

**One who sees me (Genesis 21:8-21)**

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Let's first hear a reflection on today's passage from the biblical Sarah's perspective as described by Sara Maitland in her book *Angel and me*.<sup>1</sup>

It mattered because betrayal always matters. She had kissed Hagar tenderly and smiled.

It mattered. God, their God, their untamed God, their God who was not walled and bound to a place, their God who travels, their God who is God-without-a-name, their God who dwells in the high places, El Shaddai, the Almighty went out with Hagar into the desert. They should have known their God would do so.

They had stopped laughing. They had become too rich; they had stopped travelling; they had laid claim to a land, a land flowing with milk and honey. They had formed a war-band; they had made treaties, alliances and blood-strewn sacrifices to their own advantage with people who had tame gods. They bargained with El Shaddai the Almighty, offering the God-without-a-name petty bargains - a foreskin for your name O God; a dead child on a wind-swept sand-dune, a tiny pile of bones bleached on miles of gritty sand for a true inheritance, O Lord.

In her dreams sometimes Sarah saw Hagar in the desert.

She saw the woman she had known and loved, the woman whose armpits were engraved in the pains of Sarah's now ancient wrists, the woman whom she had kissed when she sent her to her death for no excuses that were good enough because there are no such excuses. Sarah saw her in the desert walking with their God.

She saw the God who had appeared to her and Abraham at Bethel and laughed with them, walking now with Hagar, walking slowly so the shadow of the Almighty fell over her and protected her from the fierceness of the midday sun. She saw God opening the sand to find water for Hagar and comforting her and promising her that she should be the mother of many nations.

She knew that God did not do this to punish her, nor Abraham, but simply because that was how God was. God would walk with the traveller in the desert; God would talk with the lonely and the betrayed; God would appear to the deserted, and would comfort those who mourned.

On her best days she believes that their God is big enough to cope even with this treachery, this spoiling of a huge and beautiful thing. Some other days she cannot bring herself to believe this and thinks that sometime, somewhere, another little people will have to set off from another great city and burn in the desert as they burned and dance in a new country where there is a hill without a city as they had danced; and learn all over again that God is not to be tamed but to be laughed with.

On both these sorts of days she also knows that whichever of these is true, or if there is something else she does not know of, whatever turns out to be the truth, there is something truer: she should not have done it. She should not have driven Hagar out into the desert with a kiss.

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<sup>1</sup> *Angel and me*, Sara Maitland, Mowbray, London, 1995, p22-23

When she had kissed Hagar, when the whole community of the camp had watched her kiss Hagar and send her out into the burning hell of the desert with her small child on her shoulder, it was not just Hagar she betrayed. It was the promise. It was God. It was herself.

It is a complex matter, relationships with others and with ourselves and God. Sarah had laughed when Isaac was born. Abraham had laughed, and their God laughed. Now in this retelling, Sarah tries to make sense of it all, of her choices, and the nature of the God in whom she believes.

Hagar was part of all this as well. I wonder how she felt? Her now teenage son Ishmael, the first born, is to be displaced by Sarah's child. How was it for Hagar in today's story?

This is the story of Hagar, the mother of many nations, Sarah's sometime Egyptian slave. This is the story of a woman who is known by the-God-who-sees-me. This is the story of Hagar whose story mirrors that of the Israelites. She travelled with Sarai and Abram, in the desert, caring for her mistress, a companion on the journey. This is the story of a woman who when Sarah was unable to conceive and thought that God's promise would not come true, was given by Sarai to her husband Abram to get pregnant and produce an heir.

How she feels about that we do not know, but inevitably there was tension between her and Sarai when she did conceive. Sarai apparently treated her appallingly, and Hagar could see no way out but to leave.

Pregnant, Hagar fled to the desert as the Israelites did after leaving Egypt, fled and thought she was going to die of thirst in the searing heat, but a messenger from God showed her water, and surprisingly asked her to return to Sarai, promising her that she would be the mother of many nations, a similar promise to the one God had made to Abraham earlier, and not only that, the angel's annunciation to Hagar about her son is similar to announcements to Hannah, the mother of Samson, and to Mary the mother of Jesus: all would have children with special destinies, and all are addressed personally, not through their husbands.<sup>2</sup>

Hagar speaks with God whom she names, El-roi, meaning "the one who sees me", and names the place where she found water, Beer-lahai-roi, "the well of the loving One who sees."

