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Hagar: An African American Lens

Emily Peacock

There is a history of African-American identification with the oppressed character Hagar in the Genesis story. Particularly, black females can relate to Hagar because they believe she endured hardship and suffered for her skin color, her gender, and her forced social position in life. Several aspects of the Hagar narrative, such as sexual exploitation and surrogate motherhood, strike close to home for African-American slaves of the past as well as for the Womanist movement of the present.

This section sets out to identify certain advantages and disadvantages to such identification with Hagar as well as to locate effects of the Hagar story in the black community of today. The agenda for this section includes focusing on one influential scholar as a centerpiece and including others as they are related to or challenge her views. This scholar will be Delores S. Williams, a known leader of the modern Womanist movement. She highlights the similarities between Hagar and African-American females and raises issues of concern as well as appreciation regarding such connections. She discusses status as a weapon of power or oppression, the long-term effects of various surrogacy roles on the black community, and the difference between a liberation theology and a survival theology.

The African-American community has a past of severe suffering and hardship, not only at the hands of their masters but also within their community. Often, turning to God was the only way slaves could survive their harsh environment of oppression. Hagar was a slave who suffered at the hands of her masters, who had a personal encounter with God and yet was not liberated but instead taught how to survive. Modern day African-Americans can look to the ancient story of Hagar in the same sense that they can remember their own recent past. By examining both stories, African-Americans seek to translate what kind of message or influence that they can have on today's world.

Status

When discussing slavery it must be tied into social status, for there is a direct connection between oppressive institutions and social hierarchy. Clearly, whites were privileged and considered to be above all blacks during ante-bellum times. What is perhaps not as clear in our history books is that there were several status divisions within the underprivileged class, the slaves. Even black women today still feel the bite of status wars within their community and between other minority communities as well. Related to Hagar's story, there are some researchers who feel that a large factor behind the tensions between Sarah and Hagar was indeed status. This status was occurring between two members of a minority group: women.

The issue of status is a theme that recurs in several of my resources focusing on the African-American woman's viewpoint.⁽¹⁾ It is important to emphasize that within groups of slaves there were a variety of ways to distinguishing levels of status. Different roles and responsibilities accorded different levels of respect. For example, a black woman may have acted as a 'mammy' figure for the white children on the plantation, giving her a shade of favoritism and more authority over the other slaves. By interacting with the white children and their slave master parents, a mammy was associated with the powerful and thus took on a margin of this power in the eyes of the other slaves. Delores Williams feels that "the mammy role was probably the most powerful and authoritative one slave women could fill."⁽²⁾

Another way of earning high status was to be selected as the mistress to the master, a role similar to being a mammy in that it took more than it gave. Black female slaves would subject themselves, either voluntarily or because they were forced, to providing sexual pleasure along with their manual labor. Delores Williams explains that black female slaves were forced to provide a service in place of their white mistresses, like that of Hagar providing where Sarah could not. The Victorian ideal of the time painted white wives' roles to be primarily childbearing and their purity would be tainted if used for sexual pleasure; thus, masters turned to their black slave women for sexual gratification.⁽³⁾ Although it was negative attention, this singling out of certain black females contributed to the division within the black community based on status. Renita Weems points out some of the reasons for slave women to accept this demeaning role including wanting to protect their husbands and children, an attempt to stay in one location and not be sold off to another plantation, or "as the only way of elevating their social rank in order to protect themselves from vicious overseers and

mistresses."⁽⁴⁾ Even though these women were being sexually abused and no other female slave would wish to trade spaces with them, their association with the white power lent an air of significance to their existence on the plantation.

