

HAJAR¹/HAGAR

IN ISLAM, THE BIBLE², AND WOMANIST THEOLOGY

“The Fire of Hajar³”

*For one short span, she was our Hajar,
my bright young bride, the helpmeet
of a lonely aging couple.
How she grew from round cheeked girl
capable, aproned, baby strapped to her high hip,
into a woman beyond our ken, strange giant
straddling rockscape, midwifing a new earth!
Twice Sarah put Hajar's hand in mine,
as God willed, first to marry, then to desert her.
But it was I who let her hand drop.
Our last night we spent alone in God's wilderness,
our last time to circle, in the crook of my body, hers,
the baby nestled between her breast and belly
my arm around them both.
Then I dropped her supple, girlish hand and freely
I admit the tears that wet my dusty beard,
fell brackish into that dry ground
as I walked, willingly to the slaughter
of my own bared neck, my Hajar-love,
I walked away.*

*She called, “Ibrahim!” She knew
what I had to do, but still she called,
let me hear my name shaped by her lips
one last single time, “Ibrahim!”
At the pierce of that cry, I wanted
to bundle her up and carry her home again,
protect her from the howling barren land.
I turned around. But one look at her face –
she was already fiercer, older, a woman*

¹ Hajar is the correct transliteration of her Arabic name since there is no ‘g’ in the Arabic alphabet or hard ‘g’ sound in Arabic. Some scholars think her name stems from the migration (*hijra*) she made from Egypt to the Arabian Peninsular as part of her Divine mission; others argue she was named Hajar because of her inclination to disassociate herself from profanity or evil (*hajara*). Hajar will be used in the portions of this paper that discuss her significance in Islam, as will Ibrahim and Isma’il. The other segments of the paper will use the Anglicized Hagar, Abraham and Ishmael.

² Gen: 16:-16 21:1-21; Gal:4:21-26

³ Poem by Syrian-American Poet Mojha Kafh quoted by Amina Wadud in Chapter 4 entitled, “A New Hajar Paradigm: Motherhood and Family” in *Inside Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*.

*I do not know. She chose too.
 "To whom do you leave us? She said quietly.
 For a minute I could not answer. Fire
 like the fire of the trials of my youth, this fire!
 God who made the fire cool and safe for me⁴
 will make this scorched desert for Hajar
 a garden surely.
 When I said "God is here,"
 she took my words and threw them back
 at me, "Then I'll take God. I'll take the God
 of the wilderness over your home and your city."
 She turned away. I know that turn.
 I as a young man I chose to accept from God
 a hard vocation. But an old man knows
 what it means to drop the supple hand.
 I walked away bent, nearly double,
 picking my ragged path back home to Sarah
 I took one last look.*

*Hajar was walking into her own
 Soul-searching days, head on,
 far from me now, her shadow thrown
 by the lowered sun across a wild country
 turning into something stark and strong.
 Be cool and safe for Hajar, fire!*

This paper explores the historical and symbolic significance of Hajar/Hagar in Islam, the Bible, and Womanist theology. Depending upon the perspective of each tradition, this iconic Egyptian woman's story is either one of total God-Consciousness (*taqwa*) that allowed her to be entrusted by God to give birth to a prophet, one of exploitation, betrayal and abandonment, or a powerful source of strength, inspiration and hope. These discrepancies notwithstanding, in every iteration Hajar/Hagar is viewed in terms of her relationship to other humans: Sarah's slave or maid, Abraham's wife or concubine, Ishmael's mother and matriarch of the Arab people. However, it is Hajar/Hagar's relationship with

⁴ In his youth, Ibrahim had destroyed the idols his father made. The people bound him and threw him into the fire. "We said, 'O Fire! Be thou cool, And (a means of) safety For Ibrahim.'" Qur'an 21:69.

God that is the most compelling. This female monotheist, whose submission to God's will was so complete that she returned to a life of abuse and degradation upon God's instruction, rather than remain free in keeping with her own will⁵ demonstrated again and again her awareness of God's presence, her faith in God's plan and her acceptance of God's mission for her life.

Her prominent role in Islam notwithstanding, Hajar is not mentioned in the Qur'an by name.⁶ Most of what Muslim scholars understand about Hajar is found in extra-Qur'anic sources, e.g., the traditions of Prophet Muhammad⁷ (*ahadith*) and the Old Testament of the Bible. Nevertheless, Hajar's suffering during her desperate search for water between the hills of *al-Safaa* and *al-Marwah* seven times is re-enacted as an essential rite of the *Hajj*⁸ and *Umra*⁹ by millions of Muslims every year. Abu Hurairah narrates, "God has ennobled her in the Qur'an by making *Safaa* and *Marwah* integral to the Hajj."¹⁰ He then quotes Qur'an 2: 158: "Behold! *Safaa* and *Marwah* are among the symbols of God. So if those who visit the House in the Season or at other times should compass it round it is no sin on them." Hajar's obedience to God allowed her and her son to live so

⁵ The danger here is that the story has the potential for use by ministers and imams to send women victims of domestic violence back to their abusers.

