



Rereading the story of Hagar in Genesis 16:1-16 as a narrative of prejudice in South Africa

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Abstract

The present research is a rereading of the Hagar narrative in view of prejudice in South Africa. Some previous contributions on the Hagar narrative have tended to pursue either exegetical or hermeneutic route. The present research comprises an eight-tier structure. However, the Hagar narrative is explored in lieu of the following two foci. First, a critical exegesis of the Hagar narrative (Genesis 16:1-16) is given. The critical exegesis is a verse-by-verse analysis of the narrative. The analysis seeks to present clarity for the readership where some ambiguity and inconsistency occur in the narrative. For example, the study interrogates the flight of a pregnant Hagar from Sarah in Mamre and travels a journey of approximately 340km to Shur at the border with Egypt. Other misunderstood parts of the text include the enslavement, marriage and mistreatment of Hagar by Abraham and Sarah. Second, a rereading of the Hagar story as a narrative of prejudice in South Africa is explored. It is argued that the attempt is not to regard the narrative as a historical reality and that Hagar will not be discussed as a historical figure. On the contrary, the present study examines the concepts and themes in the Hagar narrative considering the perceived oppression and prejudice devastating post-apartheid South Africa today. The study argues that South Africa has not successfully dismantled apartheid policies by the dawning of majority rule; unemployment, poverty and abortion continue to depict the 'rainbow nation' in a bad light. For example, legalization of abortion contradicts the African Ubuntu philosophy. Hence, "...Return to thy mistress and submit thyself under her hands" (Genesis 16:9) suggests a perpetuity of apartheid policies. However, a rereading of the Hebrew phrase translated as "The well of him that lives and sees" (see Genesis 16:14), portrays Hagar envisioning triumph and a dispensation of euphoria beyond her situation of deprivation and prejudice. The study is, therefore, poised towards a feminist discussion of Hagar as an African mother (wife) who was jettisoned to take care of the young children solely and single-handedly. The study utilizes a contextual content analysis as an approach in which secondary data analysis on the Hagar narrative will be explored in light of the biblical text as the primary source. The study revolves around a symbolic interactionism theory.

Keywords: Abraham, Apartheid, Biblical Hermeneutics, Feminism, Patriarchy, Political Elite, Symbolic Interactionism Theory.

Introduction

The Bible contains many stories of individuals who faced difficult circumstances and overcame them with faith and courage. Some examples will suffice. Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers but eventually rose to a position of power in Egypt (Genesis 37; Acts 7:9-19). Ruth, a Moabite woman who



chose to follow her mother-in-law Naomi back to Israel and eventually became the great-grandmother of King David. Esther was chosen to be the queen of Persia and she used her position to save her people from extermination. Daniel was taken captive by the Babylonians and faced many trials, but ultimately God delivered him from danger. The present research is a discussion of the Hagar narrative in Genesis 16:1-16. It seeks to problematize the narrative in which a dialogue with previous sources is facilitated. A study of the Hagar narrative is not a virgin field. Contributions on the Hagar narrative are numerous which include but not limited to: P. Trible (1984), H. Küng (1995) and J. Claassens (2013), among others. The study attempts to demonstrate that the Hagar narrative carries with it a multiplicity of interpretative meanings both for the biblical audience and the readership in general. However, the Hagar narrative is a complex and powerful story that has been interpreted in many ways over the centuries. Hagar is an Egyptian slave of Sarah, the wife of Abraham. When Sarah is unable to conceive a child (Genesis 16:1), she gives her slave to Abraham so that he can have a child (Genesis 16:2-3). Hagar conceives and Sarah is jealous and mistreats her (v.6). Hagar flees into the wilderness, where she is visited by an angel who tells her to return to Sarah and submit to her (v.6). Eventually, Sarah conceived and a son of her own, Isaac, was born and Hagar and Ishmael are sent away (Genesis 21:8-10).

However, a missing link needs to be elaborated about Ishmael and Isaac as sons to Abraham. When Isaac was born, Ishmael was already sixteen years of age. Although born of a slave mother, Ishmael was Abraham's firstborn son and Isaac was the second. According to Ancient Near Eastern customs, the firstborn son was the heir to the father's inheritance as part of primogeniture. For example, "Israel is my son, my firstborn" (Exodus 4:22). According to Davis (2008:79) the Hebrew Scriptures portray the birthright as bestowing not only a double portion of inheritance but also a special blessing, priestly office, the position and authority of lordship, and procreative power.