Were there other slaves within Abraham's household who might have looked at Hagar with envy or at least respect because of her association with those in power? Was she esteemed yet ostracized because of her interaction with Sarah and Abraham? We cannot know, for Genesis does not mention other slaves nor does it provide a context for Hagar's daily duties and possible interactions with others besides her masters. The means of establishing status narrowly exists within a minority group dealing with oppression and this is exemplified in both Hagar's narrative and the female slaves' narratives. The crossovers between their stories and that of Hagar continue to increase, for Hagar knew what it was to be used for another's purposes (i.e. Sarah's need for a child). And just as Sarah beats Hagar, there are tales of the rapes of slave women by their masters and the resulting beatings by "resentful white wives."⁽⁵⁾ Such memories of women abusing women in patriarchal society are similar to the Hagar story, for both Sarah and Hagar were concerned with status for different reasons. Sarah needed high status to survive in a world that demanded children, and she hoped that if she offered her slave to her husband "perhaps [she would] be esteemed through her." Instead, Hagar is looking to hold onto her newly found status as the pregnant mistress of her master. The situation pits two oppressed women against each other.

Another source from the African-American community, while male, has provided an interesting spin on the question of status in the Hagar story. John W. Waters introduced the possibility that perhaps Hagar is not what we would consider a typical slave. The Abrahamic period lasted from approximately 2000-1720 B.C.E. and this was the time of Egypt's Middle Kingdom, meaning that the land of Canaan would have been under Egypt's rule.⁽⁶⁾ It makes no sense that Egypt would allow one of its own citizens to be enslaved by those who were under its dominion, raising the possibility that perhaps Hagar was initially considered a friend of the Abraham household or if not, perhaps she was forced to sell herself into slavery because of economic hardship. Others agree, "women enjoyed remarkable legal equality with men throughout much of Egypt's history."⁽⁷⁾ Of the very little that Genesis offers to its reader regarding Hagar and her history, why are we told that she is Egyptian? Is it to provide a backdrop for the reader to explain the non-subservient attitude we will read in Hagar? If she is used to being treated as an equal then it makes sense that she would resist against Abraham and Sarah when they fail to do so.

In any case, Waters points out that her attitude throughout the story is not that of a humbled and de-humanized slave woman. Her shift in attitude toward Sarah is notable for its bravado, yet perhaps it is stirred because Hagar knew that "a wife could be reduced to the status of a slave if she did not produce a son for her husband."⁽⁸⁾ It seems that once Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham, she loses her power over the Egyptian woman. Someone who has grown up in a life of servitude would not grasp the shift of power as quickly as Hagar does, nor have the courage to act upon it for her own benefit. She understands with her pregnancy that compared to Sarah, "she assumes a superior status, one she acquires as the potential mother of Abraham's heir."⁽⁹⁾

Surrogacy

Hagar's position as the mother of Abraham's child involves her fulfilling a social role that was not intended for her. Delores Williams and several others mark the similarities in Hagar's surrogacy and the surrogate roles that black females were forced to fill. Not all of these are sexual or involve biological surrogacy (like Hagar's borrowed womb does), but all surrogate roles often involve exploitation and suffering. Some of these roles were mentioned earlier, such as a female slave filling the surrogate role of mother and teacher in the mammy role or substituting as the provider of sexual pleasure for the master as his mistress. Williams is the primary scholar dealing with surrogacy roles, either coerced or voluntary, and others focus on the biological role of surrogacy that Hagar plays for Sarah. The following section will explore the variety of ways that surrogacy in all of its forms has affected the black community.

In the chapter on status, we explored the ways that some surrogacy roles led to an increase in status. Williams offers another form of surrogacy that led to a dehumanizing of black women. Beyond the Big House where slaves were substituting as mammies and mistresses, female slave laborers were filling typically male labor roles in the fields. Black female energy was substituted for black male energy and yet the women were not empowered by this role as they were in the case of a mammy.⁽¹⁰⁾ Female slaves were expected to perform the same manual duties as male slaves and were pushed beyond the limit of physical exertion on a daily basis. They often received the harshest treatment on the plantation, as women in a man's world; Delores Williams points out that on top of this, "these masculinized female field slaves were thought to be of a lower social class than the female house slaves who usually did the 'women's work.'"⁽¹¹⁾

The results from these antebellum traditions have seeped into our modern

image of the black female. The sexual surrogacy roles that black slaves filled by being mistresses has led to an image of black women as being loose, erotic, immoral, and having an uncontrollable sexuality.⁽¹²⁾ This can be connected to the Genesis story. Since Sarah conceived in her chastity through God, this makes Hagar's sexuality even more apparent. After slavery, many black women struggled with the assumption that they should and would provide sexual pleasure for their bosses or for fellow white colleagues. Unfortunately, "black women were often...[pressured] into sexual liaisons with white employers who would threaten to fire them unless they capitulated to sexual demands."⁽¹³⁾