⁶ The only woman mentioned in Qur'an by name is Maryam (Mary), mother of Isa (Jesus) in Sura Imran (3) and in Sura 19, which bears her name.

⁷ Whenever the name of the Prophet is written, may the Peace and Blessings of Allah be upon him is understood.

⁸ Pilgrimage to Mecca during the Islamic Month of *Dhul-Hijjah*.

⁹ The Lesser Pilgrimage that can be performed any time during the year.

¹⁰ Bukhari Vol. 4 #583 Book of *Ambiya* or Prophets

that he could grow to help his father build the Kaba and submit with his father to God's command to sacrifice him, and she could be the matriarch of the people from whom Prophet Muhammad is descended. It was through her God-Consciousness (*taqwa*) that Hajar gained agency. In a *hadith* reported by Ibn Kathir in Sahih Bukhari, the following account is given:

When Prophet Ibrahim turned to leave Hajar and Isma'il in the desert, Hajar quickly clung to his robe demanding, "O Ibrahim, where are you going, leaving us here without any people or sustenance?" He gave no reply. When she asked again and found he would not reply, she asked, "Is this ordained by God?" After Ibrahim replied yes, Hajar faithfully answered, "God will not let us die here.

After Ibrahim had turned away from Hajar, he prayed:

O our Lord! Surely I have settled a part of my offspring in a valley unproductive of fruit near your Sacred House; O our Lord, in order that they may keep up prayer; Therefore, make the hearts of some of the people yearn towards them and provide them with fruit; maybe they may be grateful. Qur'an 14:37

John Waters discusses the biblical accounts of Hagar in Genesis 16:1-11 and 21:8-21 in his chapter entitled, "Who Was Hagar"¹¹ Hagar was given to Abraham by his wife, Sarah, for the purpose of bearing a son who would then belong to them, not Hagar. She was mistreated by Sarah, who demanded that Abraham cast her and the child out to some remote place. The purpose of the story in the Old Testament is to establish Isaac as the only legitimate heir and the one through whom the Covenant with the Israelites/Children of Israel is established. The mistreatment of Hagar and her son, Ishmael, are seen as

¹¹ Cain Hope Felder, Ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*.

collateral damage. However, according to Professor Yehezkel Landau,¹² some Rabbinical commentary attributes the enslavement of the Jewish people in Egypt to their mistreatment of Hagar and Ishmael. From Waters perspective, it is significant that Hagar is the first matriarch of the Old Testament and the only woman in it who has a recorded theophany, after which she says, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing Him?” Waters raises serious questions regarding Western/European consensus that Hagar was a slave. Feminist theologian Phyllis Trible writes, “Hagar the Egyptian slave was one of the first females in Scripture to experience use, abuse and rejection.”¹³ Trible identifies Hagar as the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from an oppressive power structure. “Hagar, surrogate mother, flees to the wilderness to escape harsh treatment at the hand of Sarah. It is in the wilderness that Hagar encounters God. “God is with Hagar in the midst of her personal suffering and destitution.”¹⁴ Hagar does not call upon the God of Abraham and Sarah. Instead, Hagar’s act of naming is her last word in the Gen:16:7-14 account. Trible continues, “Hagar the surrogate mother is involved in a wilderness experience. This experience holds in solution a woman’s self-initiated liberation event, women’s alienation and a radical encounter with God.”¹⁵

¹² Abrahamic Partnerships Chair, Hartford Seminary.

¹³ Phyllis Trible, “Hagar: The Desolation of Rejection” in *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Womanist theologians emerged in response to both the patriarchy within the Black liberation Theology of the 1960's and the racism and classism within the white feminist theology of the 1970's. Renita Weems states, "For Black women, the story of Hagar in the Old Testament book of Genesis is a haunting one."¹⁶ Womanist theologian Delores S. Williams, founder of the Universal Hagar's Spiritual Center, has written extensively and powerfully about Hagar and the degree to which her story of social rivalry, sexual abuse, economic exploitation, slavery, and ethnic prejudice resonates within the African American cultural memory, and particularly in African American women whose historical and contemporary experience parallel it in so many ways. While other Womanist theologians have written about Hagar, it is Williams' analysis of Hagar's experience that is particularly compelling.

Williams asserts that African Americans have appropriated the biblical figure Hagar for more than 200 years within many different cultural contexts. Hagar appears in literary, social scientific, historical, anthropological and theological sources.¹⁷ The themes that course through Hagar's life in Genesis, course through the lives of African American women, historically and contemporaneously. "Hagar is a sexual victim exploited by a member of a family more prominent and powerful than she."¹⁸ The theme of destitution and single

¹⁶ Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist View of Women's Relationships in the Bible*.

¹⁷ Delores S. Williams, "Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation" in *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children*, Edited by Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell.