Sarah knew this custom very well; hence she orchestrated the departure of Hagar and Ishmael out of Abraham's home in order to facilitate Isaac as the heir instead. Some interpreters see the Hagar narrative as a story of oppression and injustice, with Hagar being treated as a second-class citizen by Sarah and Abraham. While on the one hand other people regard it as a story of faith and resilience, with Hagar trusting in God and returning to Sarah despite her mistreatment, on the other hand there are others who see it as a story of divine intervention, with God intervening to protect Hagar and provide for her needs. Meanwhile, Hagar is presented as a powerful figure in the Bible. She is a woman of faith who trusts in God despite her difficult circumstances. She is also a symbol of resilience and strength, as she can overcome her mistreatment and return to Sarah. Hagar is also presented as an intelligent woman who fabricated an angelic rhetoric about her return because she perhaps perceived that Abraham and Sarah would not dispute a divine message.

Another observation is the breaking of the law by Abraham regarding the treatment of slaves. For example, the law stated that: "Runaway slaves should not be returned to their masters" (see Deuteronomy 23:16). The Apostle Paul also broke the Old Testament law by sending Onesimus (a slave) back to Philemon (master) (Philemon 1:10). Exodus 21:20-21 also states that: "If a man strikes his male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies at his hand, he shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be punished, for the slave is his money." In respect of the above observation, God would not contradict himself by sending an angel to Hagar to tell her to "...Return to your mistress and submit to her..." (Genesis 16:9). Added to that, it is presupposed that Abraham influenced the return of Hagar back home.

After analyzing and discussing the loose ends in the Hagar narrative, the conversation will traverse the dimension of appropriation (application) not because the narrative is authentic and historical, but because of contemporary themes presented in the narrative such as: Abraham breaking the law on the treatment of foreigners, prejudice, human rights violation in the narrative, feminism and the reliance portrayed by Hagar, and race relations in the context of Ishmael and Isaac. This dimension will attract a contextual content analysis as a methodical approach (see Obendorf, Janneck & Funck, 2009:51-76). The present research is centered on symbolic interactionism as a theory (see Carter & Fuller, 2016:1-17). Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the role of language in the development of social relationships and the construction of social



reality. It suggests that people create their own reality through their interactions with others, and that these realities are constantly changing and evolving.

Problem statement

The investigation attempts to wrestle with two main problems. First, the problem in the Sarah and Hagar narrative is the conflict between Sarah and Hagar over Sarah's desire to have a child and Hagar's role in fulfilling that desire. The arrangement temporarily looked like it would work, especially when the angel from God was involved. The claim that Sarah had suggested that Abraham should have a baby with Hagar is also not credible because of Sarah not liking Hagar when the latter had become pregnant. We have a "reverse jive" in the narrative: the angelic statement to Abraham that "...whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her..." (Genesis 21:12) could be a replica of the earlier version of the narrative in which Abraham is portrayed as saying to Sarah: "...Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleases thee..." (Genesis 16:6). While on the one hand the angel is depicted as not involved from the beginning, on the other hand, the angel tells Hagar at the well in the wilderness "...Return to your mistress and submit to her..." (Genesis 16:9). That is a real serious problem with this text in which conceptualization of human ideas and their ultimate actions are portrayed as emanating from God. It is thus important to morally reflect on such notions.

The study will examine this notion critically. Because of the frailty and inconsistency presumed by the text, the present study will discuss the content of the narrative not as a true story but as a metaphor for human predicament in a contemporary context. This forms the line of connection between the exegetical interpretation of the chosen text and hermeneutics and not primarily based on ideological equilibrium. Second, earlier on in the introductory section of this conversation, I mentioned examples of contributions (among many) that explored the biblical Hagar and divergent interpretations that emerged from the narrative. The few contributions that would not escape my attention were entirely hermeneutical in character. A rereading of most of the previous contributions on the Hagar narrative seemed to have lurked on the critical analysis of the narrative. I suspect that the problem can be attributed to personal emotional experience(s) which one brings to the text. Hence, authors "jump the gun" (see Hughes, Filimonov, Wray & Spasić, 2021:272) to focus more on the application. The present study differs from such approaches. The readership can be assured of a critical exegetical study that scientifically examines the logic and authenticity of the narrative for its relevance in contemporary contexts. Hermeneutics (which is a part of the present research) will then be brought into the spotlight.

