

Abraham's Unholy Family: Mirror, Witness, Summons

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I have always been attracted by stories of suffering. For awhile I thought that was because I had a special gift of compassion and sensitivity for others. Subsequently I've come to interpret my interest differently. Stories of suffering, biblical and otherwise, have hooked me at the point of my own denial of pain, my own refusal to consider, even to admit the presence of pain in my life. That was because in my family, suffering was taboo. We did not talk about it; we pretended we were the perfect family, and I, at least, cut myself off from some of myself, I lost some of my "voice." Stories of suffering have served me as a vicarious way of meeting my denial. By showing me suffering in lives of others, they have helped chip away my defenses bit by bit.

It is from the angle of the broken family that I turn to study two episodes in the stories of Abraham's family. The large narrative of this family appears like a soap opera of romance, intrigue, and betrayal. In Genesis 16 and 21 the two wives of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, meet in life-threatening conflict.¹ These two narrative episodes do not fit neatly together. Interpreters propose that we have two different accounts of the same event woven into the text.² Although this view helps explain inconsistencies in the stories, the episodes follow a narrative sequence in the text and should be read as part of the larger family narratives of Genesis.³

Family Episode One: Gen. 16

In the social world of ancient Israel, Sarah is marked by her inability to bear a child.⁴ Humiliated and defeated by her barrenness, she follows ancient legal custom to try to settle the problem herself. Sarah gives her female slave Hagar to her husband to have a child on her behalf. Hagar will be surrogate mother, but legally the child will be Sarah's. Abraham accepts Hagar as his second wife and she conceives. After conceiving, the NRSV translation reports that Hagar "looked upon Sarah with contempt," but the Hebrew word *qalal* means simply "to treat lightly."⁵ Hagar treats Sarah as a lightweight. Relationship between the two women shifts at this point; conflict becomes explicit, but it has been implicit from the beginning of the story. How could it be otherwise, when one woman owns the other? Sarah goes to Abraham to demand justice regarding her "uppity slave."

Rembrandt's pen and ink drawing from about 1640 depicts this family conflict. Bodies speak. With expressive, economic line, Rembrandt creates the beautiful, stately, and pregnant Hagar next to the bent over old crone, Sarah. Notice the way Rembrandt renders the faces of the two women, Sarah's covered with lines, Hagar's open, youthful, spacious.

Abraham stands with his back to us, barely turned to the two women, one foot still forward on the path, as if interrupted on his way somewhere. He wags his finger at Sarah, perhaps irritated by an interruption with domestic matters. Why does Rembrandt turn him away from the viewer? Is Abraham's turned back indicative of his refusal to



Rembrandt, 1640, Pen and Ink Drawing

Dorothy Solle et al, *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature* (Macon, Ga. Mercer University Press, 1995), 41 Reprinted with permission

perform his socially prescribed role as mediator of family conflict?⁶ Might Abraham represent us, the viewers, climbing into the picture to chide the women for their discord? Rembrandt offers a nearly literal account of the passage—except that he adds a peacock. Why? The peacock, its tail enclosed, has its back to us also. In the language of art, the peacock symbolizes vanity and pride.⁷ But who is the figure of pride here? Is it Abraham with whom the peacock frames the woman? Or is it Hagar who is thinking less of her mistress, or Sarah who is about to oppress her slave? There is still another possibility. Because in the middle ages, people thought that the flesh of the peacock did not decay, in medieval art the peacock also symbolized Christ.⁸ Is Rembrandt's peacock pointing to the afterlife of the story, the unfolding of this family's tale throughout the rest of the Bible into the New Testament, as a peacock's tail opens out into bejeweled and variegated beauty?

The biblical narrative continues. Abraham gives Hagar back to Sarah. "Do with her what seems good in your eyes" (16:6). He abdicates his role as mediator and Sarah afflicts Hagar (16:6). The Hebrew verb '*anah*, "to afflict" or "oppress," is a bitter word. It is used also of Egyptians oppressing Israelite slaves in Exod 3:7 (cf., Gen. 16:11). From this oppression Hagar escapes to the wilderness where YHWH finds her and speaks to her. "Hagar, Sarah's handmaid, where have you come from and where are you going?... Go back to your mistress and submit to her" (16:7,9). YHWH promises to make her offspring too many to be counted, and seals that promise with the annunciation of a birth and a name. Hagar is pregnant with a son whom she will name Ishmael (16:11-12).

