

and privileges that far exceed those that any princess might expect, and which are nowhere accorded to her mistress.

3

Hagar: A Persecuted Madonna

(Genesis 16.1-16; 21.8-21)

Where does Hagar's story begin? In Genesis 16, or Genesis 12? She does not come on stage until chapter 16, but there she is described as an 'Egyptian slave-girl', and we have heard about Egyptian slave-girls before. They were part of the bride price the pharaoh gave to Abram, to compensate him for the loss of his 'sister', Sarai. Sharon Jeanson suggests that by using the same term for slave-girl in 16.1 as he used in 12.16 the narrator is trying to tell us something.¹ Certainly the rabbis thought the story of chapter 12 explained how Hagar came to be in Sarai's service. Not content with that, they claimed that Hagar was the pharaoh's own daughter!² By their token Hagar is a princess from the most exalted of royal families, who finds herself slave to the wife of a nomad from an obscure part of her father's empire, thanks to his payment of an absurdly large bride-price which the same nomad had tricked out of him, and which he, the pharaoh, had very soon lived to regret. By their token she comes on stage already a princess, playing the part of a slave to a barren woman who is yet to become one, for Sarai will not be renamed Sarah until chapter 17.

Alas, there is nothing in the text to support the notion of Hagar's royal blood. If there were, then there would be a further dimension to Hagar's two stories, another bitter ingredient in her humiliation and suffering, yet more pathos and poignancy for us to discover. In truth, however, the text does not need the rabbis' brilliant speculation. Its delineation of Hagar's plight is sharp enough already, while, on the other hand, it has waiting for her a status

The silence of the abused

(Gen. 16.1-6)

We have already covered the first part of chapter 16 in our discussions about Sarah. Some things about Hagar have been said already, and need not be said again. But still we must go back to these verses and explore them afresh from Hagar's point of view.

'Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children' (16.1). That is the cue for Hagar to be introduced. She arrives in the narrative as a possible answer to the problem of another woman's barrenness. Once again we must resist the idea that the only thing women were considered good for in ancient Israel was bearing and rearing children. As we said in our previous chapter,³ that was far from being the case. It is a matter of the limitations of the narrative. For the narrator, Sarai's role is to bear a child. That is Hagar's primary role also, at least to start with.

The passage reminds us immediately of Sarai's status. She is Abram's wife. When Hagar is introduced, at once we learn her status also. She is Sarai's Egyptian slave-girl. She is a foreigner, a slave, with, we might suppose, no rights or power of her own. Much will depend on her relationship with her mistress. She is her personal servant,⁴ and life might be bearable for her if Sarai treats her with some kindness and sensitivity. If she does not, then she will have no means of redress, unless, of course, God comes to her rescue.

Yet she has a name. We know what to call her. So often in Old Testament narratives, characters who appear in just one or two scenes remain anonymous. Hagar is not merely given the dignity of a name, but, as we shall see, will acquire the unique honour of bestowing a name on God himself. If 'an Egyptian slave-girl' seems to put her firmly in her place, then 'whose name was Hagar' hints already that that place may not turn out to be such a lowly one as we might expect.

For the moment all we see is Hagar's powerlessness. 'Go, please, to my slave-girl,' says Sarai to Abram. 'It may be that I shall be built up through her' (16.2b). Hagar's name is not used here. Instead Sarai reminds Abram of the woman's status, and of who she belongs to. Her mistress may give us a hint of a concern for

the fulfilment of the promises of God,⁵ but she has none for Hagar. Hagar is not consulted. She has no say in the matter. She is only a slave, and slaves are there to do what they are told. Hagar will, Sarai hopes, conceive and give birth to a child, but if she does, the child will not count as hers. Hagar will have to hand the child over to Sarai, and having done that, will have to continue living with her and serving her needs. For herself, Sarai hopes that she will be 'built up' if Hagar has a child. She entertains no hopes for Hagar beyond the pleasures of sexual intercourse and the pains of childbirth. Hope is not for the likes of an Egyptian slave. Chapter 15 has just spoken of Sarai and Abram's descendants becoming slaves in Egypt and being oppressed there for four hundred years (v. 13). That might only reinforce our sense of Hagar's helplessness and increase our sense of foreboding.