Theoretical Framework

As previously indicated, the study on the Hagar narrative revolves on the symbolic interactionism theory (see Carter & Fuller, 2016:1-17; Blumer, 1969; Blumer, 1962:179-192; Kuhn, 1964:61-84; Stryker, 2008: 15-31; Stryker, 1980). Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that focuses on the analysis of the patterns of communication, interpretation, and adjustment between individuals in a society. Thus, Carter and Fuller (2016) writes that: "Symbolic interactionism is a micro-level theoretical framework and perspective in sociology that addresses how society is created and maintained through repeated interactions among individuals" (p.1). It is based on the idea that human behaviour is determined by the meanings that people attach to objects, events, and behaviors. Carter and Fuller (2016:1) further opined that: "Central to symbolic interactionist thought is the idea that individuals use language and significant symbols in their communication with others." Symbolic interactionism suggests that people interact with one another through symbols, which are objects, words, gestures, or actions that carry meanings. These meanings are derived from the social context in which they are used. So, sculptural works, architectural artifacts, stone markings, masonry and other ancient historical works of art all depict some interactions that ancient people posited to be understood by future generations. Bringing symbolic interactionism theory into the Hagar narrative is also in order especially where the symbols are believed to be living objects that



interact and inform the environment around them including humans. First, the symbols may not mean anything if an interaction is nonexistent, and the power to initiate the interaction for the symbols to literally respond lies with human potential of creativity. In other words, when an interaction is initiated, there is a motivation in the realization that mobility does not occur unless and until some energy (no matter how small) is exerted. In addition, one does not mislay sight of the impression that the symbols which formed part of Hagar's environment and which she familiarized with had an impact on her psyche that she could visualize a futuristic and promising dispensation packed with numerous possibilities. Although in the biblical text the angel is presented as having spoken and initiated the return to society, Hagar could have been overwhelmed by the physical symbols around her which functioned as her springboard to inform the mind to make a move towards relocation.

The above assertion arises from some depictions in the biblical text in which humans interacted with mammals which is a strong indication that at some point interaction occurred between humans and the environment. For example, a serpent had a conversation with Eva (Genesis 3:4-5; 3:22); the prophet Balaam was rebuked by his donkey (Numbers 22:21-35); the Pharisees complained concerning the disciples who were shouting and praising. Jesus responded that: "...If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40). Second, in my view, Hagar might have had another strength that of talking to herself. When some individuals talk to themselves and with no one else but the surrounding natural ecosystem, there is the sixth sense that says, "someone is hearing me". Academics refers to such as scenario as "self-talk" (see Geurts, 2017:271-285). Alderson-Day and Fernyhough (2015) describe such an occurrence as "inner speech..." (931-965). Geurts (2017) associates self-talk with "a variety of mental functions, including reasoning, problem solving, planning and plan execution, attention and motivation" (p. 271). So, "self-talk" should not be confused with insanity. Self-talk is common among African cultures in which an individual endowed with ancestral spiritual prowess interacts with an invisible being. In view of that, African consultants seeking the assistance of this specialist herbalist/traditionalist appreciate with high esteem that what he/she pronounces is correct. When Geurts mentions "reasoning" and "problem solving" as some of the factors linked to self-talk, Hagar's "The God who sees me" comes to the fore.

Methodology

The study utilizes contextual content analysis as a methodological approach "for analyzing written and oral textual materials which is used sparingly by organizational researchers" (Insch, Moore & Murphy, 1997:1-25; see also McTavish & Pirro, 1990:245-265). Mayring (2002:139-148) refers to it as "Qualitative content analysis". In this study, content analysis comprises critically analyzing the content of the Hagar narrative in Genesis 16:1-16. The content within previous studies on the biblical Hagar including theories and methodologies employed will be examined. Where appropriate, ideas explored in previous research are critiqued and when necessary, included as part of the present investigation. Thus, content analysis is presented as a branch of qualitative research (see Denzin, 1994). This implies that content analysis incorporates what is known in academic circles as secondary data analysis (Johnston, 2014:619-626; see also Boslaugh, 2007). Secondary data pool includes book chapters, journal articles, periodicals, theses and dissertations are analyzed.

Exegesis of Genesis 16:1-16

The exegesis of Genesis 16:1-16 is conducted in view of the contextual content analysis. By "contextual content" reference is made to the context of the narrative itself involving key characters, namely: Angel (the), Abraham, God, Hagar, Isaac, Ishmael, and Sarah. The exegesis is punctuated by analyzing each verse to establish what it meant or did not say in context in which the text originated. Verse 1 commences by stating that Sarah did not bear children for Abraham. The barrenness of Sarah is mentioned in Genesis 11:30; 16:1-2; and 21:1-2. The Bible abounds in scriptures that talk about bareness of different kinds. Bareness in



the Bible is not only physical and biological, but it is also spiritual. For examples, Isaiah 6:11 says: “My people have become a wasteland; they are a barren land.” For Ezekiel (33:30-33) barrenness is a metaphor for “spiritual emptiness and lack of faith.” Ezekiel 29:9 says: “I will make the land of Egypt a desolate waste,” in which “barrenness is a metaphor for physical destruction and desolation.” In Genesis 25:21, Rebekah was also barren. However, Isaac did not consider marrying another woman to have a baby. The list of barren women includes Rachel (Genesis 29:31-30:22); Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-2:21) and many others. Meanwhile, Abraham had obtained a handmaid (a slave from Egypt) for Sarah.