God also revealed directly to Hagar the name she should call her son, Ishmael. We read of this encounter in Genesis chapter 16, five chapters, and more than ten years earlier. We read, 'Then the angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her."'

"Not a good thing for a messenger to say", we might think.

Some commentators, ask why would God put property rights over human rights and instruct her to return to Sarai? But they propose that her going back was again, a metaphor for the Israelites and similar to the words, spoken to Abram earlier, that his offspring would have to suffer before they came into themselves.<sup>3</sup>

So the pregnant Hagar went back to her mistress. A runaway slave returned. I wonder how she felt in all this? I don't know that I'd be very happy about it.

Hagar is Abram's counterpart it seems. God speaks directly to her, forging a relationship independent of God's relationship with Abram, and she responds, returning back to Abram's

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<sup>2</sup> Miriam Therese Winter, *Woman Wisdom, a feminist lectionary and psalter, Women of the Hebrew Scriptures: part one*, Collins Dove, VIC 1991, p37-38

<sup>3</sup> Women In Scripture, A Dictionary Of Named And Unnamed Women In The Hebrew Bible, The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, And The New Testament Carol Meyers, General Editor, Toni Craven & Ross S. Kraemer, Associate Editors

household and birthing a son, whom Abram (not Sarai) names Ishmael.<sup>4</sup> And it seems the child continues as Hagar's child and is not handed over to Sarah as her offspring as one would expect.

Years pass. I wonder how it was in that household? What is Hagar's story as her son grows? Then some 10 or 15 years later, we come to today's reading, when Ishmail is a teenager and some visitors come and promise that the old old Sarai now called Sarah would have a child. How did Hagar feel about that? If it were true it would mean that her beloved Ishmael would lose his inheritance. Lose his status.

Old old Sarah did conceive, and I imagine Hagar cared for her and helped her at the birth. Isaac, the child of laughter is born, then is circumcised, like his father and half brother Ishmael before him. Sarah sees Ishmael playing with the baby at the party. The words to describe that play have sexual connotations. Sarah would not have a bar of it and in her new maternal role, she wanted Ishmael out of there. She wanted the best for her son, not the son of her slave, though she had been through so much with Hagar. This time, Sarah chose to free her or throw her and her son Ishmael out, much to Abraham's distress.

Hagar and Ishmael go to the desert once again, to face, almost certain death, then God-who-sees-her, sees Hagar again. This God, this God, who walks in the wilderness, who is with the outcast and the needy hears Ishmael's cries and opens the desert sands to reveal water again. Hagar knew this God and was grateful, and with her wild uncontrollable son lived and thrived.

Hagar went back to her own country to find a wife for Ishmael when the time was right, and they settled in Paran. He and his wife had 12 children, 12 tribes. Hagar, lived, free and joy filled. She went from a slave girl without power to a matriarch who had spoken with God, and received a promise from the-God-who-sees-her.

What does this narrative tell us about God? Once again like last week we know that God is faithful. God walks with the traveller in the desert; God talks with the lonely and the betrayed; God appears to the deserted, and comforts those who mourn.<sup>5</sup>

We are invited to trust that God who cares especially for the needy and outcast. I guess if we are to follow this God our task is also to give preference to those who are struggling, and in refugee week, we also need to really see those who like Hagar have had to flee their homes and survived, and seek asylum with us; those like many of our first peoples who have been displaced. The God who laughs, the-God-who-sees-us, goes with us inviting compassion and love and concrete action, like a glass of water in the desert.

God, Sarah and Abraham's God, Hagar's God, our God too, our untamed God, our God who is not walled and bound to a place, our God who travels, our God who is God-without-a-name, our God who dwells in the high places, El Shaddai, the Almighty went out with Hagar into the desert. We should have known our God would do so.<sup>6</sup>

This is the story of Hagar and her God, who is our God too, the God who laughs and the-God-who-sees-me and you, God not to be tamed but to be laughed with.

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<sup>4</sup> Women In Scripture

<sup>5</sup> Sara Maitland

<sup>6</sup> Sara Maitland