The name "Ishmael" plays on the verb *sama'*, to "hear," for "God has heard her affliction" (16:11). Ishmael will be a wild ass of a man at odds with all his kin. Surprisingly, even audaciously, Hagar names the God who was speaking to her, *El Roi*,

“The One Who Sees” (16:13). From that naming, the narrator tells us, comes the name of the place where this event happened, *Be'er-lahai-ro'i*, “the well of the one who sees” (16:14). Anticlimactically, Hagar returns to the family and gives birth to Ishmael.

Family Episode Two

Gen. 21 opens with the absurd, laughable birth of *yishaq* (Isaac), to a very postmenopausal Sarah and the dilapidated old Abraham. This child of laughter, whose name means “laughter” causes laughter all around. “God has given me good reason to laugh,” says Sarah, “and everyone who hears will laugh with me” (21:6). But as often happens in families, laughter turns sour. Sarah sees Ishmael laughing (*sahaq*, the Hebrew verb means “laugh” not “play” as in the NRSV) with her son Isaac. The divine gift of laughter threatens this family for laughing together implies mutuality, equality, and a common inheritance. Again Sarah turns to Abraham: “Cast out this slave woman, for her son shall not inherit with my son Isaac” (21:10). This time God commands Abraham to “Obey Sarah,” for Isaac alone is child of the promise.

A photo of George Segal’s contemporary life-size sculpture helps tell the story. Again bodies speak. In this nearly literal interpretation of the scene, Abraham embraces the departing Ishmael. The title of the sculpture, “Abraham’s Farewell to Ishmael,” indicates that the two men are the main subject of the sculpture. The farewell is heartbreaking. Abraham’s bent posture, his face turned down into Ishmael’s shoulder, the position of the hands—all express Abraham’s immense grief.

But Segal deflects attention from the grief of the two men by including figures of the two women whose conflict frames and encompasses the sorrow. In the foreground stands Hagar. She looks past us, unable to look behind her, holding the goatskin of water, and embracing herself in a self-protective gesture that parallels Abraham’s embrace of their son. She stares into the wilderness, stoically holding back rage and fear. In the background stands Sarah. A large rock separates her from the rest of the family. She leers out at them, a silent, unfriendly witness to the scene. Whereas in Rembrandt’s drawing Abraham holds the power in the family, in Segal’s sculpture, Sarah is the controlling figure. Her fear and jealousy destroy the family. The women surround the men and their separate sufferings both cause and intrude upon Abraham’s loss.

As the Genesis story continues, Hagar returns to the wilderness, and in one of the narrative inconsistencies I alluded to earlier, Ishmael is a small child again, even though the larger narrative requires him to be a teenager as Segal depicts him (cf., 17:25). Hagar puts the child under a bush and moves away, for “how can I watch the child die?” she asks. Then she lifts up her voice and weeps. But God hears the crying of the child and asks, “What is the matter, Hagar?” and repeats for a third time the promise to make Ishmael a great nation (21:18). God shows Hagar a well of water. Ishmael grows up and Hagar finds him an Egyptian wife.

Until recently, biblical scholarship kept the lid on this family’s brokenness. Interpretation focused on the main character, Abraham, upon his call, his heroic obedience, and God’s fidelity to him. Typically, scholars saw the Sarah/Hagar events either as narratives that explain the names of places, (the story names the well), or as minor events in Abraham’s journey, where he tries to take divine promises into his own hands and fails.⁹ But just as Segal’s sculpture complicates interpretation of the family



George Segal, *Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael*
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separation, recent scholarship by women from around the globe exposes the wound at the heart of the family.

In 1978, Phyllis Trible turned attention to Hagar.¹⁰ Seen from Hagar's side, the family takes a new shape. Trible notices that Hagar is economically exploited and physically abused. She is a foreigner, an outsider, a slave. She is handmaid to Sarah turned into a sex object, a nonperson used to further her owners' interests. No human characters ever speak to Hagar, and although God addresses her, notes Trible, God sends her back to slavery, to the mistress who "afflicted her." Trible brings contemporary gender struggles to the text and finds in the family, one victim and three oppressors: Sarah, Abraham, and God. The stories of Genesis 16 and 21 are not texts of promise but, in a phrase Trible has made famous, they are "texts of terror."

Building on Trible but in contrast to her, Elsa Tamez, a reformed theologian from Costa Rica, sees in the stories a liberating God and a liberated Hagar. Hagar appears an agent, an active subject, who "disrupts the history of salvation."¹¹ Like Moses, Elijah, and Job, Hagar sees God and lives; she names God, and she receives a divine promise akin to the one given Abraham (Gen .12:1-3). And, claims Tamez, she reappears today in the lives of domestic servants in Central and South America who know sexual abuse and economic exploitation of their labor.