The distorted image of being overly sexual was not the only negative result of surrogacy roles. The enormous tribute to mammies and to a black mother's ability to nurture has resulted in a devaluation of black fatherhood in today's community.⁽¹⁴⁾ Black men are not considered as reliable or as responsible when it comes to the family because it was never required of them or allowed in post-bellum times. The myth that black men and women were more hardy, stronger, and could tolerate more pain than their white counterparts has led to "the idea that black women are not feminine and do not desire to be so...[as well as] the image of black women as superwomen."⁽¹⁵⁾ Many black liberation theologians are trying to fight against such cloaking images to expose the true vulnerability and pain that punctuates the black female experience.

This pain has transferred into the relationships between blacks and whites, particularly between black and white females. Renita Weems identifies the mistrust and fear of exploitation on the part of the black woman and gives examples of the suffragettes in the nineteenth century who "supported" black women merely to earn the right to vote or, in modern times, white Christian feminists making their experience universal and forgetting those who are oppressed not just by gender.⁽¹⁶⁾ The idea of the woman in charge using a fellow female who is below her on the power hierarchy is familiar. We see it in the Hagar narrative with Sarah exploiting Hagar for her own personal gain, yet there is not a false pretense regarding Sarah's motivations. She does not cloak her desire for a child with a pretense of wanting to help Hagar in any way. From the beginning, the story was driven by Sarah's desires.

Hagar can be identified as a female filling several male roles in the Genesis narrative, making her an even more universal symbol for black women. Hagar does not just take Sarah's place as the mother of the child of promise. She challenges the patriarchal boundaries regarding typical male roles. Several scholars are quick to point out that Hagar is the "only woman in the Old Testament who

has a recorded theopany and is recipient to a promise of possession of land and a large number of descendants.”(17) Hagar’s wilderness scenes are not just God showing pity toward the less fortunate, and they do not merely represent God’s encompassing love for all of His creations. That Hagar speaks directly to Yahweh, names Him, and receives the promise that she will be the mother of a large nation makes it clear that she is a significant female character in the Genesis story.

In the Hagar story, it seems both female characters carry several male characteristics. While Hagar is able to resist, defy, rebel, and flee, Sarah still manages to make all major decisions without the assistance of her husband and she has full control over the slavery population in their household. Modern African-American women identify with Hagar’s transcendence of the biblical gender roles in their own history. Female slaves were often required to accept any role or task assigned to them, such as the previously mentioned job as mammy, and this extended to the typically male duties on a plantation. Hagar fills typically male roles in her reception of the promise, her naming of Yahweh, and in the final rebellious act of securing an Egyptian bride for her son Ishmael.

Securing a bride for one’s son was another role typical for the man of the household. Hagar has no choice but to fulfill it because she is alone. This is another surrogate role that Hagar assumes which strikes close to home for many African-American women. Hagar is a single mother trying to keep her family on its feet and facing extreme opposition every step of the way. We have seen the identification black women have with motherhood in the roles of mammy and now single motherhood. During slavery, black mothers were left alone because either the father was sent to another plantation, was a “stud” used to breed more slaves, or was the master who would not claim his mulatto children.(18) Often, what carried these women through their hardship and allowed them the enormous strength required to support a family alone was their religion and faith in God’s protection. Biblical stories like Hagar’s showed them that God would help them to “make a way out of no way.”(19)

Hagar is deserted when she is exiled from Abraham’s household and enters the desert for the second time. She is a mother with a small child and with no one to assist her in securing his survival. Hagar is faced with harsh economic realities, including homelessness, and she is distraught. Abraham equips them only with bread and a skin of water, hardly enough for a young woman and a small child to survive long in the desert. When they had gone through what little rations they had, Hagar “went and sat down at a distance, about a bowshot away, thinking ‘I cannot bear to see the child die.’ Sitting at a distance, she began to sob.” Again,

Hagar receives a promise from Yahweh that her son will be the father of a great nation and He opens her eyes to a well. It is this last section of the Hagar narrative that has spoken so much to the African-American community. “She and Ishmael together, as family, model many black American families in which a lone woman/mother struggles to hold the family together in spite of the poverty to which ruling class economics consign it.”(20) Hagar acts as both mother and father to her son and creates a stable family environment with only God at her side.

