
DO YOU SEE WHAT I SEE? Diversity in Interpretation

Renita J. Weems

“Instead of the Sarah-Hagar story,” an Anglo female theological student queried one day when I was lecturing at her seminary, “why don’t African American women write about Mary the mother of Jesus whose story as that of a poor, unwed mother might be theologically resourceful to them?” I sat quiet for a moment, and this otherwise bright student evidently mistook my pause for awe of her insight. “Especially when one considers that Mary’s story is a favorite of Latin American religious women, both theologian and lay,” she added.

I was stunned by her presumptuousness.

First, there was this Anglo woman’s presumption to know which texts ought to be the focus of African American women’s religious reflection. Such ethnocentrism is too offensive to comment on in polite company.

Second, there was her presumption to universalize women of color. That was equally an affront. Because women of color share the common plight of being victimized by a simultaneity of oppressions (e.g., gender, racial/ethnic, and often class discrimination), it does not mean that the differences between women of African descent and women of Latin descent, for example, need not be taken seriously. Each ethnic group thinks, writes, and discourses out of the context of her own distinctive experience of oppression. As a result, there are cultural, in addition to religious, reasons why Latin women writing out of their Catholic, Latin American context are drawn to the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus. And there are social and political, in addition to religious, reasons why African American women might be preoccupied with Hagar’s and Sarah’s story,

Renita J. Weems, whose Ph.D. is from Princeton Theological Seminary, is an Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, Tenn., and an ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. A former economist, public accountant, and stockbroker, she is the author of Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988).

reasons that have to do with the Anglo settings in which they publish, teach, and do theological reflection, and reasons that have to do with the fact that less than a hundred and thirty years separate them from slavery.

Third, and related, there was the student's presumption that she was well acquainted with the gamut of African American women's religious writings. When I did finally respond, I decided it best to take the socratic approach: "What makes you think African American women have not written about Mary?" She proceeded to list the well-known theological journals—feminist and otherwise—stocked by seminaries and some of the recent monographs by African American women theologians, and commented that she had not been able to find any discussion on Mary in any of these. "Have you ever considered perusing the non-conventional literature by African American women that may not get shelved on the stacks of august seminary libraries (e.g., denominational publications, small religious press books)?"

This time my otherwise bright student was quiet.

The Hagar and Sarah story gets race, gender, and economic exploitation on the table.

"When you look at the non-conventional literature, you will be better informed as to the kinds of stories and themes that concern African American women when they address African American women."

As heartened as many of us are over the emerging dialogs that are taking place in theological and ecclesiastical settings among different cultures of women, we must continue to bear in mind that such discussions between African American and Anglo women have only been taking place consistently and self-consciously over the last twenty-five years. The Hagar and Sarah story, I submit, is ideal for getting some pressing theological issues about race, gender, and economic exploitation on the table.

I wrote *Just a Sister Away* with African American women in mind. Actually, I wrote the book out of disgust. I was fed up with having to make do. I was weary of having to insert my reality into other women's writings. I was weary of the fact that when women of color's reality was cited in the leading women's religious literature, it often read like a parenthetical aside, a footnote, a postscript—much like the story of Lot's wife. I was weary of buying books that, while they were illuminating to some aspects of my religious journey, were not particularly relevant to me as an African

American religious woman. So I decided to write the kind of book I wanted to read. And I wrote *Just a Sister Away* as a way of continuing the many conversations I had had with African American women about the women in the Bible. I was thinking of the African American women who, like I, were hungry for stories about women they could identify with.

A good writer knows her audience, their interests, their backgrounds, their idioms, their way of viewing reality. And she makes use of this information as she guides them through theological and exegetical terrain. Had I been writing for another audience of women, while I may have chosen the same biblical women to write about, I dare say I would have approached the stories very differently. For example, in the story of Hagar and Sarah, I would have concentrated more on Sarah. Or, in "Certain Women," the story of the host of unnamed women who followed Jesus, instead of focusing largely on African American women in history I would have chronicled the many Anglo women whose contributions have been ignored or mangled by modern male interpreters. The point here is that every writer writes with a particular audience in mind. How else can she make herself understood? As a result, I try not to fault the writers whose books disappoint me. I simply was not a part of their ideal audience.

