

“Where Do You Come From, And Where Are You Going?”: Hagar and Sarah Encounter God

BY TOBA SPITZER

Women’s encounters with the divine in the Bible are few and far between. In contrast to the wide variety of male encounters—Abraham’s conversations with God, Jacob dreaming and wrestling with the angel, Moses at the bush and at Sinai, the many accounts of prophetic call—we are told of few women who directly experience or speak with God. Given the paucity of material overall, the fact that there is a female character who has more than one extended encounter with the divine marks her as significant. That woman is Hagar, the Egyptian handmaid of Sarah and second wife of Abraham.¹ Hagar’s experiences provide us with an important lens on the

broader issue of biblical representation of women’s encounters with God. By comparing her experience with that of Sarah (whose one encounter with the divine is narratively sandwiched between those of Hagar), we can begin to uncover what the biblical text suggests about both the limitations on women’s experience and the possibilities that lie beyond those limitations.

In the Wilderness: Hagar

Many meetings with God in the Bible take place in liminal “in-between” places, and this is also true for Hagar. Her first meeting takes place in the wilderness, where she has fled Sarai’s mistreatment. In an echo

of Jacob’s famous encounter by the Jabbok river, Hagar is met by a divine messenger (*malakh YHWH*) at a place “on the way,” by a body of water in the wilderness:

And a *malakh YHWH* found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, Sarai’s handmaid, from where have you come, and where are you going?” And she said, “I am fleeing from Sarai my mistress.” (Gen. 16:7-8)

Hagar is the first person in the Torah to meet such a divine messenger. But in contrast to Jacob, Hagar is greeted by a question, not an attack. This is to be a friendly encounter, not a nighttime terror.

While the reader is immediately informed that the one meeting Hagar is of divine origin, Hagar is also given a clue, for this stranger knows her name and station in life: he addresses her as “Hagar, handmaid (*shifhab*) of Sarai.” It is precisely this emphasis on Hagar’s status that signals the significance of what is to come. Through an apparently unnecessary repetition—the *malakh*’s calling her “*shifhab*” and Hagar’s mention of “Sarai my mistress” in her response—our attention is focused on Hagar’s station in life. Why this repeated identification? And what is the meaning of the *malakh*’s question: “From where have you come, and where are you going”? If we as readers know of Hagar’s plight, is it possible that the All-knowing One does not?

Between Subordination and Autonomy

Certainly a messenger of God knows the literal answer to his inquiry. As a narrative device both the question and the reply point to something deeper, to a tension which is key to this encounter. On the one hand, both question and reply emphasize Hagar’s subordinate position in her particular social framework. She is a *shifhab*, Sarai is her mistress—on this both she and the messenger agree. If the first part of the *malakh*’s question, “from where have you come?” suggests Hagar’s proper place, then the second half—“where are you going?”—implies that Hagar is now out of place. Like a director who has lost control of one of his characters, the divine messenger seems to be saying: “You and I know your proper place—so what are you doing out here in the wilderness?” It is in this context that Hagar answers. Her words—“*mipney Sarai gevirti anokhi borahat*,” “I am fleeing from Sarai my mistress” (v. 8)—go beyond a simple, factual response. “*Mipney*” means “from the presence of,” but can also mean “because of, for fear of.” Hagar acknowledges that her proper place is as a servant, yet she justifies the situation by asserting that it is on her mistress’s account that she is out of place. While not entirely defiant, Hagar’s response suggests a willingness to stand up for herself, a sense of boldness and determination.

There is another aspect to the messenger’s question “where are you going?” While it does imply that Hagar

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is out of place, it is not a reprimand. Rather, in its open-endedness the question points beyond Hagar's servant status towards her agency and autonomy. The question suggests that her fate is in her hands, and that we—reader and *malakh*—do not really know where she is headed. Hagar's answer, though simple, recapitulates the two aspects of the *malakh's* question. In the first part—"mipney Sarai gevirti"—Hagar has left the place which properly defines her role; and in the second—"anokhi borahai"—Hagar is the actor, pro-actively making the choice to leave a difficult situation. It is in fact through the *malakh's* initial address that Hagar truly becomes subject in this story.² In the beginning of chapter 16, while Hagar is still in Abram and Sarai's home, she is never addressed directly by name. The *malakh YHWH* is the first to say "Hagar," and it is in response to his question that Hagar first speaks, and names her own situation: "I am fleeing."