In verses 2 and 3, the narrative takes another dimension that of salvaging Sarah’s bareness, and Hagar was considered to play that role. The Bible does not say anything about marriage and payment of a bride price perhaps because Hagar was a slave, and a slave did not have a voice. The narrative simply talks about Sarah “taking” and “giving” Hagar to Abraham. The Old Testament had no problem in one marrying a second wife. A senior (first) wife would recommend that her husband take another woman for a wife. So, what Sarah, as the “primary wife” (Speiser, 1964:117) did was not unique. In fact, the Code of Hammurabi, which was the law during the time of Abraham, permitted men to marry more than one wife. However, Deuteronomy 7:1-4 prohibits marriage with Canaanites or anyone who was not an Israelite. For Abraham to take Hagar, an Egyptian, for a wife was against the law. When Mariam and Aaron (sister and brother to Moses) spoke against Moses for marrying an Ethiopian (Numbers 12:1), it was probably because Moses had broken one of the known laws against marriage to a foreigner. Considering this prohibition as stated above, one would not be oblivious of the contradiction of the statement in Exodus 12:49 that: “There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.” Nevertheless, as the natural law (see Finnis, 1998:53-73) dictated the pace and not the biblical law (e.g., Exodus 21:20-21; Deuteronomy 23:16) it shows that human ideas and the enactment of those ideas proved that God had never made any recommendation for Abraham to have a child with Hagar. However, there are instances where God either approves or disapproves actions that humans take. In the case of Abraham taking Hagar as wife and having a baby with her maybe God approved of it.

Verse 4 shows that Hagar was now pregnant. According to the narrative, in the eyes of Sarah, Hagar was despising her mistress. The narrative does not state further whether Hagar was questioned for showing such a behavior towards her mistress. The problem now begins in verses 5 and 6, when Sarah dealt harshly with Hagar that the latter had to flee (Hagar affirms the “flight” in verse 8). It is not stated what method Sarah employed to press on Hagar so that she found it unbearable to stay. Perhaps, Sarah’s harsh treatment of Hagar could be the result of an endorsement from Abraham’s statement to Sarah when he said: “Bold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee...” (v.6). Therefore, one would suppose that Abraham played an influential part in Sarah’s persecution of Hagar. The later became vulnerable to ill-treatment.

In verse 7, the angel of God found Hagar at a fountain in the wilderness on the way to Shur: “And the angel of the LORD found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur” (verse 7). Another name for the wilderness of Shur is Ethami (Numbers 33:8). The Hebrew name for Shur is the verb שור. Tradition says Abraham “dwelled between Kadesh and Shur and sojourned in Gerar” (Genesis 20:1). Although the Hebrew meaning of the verb Shur is “to behold” or “to regard”, there are Scriptures that throw some light on Shur as a “wall” (see for example, Genesis 49:22; 2 Samuel 22:30; Job 24:11; Psalms 18:29). This probable means that there was a wall separating Egypt and the surrounding territories. With this argument in mind, one would conclude that Hagar could not proceed into Egypt because of the wall. The phrase אֵי רֵא לַחַי אֵרֶב is a Hebrew proverb that translates to “A fountain of life is seen.” It is a metaphor for the idea that knowledge and wisdom are essential for a meaningful life. In Deuteronomy 8:7, Palestine is decorated as a land of brooks of water, of fountains, and depths that spring out of valleys and hills” (see also Deuteronomy 11:11). The fountain was on the eastern side of Egypt and formed the boundary with the land of the Ishmaelites (Genesis 25:18) and the land of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:7). According to Hoffmeier (2008:113) the way of Shur “was located along the Wadi Tumilat — an arable strip of land to the east of the Nile Delta, serving as the ancient transit route between Ancient Egypt and Canaan across the Sinai Peninsula” (see also Beitzel, 1985:86-87).



