

Interpretation is All We Have. A Feminist Perspective on the Objective Fallacy¹

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ABSTRACT

Feminist biblical interpretation has the task of finding the most promising reading strategy for dealing with the male bias of the biblical text, since all reading strategies are not equally valid. Feminist histories of women in ancient Israel are often coloured with objective certainty and become influential research resources. This article argues that some of these histories tell us as much about the historian as they do about the subjects of inquiry. The reason being that authors as readers cannot avoid approaching the text from their social location that determines their presuppositions and the way they read the text. Texts do not mirror historical reality; all we have is interpretation. To illustrate this point, the narrative of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16 and 21 is examined through the interpretations of nineteenth-century lay women, visual interpretations from the world of art and a resistant feminist interpretation. The objective is to come to terms once again with the indeterminacy of historical inquiry.

“In our most intensive moments of straining to listen to the dead, it is our own voices that we hear.” (Ilana Pardes 1992:155)

A INTRODUCTION

This is a story about stories. It is a story about interpretations of women’s stories in the Hebrew Bible. Biblical stories of women are extremely powerful. They have a profound effect on women’s self-understanding and the way in which women are perceived in society, mostly to the detriment of women due to the overwhelming patriarchal ethos in the stories. In religious societies it has endorsed over the years a social system in which women internalised their inferiority and submissiveness.

The question that faces woman readers is quite simple: How to react to a document that has served as an authoritative source for the justification of patriarchy as the politics of male domination? Feminist and womanist critics have developed a variety of hermeneutic strategies to deal with the patriarchal bias of the ancient texts (Davies 2003:17-34). Their goal is not just a better under-

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standing of the text, but to change the way the Bible is read and understood in order to transform women's self-understanding and cultural patterns of oppression (Schüssler Fiorenza 2006:83).

But Fuchs (2005:211) remarked that all reading strategies are not equally valid:

Missing in feminist historical criticism of the Hebrew Bible is an awareness of the methodological and theoretical questioning of fundamental premises and concepts in the study of history as such.

This is where my investigation will start. After a brief outline and evaluation of some interpretive strategies deployed by feminist critics, different interpretations of the Hagar and Ishmael narrative in Genesis 16 and 21 will be called to bear witness to the main point argued in this article, namely the fallacy of objective history writing.

B FEMINIST READING STRATEGIES

Some feminist critics adopt a *maximising the positive* approach to the Hebrew Bible stories which trivialises or removes the androcentric elements from the text in order to demonstrate that the Bible is not as patriarchal as is generally supposed. These readings are suspiciously positivist and still implicitly promote male interests (Fuchs 2004:4). The following are examples of this approach:

A *culturally-cued* reading (Bellis 1994:20; Davies 2003:20-21) reads the text in its socio-cultural context with the assumption that the biblical authors express the culture and worldview of their time, showing that their pronouncements are not as discriminatory as they seem to us (cf. Silvia Schroer 1998:91). However, by sanitising the text of patriarchal elements, the male authors are not only conveniently exonerated of "sexist" attitudes, but attaining a neutral view on the historical or social setting of the text, is an ideal which remains elusive.

With a *canon-within-a-canon* reading (Davies 2003:26-28) womanist and feminist critics sift through the Bible to find positive texts that are liberating for women, such as maternal metaphors for God (Trible 1978) or stories about inspiring female figures like Ruth, Miriam or Esther. By concentrating on the positive images of women, the adherents of this strategy argue that the Hebrew Bible is not at all devoid of a female perspective. The problem with this approach is the limited number of heroic female figures and female metaphors for God in the Hebrew Bible. The text remains overwhelmingly patriarchal in character and the silent, powerless, nameless women who cannot speak for themselves, are not given a hearing (Fuchs 2005:214).