Yet the tension between servitude and autonomy returns, as the *malakh* now gives Hagar a troubling directive: return, and submit "beneath her hand"—that is, to Sarai's mistreatment (v. 9). Feminist Bible scholar Phyllis Tribble argues that the messenger's words

bring a divine word of terror to an abused, yet courageous, woman . . . Inexplicably, the God who later, seeing the suffering of a slave people, comes down to deliver them *out of the hand* of the Egyptians, here

identifies with the oppressor and orders a servant to return not only to bondage but also to affliction.³

In her desire to emphasize Hagar's oppression at the hands of both her masters and a patriarchal text, Tribble misses the subtlety in the narrative. The messenger is telling Hagar that she is out of place; in order for the story to continue she must go back. But in the use of the *hitpa'el* form of the verb "to submit"—that is, in telling Hagar to "*hitani*," to *cause herself to submit* to Sarai's mistreatment—the *malakh* implicitly continues to recognize Hagar's agency and personhood. As J. Gerald Janzen notes, Hagar will be able to "become subject to Sarai without losing her own subjectivity,"⁴ by acting as agent of her own act of submission. The *malakh* seems to accept Hagar's version of events, that it is Sarai's fault that she has had to flee, and in asking her to "submit herself" he is giving an insistent but not uncompassionate command.

The Promise of "Seed"

As an immediate counter-balance to the order to return to mistreatment, the messenger goes on to promise Hagar countless offspring (v. 10), in a formulation that is reminiscent of the divine promise to Abram in Genesis 15:5. There, Abram is promised "seed" as impossible to count as the stars; here, Hagar's "seed" will be multiplied to an uncountable degree. And just as Abram's descendants will have to undergo slavery before God's promise can be fulfilled (Gen. 15:13-

16), verses 9-10 of chapter 16 suggest that the divine promise of "seed" to Hagar is similarly contingent upon a period of enslavement and suffering.

The *malakh's* words are remarkable, for Hagar is the only woman in the Bible to receive the divine promise of "seed." She is thus designated the matriarch of a tribe, after the model of Abraham. The messenger's promise expands upon Hagar's agency and autonomy, and marks her as having a special relationship to the divine. These themes are further developed in the announcement of the name of her son-to-be in Genesis 16:11. Hagar is told that she will be the one to name her son, and that the name—*Yishma'el*—indicates that God has heard her *oni*, her affliction. YHWH/El is aware of Hagar and has taken her into his care, if she will play her role and return, fulfilling her destiny by giving birth to this child.

As the *malakh* goes on, in verse 12, to describe Yishmael's fate, a picture emerges of a man who will live out a life of confrontation and independence that his mother has experienced in a limited, more passive, form. Whereas she has taken temporary refuge in the wilderness, he will be a "wild ass," a nomad living in the wilderness. Hagar was made to suffer "beneath the hand" of Sarai, but Yishmael's "hand" will be against all those around him: (female) suffering will be transformed into a kind of (male) audaciousness and self-imposed independence. Similarly, in contrast to Hagar who had to flee "*mipney*" her mistress, her son will dwell "*al peney*"—"in the face of"—his broth-

ers: her flight is turned into his defiance.⁵ The implicit message of this verse is that the independence and defiance Hagar has shown will find full expression in the rebellious freedom of Yishmael's tribe.