Comparing the two stories, that of a modern African-American female and that of Hagar, indicates a parallel where each woman finds herself alone in the world with absolutely no resources for survival. Hagar is banished from Abraham’s household toward the end of chapter 21 in Genesis and is equipped with little more than a few crumbs of bread and a skin of water. She and Ishmael have their freedom but they are without the means to provide and live on their own. The African-American female community draws parallels to such a condition as, after they were emancipated and had their freedom, they too were cast out into a world in which they had no knowledge for survival. Economic hardship combined with an overwhelming sense of being alone created extreme hardship for postbellum black women and they looked to the image of Yahweh coming to Hagar and saying “Arise! Lift up the lad!” for inspiration to pick themselves up and provide. They were able to see Hagar as a role model to overcome poverty and social displacement.

Hagar and her wilderness experience have become a cherished symbol in the black community. The story has the ability to not only represent their past history involving slavery, but it is also applicable to the present day and encompasses the hope for the future. Both chapters where Hagar is in the wilderness alone in the Old Testament represent two different times in the lives of black women. The first scene can be linked to slavery for Hagar is still a slave, she is in pain and suffering and she meets God for the first time, receiving promises of survival and liberation.(21) Therefore, the community could look at Hagar and hope for the future. Then, once Hagar is freed she is sent into the wilderness again and it is here that we find parallels between her world and her struggle and that of the ex-slave who found herself in a world just as hostile. The newly freed black community “needed something to hold together its historic memory of its past and its present imaginative potential for shaping a positive quality of life in freedom.”(22) The image of Hagar in the wilderness served both purposes and has continued into this day to represent God’s attention to those who suffer and His loving gift of survival.

In addition to the surrogate social roles she has filled, Hagar was also a biological surrogate mother to Sarah. When Sarah decides that she will have a son through Hagar, she creates a situation that calls for both physical and social surrogacy. Hagar fills the social role of child-bearer for Sarah in a world where women are defined by their ability to reproduce, and she simultaneously fills the physical role of mother to the child by lending her fertile womb. This role is again very familiar to the African-American community and allows for even more identification with Hagar's character in the Bible.

Sarah and Hagar are both victims of the patriarchal society in which they live. This is a world where women are only expected to bear children and be obedient to their husbands. Abraham is promised an heir from Yahweh and the pressure is on Sarah to provide the special child. Since she is old and believes herself to be barren, she offers her handmaid Hagar to Abraham. The logic behind such a move is that Sarah hoped to fulfill her duty to her husband and to society by providing the child of Promise, and since Hagar is her handmaid then what is Hagar's belongs to Sarah. Indirectly, the child born of Hagar and Abraham's union was to be considered Sarah's. "In Hagar's time, Mesopotamian law legitimated surrogacy, which was evidently adopted by many Semitic people."⁽²³⁾ In other words, this was a common practice used by wives who could no longer physically provide children but were still socially expected to.

Many black females can relate to Hagar being used for her womb when they remember back to the practice during slavery of having breeder women provide more "property" for their masters. Angela Davis, a recent speaker here at Denison University, highlights these similarities between surrogates and female slaves. These breeder women "possessed no legal rights as mothers of any kind [and] considering the commodification of their children—and indeed, of their own persons—their status was similar to that of the contemporary surrogate mother."⁽²⁴⁾ Hagar did not have any rights as a mother to the child that she bore; that child legally would belong to Sarah.

