

women IN SCRIPTure

EXPLORING ALL THE WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

women IN SCRIPTure

EXPLORING ALL THE WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

women IN SCRIPTure

EXPLORING ALL THE WOMEN IN THE BIBLE



Hagar: Friend or Foe?

by Stephanie Catmull



“This is the only time recorded in Biblical history that God speaks from heaven to a woman twice, showing God’s unending love, compassion, and faithfulness – even to a foreigner...

Hagar is without a doubt one of the most controversial figures in Judaic and Arabic history. She leads a remarkably checkered life, being the daughter of an Egyptian pharaoh, the concubine of Abraham, and the mother of the Arab nation. Who, then, is this enigmatic woman? Was she a victim of circumstance, or did she play a willing and perhaps manipulative part in Abraham's household? Does her son and his descendants have a legitimate claim to the land of Israel? Most importantly, how exactly is Hagar's life proof of God's faithfulness?

Hagar enters the Biblical scene when 75-year-old Abram (not yet renamed Abraham) and 65-year-old Sarai (not yet Sarah) travel to Egypt during a famine in Canaan. The Hebraic couple's sojourn into this foreign land occurs approximately 1750 BCE, during the 13th dynasty of the Middle Kingdoms of Ancient Egypt.

During this brief 155-year time period in Egyptian history, the Pharaohs spoke Hebrew and were thus considered Semitic:

*"The Thirteenth Dynasty is notable for the accession of **Khendjer**, the first Semitic king of a native Egyptian dynasty, who is remembered for three things: his pyramid complex at Sagqara, which was perhaps completed as a **pyramidion**; many inscriptions on objects that bear his unique Semitic name; and the fact that his throne name, Userkare ("The Soul of Re is Powerful") did not enable the king to maintain control over his kingdom."*¹

What is so significant about this? Hagar was living in a Semitic kingdom in Ancient Egypt, being exposed to the one true God **before** she is even introduced to Abram and Sarai. (Semitics are the people descended from Shem, the son of Noah, and who spoke a common language. Today, Semitism refers to the ways and influential ideas favorable to the Jewish culture.) Thus, Hagar not only spoke the Hebrew language, she was likely raised with the knowledge of Hebraic customs and traditions.

Unfortunately, because of the dynasty's Semitic tradition – and not the prolific paganism that typifies ancient Egypt - their reign was weakened on multiple fronts. By virtue of the kingdom's (ultimately) unsuccessful attempt of setting aside the Egyptian pagan deities, their trade, political alliances, and government were in utter chaos. Their lands, too, were being heavily populated and overrun by Canaanite immigrants. It is no wonder that their dynasty lasted only a mere 155 years.

This rather unique, unstable culture is Hagar's heritage. According to scholarly commentaries, Hagar herself is the daughter of a Pharaoh during this 13th dynasty. She is raised to know of and quite possibly believe in God, pushing

aside the false gods that permeated Egyptian culture. Yet her monotheistic education is obviously erratic, and Hagar is hungry for more.

Enter Abram and Sarai, who are legendary missionaries of the one true God. Their reputation precedes them, as they were nearly kicked out of the land of Ur for spreading their religion. Abram is not only a well-known evangelist, he is also an expert in astronomy, and his knowledge of the celestial bodies is extremely sought after. He and his wife are wealthy, and blessed by God in finances, military prowess, evangelistic zeal, and scientific knowledge.

The famous couple shows up on Hagar's doorstep, bringing their bountiful knowledge with them. Rest assured that both Abram and Sarai (though pretending to be brother and sister) preached once again about God, this time to a welcoming open audience. Ironically, their deception of not admitting to be husband/wife turns out to be Hagar's fortune. Luckily, when Pharaoh is visited by God (not the Egyptian deities) in a dream, he learns of their trickery before he takes Sarai as a concubine. To make up for his lack of hospitality, they create a political alliance with the wealthy Canaanites, which also serves to further his relationship with God. Pharaoh gives them immeasurable gifts of gold, silver, cattle – and reluctantly, his daughter Hagar.

As legend has it, this was originally Hagar's idea, because during their visit, Hagar becomes very attached to Sarai, so much so that she insists that she wants to accompany them back to the land of Canaan and the one true God, meanwhile escaping the chaotic kingdom of the Pharaoh.

“What!” cried the king, “thou wilt be no more than a handmaid to her!”