I am always encouraged, of course, when Anglo women write or see me at meetings and tell me how much the stories in *Just a Sister Away* mean to them. Some comments are genuine. Others, such as that of the female reporter from Dayton who called for a newspaper interview, are not quite as innocent. "The book may have been written for African American women," she blurted, "but I had no problem understanding it at all."

"African American women are women and human, you know. And to the extent that we share that, I expect that there will be a number of elements of the book you will be able to empathize with," I said. "But I doubt whether you're able to fully appreciate the pathos and idiom of the book."

It is its pathos and idiom that makes the *Sister*, as the subtitle insists, a "womanist vision of women's relationships in the Bible." It represents African American women's attempt to read the Bible with their own eyes and recount what they see with their own voice. A womanist reading is to a feminist reading what, borrowing Alice Walker's phrasing, purple is to lavender.

Even the narrators of the Bible wrote with a particular audience in mind. For the Old Testament narrators, theirs was a first millennium, Hebrew, urban, literate, elite, male audience. For the New Testament narrators, theirs was a first or second century, Christian, urban, literate, elite (ideally, slave-holding), male audience. I wrote *Just a Sister Away* knowing full well that whatever meaning or relevance I was to find in these stories I

would have to wrestle away from their male narrators and male audience. I began the enterprise from an admittedly presumptuous posture, much like that of the otherwise bright Anglo student I mentioned above. I presumed to know the experiences of Sarah, Hagar, Jephthah's daughter, Ruth, Naomi, Mary, Elizabeth, and the other women in the Bible.

Failing that, I made another decision. I decided I knew these women better than did their male narrators. In a moment of scholarly sobriety, of course, I am forced to admit that I could never hope to comprehend fully the experience of ancient biblical women's lives. These women lived in patriarchal societies where the average life span for a woman was less than thirty-five years, bereft of religious voice, plagued by failing health and far too frequent pregnancies, fetching water from wells in the heat of the day in a region scarce on rain, rearing male children who one day might disinherit them and female children who never were theirs because they, like themselves, were the property of fathers, sons, and husbands.

Mine is admittedly an inescapably modern, highly technological, Western lens through which I view their stories. I may not know as a modern woman what it means, like Jephthah's daughter, to be so inexorably the property of my father such that I have no rights to protect me from being slain by him at whim. I do as a woman understand what it feels like to be betrayed by men you loved, trusted, and admired. I know as a woman the experiences of jealousy, disappointment, betrayal, neglect, abandonment, the loss of a loved one, infertility, the hassles of in-laws, and the loss of a broken mother. In *Sister* I tried desperately to respect the integrity of these women's lives. If my experiences as a twentieth-century African American woman were hopelessly incommensurate with those of biblical women, I decided to let these women tell me (us) that and not their male narrators.

They did not. They did, however, insist that I respect their voice. And that I tried to do.

Of course, this is not the way we as modern readers and interpreters have been taught to read and interpret the Bible. For one thing, we have been taught that the Bible is user-friendly. With the proper tools, the biblical past can be made transparent to the modern interpreter—or so we have been taught. Such arrogance is the product of a super-technological, militaristic culture. In the face of superior weaponry and (intellectual) tools, foreign cultures will submit, or so we have been taught. As professional exegetes and students of the Bible in particular, we are taught that meaning lies entombed in texts and with the proper technical procedures (e.g., exegesis, knowledge of the historical period, asking the appropriate questions) one can extract its meaning.