Another observation is that the Ishmaelites were already in existence by the time Hagar arrived in Shur when she was pregnant. Hagar's idea of naming her son Ishmael might have been influenced by her familiarization with people called by the same name in Shur. Therefore, to trace the ethnicity origin of the Ishmaelites (also known as "Arabs" in the modern day) beginning with Abraham's son, Ishmael, may not be correct. Meanwhile, Shur is believed to be the first place to be reached by the Israelites when they crossed the Red Sea (Exodus 15:22; Numbers 33:8). In other words, when Hagar left Abraham's place in Mamre, she had decided to go back home in Egypt when the angel met her at the fountain. Another factor to consider is the distance covered by Hagar from Mamre to Shur in Egypt (approx. 210 miles, about 338 km). This journey was too long to be travelled by a pregnant mother on foot, and she would return to Mamre the same distance. This is my own calculation after the Google option provided the distance estimate. Several searches did not yield into providing any other mode of transport that Hagar used. The only possible probability is that she walked. The question that remains unanswered is the feasibility of walking such a long distance (676 km when the distance is doubled) by Hagar.

Although the narrative does not mention the specifics of both the mode of transport and the period she took, it can be speculated that she might have taken several days or months. Another finding is that Hagar was not always alone at the fountain (the spring/well). In view of the location of the fountain "...the spring was on the way to Shur" (Genesis 16:7), and my personal familiarization with a fountain (spring/well) as a water source, it is probable that Hagar would interact with local people and shepherds who came to fetch water for domestic use or for the livestock. In my view, Hagar's choice of the location provided a "two-way traffic" for her emancipation and that of the baby she was carrying: (1) interaction with members of the community or shepherds with their flocks who came to fetch some water from the fountain and (2) she would survive for a period by drinking water alone without food. For example, study has shown that a human being can live without water for a period of between 8 and 21 days (Kottusch, Tillmann & Püschel, 2009:184-191). However, there is another school of thought that says one can survive without food by drinking water alone for close to two months. The narrative does not give the glimpse of how long Hagar stayed at the fountain of Shur.

In verse 9 (verse 8 is an affirmation of the flight by Hagar from Sarah), the angel tells Hagar to "Return to your mistress and submit to her". The above statement poses a serious problem for several reasons stated in this section. I am not looking at the above verse in the negative in terms of Hagar returning to Sarah who disliked her. Although the narrative talks of the angel instructing Hagar at the well to return to Sarah, one could also argue, on the basis of the absence of a "second opinion" (no one was also there to report), that Hagar calculated a generally acceptable belief in the word of the angel by the society of her time by alleging that the same angel told her to go back, not to Abraham, but to her mistress, Sarah. This argument is raised as the backdrop to the fact that if Abraham had perceived it as appropriate for Hagar to go away on Sarah's insistence, it was only proper also, in view of a strong belief in angelic apparitions in the Old Testament, for Abraham to convince Sarah that Hagar should return following the announcement of the angel for her to do so. Two scenarios present themselves in this episode also. First, one would speculate that Hagar conceptualized and framed the idea of the angel telling her to return to Sarah because she contemplated on the fact that she was carrying Abraham's child and that both would not suffer and eventually die in the wilderness when Abraham was wealthy in livestock. Second, in my opinion, Abraham still loved Hagar and the baby she carried and so he would be willing to receive Hagar back to stay with them. Hagar's return and acceptance by Sarah were positive developments for Abraham. With that in mind, it can further be problematized that Abraham, being a persuasive individual (see Genesis 18), might have discussed with Sarah on the possibility of Hagar returning and what Sarah expected Hagar to do. Abraham might have communicated the same to Hagar with assurance that Sarah was willing to receive her back. In addition, the idea of the angel telling Hagar to return might have been conceived by Abraham because in a patriarchal society in the Ancient Near East, an angel would not make a revelation to a female and so Hagar's claim would be inappropriate.

In verse 10, Hagar's blessings are confirmed by God who stated that: "...I will multiply thy seed exceedingly,

that it shall not be numbered for multitude". Perhaps, Ishmael as the heir of Abraham's inheritance would also account for the pronounced blessings (verses 11 and 12). God makes promises of the blessings to Hagar when she was still pregnant. For God to state that Hagar's son would become "a wild donkey of a man..." (v.12) would have made Hagar hesitant to go ahead and give her son the name, Ishmael. In ancient Israel, as in Africa, names given to children had meanings, usually denoting either family or cultural disputes, prowess, fortunes, greatness, successes, hunting skill, and/or a very talkative person. In the general interpretation of the metaphor "a wild donkey of a man" various negative meanings would be attached such as: stubborn, unrestrained, ill-mannered, spoiled, and so on. Perhaps, Hagar could not see anything wrong with the angel pronouncing Ishmael as becoming "a wild donkey of a man". I am persuaded to presuppose that "a wild donkey" for Hagar was a "free donkey" which was able to traverse every part of the wilderness in the ancient world. With this idea in mind, Hagar could have perceived the angel's statement of "a wild donkey of a man" to include freedom for Ishmael and his future generations. This understanding could have made Hagar view "a wild donkey of a man" in a positive light.