In the Philippines, Judette Gallares interprets Hagar as a crucial figure in biblical theology from the perspectives of women in the two-thirds world.¹² Hagar experiences physical and psychological bondage, and in and through that suffering she encounters God, dialogues with God, and squarely faces the family tyranny.

Back in the United States, African American-Womanist scholar Delores Williams notices the salient fact that Hagar is an African slave woman.¹³ Hagar's story is iconic of African American women's lives. It concerns slavery, poverty, sexual and economic exploitation, domestic violence, homelessness, motherhood, single parenting, and radical encounters with God. Hagar and her descendants represent the outsider *par excellence*. Williams points out, however, that God provides a way for the slave and her child who gain freedom and autonomy outside the house of Abraham. Hagar becomes the most important figure in biblical theology for Williams because this African slave is the first woman in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures.¹⁴ The victim becomes survivor, agent, hero, the one who names God and lives.

Perhaps this is what Henry Louis Gates, Jr., means in his theory of culture when he says the trickster replaces the victim as subject and actor within the cultural script.¹⁵ Hagar learns the tactics of freedom to overcome her horrible reality. Trible's portrayal of Hagar chiefly as victim begins to unravel in light of other interpretations. Hagar is not simply a victim, nor is Sarah simply an oppressor. Despite Segal's rendering of Sarah as malevolent controller of events, she has little power within the family. She operates only with Abraham's permission (Gen. 16:6; 21:10-14). But it may be possible to work up empathy for Abraham as a trapped figure, even though he is the most advantaged in this patriarchal family system. Feminist heresy it may be, but he too fears for the future. He is constrained by his power and defines himself idolatrously by the promise of offspring. He cannot believe that God will provide.¹⁶ The sharp dualism of oppressor versus victim so current in theological and academic thinking,¹⁷ does not completely fit these stories, nor do the blame and guilt such dualisms generate lead the family forward.

What is clear in the stories is that this family is unholy, not whole, wounded. It is a place of violence and abuse, emotional and physical. Abraham's family witnesses to us, not only about the past but also about the present, because it draws us into familiar sufferings. It presses upon us pain which this society suppresses.¹⁸

Abraham's unholy family mirrors our interlocking families in the obvious ways that Segal's sculpture evokes so poignantly: spouses separate, children are caught between parents, wives compete for support. In our time the institution of the family is a major political and religious battleground. Single mothers in housing projects raise children alone in economic, social, and spiritual wildernesses. New family formations receive neither recognition nor support, and the nuclear family itself is too often our first school of injustice, intolerance, and violence.¹⁹

But these stories are our mirror in a further sense. Genesis accounts of Abraham's family are not merely about the institution of the family. The family is a trope, a metaphor, an image for relations among peoples, among Israel and its neighbors. The major characters in the Genesis narratives embody peoples and religions.²⁰ Sarah and Abraham are Israel, the foreparents of Judaism and Christianity.²¹ Hagar, who is herself Egyptian, becomes foremother of the Bedouins, the Ishmaelites, and possibly the Hagarites (1 Chron. 5:18-22).²² Hagar's family line, fans out like the peacock's tail into its own narrative (Gen. 25:12-18) and its own religious tradition outside the purview of the Bible. In Islamic legend, Hagar is the direct ancestress, a great-great-great-grandmother of Mohammed; she is foremother of Islam.²³ The wounded family of Genesis encodes divisions among nations and religions, among races, sexes, the battle lines of today. Abraham's family story is truly discomfiting because it puts before us unjust relationships that we continue to accommodate by denying them. In the next millennium, predicts Samuel Huntington in an often cited essay, divisions in the clash of civilizations and religions will grievously accelerate.²⁴

Can this unholy family be made whole? Can it be healed, reconciled? Differences appear intractable. Yet even as the stories depict unbreachable alienation among family members, the text simultaneously hints at connection among them. When Abraham dies later in the narrative, for instance, the two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, unite to honor their common parent and bury him together. Ishmael, the wild ass of man, the warrior in the wilderness poised always to threaten Israel, joins with Isaac to bury their father (Gen. 25:7-11).²⁵ In these stories peoples portrayed as enemies are not totally other; they are not different species. They are kinfolk with similar bodies, common blood, shared physical characteristics, even as they are separate and different peoples. An implicit claim of a common humanity underlies oppositions and differences among the characters.