Those who adopt this interpretive stance have yet to explain satisfac-

torily, however, why two people who use similar approaches (e.g., they read the same commentary, study the same church school guide) still come up with different interpretations for the same Scripture. No one is willing to concede that what you see depends in large part upon where you stand. What questions you ask depends upon where you stand. What answers you are willing to hear depends upon where you stand.

Meaning takes place, however, when the values and interests of the narrators coincide with those of the readers.

For example, as a woman of African descent, my cultural and ethnic sympathies naturally lie with the Egyptians. We share an African heritage. Therefore, I come to the Scripture prepared to identify with Hagar. And yet, when I come to the Exodus story, ambivalence surfaces. My social and political circumstances—as the great-granddaughter of slaves whose abiding aspiration was for freedom and self-determination—tend to make me, along with other liberation theologians, identify with the runaway slaves in the book of Exodus known as the Hebrews. The narrator of Exodus ingeniously tapped into my deepest existential yearning.

“What prevents you from reading your own agenda into these stories?” asked a male colleague. The tone of his voice betrayed him. He was apparently deeply suspicious of interpretations of the Bible done by anyone other than the official interpreters of Scripture, namely, men. “No biblical method is free of the interpreter’s agenda or presuppositions,” I answered. “Besides, I have not read anything more into these texts that is more injurious to humankind than what patriarchal interpreters have read into them.”

People are threatened by difference, by diversity in interpretation, by marginalized people asserting their right to interpret Scripture for themselves.

At the risk of sounding anecdotal and not analytical, and to make a point, I recount stories of encounters I have had over the issue of interpretation. These, and other such ones, have taught me that people are threatened by difference. They are especially threatened by religious diversity, by diversity in interpretation. They are threatened by marginalized people asserting their right to interpret Scripture for themselves. They are threatened by the marginalized insisting that theirs is a legitimate interpretation. These, and other such encounters, have shown me that it is not the

Bible that is authoritative. After all, the Bible is a document that waits to be interpreted. It is one interpretation over another that is authoritative. And that interpretation is not adjudicated solely on the basis of reasonableness, accuracy, truth, and logic. It is adjudicated most often on the basis of power. One interpreting community acquires the power (e.g., in the legal, political, ecclesiastical, pedagogical arenas) to assert and propagate its interpretation over all others. In other words, people have power, not texts.

In the Genesis story of the social, economic, and sexual exploitation suffered by an Egyptian handmaiden Hagar at the hands of her Hebrew mistress, African American women interpreters find a story with haunting parallels to their own. Even if it is not our own story, it is the story of far too many of our mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and the women in our neighborhoods. It is as if we know it by heart.

Although the easiest thing would be to concentrate on Hagar's and Sarah's ethnic differences, to do so would not be altogether fair to the story. That is, it would not be fair to make the Old Testament story of Hagar and Sarah carry all the weight of the history of race relationships in the modern world. After all, it is not Hagar's and Sarah's story. It is Abraham's story. Still, the similarities between the biblical story and the reality of the relationships across racial lines among women today are unmistakable. It is a story of ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and sexual exploitation. It is a story that I suspect African American women interpreters will return to again and again until our modern predicament no longer warrants us having to do so. It is a story, I submit, worthy of considering one more time.¹

The biblical story opens with the spotlight on Abram's barren wife, Sarai (Gen. 16:1).² The first thing we come to know about Sarai, other than her status as Abram's wife, is the stark fact of her barrenness. In ancient times a woman's self-worth and social status pivoted around her family—namely, the reputation of her husband and, more importantly, the number of children she had borne, preferably males. Therefore, the first verse of the chapter is especially significant; in that one line Sarai's honor rises and falls:

Now, Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children.

As the wife of Abram, who was a socially prominent and successful herdsman, Sarai was a wealthy woman in her community. As a Hebrew mistress, she was a woman of immense social and economic standing. But Sarai was barren. And in the culture in which Sarai lived, a woman's womb was her destiny.

