, but by inviting her to speak with him, the messenger gives Hagar a voice and empowers her to tell her story. Hagar responds only to the messenger's first question by admitting she is running away from her mistress, Sarah (Gn 16:8). Then, in another unexpected turn of events, the messenger of YHWH inexplicably directs Hagar to 'Return to your mistress and submit to her hand' (Gn 16:9). At first glance, the messenger's directive appears to be fraught with cruelty. In his divine speech, the messenger uses the same verb ענה – translated here as *submit* – that was used previously to describe Sarah's punitive affliction of Hagar in Genesis 16:6. Therefore, as Trible (1984:15) points out, the force of

the double imperatives (*return* and *submit*) might generate a 'divine word of terror to an abused, yet courageous, woman'.

Why would the messenger of YHWH encounter Hagar on her flight from intolerable abuse, speak to her, validate her dignity, only to tell her to return to the injustices of her enslavement? To understand the messenger's seemingly cruel instructions, it is necessary for us to hear the messenger's directive in the context of the rest of the message. Firstly, the messenger assures Hagar she will have a hopeful future, by promising to greatly multiply her descendants that they will be too numerous to count (Gn 16:10). This divine assurance to Hagar echoes the promise YHWH made with Abraham, concerning his descendants (cf. Gn 12:2, 7; 13:15, 16; 15:5). Notably, Hagar is the only woman to receive the divine promise of innumerable descendants. Furthermore, what makes this promise so salient, is that it is given to a '*non-Hebrew*' slave woman (Pigott 2018:518). Secondly, the messenger reveals that Hagar is pregnant with a son (Gn 16:11). Thirdly, the messenger instructs Hagar to name her son יִשְׁמָעֵאל (Ishmael), 'because YHWH has heard your affliction' (Gn 16:11). Under Abraham and Sarah, we never hear Hagar's woeful laments. Such silence signals the sustained and torturous abuse Hagar endured at the hands of Sarah and Abraham. Nevertheless, the meaning of 'Ishmael' indicates Hagar did cry out and, while there is nothing in the text that indicates Hagar's cries are directed to God, God hears her cries, 'is affected by' her cries (Brueggemann 2008:26). He responds to the cries of the oppressed outsider. Fourthly, whereas Hagar must return to enslavement, her son will live as a free man (Gn 16:12).

In the context of these verses, it is not hard to imagine that the divine messenger of YHWH encounters Hagar to give her direction concerning her future. We recall that when the messenger first encountered Hagar, he asked her two questions: 'Where are you coming from and where are you going?' (Gn 16:8). Hagar responds only to the messenger's first question. Although her geographic location suggests she is on her way to Egypt, the text implies by Hagar's silence to the second question that she is ambivalent about her future. Hagar may not have been directionally lost, but she felt lost, confused, and in need of direction. Thus, the divine messenger finds her and orders her future.

Hagar's wilderness scene ends with Hagar – the oppressed slave woman – naming the one who calls her by name: 'and she called the name of YHWH, the one speaking to her, "You are the God who sees"' (Gn 16:13). Notice that Hagar does not ask the messenger his name,[3] nor does the messenger reveal his name to Hagar; but rather, Hagar gives YHWH a new name. By calling YHWH אֵל רֳאִי [*the God of seeing*, or *the God who sees*], Hagar becomes the only person in Scripture to name YHWH (cf. Goldingay 2020:268–69; Pigott 2018:519; Trible 1984:18). Indeed, YHWH has seen Hagar, and Hagar has seen YHWH (Gn 16:13; Goldingay 2020:269). The name אֵל רֳאִי; indicates Hagar's personal, experiential, and relational knowledge of YHWH's nature and character

3. Compare to Moses (Ex 3.13–14) and Manoah (Jdg 13:17–18).

that derives from Hagar seeing YHWH (Gn 16:13). That is, Hagar's recognition of YHWH as 'the God who sees', is not an observation made from a distance, but rather a unique understanding of YHWH that comes only from her direct encounter with YHWH.[4] Hagar's naming of God is a definitive theological statement, based upon YHWH's self-disclosure to her. Hagar is therefore a 'theologian' (Trible 1984:18). Undoubtedly, Hagar's naming of YHWH is a worshipful and transformative response to her encounter with the God who sees and hears her affliction. Furthermore, the name אֵל רֳאִי is not limited to Hagar's wilderness encounter, but it serves to reveal to future generations that YHWH is the God who cares for the marginalised (Gossai 2010:19).

The first part of Hagar's story concludes with Hagar returning to Abraham and with the birth of Ishmael. Sarah's absence in the closing scene is of particular interest because Hagar's narrative begins with Sarah hoping to be *built up* through the children of Hagar. However, at the end of this part of Hagar's story, it is Hagar – not Sarah – who is built up.

Conclusion

The story of Hagar generates a number of affective responses from the hearer. Firstly, the rhetoric of Abraham and Sarah's brutal exploitation, abuse, and dehumanisation of Hagar evokes outrage. When a human being suffers appalling injustices by an oppressor (even when the oppressor is a hero of the faith), we should be revolted by their cruel and unjust actions. The story of Hagar does not sanction the victimisation of other human beings, and it does not permit us to uphold or participate in systems of oppression. As Christian believers, we have a moral responsibility to denounce injustices and to restore the dignity of all human beings. Secondly, the story of Hagar produces compassion that is demonstrated as love for the foreigner, the oppressed, and the marginalised. Because God turned to the outsider with love, kindness, and concern, we also must demonstrate love and respect for the persecuted stranger in our midst (cf. Dt 10:17–22). Furthermore, we must not forget that Sarah herself suffers from the humiliation of barrenness. As we remember Sarah's pain, we are moved with compassion for those who endure rejection and isolation because of physical disabilities and other special needs. Thirdly, YHWH's encounter with Hagar generates hope for those who are tyrannised, enslaved, and exploited. YHWH as the God who hears Hagar's cries and sees her afflictions, indicates that God is a personal God who does not abandon the disadvantaged and misused. It is no wonder that African Americans, particularly African American women, identify with Hagar. Jones (1987:36–37) notes that they see God as 'the only one who [*is*] with them, who [*gives*] them a feeling of "somebodyness", and who [*is*] the bedrock of black identity and sanity'.

Perhaps it is not coincidental that I wrote the majority of this article during Black History month here in America. As I interpreted the story of Hagar, it was difficult not to notice the interface of the contemptible servile situation of African American slave women, with the oppressed character of Hagar. Like the slave women in America, Hagar is of African lineage, who was forced into slavery, coerced into coupling with her master to produce children, and violently beaten by her mistress. Black History month reminds us that even when black people are intelligent, powerful, or have high character, they are not always acknowledged by the mainstream, and they often become insignificant and hidden figures in history. Similarly, is the situation with Hagar. Hagar is one of the most interesting characters in Scripture, but yet she is cast as a minor character who is often overlooked by Christian tradition. Like Paul, Christians immediately lump her into a negative context and see her nothing more than the covenant of bondage. Yet, it is this same maligned, immigrant, runaway slave girl who meets with God, sees God, hears God, receives a promise from God, and is empowered to give God a name.

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4.For a detailed discussion of the word ראה [*to see*] in the OT, see Basdeo Hill (2019:61–67).

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