“Better to be a handmaid in the tents of Abraham than a princess in this palace,” says Hagar.²

Hagar also refuses to take any Egyptian idols with her when she leaves. In ancient Mesopotamia, it was customary for people leaving their homeland to take their idols with them, for they assume the idols have “magical powers”. They certainly would not leave their all-important deities behind as they would need them in their new country. But Hagar does just that, and effectively demonstrates her utter disregard for the pagan idols of Egypt.

And so, Hagar joins Abram and Sarai's Hebraic household. By endearing herself to Sarai, Hagar earns more than the title of mere slave; she enjoys the elevated status as Sarai's handmaid. Despite Hagar's name means “foreigner”, “stranger” and “immigrant”, she becomes a high ranking bondwoman in the land of Canaan.

For all intents and purposes, the trio enjoy a seemingly happy household. Hagar, most certainly has heard of God's covenant promise to Abram that he will be the father of many nations. Meanwhile, she is living the dream of being in a true Semitic household with the leaders of the Jewish nation, and she herself is being immersed in Jewish culture.

10 years go by, and all the while Hagar is committed to Sarai's side while Sarai suffers the shame of infertility. Sarai can't conceive children with Abram, and her severe embarrassment is compounded because her own society considers her punished by God. Hagar silently watches as Sarai endures menopause, effectively cementing her barrenness. Sarai never letting go of God's covenant with Abram years before, desperately decides to make it happen rather than patiently wait on God's timing.

And so it goes with Sarai's not-so-bright, albeit legal prerogative, to have Abram's heir be conceived through Hagar. According to the customary Nunzi law and Hammurabi code of Ancient Babylon, archaeological tablets demonstrate that,

*"an infertile primary wife could give her maidservant to her husband for the expressed purpose of providing him an heir, who could subsequently be adopted by the primary wife."*³

Here, Abram fails to take any responsibility in her decision, lead his household, or consult with God. Legally, Sarai has the right to rent out Hagar's womb to provide their family with Abram's heir. Yet, just because Sarai legally *could* do it, doesn't mean she *should* do it. Sarai's combined weaknesses of impatience, shame, embarrassment, and pride got the better of her, and she takes the fateful reins of history into her own hands.

Hagar, of course, is more than happy to comply. This is her beloved family, and she is given the unbelievable chance to give birth to Abram's heir. She can finally do something noteworthy that Sarai cannot. Her social status of being a mere stranger would now be accepted. Of course, even if she wanted to, it wasn't Hagar's place to defy the wishes of her mistress. All things considered, Hagar becomes a willing pawn in Sarai's misguided attempt to fulfill Abram's lineage.

Yet Sarai's decision ultimately haunts her. Months later, as she looks down at her flat, useless, dried-up belly, she sees pregnant, glowing Hagar flushed with Abram's seed growing inside of her. Hagar is by now the center of attention in both their family and their society, and she is certainly enjoying every minute of it. Selfish pride was first evident when she spoke to her Pharaoh father upon leaving Egypt, and haughty Hagar again becomes rude and arrogant. She despises her mistress, and heaps endless insults upon Sarai's already

miserable head.

Broken, Sarai herself becomes incredibly jealous, offended, hurt, angry, and indignant at this harsh treatment at the hands of her handmaid. At the blessing of her husband who callously tells her,

“Your servant is in your hands...Do with her whatever you think best”, (Gen 16:6, NKJV)

Sarai returns offense for offense. Sarai has reaped the consequences of what she herself has sown. And now, she mistreats Hagar unbearably to the point where Hagar feels it is better to flee and die in the desert with her unborn child rather than endure Sarai's punishing tongue.

Hagar, still the immigrant, has nowhere to go. She has broken the Nunzi law of ancient Mesopotamia wherein, if caught, she could be executed. Still, the slave blindly flees into the desert with no plan and no direction. Yet she is also carrying Abram's child, and Abram is the apple of God's eye.

Even though this messy triangle of adults have ventured outside God's original plan, God still chooses to protect Ishmael's life. And so out of respect for Abram, God sends His angel to speak to her directly. As Hagar weeps next to a well, the angel instructs her to return to Sarai and submit to her mistress. Hagar, who has believed and served God for her whole life, proves her obedience by adhering to His command.