In a world devoid of the technological skills that we in the Western world have come to take for granted; in a world where entire families, communities, and nations could be wiped out by famine, drought, plague, and pestilence without warning; in a world where the average life span of men was forty years and women, thirty years; in such a world, the ability to reproduce and replenish the population was held in high esteem. Thus, despite her marriage to Abram and all the social and economic privileges that came with such a union, Sarai's barrenness made her a woman to be scorned.

As is the case with most wealthy women, however, Sarai possessed a handmaiden. Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman, attended to the personal and domestic needs of her Hebrew mistress. While her mistress was old and had no hope of ever conceiving a child, Hagar was young and fertile. But Hagar was poor, in fact she was worse than poor: she was a slave. And because she was a slave, Hagar was powerless. The differences between the two women, therefore, went beyond their ethnic identities, beyond their reproductive capabilities. Their disparities were centered in their contrasting economic positions. And economic differences have, on more than one occasion, thwarted coalitions and frustrated friendships between women.

With the scant information contained in the first verse alone, we have all the clues we need to know that this story will probably end in sadness.

Sarai, the barren but wealthy mistress, appealed to her husband, Abram, to go in and have intercourse with her fertile but poor handmaiden, Hagar. The child born to that union would become Sarai's. After all, Hagar was Sarai's property; what belonged to Hagar actually belonged to Sarai.

Sarai had social standing, as Abram's wife, but she had no respect! She had material abundance, but she was not comforted. She was beautiful, but she was barren, childless, less than a woman in the eyes of her Hebrew community. That which Sarai craved most, her husband's money could not buy her. Only her slave's womb could give it to her. And according to custom, because Hagar belonged to Sarai (through Abram, of course), any children Hagar bore would legally belong to Sarai. Thus, what the Lord had prevented of Sarai, Sarai set out to obtain through her slave.

Notice: The slave Hagar was never asked her opinion.

Without so much as a murmur of protest, Abram complied. Hagar conceived.

To our modern way of thinking, Sarai's act of giving Hagar to her husband, Abram, as a concubine is nothing less than reprehensible. We are offended not only because of our moral and legal customs concerning monogamy and fidelity, but we are also offended because of the seeming presumptuousness of it all. The nerve of Sarai exploiting Hagar's body,

manipulating Abram, speaking for God!

Yet we must lay aside our cultural biases long enough to consider that Sarai was not the only woman in the Bible to convince her husband to have sex with another woman. Rachel, too, persuaded her husband, Jacob, to enter into conjugal relations with her maid Bilhah (Gen. 30:1-24). Not only was concubinage an acceptable custom of the times, but there were men who took concubines evidently with their wives' blessing. At least for barren women, concubinage functioned in a critical way to provide a (male) heir who would retain land and property holdings within the family.

However, providing an heir for her husband's immense property was not Sarai's sole concern. Sarai (as did Rachel, no doubt) had her own reasons for offering her slave to Abram.

"Perhaps I will be esteemed through her." (Gen. 16:2)

Through her slave's womb, Sarai sought esteem and honor for herself.

But the tables were turned on Sarai.

But when Hagar saw that she had conceived, her mistress' honor was lowered in her eyes. (Gen. 16:4)

Instead of esteem, Sarai received contempt. Instead of respect, Sarai was ridiculed. And by her maid, no less!

Whether Hagar's contempt for Sarai was real or imagined on Sarai's part, we can only guess. (After all, the story is told more from Sarai's point of view than Hagar's.) But one thing is certain: Hagar's elevation as Abram's pregnant concubine must have served only to point up Sarai's downfall as the wife who could bear him no children.

As the woman carrying the child of the wealthy landowner, the status of the pregnant slavewoman in the house of her mistress and master drastically changed. The relationship between the mistress and maid required renegotiation. Before, Hagar had been a defenseless slave. Now, as the pregnant concubine of the prosperous but old man Abram, Hagar was protected. She ceased to be Sarai's slave and became Abram's wife.