Yet, as we saw in our last chapter, the tables are quickly turned, and Hagar's fecundity exalts her above her still barren mistress. The narrator and Abram have decided what roles these women will play in this story. They have put them in a situation where conflict is to be expected. We should not be surprised by it now that it occurs.⁶ Its predictability, however, does nothing to lessen the tragedy of it for both women. For Sarai the results are further bitterness, a deeper sense of her own failure, a greater despair, and the practice of a harsher cruelty. As for Hagar, she finds that her new pride, her new status and power are a sham, a cruel charlatan. For they only make things worse. They lead to Sarai treating her so harshly that she has to escape. The treatment is condoned by Abram. 'Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please,' is all he says to Sarai when she confronts him with the conflict that has arisen (16.6a). His speech amounts to just seven words in the Hebrew. In its brief simplicity it encapsulates Hagar's plight. It sums up what it means for her to be a slave. The cruelty that immediately ensues sums up what it means for her to be a slave in that particular household. Neither her mistress, nor her mistress's husband, the man whose child she bears in her womb, have once used her name in their speaking to one another. She has not been Hagar to them, simply a slave-girl. She has been given no words to say, no initiative to take. She conceives, she realizes she is pregnant, and she runs away. These are the only things she does. Everything else is done to her.⁷

A first meeting with God

(Gen. 16.7-16)

Next, however, the scene changes, and suddenly we see what part Hagar is playing in the story. The narrator follows her out into the wilderness, and finds her beside a spring of water on the way to Shur (16.7). Shur is either a place near the Egyptian border, or a reference to the border itself and its defensive forts.⁸ It seems Hagar is going home. But the narrator and we, the readers of his masterly story, are not the only ones to find Hagar. She is found also by 'the messenger of the Lord'.

Exactly who he might be will not become entirely clear until the end, but already we have a clue. Hagar, a slave, has been subjected to unusually harsh treatment, and has fled from her oppressor. She has escaped into the wilderness, and now there is talk of water. To those who know the story of the Exodus from Egypt, all this sounds remarkably familiar. In Genesis 12 we found Sarai playing the part of the enslaved Israelites.⁹ Now, with supreme irony, the Egyptian Hagar is playing the same role. Unlike Sarai, however, Hagar has come to 'Sinai', not only to the desert of that name, but to its place of meeting, the place where God is encountered and new promises are made and new demands given. When the people of Israel come to Sinai they will be given, not long after the Ten Commandments, the following instruction: 'You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry . . .' (Exod. 22.21-3). The Hebrew word for 'abuse' twice used there is the same as the one behind the 'dealt harshly' of Sarai's treatment of Hagar in 16.6. It occurs earlier in Exodus, in that book's very first mention of the enslavement and oppression of the Israelites in Egypt (see Exod. 1.11-12, where the NRSV translates it as 'oppress').¹⁰

Hagar may not be a widow, though the man who is her husband (for Sarai gave her to Abram 'as a wife') took no care of her when she found herself so threatened by her mistress. She may not be an orphan child, though she is every bit as vulnerable as one and in as much need of protection. She is an alien, though no longer a resident one. But God is not pedantic. 'If you do abuse them . . . I will surely heed their cry.' That is what he will say to his people. Here, though Hagar has not yet uttered a sound, he is as good as his as yet unspoken word. He pays her heed. At the end it will be

quite plain that 'the messenger of the Lord' is none other than God himself. For the moment he hides himself in the narrator's pious periphrasis.

'And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?"' (16.8a). For the first time someone other than the narrator has used Hagar's name. The questions he asks of her recall the one that will be asked of Elijah when he too comes to Sinai: 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' (1 Kings 19.9, 13). But the question to Elijah is high comedy, designed to prick his paranoia and deflate his absurd ambition.¹¹ God's question to Hagar lacks such playfulness. He reminds her that she is Sarai's slave. He wants to know what she is doing there, on her own, in the desert.

Whose side is God on? We do not know that yet. Has he come to rescue Hagar, as he will rescue his people from the oppression of the Egyptians, as he will vow to rescue the widow and the orphan? Surely it is one of the distinguishing marks of the God of Israel that he always takes the side of the oppressed? That is the nature of the God of the Exodus, of the God of the torah, and of the God of the prophets. Or has this God come only as a spy, to find out why this slave is not about her duties? In short, is he the God of hope and revolution, or the God of the *status quo* who works in the interests of the powerful?

Hagar replies to his question, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai' (16.8b). She speaks the truth, but she does not speak the whole of it. She does not tell him why she is running away. She does not tell of the abuse, the harsh treatment, the cruelty. And yet God catches their dark undertones beneath her words. 'Return to your mistress, and suffer harsh treatment beneath her hand' (16.9). The NRSV has, 'Return to your mistress, and submit to her.' But that is far too tame for the Hebrew, which again uses the strong verb of the 'dealt harshly' of verse 6, the same verb as the 'abuse' of Exodus 22.22-3, or the 'oppress' of Exodus 1.11-12.