The *historical approach* used by feminist biblical historians, aims at affirming biblical women by reaching beyond the text to discover the actual conditions of women's lives in the biblical period. This approach has recently been criticised for the scientific and objective certainty that colours their histories (cf. Fuchs 2005:211-222). Carol Meyers is a respected biblical historian who uses archaeological evidence and data from other Near Eastern cultures to reconstruct "accurate" pictures of women's role and lives in ancient Israel. She argues that women's crucial role in the economic survival of the family, granted them social parity and cultural prestige with Israelite men. In other words, women's power and male authority carried equal weight (Meyers 1988:139-164). Conceived as the product of real social circumstances, the text is approached as historicised truth, rather than a product of male ideology (Fuchs 2000:22). This problem is compounded by the nature of biblical literature, the scarcity of written sources from outside the Bible and the uncertain data gleaned from archaeology. Fuchs (2005:214) points out that one never knows what is fact and what is fiction, what is story and what is history, for all history is in flux and the biblical past can never be recalled. What is offered as historical reconstructions are in fact interpretations of data, tentative readings, a hermeneutics rather than a collection of historical facts (Fuchs 2005:212). Since readers, as historical beings, are products of their times, contexts, experiences and beliefs, there can be no purely neutral or objective reading (Snyman 2007:53), resulting in feminist historians and interpreters, knowingly or not, recreating Israelite women in their own image.

The main problem with a method that promotes the positive, is that it misses the patriarchal *ideology* behind the positive portrayals of women. All genres that make up the biblical canon, whether historiography, narratives, law, psalms, appear there because in one way or the other they serve ideological needs (Amit 2000:xi). Unless the *ideology* of the text is exposed and subjected to critical scrutiny, we will not get far with the androcentric biblical texts (Davies 2003:109). Therefore, the most promising strategy developed by feminist critics is a reader-oriented literary-critical approach which focuses on the text as it stands today as the dialogue between text and reader (Davies 2003:vii).

Resistant feminist readings draw upon insights from reader-response criticism to adopt a hermeneutic of resistance with which to unmask the Bible's patriarchal ideology (Fuchs 2000:29; Davies 2003:47-53). They no longer accept the assumptions and values promoted by the male authors. They insist that the Bible and its interpreters must be held accountable, even if only because of the profound influence, good or ill, which it has exercised upon its readers (Schüssler Fiorenza 1988:15). They apply a "hermeneutic of suspicion" to the biblical text to oppose, question and criticise statements that are sexist and discriminatory. They insist that Bible readers have a right and an ethical duty to evaluate and resist biblical norms and values that appear to be destructive, harmful or detrimental to human beings (Snyman 2007:64; Davies 2003:110).

They consciously read as women; through the eyes of women and from the experience of women. They declare the principles on which they operate, thereby disciplining them and using them positively in the process of understanding.

Not only the patriarchal ethos of the *biblical text*, but also that of *malestream biblical interpreters* is subjected to a hermeneutic of suspicion (Schüssler Fiorenza 2006:88). Traditional male commentators wrote under the guise of neutrality but imposed their assumptions on the text and failed to question its moral difficulties.

C INTERPRETATION IS ALL WE HAVE

When this has been said, interpretation is all we have for bridging the gap that separates us from the text. Hermeneutics philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1988:264) points out that spatial and temporal distance should no longer be an interpretive stumbling block since we cannot and need not understand objectively. The abyss of time and space is filled with the continuing history of interpretation. The meaning of a specific text or work of art is never final, but an ongoing process because our presuppositions and interpretations change continuously to present us with new possibilities.

To illustrate the effect of the above and its resultant ideologies on our understanding, I now turn to the narrative of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16 and 21 through its history of interpretation

D INTERPRETATIONS OF HAGAR THE EGYPTIAN SLAVE-WOMAN

The biblical story of Hagar has a long reception history. Hagar inspired Bible readers because she embodies universal social issues like slavery, concubinage, surrogacy, single parenthood, female rivalry, abuse and exile. In light of Jorge Luis Borges's statement that "each reading of a text or telling of a story, each rereading or retelling, each memory of that retelling, reinvents the text" (Exum 1996:80), this is an attempt to reinvent Hagar through (1) the interpretations of nineteenth-century women, (2) visual interpretations from the world of art and (3) a resistant feminist reading.

1 Nineteenth-century women interpreting Hagar

In a unique publication on interpretations of women in Genesis written by nineteenth century lay women (*Let Her Speak for Herself* edited by Taylor & Weir 2006) the reconstructions of the Hagar character clearly reveal the historical and cultural contexts of its authors.