Perhaps the pregnancy awakened something in the slavewoman, something that previously lay dormant.

Perhaps it was her sense of self-worth.

Perhaps it was her sense of purpose and direction.

Or, perhaps, it was the prospect of being loved unconditionally by her child. (Pregnancy has had that effect on more than one woman.)

Whatever the reason, Hagar could no longer see Sarai and her relationship to her mistress in the same way as before, for Hagar was able to give the old man Abram something his wife Sarai could not. Consequently,

Hagar transformed before her mistress' eyes. Her attitude about herself changed as well. The child growing inside her was proof that she was more than a slave: she was a woman.

Resentful and enraged, Sarai renounced her part in the whole humiliating affair (Gen. 16:5). She blamed Abram. He, in turn, renounced his authority, role, and interest in the irksome situation and gave Hagar back into the hands of Sarai to be done with as she saw fit. Thus, as quickly as Hagar was elevated to the position of wife in her mistress' house, she was reduced back to the position of slave. She, who had been to Abram as a wife through a transfer of power, once again became property—again, without her permission.

Once Sarai's authority over the pregnant slave woman was restored, the barren wife proceeded to punish the slave woman for humiliating her: she began to treat Hagar harshly. We know only too well the kinds of violence the Egyptian woman must have been forced to endure: beatings, verbal insults, ridicule, strenuous work, degrading tasks, and the like. For to be under the power of a resentful woman can be a dangerous thing.

If we as black women appear, to some, to be reading too much of our own brutal history into the biblical story, let it be pointed out that whatever the nature of the punishment Sarai imposed, it was evidently harsh enough to convince the slave woman to run away. Hagar chose the unknown dangers of the wilderness over her pallet in her mistress' house.

The story of the Egyptian slave and her Hebrew mistress is hauntingly reminiscent of the disturbing accounts of black slave women and white mistresses during slavery. Over and over again we have heard tales about the wanton and brutal rape of black women by their white slavemasters, compounded by punitive beatings by resentful white wives who penalized the raped slave women for their husbands' lust and savagery.

There are also the pitiful stories of slave women who willingly conceded to their slavemasters' sexual advances: first, as a way of protecting their husbands, children, and loved ones from being beaten; second, as a way to keep themselves and those close to them from being sold away; or, third, as the only way of elevating their social rank in order to protect themselves from vicious overseers and mistresses.³

The painful memory of black and white women under slavery and the web of cruelty that characterized their relations continue to stalk the relationship between black and white women in America even to this day. Slavery was abolished in America a mere one hundred and twenty-five years ago; but evidently one hundred twenty-five years is not long enough to abolish the memories and attitudes that slavery arouses in a nation. Unless a miracle occurs, it is sad to say that it will probably take another one hundred and twenty-five years to erase the pain and antagonism bred

from two hundred and fifty years of the cruelest brutality one race could inflict upon another—especially in the name of God.

And, for some peculiar reasons, when it comes to women, those memories have proven especially hard to erase.

Resentment and distrust linger. For black women in America, there remains the fear that white women, if given the slightest opportunity, will betray their trust and exploit their vulnerability as racially and sexually oppressed women. And with good cause: in many instances modern history, too, has borne out these suspicions.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, suffragettes, who began their social activism as ardent opponents of slavery and race prejudice, eventually used racism to secure their right to vote. They pandered to the racist attitude of white southerners who ardently opposed black enfranchisement, and they extolled the supremacy of white women over black men (and black women).⁴

More recently, white women within feminist and Christian feminist circles continue to speak as though theirs is the universal experience. In doing so, they betray their persistent belief in their superiority and sovereignty over women of other races.

The truth is, very few black women manage to make it through adulthood without a footlocker of hurtful memories of encounters with white women.