A further connection among peoples lies below the surface of the text in intertextual links with the book of Exodus. In a strange symbolic reversal, Hagar is Israel and Israel is Hagar. Like Hagar, Israel is enslaved in a foreign nation, cries out in pain, and escapes to the wilderness. And as God sees and hears Hagar's affliction (Gen. 16:11 and 13), so God sees and hears Israel's affliction (Exod. 2:23-24).²⁶ God knows (*wayyeda'*, Exod. 2:24). In the wilderness both learn God's name, and God provides both with water in the wilderness. In event and vocabulary, features of Hagar's story parallel Israel's enslavement in and escape from Egypt. Symbolically, the two peoples, Egypt and Israel, Judaism and Islam, share a common suffering, know similar abandonment, gain divine protection and survive into a future of blessing.

Undergirding the family narrative is a vision of common humanity even as it portrays rupture, dissonance, and woundedness.

On the narrative surface of the text, the human characters offer little hope for reconciliation. But taking a lead from Robert Schreiter's study of reconciliation, a further aspect of characterization becomes visible.²⁷ Of the human characters, Hagar alone remains whole because she exploits no one. Although translators accuse her of looking on her mistress with "contempt" (Gen. 16:4 NRSV), such a translation is far from necessary. She treats her mistress "lightly," *qalal*, with less *kabod*, less weight, less glory perhaps because she realizes her own value, her own dignity.²⁸ She comes into her humanity. She is an agent. Alone among characters in the Bible, she names God from her own experience of divine presence. Moses learns God's name, she gives God a name. She gains speech, reformulates the language, and inverts theological naming. She learns how to survive, thrive, flourish in the context of her suffering. In this way she becomes a witness. Schreiter insists that, in the arena of national and international affairs, reconciliation can begin only with the abused, the sufferers, the recipients of violence, because only they have held to their humanity by not abusing others. Only they can extend an invitation to reconciliation and offer human wholeness back to their persecutors.

But if the unholy family is to become whole, if there is a way toward family healing, then the theology of these stories offers a slim filament of hope. In these episodes God's power manifests itself, not in violent destabilizing demonstrations, nor in intrusive meddling. God's power is the power of the Witness, the only witness, the Divine Witness, to the suffering of Hagar. Hagar calls out in pain and despair; she does not address God, but God sees her. As divine Witness, God brings Hagar to life, opens her eyes to the possibilities for survival around her, strengthens her voice. The Divine Witness sees her pain and the approaching death of her baby. This One Who Sees cannot tolerate the death of her child anymore than she can.²⁹ And as Delores Williams observes, directly challenging Tamez's interpretation,³⁰ the witnessing God is not here a liberating God. The One Who Sees and Hears does not liberate Hagar from slavery immediately.³¹ God shows her how to survive and sends her back to Abraham's household with strength to cope with her circumstances, to become a survivor. Divine seeing and hearing instigate a process for Hagar's flourishing.

The power of witnessing is that seeing and hearing validate pain, give it meaning, expose it for healing. Divine seeing and hearing are a form of embrace. By being witnessed, seen, and heard for who she is, Hagar gains the power to speak. God hears her into speech. From the voiceless, God empowers voice, and from the powerful in this family, God effects relinquishment of power.

As we face the third millennium, in the world's richest and only dominant nation, in this rising city in the South, the recovery of these suppressed family memories appears like a summons. They summon us to be like God, not by dominating the earth and subduing it, but by witnessing, by seeing and hearing the outcast slave and her child, thereby participating in a process of coming to life all around. A Theology of Witnessing summons us to praxis, to action.

1) The texts summon us to a spirituality, a way of being and acting in the world, that embraces the personal and the sociopolitical. They call us to see that denial of pain, personal and social, denies the truths of our lives. Denial cuts us off from our voices, from part of our lived experience, from our innermost selves. It bifurcates our spirits,

so that we cannot possibly hear the pain of others, let alone our own, and receive it in reverence. The texts call us to a spirituality that faces, names, and validates our own sufferings. I believe that issues of racial discord are so difficult to face, in part, because we have trouble caring for our own pain and rage. If we could do that, if we could be witnesses to ourselves, then we may find our own authentic centers, our own voices, and compassion would be possible. Then the pain, rage, and discontent of groups, nations, and individuals would not infuriate or silence us but join us together in shared humanity.