It became evident that nineteenth century women lived in a patriarchal world. Industrialisation and urbanisation forced their men to leave home for the factories and cities, causing home and family to become the centre of their lives

(2006:2). Although the nineteenth century was a time of rising criticism, for most women it was a time of elevated piety. Religion, purity, self-sacrifice and femininity were the qualities every woman was expected to display. A theme that runs through all the readings was that of duty and submission to authority. Readers are encouraged to do their duty and be submissive like Hagar when she was told by the angel to return to her mistress and “suffer affliction under her hand” (Gen 16:5).

As mothers they felt a particular bond with the plight of Hagar who could not bear to see her son die, since the death of a child was a very real possibility for mothers in the nineteenth century. Hagar, who embodied the oppression, vulnerability and weakness that many nineteenth-century women experienced, was treated with much more compassion than Sarah. They saw in her a reflection of themselves and their readers (2006:187).

The authors’ cultural contexts strongly influenced their interpretations. In the United States the issue of slavery was on the foreground and many American interpreters supported the abolitionist cause. Two white Americans, Warner and Stowe, used language that clearly indicates that they read Hagar as a black slave woman. Stowe (1811-1896) described Hagar as “a poor, fiery impatient creature, moaning like a wounded leopardess” (2006:215). Warner (1819-1885) wrote that Hagar “despised her former mistress, and would not take orders from her meekly, but held her pretty black head high” (2006:254). Bibb (1878-1927), a black American, wrote poetry influenced by the memory of American slavery and its ongoing influence on society. She found no hope in Hagar’s expulsion and puts the following words in her mouth: “My boy! ... All is o’er. And we are outcasts ever more” (2006:247). Aguilar (1816-1847) was a Jewish woman who, from her historical experience as part of the Jewish diaspora (2006:191), interpreted Hagar and Ishmael as wanderers and outcasts “who hand in hand wend their way o’er hills and vales and wild”.

British women approached the text from a position of wealth, privilege and status. They understood ordered societies with clear class divisions and the Hagar incident is interpreted through the lens of their experience of possessing household servants (2006:217). Woosnam (1849-1883) is comfortable with Hagar’s return to Sarah because it was wrong to “desert one’s duty” and Hagar has been “insubordinate to the authority” over her (2006:219). Hagar’s sorrow is the result of her offences, for servants had to heed their status and position in society. Morton (1870-1898) calls Hagar a “servant”. According to her interpretation, Hagar became rude to Sarah when she discovered her pregnancy and instead of bearing her mistress’s punishment, she ran away! “Was it wrong of her to go away like this? Yes, it was very wrong. She was Abram’s wife, and she had no right to leave him; she was Sarah’s servant, and her place was with her mistress” (2006:226). Abusing a woman servant is acceptable whereas deserting a husband, even to achieve God’s mission, is not (Bellis 1994:83).

From these brief examples it would be reasonable to conclude that nineteenth-century women writing on Hagar tell us almost as much about themselves and their world as they do about the biblical Hagar. These “lay” interpretations are important. Not only do they make us aware of the way our background influences our interpretation, but the pioneering work of the fore-runners of our hermeneutical theories and methods must not be dismissed as naïve “for lacking the sophistication that would not have come about were it not for their contributions”, as Fuchs (2004:2-3) rightly observed.²

I now turn to visual representations of Hagar’s expulsion in works of art.³ The frequency with which the expulsion scene has been painted testifies to a fascination with the fate of the slave-woman who has been wronged by her master and mistress.

2 Artists interpreting Hagar

Artists as Bible readers are not mere illustrators of the biblical narratives but act as interpreters in their own right. The following paintings are interpretations from the seventeenth-century Baroque and nineteenth-century Romantic movements. I approach the paintings not in relation to art history, but from a perspective that I describe as a reader-response criticism of art viewpoint, as if, like a text, paintings have a story to tell (cf. Exum 1996:10).

It is clear from these works that Hagar receives more sympathy than Sarah. The latter does not impress as a positive character. A favourite device deployed by the biblical narrators to foster their patriarchal ideology was to associate negative traits with women and to contrast them with admirable qualities of their male counterparts. In these paintings Sarah’s heartless casting out of Hagar is contrasted with Abraham’s compassion for mother and son.