A recent odious experience comes to my mind and, I admit, continues to grieve me. I was invited by a group of white women to join them in planning an upcoming national symposium. Because their stated objective was to see that this symposium, unlike previous ones, be multi-ethnic, they were eager to solicit the input of black women on their otherwise all white board. At first when asked, I flatly declined. Admittedly, I am immediately suspicious of requests for my services primarily because I am black, and when I can help it, I try to avoid being the only black in otherwise all white settings. Both, as I see it, portend danger. However, after much persuasion and insistence upon the sincerity of this group's intentions, I consented.

At the first meeting, everyone was very enthusiastic and solicitous of the other black woman and myself. In fact, our suggestion for the theme of the conference was accepted unanimously. The next time the group convened, however, it was a closed session—without either of the two black women having been invited. For days I walked around hurt and enraged. Again and again, I berated myself for betraying my instinct and for allowing myself to be used once again by white women. Every time I saw the announcements for the upcoming symposium with the title I had suggested, I wanted to scream.

But, as I said before, the story of Hagar and Sarai is about more than ethnic prejudice. It is not fair to make this Genesis story carry all the weight of race relations between black women and white women in the modern world.

In the first place, owning slaves was not unique to the ancient Hebrews. Later, in the book of Exodus, we discover that the hands of power reversed: Hebrew women became slaves in the hands of Egyptian women. (It would become the responsibility of an Egyptian Princess to come to the rescue of a Hebrew slavewoman.) In other words, no race or culture has a monopoly on evil. At some point in its history, virtually every culture has, if not instituted slavery, then profited from the bartering of human flesh.

In the second place, the story of Hagar and Sarai is about the economic stratification of women as much as it is about the ethnic discrimination of one woman against another. Translated into today's language, Hagar was a domestic; Sarai was her employer.

Certainly there is nothing inherently ignoble about being a maid, nor anything inherently honorable about being an employer of a maid. Neither need apologize nor boast. Circumstances and lifestyles have a lot to say about the choices we make. Women who have been in the position to do so have long sought the help of other women in maintaining the physical upkeep of their households. Women who have had to do so have long hired themselves out for the one line of work many have known since childhood. The problem lies not with the choices themselves, but with the attitudes that too often accompany the choices.

Within a capitalistic society such as our own, disparate economic relationships among women can distort perspectives of reality. Among the "haves," it breeds a false sense of superiority. Among the "have-nots," it breeds an irrepressible sense of inferiority. Wherever human worth and dignity are measured by purchasing power, there is always the problem of class prejudice.

In the instance of Hagar and Sarai, the owner took advantage of her economic leverage over the Egyptian slavewoman. She exploited the slavewoman's body for her own personal ambitions. But in trying to provide a son for her husband and secure respect for herself, Sarai almost lost a slave. And that would never do!

When she saw that her scheme had backfired, Sarai tried to save face and regain her (false sense of) superiority over Hagar. She tried to humiliate the slavewoman and thereby remind Hagar that it was she, Sarai, who had power—not Hagar. In so doing, Sarai grasped desperately for the little power her husband had restored to her hands, even if that power extended only to slaves.

Taking advantage of Hagar's slavewoman status, exploiting the fact that the woman who tended to her house was vocationally limited and her financial options virtually non-existent, Sarai took advantage of her status over Hagar. She knew that the way to enslave a slave—all over again—was to humiliate her, to destroy her (new found) sense of self-worth, to dehumanize her.

It works every time.

Not all women in America have had the means, temperament, nor need to employ the services of a domestic. Neither have most women ever deliberately exploited another woman economically. But practically all of us in capitalistic America have found ourselves in situations where we have been grievously reminded of the inequity among people in general, and women specifically.

I am the daughter and granddaughter of domestics, and the great-granddaughter of a slave. Yet through freak circumstances and the grace of God, I am an educated and employed black woman upon whom, from time to time, capitalism confers the opportunity to exploit other women—both black and white. My potential victims are those who are neither educated nor employed.

None of us is safe from the ravages of a society that makes room for only a chosen few and keeps at bay the vast majority.