Hagar, for Abram's sake, is then promised by God,

“I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count...You are now with child, and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael (God hears), for the Lord has heard of your misery.” (Gen 16:9-11, NKJV)

What **exactly** is Hagar's misery? At the moment, she has no country, no husband, and no son to take care of her in her old age. In ancient times, this crucial deficit meant years of extreme poverty. This dismal future comes rushing to the forefront of her mind when she is alone in the desert, and the reality of her circumstances come crashing down. Even if she returned to Canaan, Abram and Sarai would adopt Ishmael as their own, and her rights as a mother would be completely stripped away. She would continue to be a stranger in a strange land. Still, God has his hand on her, and sees her as one of His children. She, at the very least, would not be destitute, and is promised many descendants. God gives Hagar hope.

Grateful for the angel's words, Hagar humbles herself and sheds the nasty

pride that instigated Sarai's brutal treatment of her. She names the well "Beer Lahai Roi" – meaning "well of the Living One who sees me." For God has truly seen her, and makes provision for her and her descendants.

However, not everything will be rosy, for her son Ishmael is not the child of God's Promise. Note that nobody's name is changed with Ishmael's conception – not Abram's, not Sarai's, and not Hagar's. Nor is the covenant of circumcision instituted just yet, since God has not affirmed his covenant with Abram through Ishmael. Not only that, but the angel has prophesied about Ishmael, saying:

"He will be a wild donkey of a man;

His hand will be against everyone

And everyone's hand against him,

And he will live in hostility

Toward all his brothers." (Gen 16:12, NKJV)

During the next 13 years, Hagar is welcomed back into the household, and a temporary truce ensues. In the meantime, Ishmael is brought up with all the conveniences of an only child. He is educated in both science and in the Hebraic tradition. Indeed, Sarai raises and loves him like her own, as noted in Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*.⁵ Ishmael is quite likely indulged, unbridled, and spoiled in a wealthy family since he has no other rivals for his affection. All this changes when God finally steps in to fulfill His covenant promise to Abram and Sarai. God's perfect timing shows His glory through the miraculous birth of Isaac, and His will cannot be undone by mere human error. Sarai's faith had been tried and tested, and though she had made a mistake by trying to force the issue of adopting a slave's child, she still immutably holds faith in the promises of God. As a matter of fact, she is only one of two Old Testament women who end up on the Hall of Fame of Faith in Hebrews 11. Hagar, on the other hand, is conspicuously absent from this list.

Hear God's clear commandment to Abram when he is 99 years old and Sarah (90) becomes pregnant:

"I will confirm my covenant between me and you [Abraham], and will multiply you exceedingly.' Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from

you. And I will establish my covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be there God.” (Gen 17:2-8, NKJV)

Take note that in this moment in history, Abram's name - originally meaning Noble Father - is now changed to Abraham, the Father of Many Nations. Sarai's name – Princess - becomes Sarah, Mother of Nations. Names, of course, were significant in biblical times for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they communicated a message from God. Other times – such as in the case of Abraham and Sarah – they signified a change in identity as well as indicate a change of direction their lives. However, God did not change Hagar's name, indicating she would never rise above that being a slave.

The next question that is obviously raised is if Abraham already has Ishmael, how can Isaac hold the birthright as the child of Promise? Simple. The Nunzi law of ancient Mesopotamia is applied once again, legal and ironclad:

“The patriarch/father [Abraham] was not free to arbitrarily assign the first son's birthright to a younger sibling (Dt 21: 15-17), although the birthright could pass to another son in exceptional circumstances...if a concubine bore the first son, his birthright could be withdrawn if the primary wife subsequently gave birth to a son.”⁴

Now it's Hagar's turn to be jealous, and her attitude infects Ishmael. They BOTH resent Sarah, not only because Sarah's miraculous pregnancy outshines Hagar's natural one – a conception that clearly shows God's favor to Sarah – but because Sarah is showered with the adulation of her people. The Jewish people have truly seen God's miracle in their midst, and Hagar's brief period of popularity is promptly set aside.

Hagar is very cognizant of the fact that she and her son's position have suddenly been displaced. Hagar's suppressed pride comes roaring back with a vengeance, and she becomes harsh, critical, and mocks Sarah. Ishmael, in turn, becomes the wild donkey he is prophesied to be, hurling insults at Isaac his half brother, and at times, physically abusing him. Ishmael is 13-years-old when Isaac is born, and has his birthright handedly swept aside by Abraham's chosen seed.