Even today, the issues of laying claim to a child and whether or not it matters whose womb carries it is ongoing in the debate around surrogate motherhood. Many are of the opinion that surrogacy hurts all women because it is still enforcing the idea that a woman's essential role in life is pregnancy, and women are viewed as an embodied uterus making itself convenient for patriarchy. The business of buying and selling babies poses several moral complications and dehumanizes the issue at hand. Elizabeth Bettenhausen worries that there may come a day when science will no longer require the surrogate's egg, thus elimi-

nating her claim to the child, and will then be able to recruit poor, foreign women as breeders to simply carry a fertilized embryo.⁽²⁵⁾ The economic situation in such countries would perhaps drive women to accept less pay for the job of acting as a surrogate uterus. While this modern situation is not limited to the African-American community by any means, it reminds them of their abuse during slavery and of seeing their children sold off as commodities to the highest bidding slave master.

If we liken this story to that of an African-American slave woman, then what happens to Hagar once she is pregnant takes on new meaning. It is an awakening for a woman who had previously been living a numb life. Something within the slave woman comes alive, and "it was her sense of self-worth."⁽²⁶⁾ Sarah's plan has backfired in that Hagar clings to the esteem that should have been transferred upon her mistress. No wonder Sarah reacts spitefully in an attempt to dehumanize this Egyptian woman and strip her of her newly found self-worth. This is a common way to regain an obedient slave: remove any sense of humanity or an entitlement to rights.

Liberation theology versus Survival theology

For many scholars, the most powerful attraction in this narrative is that Yahweh does not liberate Hagar from her oppressive state in life. Much of modern liberation theology would expect their God of the Oppressed to eliminate the hardship in her life and to deliver her from her suffering. James Cone believes that from the Exodus onward, God identifies with the oppressed and is an active fighter for their liberation.⁽²⁷⁾ Unfortunately, this story takes place long before the Exodus. Several scholars have searched for the answer to why Yahweh does not liberate Hagar. Delores Williams is the only source I have introducing the concept of survival theology to allow an understanding of Hagar's "wilderness experience" and give meaning to what seems on the surface to be Hagar's abandonment.

Black females identify with Hagar because of her wilderness experiences. Williams defines such experience as a "near-destruction situation in which God gives personal direction to the believer and thereby helps her make a way out of what she thought was no way."⁽²⁸⁾ Twice, Hagar entered the desert: once, of her own accord when she fled from Sarah's harsh abuse and again, when she was exiled from Abraham's household with her child and forced to make a home in the desert for her small family. On both occasions, she encountered Yahweh. First, the angel of the Lord instructed her to return to Sarah's treatment and later

on, Yahweh opened her eyes and showed her a well from which she could draw water. Each time, Hagar received a promise from Yahweh that her son would be the father of a great nation and would be a "wild ass of a man."

How can this comfort Hagar? The bottom line is that after such divine promises she is still alone, in the desert, with no food or sustenance for either herself or her son! Williams argues that the rest is up to Hagar at this point; God has given her the resources and the means to make it but He will not go ahead and do it for her. Hagar's fight against oppression is her own, though God is there at her side to assist and to support. The main difference between liberation and survival strategies is that one anticipates the victory of God over oppression and the other finds strength to continue toward one's personal victory over oppression. In the second wilderness scene, Hagar is free but without any means to survive or provide for herself or Ishmael. Yahweh opens her eyes to a well so that she can hydrate her child and again promises a nation for her son. Instead of liberating, God gives survival techniques to the oppressed so that they can pick themselves up and work toward their own liberation alongside their God. Hagar draws the water, gives Ishmael a drink, and proceeds to make a way for them to live in the stark desert environment. Perhaps it was best for Hagar to leave Abraham's household, for "sometimes we need a shove—even from our enemies—to make us stand on our own two feet."⁽²⁹⁾ The situation forced her to provide for herself and for her son, a step of independence that must have been exhilarating for a former slave.

One of the more frustrating moments in the Hagar narrative occurs when the angel of the Lord bids Hagar to return into the jaws of abuse from which she has just fled. In chapter 16, Hagar is pregnant, alone, and suffering and God tells her to return to hardship! This does not sound like the type of Yahweh any oppressed person would have faith in, yet some say that God is liberating her in the manner best suited for the situation. Black women recognize survival strategies in the messages that Hagar receives from Yahweh rather than liberation proclamations. African-American women find hope in the Hagar narrative because they read the means that God provides to help them liberate themselves. He is not a God to deliver liberation, yet He provides survival techniques so that the oppressed can work toward liberating themselves.⁽³⁰⁾ Many African-American females are comforted by this because they look upon God as a God who sees their struggle and wants to give them the means for a better quality life, so He "helps them make a way out of no way."⁽³¹⁾ Hagar provides an image of determination and stamina in the face of hopelessness and allows black women to continue even when it seems impossible.