Rembrandt (fig. 1), the seventeenth century Dutch painter, portrays Hagar as sitting on a donkey in this one of his several expulsion scenes. In so doing Rembrandt purposefully portrays Abraham in a positive light, for according to Genesis 21:14 he merely put a waterskin on her shoulder and sent her away on foot. Typical of baroque excesses, Hagar is richly clad in Dutch finery for the departure. Art historian Helen Gardner (1975:611) points out

² The nineteenth century also produced influential feminist voices. Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902) published *The Woman’s Bible* in 1895 to highlight the role of the Bible in the oppression of women. Texts which upheld patriarchy were excluded (Taylor & Weir 2006:392; Davies 2003:11).

³ Permission has been granted by Eerdmans Publishing Co. to use the pictures from the publication *Great women of the Bible in Art and Literature* (1994).



Fig. 1 Expulsion of Hagar. Rembrandt (1606 – 1669)

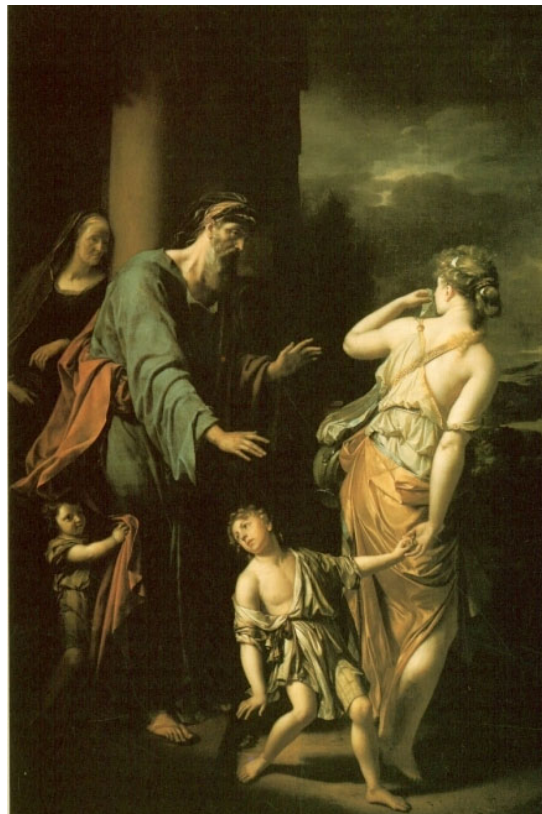


Fig. 2 Expulsion of Hagar. Adriaen van der Werfft (1659 – 1722)

Rembrandt's characteristic use of light and darkness to express "subtle nuances of character and mood". Hagar's brightly illuminated figure calls attention to her body-language and emotions. She is distressed. She bows her head towards him and her eyes are fixed on his face while Ishmael holds the animal's reigns. Abraham is not particularly concerned about the boy, but the expression on his face suggests reluctance to let them go (Schnieper-Müller 1994:43). His right hand seems to indicate the direction for their journey.

The famous Dutch painter of religious and mythological scenes and portraits, Adriaen van der Werfft's (fig. 2) expulsion scene from the same period, reveals more of the relationships and emotions within the family. Once again the Dutch baroque manipulation of light and darkness emphasises Hagar and Ishmael as the protagonists in the story while keeping Sarah in the shadows from where she views the scene unemotionally. Abraham and Hagar's eyes meet while he sends them on their way with last instructions and a blessing for his firstborn son. Ishmael struggles against parting from his little brother who watches from behind his father's coat (Schnieper-Müller 1994:42). Whoever gave a thought to the feelings of little brothers being separated in this way?

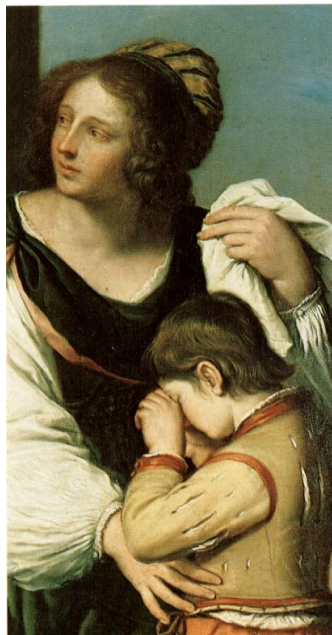


Fig. 3 The expulsion of Hagar. Francesco Guercino (1591 – 1666)

In this detail from a painting by the Italian baroque painter Francesco Guercino (fig. 3), he focuses on Hagar and Ishmael on the point of leaving. Hagar's eyes are red from crying and with disbelief and reproach she glances back to Abraham whose harsh command she cannot comprehend (Schnieper-Müller 1994:42). The sobbing Ishmael gets a motherly embrace for he had

been loved by Sarah like her own and for some reason he and his mother are cast out into the fearsome *midbar*, described in Deuteronomy 1:19 as “that great and terrible wilderness, a land of trouble and anguish”. How to grasp grown-up behaviour?