In verses 13 and 14, the Hebrew name *ישמעאל* (translated as "God hears") derives from Hagar's affirmation that: "The well of him that lives and sees me" [*לְחַיֵּי רַאֲרָבִי*]. Hagar described God as *El Roi* [רועי] "The God who sees me". Hagar's annunciation might have led some biblical commentators to idolize Hagar as "the only woman in the Bible who gave God a name" (see Trible 1984:28). Trible (1984:28) further notes that:

Hagar is a pivotal figure in biblical theology. She is the first person in scripture whom a divine messenger visits and the only person who dares to name the deity. Within the historical memories of Israel, she is the first woman to bear a child. This conception and birth make her an extraordinary figure in the story of faith: the first woman to hear an annunciation, the only one to receive a divine promise of descendants, and the first to weep for her dying child. Truly, Hagar the Egyptian is the prototype of not only special but all mothers in Israel. When Hagar finally returned and gave birth, she named the boy "Ishmael" [*ישמעאל*], which means "God who hears" (verse 15). Abraham was 86 years old when Ishmael was born (verse 16).

Rereading the Hagar Story as a Narrative of Prejudice in South Africa

In my earlier discussion in this study, I alluded to the fact that I am neither regarding the Hagar narrative as a historical reality nor Hagar as a historical figure. It is not imaginable for the readership to perceive of Moses, who lived later than Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, to write a detailed and factual account of Hagar's movements. The following two schools emerge concerning the rereading of the Hagar narrative. The first school comprises individuals who are entrenched in what is known as "inerrancy of Scripture" (see Beinert, 1995:386; Holmes, 2009:41). This group (including the Church) reads the narrative (and the Bible itself) from a supernatural/religious/faith perspective. From this perspective, they argue that the Bible is inerrant. However, the exegesis of the Hagar narrative above has shown that some claims made in the narrative are not only strange, but also naïve. The second school comprises theologians and biblical commentators (academics) who hold that there are numerous flaws in the Bible. The present study pursues the second school. The only difference is that the present research attempts to present for the readership that themes that the Hagar narrative grappled with are also particularities that we experience every day in democratic South Africa. Nevertheless, the biblical story of Hagar is a narrative of experiences of forced migration, prejudice and slavery. Being a slave is not a good thing. Thus, Trible (1984:28) writes that:

From the beginning, Hagar is powerless because God supports Sarah. Kept in her place, the slave woman is the innocent victim of use, abuse and rejection. As a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the



religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to other.

In numerous instances, individuals do not even know that they are gradually drowning into institutionalized slave trade of the 16th and 19th centuries (see Angeles, 2013:2). In this section, I will begin by recounting some examples drawn from the ancient near East (e.g. Hatti and Israel) to illustrate how individuals became slaves. According to Exodus 22:3, a thief who was unable to pay compensation for the theft ended up becoming a slave. In numerous instances, impoverished persons were unable to repay the loan so they ended up by either presented themselves over as slaves or the lender forced them to become his slaves (see Leviticus 25:39-44; Deuteronomy 15:1-18). It was also common for people to be born slaves (see Hoffner, 2008:133). Exodus 21:4 states that: "If his master has given him a wife, and she has born him sons or daughters, the wife and her children will be her master's, and he will go out by himself". Hoffner paraphrases the above text by saying "If a Hebrew slave was given a wife, paid for by his master, and if the couple had children at the end of the period of the indentured servitude, he could go free, but not his wife or children" (2008:133). In this mode of slavery, people would become perpetual slaves including future generations. It is also asserted that individuals became slaves when they were captured in military campaigns (Hoffner, 2008:133; see also Bryce, 2002:105-107).

Abraham's concession to send Hagar away has been viewed by many as a morally questionable act. Furthermore, the fact that Hagar was a slave and had no choice in the matter has been seen as a violation of her human rights. Additionally, the fact that Abraham did not provide any support or protection for Hagar and Ishmael as they were sent away has been seen as a sign of his lack of compassion and empathy. Hence, Hans Küng (1995:11) is unamused by the character of Abraham in the Hagar narrative as depicted in the following writing:

[Abraham] the one who is described so sympathetically in the Hebrew Bible with human weaknesses, the one who during his life often slyly presented his wife as his sister [Genesis 12:12f.], the one who literally sent his subsidiary wife, Hagar the Egyptian, and her son Ishmael (the tribal ancestor of Muslims) into the wilderness on the urging of his wife Sarah [Genesis 21:14], the one who paid off the sons of his subsidiary wives with gifts and banished them from his house [Genesis 25:6], this Abraham (and here exceptions prove the rule), is increasingly celebrated as the embodiment not only of the virtues of modesty, mercy and hospitality, but also as the embodiment of all the virtues, which his descendants had only to imitate.