God's commands to Hagar represent one of the darkest, most unnerving moments in all Scripture. It seems he has revealed his true colours. Here, at least, he seems to be in favour of the *status quo* and on the side of the oppressor, a defender of the interests of the Sarais of this world against its all too vulnerable Hagars. If the story were to end here, it would surely be intolerable.

But it does not, and its image of God has other, brighter facets to it. 'The messenger of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude"' (16.10). This is the by now familiar language of the

promises. In 12.2 God declared to Abram, 'I will make of you a great nation'; in 13.16 he told him, 'I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted'; in 15.5 he brought him outside his tent and said, 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them . . . So shall your descendants be.' So far in the ancestral narratives Abram has been the only person to hear such talk. God will repeat his promises to his son and his grandson, to Isaac (see 26.2-6, 24), and to Jacob (28.13-15; 35.9-12; 46.3-4), but to no one else. Even the great Joseph will have to receive them at second hand from his father (see 48.3-4). Hagar, then, is one of just four people in Genesis to hear the language of promise from God's own lips, and she a woman, a slave, an Egyptian.¹²

She is, indeed, one of only three women in Genesis to engage in dialogue with God. The other two are the woman in the Garden and Sarah. But Sarah's conversation amounts only to this: 'I did not laugh'/'No, but you did laugh'; and Eve's to this: 'What is this you have done?'/'The snake tricked me, and I ate' - and to that God responds with his judgement upon her. In both of those cases God's language is that of accusation and judgement. There is promise, right enough, in his 'No, but you did laugh' to Sarah, for, as we have seen, it effectively renews his commitment to her bringing a son called Laughter into the world. Nevertheless, promise is only whispered in what is much more loudly a rebuke. There is a hint of accusation, as we have also just discovered, in God's initial questions to Hagar, 'Where have you come from and where are you going?', and fearful judgement in his, 'Return to your mistress, and suffer harsh treatment beneath her hand.' Yet in her case, and her case alone, God does not stop there. With Hagar he is not content with accusation and judgement. Indeed, the vast bulk of his speech to her is concerned with promise, for he continues:

'Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;

you shall call him Ishmael,

for the Lord has given heed to your being so harshly treated.

He shall be a wild ass of a man,

with his hand against everyone,

and everyone's hand against him;

and he shall live at odds with all his kin.' (16.11-12)

There are a number of annunciation scenes in the Bible, and this is the first of them. God's solemn announcement of the birth of Ishmael is echoed by words of his to Abraham in 17.19-21:

'Your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.'

There is a further parallel to be found in Judges 13.3-5, when 'the messenger of the Lord' announces the birth of a son to the unnamed wife of Manoah (the son is not named there either, but turns out to be Samson), and a much more famous one in Isaiah, where the prophet is speaking to Ahaz, king of Judah: 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel' (Isa. 7.14). But, of course, the most striking parallel of all is in Luke's Gospel, when the angel Gabriel announces to Mary the birth of Jesus:

'You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' (Luke 1.31-3)

There are a few other formal annunciations in the Bible. There are the brief predictions of Isaac's birth in Genesis 18.10 and 14; an anonymous prophet announces the coming birth of king Josiah in 1 Kings 13.2, addressing his words to an altar in the presence of king Jeroboam; David reports to Solomon a prophecy he had once received about his birth (1 Chron. 22.9-10); and Zechariah receives from an angel word of the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1.13-17). Matthew also has his own annunciation scene, when 'an angel of the Lord' appears to Joseph, and tells him of the birth of Jesus (Matt. 1.20-1).

We begin to see from these parallels how very surprising is the honour which is bestowed upon Hagar (and upon Ishmael too) in Genesis 16. For a start, annunciations are a rare commodity in the Bible - we have listed *all* the significant occurrences - and Hagar's is the first of them. In only three cases, those of Hagar, Manoah's wife, and Mary in Luke, is the promise of a son made to the one

who will be the mother of the child (although Sarah overhears in Genesis 18, the words are addressed to her husband). In only four cases does God make the announcement himself. God speaks with Abraham in Genesis 17, and again in chapter 18 (though, as we have seen, in the second passage Abraham does not realize who he is); and Judges 13, like Genesis 16, makes it plain by the end that 'the messenger of the Lord' is God himself (see vv. 6, 18, and especially 22). Thus only two women in the entire Bible receive annunciations from God himself, Hagar and the unnamed wife of Manoah. When Luke came to write his Gospel, he took the patterns for his two annunciation scenes from their stories. The announcing of John the Baptist's birth is clearly modelled on the second of them, though, interestingly enough, Elizabeth, John's mother, does not appear on its stage, and is only mentioned by name. For the appearance of Gabriel to Mary, Luke took the Hagar passage. Hagar, then, turns out to be the Mary, the madonna of the Old Testament,¹³ or one of them at least, for Hannah will be another.