Seeing and Naming

But this encounter does not end with God's promise to Hagar. In verse 13 the focus shifts back from son to mother, from the *malakh's* words to Hagar's. Having just been told that she will name her son after the God who hears her, Hagar turns and tells the messenger *his* name, after her own experience of seeing/being seen: "And she called the name [YHWH] of the one who spoke to her '*atah el ro'i*.'"⁶ In an act unique to her, Hagar is naming God! But what exactly is she saying? *El ro'i* can be translated "the God who sees me," "the God of seeing," and the "seen God." The precise meaning of her words is enigmatic, but Hagar is clearly identifying her meeting with the *malakh* as an encounter with God. Even more powerfully, she does not displace this act of recognition/naming onto an intermediate symbol, as does Jacob in naming a place—Penu'el—after his wrestle with the "man" (Gen. 32:31). Hagar names this deity face to face: "You are El Ro'i." Hagar has not limped away; her words indicate that she is still in the presence of the divine even as she calls its name. While traditional scholars have minimized the power of this act of naming, Phyllis Tribble captures the power of the moment:

Hagar does not call *upon* the

name of the deity. Instead, she calls the name, a power attributed to no one else in all the Bible . . . Hagar is a theologian. Her naming unites the divine and human encounter: the God who sees and the God who is seen."⁷

This sense of seeing and being seen is further developed in the second half of verse 13, although the exact meaning of the words is unclear. The phrase *hagam halom ra'iti aharey ro'i* has been variously translated "Did I not go on seeing here after he had seen me?" "Have I really seen the back of the One who sees me?" "I have seen God after he saw me," and "Would I have gone here indeed looking for him that looks after me?"⁸ Yet despite the differences, every translation shares the sense of reciprocity that Tribble points to—the God who sees and is seen, who is aware of the protagonist and is, in turn, recognized.

This is not amazement on the part of Hagar, who makes her statement in an utterly matter-of-fact way, but an acknowledgment of intimate and mutual encounter. Naming in the Bible carries with it the sense of knowing and expressing one's essence. In naming God and explaining that name, Hagar is making a statement about the power of being seen, and thus being known. This *malakh* saw her and called her name, and in his greeting proved that he knew her (in stark contrast to Hagar's status as nameless pawn in the machinations between Abram and Sarai). In being seen and named, Hagar achieves her own

power to see and name. This is the power of the word *aharey* ("after") in verse 13: her ability to see comes "after" she has been seen by God.

It is true that, in contrast to Abram who is passive (that is, a non-actor in the narrative) until he receives the call and command from God, Hagar's own agency has in fact preceded this divine encounter. She "sees" that she is pregnant in verse 4, thus precipitating the conflict with Sarai, and takes matters into her own hands by fleeing.⁹ Yet it is only in the wilderness, away from the confines of her life as maid to Sarai and wife to Abram, that Hagar can be seen and known, and thus come into her own power as seer and namer.¹⁰ Here Hagar is anything but an abject, downtrodden slave woman. Her naming of God is a simple, direct, yet audacious act. And again in contrast to Jacob, Hagar has not had to wrest a name away from the angel—she has provided it on her own. The messenger calls her name, but in this story it is the human protagonist who gives a new name.

Despair and Defiance

At the end of chapter 16 we are told that Hagar has indeed returned to her masters, and has borne a child to Abram. In chapter 21 her story picks up again, leading to a second encounter in the wilderness. Yet where Hagar's first experience is marked by defiance and agency, this episode begins as a tragic inversion of that earlier encounter. Hagar does not flee of her own initiative but is cast out, wandering without direction. This time she does not find a spring of water, and

the insufficient supplies given to her by Abraham run out. At the peak of Hagar's despair, as she completes Abraham's act of sending her and Yishmael into the desert by casting her child under a bush to die (vv. 14-15),¹¹ the very act of seeing turns from life to death.

In chapter 16, Hagar's encounter with the God of seeing is associated with *be'er lahay ro'i*, a well of life and sight (v. 14). Here in chapter 21 there is no water, and Hagar repudiates the power of seeing: "And she went and sat herself opposite, at the distance of a bowshot, for she said: 'I shall not look upon the death of the child'" (v. 16). If seeing is associated with life, then not-seeing is associated with death. Everything has come undone, and Hagar seems to have reached the end—losing the son whom she was promised, losing the power of sight and life.