The fact that Abraham's decision to send away Hagar and Ishmael was based on Sarah's jealousy has been seen as a sign of his lack of moral leadership. In my view, if both Abraham and Sarah had taken the assertion of Hagar's rudeness towards Sarah seriously, it would have been proper for Hagar to get the opportunity for a dialogue for her to respond and perhaps apologize for the alleged misconduct. However, one would also understand that Hagar was a young mother, and a polygamous relationship was delicate to handle where she had to share a man (Abraham) with Sarah. Alternatively, if the report of Hagar's disrespectfulness towards her mistress was proved to be true, one would empathize with the young mother for a childish behavior in view of her being a novice and a new entrant into a relationship of this kind.

Meanwhile, one would regard Hagar as a "Think-Tank"; a symbol of resilience and strength in the face of adversity. Under harsh circumstances of mistreatment and denied justice by both husband Abraham and her mistress Sarah, she still managed to find a way to survive and thrived. She was able to think outside the box and came up with creative solutions to her problems. She was also able to trust in God and rely on Him for guidance and strength. The song that she had literally composed in the desert, namely: "The well of him that lives and sees me" (Genesis 16:13) was motivated by the waters she drank from the fountain in Shur. After drinking from the waters of Shur, Hagar's situation of enslavement, rejection and alienation was



transformed to become the source and springboard of empowerment. She looked at her situation positively and prepared herself to face the reality head-on by returning to Abraham with whom she had conceived. In our contemporary thinking, we have a phrase that literally says, “If you can’t win them, join them...” (Bale et al., 2010:410-426) as opposed to “If you can’t join them, beat them...” (Twenge et al., 2001:1058-1069). The earlier metaphor attempts to shed more light on Hagar’s decision to return to Abraham and Sarah, suggesting that from a distance, it would be difficult for her to put pressure on Abraham in terms of his responsibility to take care of both Hagar and the pregnancy. When she returned to Abraham and Sarah, Hagar stayed until Ishmael was between 17 and 19 years old (Genesis 21:5-10).

Hagar’s story is an example of how contemporary women can use their minds to come up with solutions to difficult situations. Trust in God is one level of a much broader program of action; Hagar had to take a step by moving towards the cause and source of her enslavement. Hagar’s narrative attempts to put in motion a culture of interaction, a public speaking. Individual or collective support will only be realized when one speaks out the nature of the problem one is experiencing. Support may not only come in the form of food, but also in the form of ideas. Ideas rule the world. Hence Dorow, Varvakis, Davila and Vallejos (2015:51-59) penned the “Generation of Ideas, Ideation and Idea Management”.

In my view, the Hagar narrative can be applied to the South African situation in a few ways. Hence, Brenner, Lee and Yee (2010:247) write of Hagar as a “forerunner and a companion to all immigrant women who lived and worked in forced reality”. Studies on the negative impact of apartheid in South Africa are plentiful. For example, Mofokeng (1988:35) argues that the Bible was used negatively by westerners to subjugate indigenous people of Africa. Mofokeng also followed up the above idea in his later work, namely: “Land is Our Mother: A Black Theology of Land” (1997:45-56).

The consensus among most scholars is that the Bible should be used in the same way to emancipate the oppressed people of our beautiful continent. Unfortunately, most contributions focus on the negative impact of apartheid in general terms while neglecting the question of prejudice against women in a democratic South Africa. There are numerous instances in which people (especially Africans) experience slavery and prejudice either at home in a postcolonial situation or in a foreign country where they migrated in search of greener pastures. In some situations, due to poverty and starvation numerous African young women are married at the tender ages of 10-15 as a way of salvaging a food crisis for the entire family or clan. Numerous spousal relationships in South Africa are punctuated by sad narratives of physical attack, wife-battering, and murder, among other abuses. When these phenomena occur, they leave behind reminding marks and permanent scars on the bodies (and lives) of those still living especially the little ones left behind.