2) A Theology of Witness calls us to a discipleship that counters our national predisposition to fix everything in automatic response to pain and disorientation. It invites us to practice a contemplative stance in the world, in which action flows from contemplation, from attentive openness, toward a centered-wide-awakeness to all reality. True listening and seeing will lead to action, but it will not be action that projects pain upon others or that extinguishes the worlds of others.

3) A Theology of Witnessing calls us to a politics of listening, of waiting, that does not impose solutions upon peoples. A politics of listening might enable us to hear the cries of our neighbors; it might open our ears to the pain of peoples around the globe who say that our capitalist system and our cultural arrogance stifles them, squeezes out their life, obliterates their identities.

4) A Theology of Witnessing summons us to try even harder to create pedagogies and curricula that respect and reverence differences within our seminary, churches, and our global families. It urges us to prepare church leaders whose evangelical passions are rooted in disciplined capacity to see and hear their people.

Finally, the Witnessing God, the God who sees and hears is, in the stories of this first family, also the God of Laughter. This God makes people laugh, wants to join all the family together in laughter, but inheritances, economic, political, and theological, get in the way. The laughter that emerges from suffering and from endurance triumphs over death. Emerging from the deepest pain, laughter is a gift; it is an unbidden act of Easter praise.

May the God who sees and hears bring us to a great roar of global laughter.

Notes

¹ In Genesis, Abraham and Sarah are called Abram and Sarai until chapters 17 where their names are changed

² Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Old Testament Library, Philadelphia Westminster, 1972), 191

³ Terence Fretheim, "Genesis," *New Interpreters Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville Abingdon, 1994), 451

⁴ See Jo Ann Hackett, "Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an Epic Pattern," *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy Day (Minneapolis Fortress, 1989), 13, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York Fawcett Columbine, 1992), 123-25

⁵ Susan Niditch, "Genesis," *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville. Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 10-25

⁶ Leo G. Perdue, "The Israelite and Early Jewish Family: Summary and Conclusions," *Families in Ancient Israel*, ed. Leo Perdue et al. (The Family, Religion, and Culture, Louisville. Westminster/John Knox, 1997), 181

⁷ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art* (New York Oxford University Press, 1954), 22-23

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22

⁹ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible 1, Garden City Doubleday, 1964), 119, von Rad, *Genesis*, 195

- ¹⁰ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Overtures to Biblical Theology, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 9-35
- ¹¹ Elsa Tamez, "The woman Who Complicated the History of Salvation," *New Eyes for Reading Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*, ed. John S. Pobee and Barbel von Wartenberg-Potter (Oak Park, IL: Meyer Stone, 1986), 5-17
- ¹² Judette A. Gallares, "Hagar: The Oppressed Foreign Worker," *Images of Faith: Spirituality of Women in the Old Testament* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 7-33
- ¹³ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 15-33. See the earlier work of Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988), and also Weems, "Do You See What I See? Diversity in Interpretation," *Church and Society* 82 (1991): 28-43
- ¹⁴ Williams, *Sisters*, 19
- ¹⁵ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), see also Phillip Fisher, "American Literary and Cultural Studies since the Civil War," *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association, 1992) 232-50
- ¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation, Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 158
- ¹⁷ Fisher, "American Literary and Cultural Studies, 240"
- ¹⁸ Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)
- ¹⁹ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990)
- ²⁰ Brueggemann calls Hagar-Ishmael and Sarah-Isaac "theological types," *Genesis*, 184
- ²¹ For postbiblical Jewish accounts of the Abraham's family, see Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women* (Gender and the Biblical Tradition, Louisville, Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 85-165, and Louis Ginsberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1913), 187-307
- ²² See Williams, *Sisters*, 33, and "Hagar," *Encyclopedia Judaica* vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), 1075-76
- ²³ For Islamic legends about Hagar's miraculous powers and protecting role, see Gordon Darnell Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet: A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989)
- ²⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993): 1-26
- ²⁵ In the Quran, Abraham remains involved in the story of Ishmael, Rudi Paret, "Ishmael," *Encyclopedia of Islam* vol. 6 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 184-85
- ²⁶ God heeds Hagar's affliction (*ki-sama' YHWH el-'anyek*, Gen. 16:11) and God sees (*El-roi*, Gen. 16:13, NRSV). God sees the Israelite's affliction (*YHWH ra'oh ra'itu et-'ani*) and God heard their cry (*weet-s' aqatam sama'u*, Exod. 3:7)
- ²⁷ Robert J. Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission & Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992)
- ²⁸ Trible, *Texts of Terror*, 12
- ²⁹ Gallares, *Images*, 19
- ³⁰ Tamez, "The Woman," 14
- ³¹ Williams, *Sisters*, 21