Yet even here Hagar has not completely lost her agency, her power to act:

And she went and *sat herself opposite*, at the distance of a bowshot, for she said: "I shall not look upon the death of the child." So *she sat opposite*, and she raised up her voice, and she cried (Gen. 21:16).

The phrase "she sat opposite," "*vateshev mineged*," appears twice, bracketing her statement "I shall not look upon (see) the death of the child." The repetition serves to set off Hagar's words—the only ones she speaks in this chapter—and to highlight the action itself. The word "*mi-*

neged" subtly hints at Hagar's "opposition" to this turn of events. After the second mention of her sitting down "opposite," she "raises up her voice and cries." Is Hagar praying? Pleading for divine intercession? We are not told. What is significant is that Hagar has not given in passively or silently. Hagar remains an actor in these verses, albeit a tragic one, pointedly setting her son under a bush, sitting down "in opposition," and raising her voice. Hagar then takes away the only thing left to her—her own sight—as if to say: if God no longer sees me, then I too will no longer see. This is Hagar's final act of defiance.

Return of Sight and Life

It is at this point that God does respond, fulfilling the prediction from chapter 16 that "God will hear." We are reminded of the intertwined nature of Hagar's fate and that of her son. In chapter 16 the boy's name, Yishmael, was given as a sign of God hearing Hagar's affliction. Here, in 21:17, we are told that God hears the *boy's* voice—when it has just been mentioned that it is Hagar who is crying out! Whether or not the text preserves some kind of error or confusion between different traditions of the story, the effect is one of allusion between Hagar and Yishmael. Each one reflects the other, as we saw previously in the announcement of Yishmael's destiny. If Yishmael's life is to be an amplified version of Hagar's experience, then here his voice too is amplified—it is his cry that reaches to heaven. Yet it is his mother's agency,

the power of *her* voice “lifting up,” that initiates the divine response.

The *malakh*'s call from the heavens in verse 17—an almost conversational “what’s the matter, Hagar?”—belies the anguished mother’s desperation. Judging from the messenger’s response, it seems that Hagar has been overreacting, or at least misperceiving the situation. And in an alliterative word-play on the theme of sight, the messenger tells her “*al tiri*,” “do not fear”—the similar sounding roots of “fear” and “see” making his negation of fear a negation of *her* negation of sight. And perhaps it has been only her fear that has kept Hagar from seeing, for the next thing that happens is that “God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water” (v. 19). Sight has returned, and with it, life-giving water.

Looked at schematically, the turning point in this story is its structural center—the emphasis on the word *voice*, both Hagar’s and the child’s:

A. Water runs out/the child is sent to die (Gen. 21:15).

B. Negation of sight (“I won’t see the child’s death”) (v. 16a).

C. Hagar lifts up her *voice* (v. 16b).

C1. God hears the child’s *voice* (v. 17).

B1. Return of sight (Hagar sees the well) (v. 19a).

A1. Return of water/child is sustained (v. 19b).

The return of sight and of life—embodied here by water—pivots around Hagar’s act of raising her voice, and God’s hearing. Salvation

occurs as Hagar reasserts herself as an actor in the story. Her passivity in being cast out by Abraham, and her inability to sustain her child after Abraham’s flask is emptied, are inverted after the encounter with the *malakh*. Now it is Hagar who fills the flask, and who sustains her child where Abraham could not.

By the end of this episode, Hagar’s agency is fully restored, and in fact extended beyond her role as assertive handmaid. The final mention of Hagar in the Bible has her taking the first step toward the divine promise of countless “seed.” Not only does the destiny announced by the *malakh* in chapter 16 begin to be fulfilled, but Hagar’s act—finding a wife for her son from her own homeland (Gen. 21:21)—is an exact parallel of Abraham’s search for a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:4). In a few dramatic verses, Hagar has been transformed from victimized and endangered slave woman to autonomous matriarch of a nascent people.