An informal investigation with some local individuals has revealed that most families in South Africa are widowed and in certain instances child headed. When I inquired further, it emerged that one of the spouses passed on due to mysterious health challenges. In some cases, witchcraft is cited due to continued conflicts which could not be resolved. It also emerged that most children in South Africa, especially girls, have had sex or conceived at tender age, and the young mother is left alone to care for the baby. Some of them are forced to abort. Nevertheless, the Ubuntu concept does not support the promotion of abortion because South Africans do not believe in bloodshed even that of a foetus. In addition, revelations have also unearthed of young girls who are raped, not only by their peers, but also by adults and married men (see Rugwiji, 2017:50-58). Babies who are lucky to have a mother with a strong character like Hagar who says “The God who sees me” will survive the threshold of impunity up to maturity. Usually, orphaned children who endured the harsh terrain of life until adulthood tend not to like the reiteration of the narrative due to its emotional and unpleasant disposition. Some of the weird behaviors by teenagers are consequences of mistreatment and abuse experienced in their childhood and upbringing (see for example, Ngubane et al., 2022:1). In some cases, the rape experiences and abuse will cause trauma and mental disorders (e.g., De Bellis & Zisk, 2014:185-222; Dworkin, 2020:1011-1028). In my view, the voices of feminist activists getting louder against rape and child abuse can be an additional solution to the problem.

In the Sotho language, we have the following proverb *Ngwana wa sa llogo o hwela tharing* [Literally: “A



child who does not cry while on their mother's back will die quietly"]. What the proverb means is that one should not only ask but situate oneself where assistance is accessible, otherwise, one might never get the assistance needed because those who can help are unaware. The above Sotho proverb applies even to adults although it uses the name *ngwana* (child). In view of both the symbolic interactionism and the Sotho proverb, Hagar (and people experiencing prejudice) would use every tool at their disposal to emancipate themselves. The starting point is interaction with people. Some people prefer to call it "activism". Given the patriarchal mood that prevails in our modern world, especially in South Africa, the majority of women find themselves in a precarious situation in which the environment outlaws them to maneuver as they are "threatened by forces that prevent them from flourishing" (Claassens, 2013:2). Resilience becomes not an option but a "must-do". It is also critical to enrich one's mind through reading and further studies and/or attainment of skills. Universities, technical colleges, and polytechnics, among other institutions of further education will serve as a springboard like the fountain of Shur. Joining discussion groups and attending women forums can serve as a "fountain" of knowledge enrichment. It is advisable that prior to confrontation with the oppressor, one should be equipped psychologically and mentally. Few of our women in positions of power and those who have excelled in further studies can compensate for the majority who are unfortunately disoriented.

Conclusions

This research is a critical examination of the Hagar narrative in Genesis 16:1-16. The study investigated the mistreatment of Hagar by Sarah. It was argued from the beginning that the study is neither inclined towards discussing the narrative as a historical reality nor Hagar as a historical figure. The main concepts that drew my attention are the themes grappled with during ancient biblical times which are common as lived realities in a contemporary world. Meanwhile, Hagar became a maidservant (a slave) to Sarah when Abraham took Hagar away from her family in Egypt. Sarah did not have a child and so she suggested that Abraham to have a baby with the maidservant Hagar. Hostilities between Sarah and Hagar started when Hagar had conceived. It was explored that when the amount of persecution exerted on Hagar by Sarah heightened, the former ran away, and she was apparently heading for home in Egypt when the angel of God met her at the fountain in Shur. The angel told Hagar to return to Sarah, her mistress. It was argued that it is not a good thing to be enslaved. According to the depiction in the biblical text, a slave had no legal rights whatsoever.

The study explored that the story of Hagar can be seen as a metaphor for the struggle of the oppressed in South Africa and elsewhere. Many people in South Africa have experienced mistreatment and oppression due to the legacy of apartheid. Like Hagar, they have been forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in other countries. Hagar was able to overcome her oppression and find a new home, and many South Africans have done the same. Despite the challenges they have faced, they have been able to build new lives for themselves and their families. The story of Hagar can also be seen as a reminder of the importance of resilience and hope in the face of adversity. Despite the physical, material and emotional challenges she experienced, Hagar was able to find hope in the message of the angel who revealed himself to her. The refrain "The God who sees me" motivated Hagar to envision prospects of a better future. In ancient Israel, the treatment of a married woman was largely determined by her husband. Women were expected to be obedient to their husbands and to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers. The study argued that South African women face numerous vestiges of oppression and prejudice, exerted not necessarily by beneficiaries of apartheid, but by their male counterparts in a democratic South Africa. It was argued that the playing field in view of gender is not in any way level, and that women must fight for their cause from within. Additionally, women must use every platform for their emancipation, including academic discourses.

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