As if the name changes weren't enough, once Isaac is born, God seals the Abrahamic covenant by instituting the rite of circumcision. Notice that this does not occur when Ishmael is born, signifying that Ishmael's birth did not fulfill God's covenant with Abraham. It is only when Isaac is conceived does God say:

"As for you [Abraham], you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner, who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant." (Gen 17: 9- 13, NKJV)

Ishmael, demoted to be the mere son of a foreigner who was born in Abraham's house, was commanded to be circumcised when he was 13 years old. This covenant did not occur when Ishmael was eight days old – this was reserved for Isaac - again signifying that Ishmael was not Abraham's promised seed. However Ishmael, becoming the father of the Arab nations, will institute this rite of circumcision to all of his Arab descendants when the males turn 13 years of age. Herein lies the reason for the age discrepancy for circumcision amongst the Judaic and Arab nations.

Fast forward three years, and the contention in Abraham's house is at its breaking point. The wild donkey who lives in hostility to his brother becomes completely incorrigible. Hagar mocks, scoffs, and bullies Sarah. The fighting is endless, and when the festival for Isaac's weaning is celebrated when he is 3 years old, Sarah, living up to her matronym as Mother of Nations, unequivocally states to her husband:

"Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac." (Gen 21:10, NKJV)

Yet Abraham, difficult though his son may be, has great affection for Ishmael. He's not exactly comfortable with "getting rid of him", so corrects his first mistake by now conferring with God, who says to Abraham:

"Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. Yet I will make a nation [Arabs] of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed." (Gen 21:12- 13, NKJV)

When Sarah first wanted Abraham to have relations with Hagar, he never consulted God about this decision (obviously reminiscent of Adam and Eve). Instead, he took his wife's advice and inadvertently circumvented God's will. If only Abraham had talked with God, perhaps the persistent wars between the Jews and Arabs would not be an ongoing problem in the Middle East today. Abraham, though, can't fix what has happened in the past; he can only correct his

current behavior. He has learned from a hard mistake that led to a contentious home life, which now is forcing his estrangement from his son.

Abraham, then, makes the wise decision of heeding God's Word, even though it will devastate him emotionally. Abraham trusts God, especially because God has reassured Abraham that He has no intention of going back on His promise to Hagar. Indeed, Ishmael is of Abraham's blood and will be honored as such. Ishmael will survive, and will also have many descendants. Abraham takes comfort in this, and places the son of his slave in God's hands.

And so, with Abraham's reluctant blessing, Sarah unceremoniously kicks Hagar and Ishmael out into the barren desert. Twice now, Hagar has had to leave Abraham's household – the first time she fled of her own free will, and the second she is forced to leave bitter, angry, and helpless. Since Abraham held great affection for Ishmael, they were provided with a supply of bread and a flask of water for their unknown journey.

Hagar, isolated in the lonely desert accompanied by her 16-year-old, disinherited son, comes to grips with her decrepit situation – no husband, no money, no land, no people, and with dwindling supplies. At least she now has a son who is capable of providing for her in her old age, that is if she can make it to civilization. She also is free from the bonds of slavery, since Mesopotamian law allowed her to claim freedom in turn for having her child's rights to any inheritance waived.

The hot desert sand quickly dehydrates mother and son, and they are days away from death. Ishmael can't help but weep from distress, starvation, thirst and despair. Their plight looks helpless, and Hagar, not wanting to watch her son die, places Ishmael under a bush and wanders away for approximately two hours (the Bible states a bow-shot's distance away).

Hagar is so entrenched in her grief that she doesn't even notice the lifesaving spring of water that is merely yards away. She is literally blind to her surroundings and feels utterly betrayed by God. Still, God always remains faithful to His promises, and sends down *another* angel to Hagar. This is the **only** time recorded in Biblical history that God speaks from heaven to a woman **twice**, showing God's unending love, compassion, and faithfulness - even to a foreigner:

"What is the matter Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy [Ishmael] crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." (Gen 21:17-18, NKJV)

This great nation, one of numerous descendants, is the Arab nation. Because the angel reminded Hagar of God's faithfulness, her hope is once again restored.

Hagar opens her eyes, this time with the clarity of God's vision, and she sees a well of water, which she promptly uses to hydrate herself and her precious son back to health.⁶ Not surprisingly, Hagar wants to journey back to the land of Egypt she left behind 41 years ago. At least there she might have family who would welcome her back. Yet Ishmael stoutly refuses, and instead remains in the wilderness of Paran (between Canaan and Egypt) where he later would become an expert archer. Hagar must go on alone.