I am painfully aware of this when I step across the floor recently mopped by the black janitress at the office building where I am late for an executive meeting. This fact becomes glaringly evident when I eat out at a restaurant, and the white waitress who is the age of my mother calls me "ma'am." And I am reminded of my privileges when, while sitting at a desk in my hotel putting the final touches on a speech for an organization of Christian women, the Latina maid tiptoes in to replace my soiled linen and make my bed.

None of us is safe from the ravages of a society that makes room for only a chosen few and keeps at bay the vast majority. For those of us who are educated and employed, there is always the potential to be a Sarai; and, lamentably, there are far too many opportunities in a capitalist society for her to surface. Yet most of us are just a paycheck away from Hagar.

The tragedy of it all is that, in actuality, this is neither Hagar's nor Sarai's story. It was never meant to be. It is Abram's story. The episode concerning Hagar and Sarai is only part of a larger drama about the promises of God to God's elected servant Abram. Hagar and Sarai are introduced only in so far as the role they play in being used by God to demonstrate the faithfulness of the divine promise to Abram: the promise that God would grant to Abram a legitimate heir who would, in turn, be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3; 17:1-4).

As Abram's wife, Sarai proved to be unfaithful and too impatient to trust God's promise to her husband. She lost sight of who she was in relation to the sovereign word of God, and in so doing, she lost sight of reality itself. Sarai forgot that in a patriarchal society she and her female slave Hagar had more in common as women than that which divided them as Hebrew mistress and Egyptian slavewoman. In fact, the only things that separated the two women were a couple of cattle and some sheepskins (which in today's language translates to a paycheck and a diploma). What bound them as women in Abram's house—their fate as women in a society that seemed to reward only men—also brought them back together

Can we deny the sorrow in this story? Can we afford to ignore the lessons of this kind of pain? The answer to both questions is a resounding "No." The story of Hagar and Sarah touches us in the many places we hide, places which are not often held up for public view. It is a story that also exposes the many hidden scars and ugly memories of the history of relationships between racial ethnic and white women in America.

But the story is not limited to the races. It goes beyond race and speaks to the class stratification that divides women: the so-called "professional" woman versus the so-called "non-professional" woman; the female Young Urban Professional (YUPPY) versus the female factory worker; the Black Urban Professional (BUPPY) versus the store clerk.

Hagar's and Sarah's story searches out our unconfessed sins of arrogance and low self-esteem, presumptuousness and passiveness, jealousy and faithlessness, and our conspiracies get others to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Like an endless row of braids, the plot weaves the strands of so many women's lives together. And Hagar's life becomes the braid of the oppressed and rejected women—from the exploited maid and the welfare mother, to the single mother and the pregnant girlfriend.

Moreover, if we can step outside of the painful memories that haunt us in our relationships racially as black and white women, and economically as stratified women, we might find another story, one equally familiar, one equally haunting. We will recognize it by its basic storyline: two women's involvement with the same man.

Hagar's and Sarah's story is also the story of the "other woman" by whom a man has children. In many cases this woman is the most abused, neglected, and maligned woman of us all. We, like Sarah, think if we can ignore her children, we can also ignore her.

We are all Hagar's daughters.

At some time in all our lives, whether we are black or white, we are all Hagar's daughters. When our backs are up against a wall; when we feel abandoned, abused, betrayed, and banished; when we find ourselves in need of another woman's help (a friend, neighbor, colleague, relative, stranger, another man's wife); we, like Hagar, are in need of a woman who will "sister" us, not exploit us.

In those times we are frequently just a sister away from our healing. We need a woman, a sister, who will see in our destitution a jagged image of what one day could be her own story. We need a sister who will respond with mercy. We need a sister whose genuine mercy—not pity that is episodic, random, and moody—is steadfast, consistent, and free.

Betrayal. Exploitation. Denial. Resentment. Suspicion. Distrust. Anger. Silence. How do we get past these memories? How do we reach beyond the enormous gulf of distrust on both our parts and forge friendships and coalitions?

