

The Stories We Do Not Tell
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Generally, we are fascinated by stories of victories, overcoming great odds, miracle escapes, great deeds, and everything that shows how humans can be exceptional beings. We are inspired by great stories and amazing people in the Bible, in our countries and in our own lives. We love to share about Abraham, Moses, David, and Paul. We can cite all of the names written in the hall of fame in Hebrews as in the case of our own books of history as well. We love to share stories and testimonies of triumphant moments and how we can overcome complicated situations.

There is nothing wrong with doing that. It is a common thing to be amazed and inspired by those kinds of stories and characters. They truly help us to strengthen our faith and to develop our spiritual lives. However, we have to recognize that struggles are also part of our stories. Mistakes and bad things can also be seen printed in our lives; they are also part of who we are.

Unfortunately, it is not easy to acknowledge that life is not only made by a shining sun or a bright morning. It is not comfortable to accept that life also has its dark spots and moments when the night seems to last forever. However, if we want to embrace fully our humanity and also live a transparent life, we also have to embrace those moments that we tend to forget; we have to start sharing those stories we do not tell. In Genesis 16 we find one of those stories we normally do not tell. Even though in this story we can find two of the most important characters of our tradition, Abraham and Sarah, we tend to skip the

chapter, or at least part of it. We avoid telling what is depicted there because in Genesis 16, we find one of the first recorded stories of terror with a woman, Hagar, as the victim. Yet I believe the story of Hagar is one of the most striking in all of scripture, a story that shows an exemplary woman who has an encounter with God and who is so moved by that encounter, that she names the God who sees her!

In my own family, we have a terrifying and untold story like that. Specifically, it is a story of terror lived by one of my grandmothers, Vó Mariquinha. She was married to two brothers, of course not at the same time. The story my grandmother told us was that she married the oldest brother; then he died and she married the youngest. However, when she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, we discovered that she was hiding something really painful from us. After a lot of strange pieces of information, we finally found out the whole story: she was obligated by her father to marry the youngest brother. Her first husband invited his youngest brother to work and live with them. However, after he died unexpectedly, my grandmother was left behind with five kids. The youngest brother, who was already living with her, wanted to help her raise the kids. However, afraid of what society would say about a widow sharing her house with a single man, my great-grandfather forced the two to get married though they were not willing. In order to please society, my grandmother's voice was silenced and her will ignored.

It is not difficult to understand why my grandmother had never told us this part of her story: she was treated as an object and had her humanity denied. However, it is exactly because of this that I think it is so important to tell her story. By telling her story,

I can recover her dignity and point out the oppression she suffered for being a woman and a widow. As the prophets of the Old Testament remind us, truth-telling is a necessary feature if we want to live our present without being haunted by our past. Also, if we want to use our prophetic voices, there is no other way than telling the truth about our own stories.

As I retell my grandmother's story I am recovering her dignity and exposing the social structures which oppressed her, retelling Hagar's story allows us to do the same. Thus, when we look at Genesis 16, its first verse starts with Sarah and ends with Hagar, clearly showing us that status, privilege, and power belongs to the first and alienation, harm, and powerlessness marks the second. From verse two to six, Sarah is presented as a commanding figure who sees Hagar only as an instrument, not a person. Because of that, Sarah can handle Hagar as an object, doing to her life whatever she wants. Seen as less than human being, Hagar has her voice silenced completely in the first six verses of the chapter.

In the biblical story, Hagar has her ethnicity and her social condition well delineated by the narrator: she is the Egyptian slave-girl of Sarah. In other words, she is an outsider as well as poor and a maid, a domestic servant who belongs to Sarah as property forever. Because she is a woman, Hagar is a person oppressed three times over, considering her slave status, her race, and her sex.

Thus, as an object, Hagar is handed to Abraham by Sarah in order to give him a child. As a chattel, Hagar has her body and sexuality used by her mistress and master

according to their own wills. However, upon becoming Abraham's concubine and awaiting his child, Hagar suddenly realizes what her slavery means. It seems like the pregnancy awakens something in the slave woman, something that previously lay dormant. Apparently Hagar's being pregnant with Abraham's first born gives her a taste of freedom, hope, and liberation – she begins to feel like a human being.

When Hagar begins to see herself beyond her slave status, she also changes the way she sees her mistress: according to the text, “she looked with contempt” on Sarah (Gen. 16:4). In doing that, she breaks with legal tradition, believing herself to be a person equal in status to her former mistress. Of course, Hagar's behavior challenges the social norm and disturbs the order in Abraham's house. In order to keep things in place, especially the slave's place, in verse five we have Sarah contending with Abraham and citing a judicial formula to help her seek protection: “My offense falls on your shoulders; I let my slave sleep with you, but you look at me with distaste now that you see her pregnant ...”

Hammurabi's Code imposed a penalty on slaves who, on becoming concubines, tried to gain equal status with the legal wife. According to it, the wife had the right to send the concubine back to slavery. Thus, Sarah sees her right as wife and mistress threatened and uses the law in her favor. Unfortunately, instead of siding with the marginalized, Abraham chooses to obey Sarah and the law.

With Abraham's consent, Sarah oppresses Hagar. The Hebrew verb used in the passage, *yanah*, is the same one used in the exodus story. In other words, Sarah oppresses

Hagar (Gen. 16:6) in the same way the Israelites were oppressed in Egypt. However, instead of submitting herself to her mistress, Hagar rejects her slavery and flees from Sarah. She becomes the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from oppressive power structures.

