

## HAGAR: MOTHERING A HERO.<sup>1</sup>

The story of Hagar leads to a wider discussion of the major themes of this study: the barrenness of the patriarch's wives, the annunciation scenes, and the wives' positions as mother of the patriarch of the next generation. Hagar's status is contingent on that of her mistress, Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Sarah bears no children and gives Hagar, her Egyptian maid, to Abraham as a wife (16:3), hoping she will become a surrogate mother for Sarah (16:2). The custom of having children through another woman (note the expression "that she may bear upon my knees," 30:3) is found also in the tale of barren Rachel. It is probably safe to assume that surrogate motherhood was an actual custom in the ancient Near East and would have been eminently possible in a world in which slavery was practiced and persons' sexual services could be donated by their masters or mistresses. Surrogate motherhood allowed a barren woman to regularize her status in a world in which children were a woman's status and in which childlessness was regarded as a virtual sign of divine disfavor (see 16:2; 30:1-2; and below also on Genesis 38). Childless wives were humiliated and taunted by co-wives (Gen. 16:4). The tension in the scene between Jacob and Rachel in 30:1-2 is fraught with desperate realism, as she cries, "Give me children, or I shall die!" And he responds bitterly, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" It is always the woman in this culture who is perceived as the cause of infertility. So Sarah, so Rebekah, so Rachel.

By the same token, virtually no hero worth his salt in Genesis is born under circumstances that are ordinary for his mother. It is the unusual and often initially infertile women who have special births. It is their sons who count in the ongoing tradition. These women mother nations and receive special communications about the child to be born. They often engineer the births, thereby showing considerable power in matters related to fertility and sexuality. Hagar is not a barren woman, but a victim sensing a new power on conceiving Abraham's child. She now finds her mistress "to be of less worth literally, "lighter-weight") in her eyes." Sarah knows she has lost status and complains to her husband, who tells her that the maid is hers to do with as she wishes, for this is a woman's world of competition concerning children. It is in this light that we understand the scene involving Jacob and Leah in 30:14-16. One of the sons of Leah, the fertile wife of trickery whom Jacob had never loved, finds some mandrakes, plants that were believed to have the capacity to produce fertility. Rachel, desperate for children, begs Leah for the plants, and she grudgingly agrees, in exchange for a night with their husband Jacob. Upon returning from the fields, Jacob is told by Leah that he is with her that night, having been "hired" with her son's mandrakes. Without a comment he goes to her. He obeys in this world of women, as Abraham defers to Sarah in the matter of Hagar.

Sarah afflicts Hagar, who flees to the wilderness. There by a spring of water God appears to her in the first of the annunciation scenes in Genesis. She is told about the son to be born and, like Abraham, is promised a multitude of descendants and declares that she has seen God. After the son Ishmael ("God

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Niditch, "Genesis," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol Newsome and Sharon H. Ringe (London: SPCK, 1992), pp. 17-18.

will hear") is born, Abraham and Sarah are visited by three men, manifestations of God, who announce that a son will be born to them. Sarah has the nerve to laugh at the unlikely news (18:12), for she and her husband are old and past child-bearing. In these scenes the women see God and confront God; they demand and receive some answers. Similarly, when Rebekah, who finally becomes pregnant after her husband petitions God, feels the children moving around violently (literally, "crushing one another") within her, she inquires of God and is told about the feuding twins, Jacob and Esau. She is made the keeper of the information that the elder, Esau, will serve Jacob, the younger, and she actively sets out to fulfill God's prediction (25:21-23).

Hagar receives a second prediction from God about her son Ishmael in a setting of wilderness and water. Sarah sees Ishmael playing with Isaac (21:9) and demands that Abraham banish Hagar and her son. "The son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac" (21:10). Her words shiver with contempt for the upstarts, the upstarts that she herself had created. Abraham greatly disapproves, for his son Ishmael's sake, but again the voice of Sarah, the matriarch, and the voice of God are one. Abraham's wishes in the matter of inheritance are unimportant and misguided, as will be Isaac's once he has sons.

This passage is a difficult one in biblical ethics. Abraham cares not at all about the maid he has bedded, and Sarah is contemptuous of mother and child and would expose them to death. The author works hard to rationalize and justify the emotions and actions of Abraham and Sarah (21:12-13). Yet while reading this story one has the distinct feeling it is being told from Hagar and Ishmael's point of view. One is moved by the portrait of the mother who places the child apart because she cannot bear to watch him die: the weeping mother (21:16) and the divinely protected boy ultimately rescued by God and promised a great future, the blessed child and mother, for whom God opens a well of water in the wilderness so that they might drink and live.

The motif of the exposed, endangered, and delivered child is as common in the stories of great heroes as that of their mothers' unusual, difficult conceptions. Compare Moses' origins (Ex. 2:1-10). The motif occurs also in Greek narratives about Oedipus and about the Persian king Cyrus. Embedded in the Israelite tale of origins is thus another related people's story of its hero's youth, and on some level Abraham and Sarah are its necessary villains. God is the god of those deserted in the wilderness, of those on the fringes, who are usually in the Hebrew Scriptures not Ishmaelites but Israelites, whose tales are those of the tricksters [e.g., the wife/sister tales in Genesis 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-17].