It will not be easy.

In fact, it will be very difficult.

It will require a deliberate effort on our part to listen when it is easier to dismiss.

At times, it will mean that we must be as willing to confront and confess the evil in us, as a community of women, as we are to point to evil in the world.

It will require a resolve to work with one another both in spite of and because of the pain.

It will require a willingness to respect the genuine differences in one another and to see them as the strength of our coalition, not the bane of our existence.

As black and white women in America, as Israeli and Lebanese women, as white South African and black South African women, as Asian and European women, as the wives of terrorists and the wives of victims of terrorists, working for righteousness in splendid isolation from one another is a luxury we cannot afford.

Injustice in our lands relies upon the perpetual alienation of women from one another and upon relentless hostility between women. Indeed, our estrangement from one another continues to compromise the integrity of our witness as God-fearing women.

The future of our families depends upon our ability to bridge over the memories of our scars.

The future of our people depends upon our willingness to tunnel through the tragedies of our past encounters.

The future of our world depends upon our resolve to walk headlong into that which makes us different as diverse tribes of a vast world and to march straight into that which binds us as people of God.

If we don't, who will?

Finally, out in the wilderness, overcome with grief, the bitter, distraught, banished Egyptian slave woman set her child down and went off a short distance to weep alone. She could not bear to watch her son suffer.

This time, instead of an angel, the Lord appeared. However, it was not the mother's weeping which caused the Lord to speak. Rather, it was the child Ishmael's tears that moved the Lord to intervene on behalf of the mother, Hagar.

But the Lord heard the voice of the lad. (Gen. 21:17)

Just as Ishmael must have wept for the senselessness of Hagar, Sarah, and Abraham's ways, maybe it will take our children weeping on our behalf—our children weeping for the sins and prejudices and stubbornness of we their mothers and fathers—to convince God to intervene on our behalf. Perhaps as a global community we will be saved—if we are to be saved at all—because of the little children whose innocent tears will prostrate heaven.

Though their tears have not always moved us, hopefully they will move God.

God have mercy upon us.

Notes

1. What follows is excerpted from *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988), pp. 2-12, 16-19.
2. The progenitors of the nation of Israel are introduced in the Genesis narrative (Genesis 12) by the names of Abram and Sarai. The two are known to us by those names until Genesis 17, at which time we are told that God entered into covenantal relationship with them, changing their names to Abraham and Sarah to symbolize their new relationship with God, to signify the sealing of the covenant with the birth of a son of their own. Therefore, all

discussion of the events in Genesis 16 will refer to the two by their pre-covenant names, Abram and Sarai. When the story turns to Genesis 17, the discussion will refer to the couple as Abraham and Sarah.

3. Some of the more popular and recent collections of slave women's testimonies have been recorded in *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life* by Bert Lowenberg and Ruth Bogin (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University, 1976); and in *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Dorothy Sterling (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1984). For an especially poignant fictional account of slavery based on real testimonies, see Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966.)
4. For a very helpful discussion of the similarities in the racism within the nineteenth century suffragette movement and that within the modern feminist movement, see Barbara Andersen's *Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks: Racism and American Feminism* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986).

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you evaluate the relationship between black and white women in America today? Black and Latina women? Protestant and Jewish women? How does our shared faith in Jesus Christ (or God) help erase the memories of what has taken place in the past between us?
2. What has been your most painful encounter with a woman from another racial/ethnic background? Were your differences related to your ethnic/racial backgrounds, or simply differences in personalities? How, if at all, did the two of you resolve your differences? What has been your most positive encounter with a woman from a different background?
3. Imagine yourself in the story of Hagar and Sarah. What has been left out in the telling of the story, *from your perspective*? And what is your perspective (employee, employer, the "other woman"—social outcast, racial/ethnic background, other perspectives)? What feelings are present in you as you place yourself in this story?



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.