In the next part of the chapter, from verse seven to fourteen, we encounter one of the most striking stories in the Bible. While in the desert, Hagar is found by the angel of the Lord. As von Rad, Westermann, and many other scholars highlight, Yahweh and the messenger are the same person. Thus, Hagar is the first person in scripture whom Yahweh visits. Not only that, the Lord talks to her, calling her by name. It is the first time in the entire chapter that Hagar has her humanity recognized and her voice heard. And the one who recognizes her and hears her is God.

God is with Hagar in the midst of her personal suffering and destitution. He finds her in the wilderness, a place that has a thematic significance in the Old Testament and in the New Testament and which can be seen as, bell hooks says, “a site of creativity and power, an inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonizer/ colonized.” Hagar is canonically the first person approached by God in the wilderness, opening the doors for many divine encounters that will take place in the desert. It is even more interesting and ironic, keeping the exodus in mind, that God comes to the rescue of an Egyptian in the wilderness! As the biblical story tells us, Hagar also receives a formal annunciation with promises to herself and to her offspring. After that, she becomes a theologian, in the words of Tribe, because she does

not only encounter God, but also makes sense of the encounter, being able to name the deity in a way which unites the divine and human encounter: Hagar names God the God who sees and the God who is seen (Gen. 16:13).

However, what could be a moment of liberation in the story becomes a moment of terror when the angel of the Lord says to Hagar, “Go back, and suffer oppression” (Gen. 16:9). Thus, what is depicted in this part of the biblical story is a God who identifies himself with the oppressor and orders a servant to return to bondage and affliction. Here we have found the part of the story that we, for sure, avoid telling.

Some theologians tend to ignore verse nine’s order to return in order to see the second part of the chapter where God encounters Hagar in the midst of her suffering and makes promises to her and her offspring as a tale of liberation. Other theologians, such as Elsa Tamez and Nicole Simopolous, read the command to return to Abraham’s house as God’s concern to secure Hagar and her child’s well-being by using the resources Abraham has to offer. For them, God indirectly compels Abraham and Sarah to do justice toward Hagar. But, as it was said previously, in this moment, God does not directly express concern nor he is involved with liberation.

How can we tell a story like this which includes injustice, oppression, and a God who seems to not be bothered by these things? Can we do that? First of all, we have to tell Hagar’s story in order to recognize and recover her dignity, her eminence, and her exemplary character. She is depicted from the beginning to the end of the biblical text following orders – first from Sarah and then from the divine messenger; she is shown as

doing nothing wrong, in fact, she is punished for doing what she is told to do by Sarah. It is also important to highlight that she is the first person in scripture to be visited by a divine messenger, to name a deity, and the first woman to hear an annunciation. As Dydimus the Blind claims, we can say that Hagar is among those who have a pure heart – because those are the ones who see God, according to Matthew 5:8.

After that, we must voice a suspicion about a God who sides with the oppressor and not with the oppressed. Yahweh is a God of liberation from the house of slavery and all the texts of the Bible have to be measured by that. If God is used to legitimize oppression and injustice, we must liberate God from that lifting up the voice of God from the story of God. If God is put on the side of those who afflict and not with those who suffer, something is very wrong with our depiction of God. In Hagar's story, God can be seen as the one who comes to the rescue of an Egyptian slave in the wilderness, emphasizing her dignity as a human being and allowing her to speak for herself.

As with my grandmother's and Hagar's stories, there are many other untold stories in which women are the victims of an oppressive system. There is the story of the undocumented immigrant who submits herself to an underpaid job in order to provide for her children. There is also the story of the wife who lives with an abusive husband. There is still the story of the preacher who cannot find a place to use her gift because she is a woman. There is the story of the African-American woman who is seen as a "welfare queen" for not being able to break with the cycle of poverty. There is the story of the maid who takes care of her bosses' children while hers are watched by her neighbors.

Like these, there are so many others waiting to be told and it is the role of the church, as the messenger of a liberating God, to release them from the captivity of marginality and oppression.

By releasing and telling the stories of oppressed woman, we are also celebrating and honoring the story of Hagar – a woman who deserves a place in the hall of fame in Hebrews 11. As Megan McKenna says, “our mother in faith is a black slave woman who refused to be humiliated, who saw God, who knew in flesh a promise and the reality that God is revealed to those most desperate as well as those chosen as God’s people.”

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In *Reading the Bible with the Dead*, John L. Thomspson highlights how traditional commentators
of the patristic, medieval, and Reformation eras also wrestled with Hagar and her story. For Philo, a Jewish

contemporary of St. Paul living in Alexandria, Hagar was not a symbol of the old law or a doctrine of justification by works. Instead, she designated “primary teachings” that the wise will study with diligence on their way to attaining true wisdom. Writing in the third century, Origen sees Hagar not as a literal wife but as the virtue of wisdom. For him, Abraham acquired not a second wife but another virtue. Thompson also mentions that, by the fifth century, the Latin exegesis of western Christendom reduces Hagar either to an inferior status granted by Philo or to the more suspect position described by Paul. However, lecturing on Hagar in 1538 or so, Luther casts Hagar as a Christian exemplar. On the other hand, Calvin refused to allow anyone but Paul to have the last word. As Thompson claims, Hagar is connected to us by our own tradition and it would be wrong to our congregations to read her story as if we were the first to know or care about this Egyptian woman. John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis that You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 13-32.

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Trible, 18.

Even though there is scholarly debate about whether this verse is a latter addition or not, the reality is that it is still printed in our bibles, undermining the presence of a liberator God.

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