God promises Hagar survival, freedom and nationhood in her first journey to the wilderness and the African-American community has always struggled for these things.⁽³²⁾ The knowledge that such rewards are in store and are a part of God's plan is comforting and gives them hope. Hagar is their symbol, their spokeswoman, and if God can provide for her then God will provide for them. More specifically, Hagar acts as an ideal for black womanhood in her struggle against all odds to make a life for her and her son in a hostile environment. The image of Hagar in the wilderness is something black women strive for because it embodies defiance, risk, independence, endurance, holding up a family without a mate, making a way through extreme poverty, and having a close relationship with God.⁽³³⁾ The oppressed do not always experience God's liberating power but often must draw that power from within them with God's help.

The African-American community understands the wilderness experience. They comprehended Hagar's biblical wilderness while under the yoke of slavery and often thought of it to keep their spirits up and their hope alive. After emancipation, their idea of the wilderness took shape in the wide, hostile world into which they were thrust with their freedom tickets in hand. Against all of the hardship and the restrictions of previously mentioned surrogate roles, black women displayed resilience and determination in the face of adversity. They did not sit around idly and wait for their God to deliver them into a land free of oppression. Rather, black women endured and at times resisted, falling back on their instinctive care and compassion as well as shrewdness. When the oppressed are called to actively participate in the fight for equality and freedom, the community forms under one cause and through this connection with fellow peers a resource of unity and strength is made available. Hagar felt alone in the wilderness and yet was guided and supported by Yahweh, setting an example for the black community in generations to come.

What type of message did God bring to his faithful in regards to the oppressive structures in which we live? With Hagar, He gave her the means to survive amid the evil and injustice of her world. In Jesus, God provided a new way of structuring our social world to rid us of oppression. In this case too, the call for action rested upon the people and was not simply carried out by God. He gave us a perfect example in "Jesus' life of resistance and by the survival strategies he used to help people survive."⁽³⁴⁾ This type of liberation has more to do with the quality of life instead of merely escaping from the bonds of slavery. While slavery may be over, America has made many economic slaves of its people and a vast majority of the black community is shackled by poverty and lack of oppor-

tunity. "The question was and still is today, how can oppressed people develop a positive and productive quality of life in a situation where the resources for doing so are not visible?"(35) The answer is to use the survival techniques, which God has provided.

Black women's widespread ability to relate to Hagar makes her role in the biblical story even more vital to the black community. It is important for African-Americans today not to allow the memory of Hagar to diminish. Identification with Hagar's adaptation of surrogate roles, her involvement in status wars, and her survival strategies in the face of adversity allow black women to enter their own personal wilderness experiences with confidence in God's love for them. Hagar has become a special symbol of how to cope with the injustice of slavery and discrimination and still maintain faith in a God who loves and works toward equality. By using resistance strategies to counteract prejudice, black women strive to be like Hagar and embody her qualities of nurturance, determination, endurance, and steadfastness.

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2. Williams, 64.
3. Ibid, 67.
4. Weems, 7.
5. Ibid.

* All biblical references are taken from the Book of Genesis, chapters 16 & 21.

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7. Savina Teubal. *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), xxxiv.
8. Waters, 193.
9. Ibid, 196.
10. Williams, 65.
11. Ibid, 67.
12. Ibid, 72.
13. Bell Hooks. *Ain't I a Woman?* (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 37.
14. Williams, 80.
15. Ibid, 70.
16. Weems, 8.
17. Waters, 199.
18. Williams, 34.
19. Ibid, 122.
20. Ibid, 33.
21. Ibid, 118.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid, 82.
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28. Williams, 108.
29. Weems, 15.
30. Williams, 198.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid, 118.
33. Ibid, 122.
34. Ibid, 164.
35. Ibid, 193.