

Purpose and Thrust of the Expulsion of Hagar¹

As long as human society has existed, so too have outcasts, even as early as the family of Abraham. The outcasts can be guilty or guiltless. Here they are guiltless. In the instruction to Abraham, God gives Sarah her way; but the outcast experiences a miraculous deliverance. Sarah has achieved her purpose, but Hagar's story is told for centuries and centuries. It is narrated that God heard the cry of the child who was dying of thirst; he is only the "son of the maidservant," but God has given ear to him. The old story wants to narrate that there is no doing away with the harshness and cruelty of mankind, whereas the merciful God does not abandon the outcasts but lets them experience God's miraculous deliverance.

It is no mere chance, but basic to the structure of the Old Testament, that the history of the people of Israel also begins with the experience of deliverance (Exodus 1–15). Here it is totally different because it is a different stage in history and a different form of community; but it is the outcasts, the forced laborers exposed to every threat, who have the experience; this is the source of Israel's Credo. Much has changed, but God remains Israel's Savior. It is not only the people who experience God as Savior, but also the individual personally, as Hagar and her child in the desert. A wealth of psalms of praise attests this. At the end of this history Christ comes as the Savior. The Bible can speak of God who saves and Christ as Savior only on the basis of the experience of those who have encountered the Savior in the face of death. The story of Hagar and her child in the desert is as vivid today as it was then; everyone understands it.

The narrative has taken on another meaning inasmuch as it has been resumed by and applied to the people of Israel. This was done by inserting the promises about the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael in vv. 12–13 and 17–18, thereby throwing the emphasis in the narrative on the separate destinies of the two children and their descendants. The expulsion of Ishmael limits the people which calls Abraham its father to the single line, the descendants of Isaac. The particular history of this people demands that it be separated from the "son of the maidservant," as God himself had ordered. But God's blessing goes also with Ishmael: he is to be "a great people." Contrary to the friend-foe mentality, a relationship of Israel with other peoples is retained from the early period. Abraham as father, despite the emphasis on the one legitimate line through Isaac, has a significance which bridges the gap to other peoples.

¹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), pp. 343–44