It is significant that both of Hagar’s encounters with the divine occur in the wilderness. Many of her male counterparts in the Bible—Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Elijah—also find God in the wilderness, or in a place which is no-place. Yet Hagar not only finds God, she finds herself. We do not hear Hagar’s voice in the confines of Abraham and Sarah’s camp, and no *malakh* speaks to her there. To a far greater extent than the men, Hagar must leave her defined place and her defined role in order to encounter the divine presence, to hear her name and find the power to name. The *malakh*'s

first question to Hagar implicitly acknowledges the importance of place: from where are you coming, and where are you going? Hagar’s place in this moment of encounter is ambiguous: she is in-between places (“on the way to Shur,” between Egypt and Canaan) and in-between roles, not quite a handmaid yet not quite free. It is in this out-of-her-place place that Hagar is able to fully meet God.

In the Tent: Sarah

The importance of place for women and divine encounter is approached—from the opposite angle—in the story of Sarah’s laugh. Bounded by the two accounts of Hagar in the wilderness, Sarah’s one conversation with God reveals the limiting power of place, in contrast to Hagar’s redemptive experience.

As with Hagar, Sarah’s encounter begins with a question of place. After enjoying an afternoon meal, a contingent of divine messengers ask Abraham, “Where is Sarah your wife?” (Gen. 18:9). As in Hagar’s case, we have to assume that the questioner knows the literal answer to his inquiry. The question and its answer—“here in the tent”—establish the context for Sarah’s eavesdropping, but they also affirm that (in contrast to Hagar) Sarah is clearly in her place. The messengers have come to announce to Abraham that he and Sarah will soon have a child, to which Sarah reacts by laughing.

Feminist readers have emphasized the transgressive nature of Sarah’s laughing response to the divine promise of a son. Alicia Ostriker writes that

“The moment of laughter ruptures the principles of authority, whatever they may be . . . Comedy teaches that you can transgress and get away with it.” Lori Lefkowitz pursues the meaning of Sarah’s eavesdropping and laughter on a deeper level, and sees in it “an alternative discursive possibility to woman as Other. Instead we see Woman as outsider looking in, with powers and privileges that accrue from distance.” Lefkowitz goes on to argue that the reason for Sarah’s laughter remains mysterious, to the reader and to God, yet this story “represents God in relation to her as deferential to her psychic complexity, as if God . . . speaks with clarity, and Woman responds with ambiguity. He inquires, receives no satisfying response, and He shrugs.”¹² While Sarah’s laugh does represent a kind of defiance or transgression of boundaries, I would argue that ultimately her challenge is a failure, and her own subjectivity denied.

If Hagar pushed against the boundaries of her “place” as servant by fleeing into the wilderness, Sarah pushes the boundaries by reacting derisively *from* her place in the tent (a quite literal representation, in this story, of woman’s place within the private realm). The divine promise of “seed” to Abraham is the engine driving this entire narrative, and Sarah dares to laugh! And beyond laughing (which after all Abraham has done as well), she derisively mocks both her own reproductive capacity and her husband’s sexual ability: “After I am worn out, shall I have [sexual] pleasure, as my lord is old?” (Gen. 18:12). The narra-

tor, in the preceding verse, mentions both Sarah and Abraham's age but emphasizes that Sarah is menopausal; similarly YHWH, in his response after Sarah's laugh, mentions only Sarah's age. By bracketing Sarah's own appraisal of the situation with these two contrasting accounts, the text highlights her mocking of Abraham. Sarah appears to be saying, in effect, that the old man can no longer perform sexually. But for all their audacity, Sarah's words come across as less defiant than sadly bitter. Mockery is a weapon of the powerless, and here Sarah is reduced to making fun of her husband's—and by extension, God's—potency, to express her disbelief.

The Last Word

The divine response to these mocking words is neither deferential nor approving. This is a passage in which God literally has the last word(s)—words which are, quite pointedly, an ironic inversion of Sarah's own. A closer look at the structure of the passage is useful in capturing the ultimately tragic tone of this encounter. There is a repeated pattern of Divine Question—Divine Announcement—Sarah's Denial, with an added closing statement by God:

- A. Messengers ask Abraham, "where is Sarah?" (v. 9).
- B. It is announced that Sarah will have a son (v. 10a).
- C. Sarah reacts to this announcement, denying the possibility of giving birth (v. 12).
- A1. God asks Abraham about Sarah's response (v. 13).