The nineteenth century painting by the French landscape painter, Jean-Charles Cazin (fig. 4), shows Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness before the appearance of the angel. Ishmael clings to Hagar whose desperate crying suggests loneliness, rejection and uncertainty. Cazin was known for his realistic landscapes with fine, tender atmosphere (Schnieper-Müller 1994:45). He loved simplicity in his landscapes, and when he associated them with human feelings, he made his scenes harmonise with the emotions. In this picture, the general suggestion of desolation corresponds with the despair of Hagar (Gardner 1975:692). Though Hagar’s clothing is more suggestive of the present than of the past, it seems appropriate because it blends perfectly with the scenery. This scene may also reflect romanticism’s sensitivity to nature and acute awareness of feelings and emotional expression (Baumer 1977:278).



Fig. 4 Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert. Jean-Charles Cazin (1841 - 1901)

Italian baroque painter, Giovanni Castiglione (fig. 5), shows Hagar about to kneel on the ground with an empty water jug. Her feverish son, his tongue swollen and protruding from his mouth, is dying of thirst. In a bright cloud an angel appears pointing out a well to Hagar (Schnieper-Müller 1994:45). In the biblical account an angel of God calls remotely from heaven

(Gen 21:17), but Gardner (1975:580) explains that the Italian Baroque generation was obsessed with a visible heaven at which they could gaze in awe, which explains why ceilings were to them natural painting surfaces and why heaven appears in this painting as a nearby, almost tangible, cloud. At this point in history, Newton (1642-1727) was about to penetrate the heavens to find the laws of their movement (Gardner 1975:597).



Fig. 5 Hagar and the Angel. Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (1609-1664)

Each of the above paintings reinvented Hagar and recreated a new story that fills in the gaps and open spaces in the biblical text (cf. Cornelius 1997:221). This happens because of the ability of a painting to condense a sequence of events in one visual moment on the canvas and the viewer's mind. And since a picture is closer to reality than the written word, human emotions are rendered more realistically, personally involving the viewer in the events taking place.

3 A feminist rhetorical interpretation of Hagar

Hagar is one of the many objectified women in the Hebrew Bible whose lack of human qualities permits use and abuse by the pen of the male authors. Knowledge of her has survived in two scenes in the Abraham cycle: Genesis 16:1-16 and Genesis 21:9-21. Between chapters 16 and 21, she disappears and only her son Ishmael remains on the scene. Though Hagar appears in the genealogical list of Genesis 25:12, in Genesis 25:9 only Ishmael is reported to have been present at Abraham's burial. She is eliminated after she has fulfilled her role by giving birth to a son (Fuchs 2000:151).

The *first scene* (Gen 16) opens with the barren Sarai offering her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to Abram as a co-wife, not a concubine, to produce offspring. She uses her as a surrogate, a means to having a child. For Sarai, Hagar is an instrument for enhancing the mistress, she never speaks to her or utters her name. When Hagar, as Abram's wife, conceives, she no longer views Sarai's status higher than her own and looks down on her. In retaliation Sarai blames Abram who washes his hands in innocence of Hagar and hands her back. Degraded and exploited she is passed from person to person, a pawn in a power game. She then takes command of her own life and flees to the wilderness of Shur on the Egyptian border, close to her country of birth. A messenger of God finds her there. Rejected by humans in her pregnant state, God "sees" her, calls her by her name and tells her to return to Sarai and submit to her suffering because God intends to make a numerous people from her son whom she is to name Ishmael. Tribble (2002 :23) notes that this makes Hagar the first person in the Bible to be visited by a divine messenger and the first to receive a divine promise of descendants. These positives, however, do not erase her suffering. A resistant reading is interested in Hagar's point of view, who, having been abused and afflicted, is commanded by God to return and submit to further affliction (Bellis 1994:76). The narrator is silent on the matter.