¹⁸ Ibid.

parentage – having to make a way for herself and her child after having been abandoned by the child’s father – resonate with African American women. According to Williams the participation of God in Hagar’s survival differs from liberation. God helped Hagar make a way out of no way. This speaks to the belief of many Black women that God supports their struggle for quality of life. “In Black consciousness, God’s response of survival and quality of life to African American women and mothers of slave descent struggling to sustain their families with God’s help.”¹⁹ God’s response to Hagar was not liberation. Rather, God participated in Hagar’s and her child’s survival. “When she was a runaway slave, God met her in the wilderness and told her to return to Sarai’s and Abram’s domicile. Williams explains that Hagar in the wilderness concept provides a biblically based Christian model that de-emphasizes male authority and lifts up the roles of women. Then, when Hagar and her child were finally cast out of the home of the oppressor and were not given proper resources for survival, God provided Hagar with a resource.”²⁰ Williams also argues that the connection of faith and politics is a theologically important aspect of the African American appropriation of the biblical story of Hagar. She writes, “My own research has shown that hope is supported between Black women’s religious faith and their political ways of acting in the world.”²¹ Williams draws on Hagar’s triumphant

¹⁹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

confession of faith, “Thou art a God of seeing”²² to connect her experience with that of African American women. Through the generations, Black women have testified, “God helped us make a way out of no way,” just as Hagar named God as a “God of seeing,” a God that not only could be seen, but Who was seeing her suffering.

In the same way that Womanist theologians relate Hagar’s experience to that of African American women, two feminist Muslim theologians raise up Hagar’s experience for contemporary Muslim women to consider and draw strength from. Hibba Abugidieri argues Hagar’s significance in terms of “how her struggles as a woman seeking reform in a patriarchal society constitutes a historically potent model of reform for modern Muslim women.”²³ Abugidieri chooses to analyze Hagar “on her own terms, not in relation to Ibrahim or in opposition to Sara, but as an independent historical example of a female reformer.”²⁴ She asserts that, “Hagar constitutes an exemplary and powerful figure for demonstrating how female struggle and liberation remain integral aspects of Muslim women’s modern lives...”²⁵ Abugideiri stresses that it was mainly “Hagar’s God-consciousness (*taqwa*) that made her worthy of Divine instruction

²² Delores S. Williams, “Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation” in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, Edited by Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell.

²³ Hibba Abugideiri, “Hagar A Historical Model for ‘Gender Jihad’” in *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Edited by Yvonne Yazbek Haddad and John L. Esposito.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

and that gave her the strength to persevere through her struggles to carry out an active female role in Islam.”²⁶ Amina Wadud, an African American Islamic scholar and exegete argues Hajar’s identity as an enslaved African woman who is required to be sexually available to her male master and whose child would belong to him is historically familiar to African American women, whether as a result of rape, consent or custom.²⁷ Hajar’s status as a single head of household resonates with many African American Muslim women who are abandoned by their husbands and left to fend for themselves and their children economically, emotionally and spiritually without support. Wadud refers to these African American Muslim woman head on households as, “modern day Hajars” who, like Hajar, are abandoned and “are forced to make a way where there was none for herself and her child.”²⁸ In her discussion of the lack of formal structures in America to sustain the traditional paternal support found in Islamic law unless a Muslim woman avails herself of child support provisions within the U.S. legal system. An element of this reality is that many marriages among African American Muslims are Islamically lawful, but not sanctioned according to civil law. Consequently, legal remedies to obtain child support are not available to many divorced/abandoned Muslim mothers and their children. For African American Muslim women heads of households especially, the Hajar Paradigm is

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Amina Wadud, “A New Hajar Paradigm: Motherhood and Parenting” in *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women’s Reform in Islam*.

²⁸ Ibid.

a reality in which they are considered deviant and no Islamic legal constructs exist to assist them because they deviate from the patriarchal, androcentric norm. Wadud lauds Hajar's God-Consciousness but argues, "Engaged surrender" rather than "submission" is linguistically and existentially more accurate to describe her state. Abugideiri argues that Hajar's status as both Black and enslaved did not preclude her being selected by God to play a significant role in establishing monotheism and to be the matriarch of a people whose descendent was Prophet Muhammad²⁹. Further, she argues it demonstrates Islam's disregard of ethnic, racial and economic differences. Wadud also discusses the way in which the principle of *tawhid* extends beyond the essence of God to all of humanity, to obscure ethnic, gender and economic designations. However, she draws compelling parallels between Hajar's experience and those of African American Muslim women.

Hajar/Hagar continues to fascinate and inspire theologians who are willing to excavate new meanings from her Divinely inspired life. Women of faith continue to recognize God's Mercy in the life of Hajar/Hagar, and in their own.

²⁹ Abugideiri, Hibba, "Hajar : A Historical Model for 'Gender Jihad'" in *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*.

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