- B1. Repetition of announcement of birth of a son (v. 14).
- C1. Sarah fearfully reacts to God's rebuke and denies her own response, saying "I did not laugh." (v. 15a).
- D. "He" (a messenger/YHWH) refutes her: "No, you laughed." (v. 15b).

What immediately emerges from the text is that, in stark contrast to Hagar's encounters in the wilderness, Sarah has little direct contact with the divine. Until the final verse, the messengers/YHWH talk *about*, not to, Sarah, directing their words to Abraham. Both of Sarah's statements are, in turn, reactions to something said about her. Enclosed in her tent, Sarah is placed in an essentially passive position, with only the power to deny. Her reactions may be audacious, but her words lack any positive or creative power.

Where Hagar is given the last word in her encounter with the *malakh*, naming God and her own experience, Sarah's words are repeatedly taken away from her, their meaning transformed. When she mocks Abraham's potency, YHWH (mis)quotes her as disbelieving her own. When she denies laughing, "he" (presumably God) refutes her denial.

This last exchange—Sarah's only direct conversation with the divine—encapsulates her experience with a breathtaking economy of words. Structurally the passage as a whole builds to God's final words, the divine response (D) added on to the repeated A-B-C pattern. In verse 15 Sarah says

"*lo tzahakti*" ("I didn't laugh"); God replies "*lo ki tzahakt*" ("No, you laughed"). One little word, *ki*, is added to Sarah's denial, but the transformation in meaning is large. The untranslatable shift from *lo tzahakti* to *lo ki tzahakt* is the final refutation of Sarah's power to defy authority or name her own experience. Her own words are used against her. An exchange that may first read as comedic farce¹³ reveals a deeper, more tragic view of Sarah's lack of agency and subjectivity. Her servant is able to overcome fear in the wilderness and in so doing reclaim her sight and the power of life, but Sarah is left fearful in her tent, denying her own experience, her words literally taken out of her mouth.

On the Way

The contrast of Hagar's and Sarah's experiences teaches the all-important role of *place* in the Torah's depiction of women's encounters with the divine. For each, the encounter begins with a question about place: Where has Hagar come from? Where is Sarah? Questions suggest ambiguity, and the biblical text seems to implicitly recognize the dilemma posed by woman's place in a patriarchal society. The women in these stories are confined to the domestic realm, defined by their relationship to husbands and sons. Yet one who is so confined and limited cannot fully experience God. Sarah's encounter reveals the bounds placed on one who remains "in the tent": she cannot emerge as a whole person to meet her God. Hagar's experience shows, from the opposite side, that

women must flee the place of social constriction in order to fully meet the divine.¹⁴ Herein lies the dilemma, for if the woman remains "in the tent," in her place, meeting cannot fully occur. Yet if she is able, like Hagar, to have direct encounter, then she must leave a significant part of who she is (in that social context) behind. Perhaps that is why only a secondary character—one who is not necessary for the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham—is allowed such a full encounter. She leaves her place and ultimately leaves the story.

Yet beyond this comment on the situation of women in biblical society and text, there is a deeper teaching here about what it means to be able to encounter God's Presence. The *malakh*'s question to Hagar in Genesis 16 points to the power of moving beyond one's "place" in order to achieve such a moment of meeting. When he asks her "where are you going?" we know that Hagar's fate is open-ended, still a question. We learn here that it is the one on her way, the one whose future is open, who is also open to meeting. There is, as well, an element of risk and danger in this openness. The significant, sacred moment is the one in-between, the moment of not-knowing. For Hagar, it is the moment between slavery and freedom, the moment between life and death.

From Hagar we learn that meeting God is about reclaiming oneself, about being seen and called by one's name. Encounter with the divine is at the same time about agency, about the power to see and to give a name. It is this mutuality which is at the heart of