Genesis 16 concludes with the birth of Ishmael: "Hagar bore a son to Abram" (Gen 16:15). Not her motherhood but the fatherhood of Abram is mentioned. The narrator reports that "Abram called the name of his son Ishmael", depriving Hagar of the power granted by God of naming her child. Patriarchy is once again in control.

In the *second scene* (Gen 21) the enmity between the women continues. Sarai (now renamed Sarah) in the meantime also bore a son which increased her power. When she notices Ishmael doing something to Isaac which commentators are still debating, she demands that Abraham cast out "this slave woman with her son" (Gen 21:10). The description "this slave woman" increases the distance between Sarah and Hagar (Tribble 2002:16). According to the narrator, Sarah's demand distressed Abraham, but God supports Sarah and orders him to obey, thereby becoming an active agent in Hagar's rejection. Some interpreters maintain that Hagar's expulsion was not as cruel as it seems for according to the slave laws of the time, mother and son are not sold but freed (Frymer-Kensky 2002:235). Hagar is not consulted about her feelings but it would be fair to assume that what she experienced was not emancipation, but forced exile. The next morning Abraham sends mother and son away with bread and water to the wilderness of Beersheba. When their nourishment is spent, Hagar puts Ishmael under a shrub to avoid the agony of seeing him die. In this scene Hagar speaks for the first time when she says: "Let me not see the death of the child" and unlike many voiceless women in the Hebrew Bible, the

narrator allows her to grieve as “[s]he lifted up her voice and wept” (Gen 21:16).⁴

The El-god of the patriarchal period, characterised by Rainer Albertz (1994:34-35) as having compassion for powerless women and infants, hears Ishmael’s cry (Gen 21:17) and reassures Hagar before pointing her to a well.

Hagar’s story concludes with Ishmael prospering in the wilderness which became his home. The narrator takes leave of her in Genesis 21:21 where she for the first time is called a mother: “and his mother (being a single parent) took for him a wife from the land of Egypt” (my parenthesis – F. K.), thereby assuring in her last act that Ishmael’s future is secured and that her descendants will be Egyptian (cf. Tribble 2002:23).⁵

E EPILOGUE

We have come to the end of this story about interpretations of women’s stories in the Hebrew Bible. In the end it turned out to be about only one woman’s story. In an attempt to demonstrate the fallacy of objective history-writing, a search for Hagar the Egyptian slave-woman in the book of Genesis, was undertaken. Since the real Hagar has been lost in the mists of time, she came into view in bits and pieces from readers’ interpretations of the biblical story. Interpretation is after all, all we have.

Nineteenth-century woman interpreters approached the text with a belief in the authority of the Bible and its ability to address life situations. They are content with their biblically ordained subordinate lifestyles. For them the Hagar story served as inspiration to talk and preach about issues in their lives. They came up with images of Hagar that are carbon copies of themselves, while as a victim of abuse and rejection, she remains veiled. In their paintings, *seventeenth and nineteenth-century male artists* depict mother and child with compassion. They powerfully capture the feelings and emotions of the characters to work up empathy for Hagar and Ishmael, disapproval for Sarah and support for Abraham. Through the eyes of a modern woman, a *dissenting feminist interpretation* assesses Hagar as a male construct from a patriarchal culture who fell victim to oppression in three forms: nationality, class and sex (Tribble 2002:23).

Therefore, one text authorised different interpretations and each interpretation is unique and authentic as it emerged from the interpreter’s frame of reference (cf. Davies 2003:103). Hagar belongs to a narrative that rejected her,

⁴ However, translators from ancient times changed the indefinite feminine verbs to masculine constructions. These alterations make the *child* lift up his voice and weep (cf. Tribble 2002:20).

⁵ In the legends of Islam, Ishmael is said to be the ancestor of the twelve tribes of North Arabia and Hagar and Abraham were buried in the Kabaa, the holy shrine in Mecca - a distinction they share with most of the prophets (Teubal 1990:176).

but she will continue to survive in the response from interpreters and readers who are fascinated by the traditions of the matriarchs in Genesis who played a powerful role in the ancestry of the Israelite people.

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