She returns to Egypt, the land where all the false pagan gods that she left behind now become her reality once again. Against the Godly principles that Abraham and Sarah instilled in her, Hagar arranges an Egyptian wife for her son, knowing that in doing so, she runs the risk of polluting the faith of the one true God by mixing it with pagan traditions. Not surprisingly, this is where Hagar's journey in the Bible ends, where the remainder of her life is conspicuously silent.

Yet Ishmael's life goes according to God's promise. He and his Egyptian wife flourish, and become the parents of the 12 twelve tribes of the Arab nation, whose hands, as predicted, would forever be against his brother. Ishmael's return to Canaan is only mentioned once in the Bible - after Abraham's death at the ripe old age of 175. Ishmael, now 89 years old, travels back to the land of his upbringing and is briefly reunited with his brother Isaac as they bury their father in the cave of Machpelah (Gen 25:9). Note again that Abraham is buried next to his lawful and primary wife, Sarah. There is no burial plot provided in the cave for the foreign slave Hagar.

What is certainly ironic is that after Abraham's death, Isaac settles to live near the well of Beer Lahai Roi or "the Living One who sees me" – the well which Hagar first escaped to in the desert. God now has His eyes on Isaac and the tribes of Israel.

According to His nature, God once again demonstrates His omniscience – knowing and seeing all. As prophesied by the angel of the Lord over three thousand years ago, the land of Canaan, promised to Isaac, will become the severe bone of contention between the half brothers. Ishmael was disinherited as a firstborn son by the Nunzi law and Hammurabi code, Isaac's birth of Abraham's primary wife, God's covenant promise which was sealed by Isaac's circumcision, as well as by the significant name changes of Abraham and Sarah. Yet Ishmael will falsely claim the rights to the land, and this is where the messy conflict of the Middle East originates, thanks to the trio of adults who tried to force God's will by impatiently taking matters into their own hands.

Note, for example, years later when the Ishmaelites enslave Abraham's great-grandson Joseph, as Joseph's brothers sell him out of jealousy for twenty

shekels of silver. (Gen 37:28) Without a doubt, the destinies of Egypt and Israel remain closely intertwined for the next 400 years, where the final chains of Israel's slavery will be broken by Moses.

Moses, a Hebrew child raised by the Egyptians, ends up freeing the slaves under God's direction, whereas Hagar, the daughter of an Egyptian Pharaoh, paradoxically becomes the slave of the Hebrews as she went *against* God's plan.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, sums up Hagar's legacy:

"For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman [Hagar] and the other by the free woman [Sarah]. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise.

These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar...Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now." (Gal 4:22-31, NKJV)

Truer words were never spoken.

Let it not be forgotten that in God's faithfulness, He made sure that He kept His promises to BOTH families, even though they acted outside of His will. Take comfort that God's purpose can never be thwarted, no matter what mistakes a person makes even if their actions are well intended. It just might take a little longer, with much self-imposed and self-created misery along the way.

God, no matter what, is forever faithful.

Amen.

Notes and Bibliography

¹ CENTCOM Cultural/Historical Advisory Group,
<https://www.cemml.colostate.edu/cultural/09476/egypt02-04enl.html>.

² Lockyear, Herbert. *All the Women of the Bible*. Zondervan

Publishers, 1967. p. 61. ³ Archaeological Study Bible, NIV Version.

Zondervan Publishers, 2005. p. 52. ⁴ Archaeological Study Bible, NIV Version. Zondervan Publishers, 2005. p. 43.

⁵ *The Works of Josephus*, Trans. by William Whiston. Hendrickson Publishers, 1987. Book 1.12.3.215.

⁶ Frankel, Ellen Ph.D. *The Five Books of Miriam: A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1996. p. xiv.

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7021-hagar>

<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/hagar-midrash->

[and-aggadah](#)

<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/all-women->

[bible/Hagar](#)

[http://www.gracecentered.com/christian_forums/theology/was-hagar-pharaoh's daughter/5/?wap2](http://www.gracecentered.com/christian_forums/theology/was-hagar-pharaoh's_daughter/5/?wap2)

<https://www.genealogieonline.nl/en/stamboom-homs/I6000000001046179057.php>