In one sense, if we compare her to Mary, the honour done to Hagar is the more remarkable. By the time Luke's Gospel was written the Jews had filled their heavens with a host of angelic beings, who were independent from God and had their own function as mediators between him and human beings, and sometimes, as in Gabriel's case, their own names.¹⁴ Though Gabriel comes trailing God's glory behind him, so that Mary is disturbed by his speech, he is not God himself. God, for that moment at least, keeps his distance and allows the angel to bridge the gulf between them. Mary does not react in the way Hagar soon will with her cry, 'Have I really seen God, and remained alive after seeing him?' (16.13).

In his words to Hagar, not only does God pay Hagar a singular honour, he also shows a new concern for her plight. Our rather cumbersome translation of the final part of 16.11, 'for the Lord has given heed to your being so harshly treated', is an attempt to convey another echo in the Hebrew. The single word behind 'your being treated so harshly' comes from the same root as the 'dealt harshly' of verse 6, or the 'suffer harsh treatment' of verse 9. In verse 9 God's response seemed itself to be intolerably harsh, and to add abuse to abuse. Then he spoke words of judgement. Now, however, he slips into the language of salvation. At the Burning Bush God will assure Moses, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt . . . and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land

to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey . . . ' (Exod. 3.7-8). Later Moses will instruct those who will farm that same good and broad land what to say when they bring their harvest offering to God: 'When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us . . . the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction' (Deut. 26.6-7). The Hebrew word for 'misery' in the first passage and the ones for 'afflicted' and 'affliction' in the second belong to the same root as Hagar's 'harsh treatment'. So the text invites us to compare God's salvation of Hagar to his deliverance of his own people. But in what will Hagar's salvation consist? Not in escape from oppression, for already she has been ordered back to her tyrant of a mistress. Not in the gift of a good and broad land, for she and her son will not have a land of their own. Ishmael will be the ancestor of the bedouin desert tribes, who will live on the borders of the territory of the Israelites and be in continual conflict with them and their other neighbours. No, her salvation will be her son, a son whose name will be a constant reminder to her of the heed God once paid to her misery. For Ishmael means in the Hebrew, 'God hears'.

We might think God's promises concerning Ishmael amount to something more akin to a curse than a blessing. We can compare them to the blessing the dying Isaac will pronounce upon Esau in Genesis 27.39-40, remembering what a poor thing that will be beside the one he has just given to Jacob (see 27.28-9). Certainly the conflict promised to Ishmael and his descendants will recall Hagar and her own plight. We have already seen her at odds with Sarai, and will do so again. Like mother, like son, we might say. Yet Ishmael and his people will also remind us of the defiance Hagar showed when she knew she was pregnant, and which she will demonstrate a second time at the very end of her story.

'He shall be a wild ass of a man,
with his hand against everyone,
and everyone's hand against him;
and he shall live at odds with all his kin.' (16.12)

Claus Westermann describes this verse as a tribal saying which must have originated among the Ishmaelites themselves, and is surely correct when he calls it a 'jubilant, defiant affirmation of predatory, bedouin life'.¹⁵

So far in this encounter with God, we have been able to compare Hagar, the Egyptian slave-woman, to the patriarchs who received God's promises and to Mary the mother of Jesus. But the verse we

now come to in her story allows her a role which no one else at all plays in the whole Bible: she gives a name to God. 'So she named the Lord who spoke to her, You are El-Roi' (16.13a). Now the identity of the 'messenger' is out in the open for us all to see. He is the Lord himself, Yahweh, the God who will be the God of Israel. Hagar calls him El-Roi, 'The God of My Seeing', that is, 'The God who Sees Me'.¹⁶

Westermann comments, 'That is not to say that Hagar gives to a hitherto nameless divine being a name that sticks to him everywhere and always . . . but Hagar says: "For me he is, whatever else he may be called, the God who sees me, i.e., the one who came to my aid in my distress."' ¹⁷ He is quite right. The name El-Roi occurs nowhere else in the Old Testament. It is Hagar's name for God, and Hagar's alone. It arises out of, and speaks eloquently of, her own private encounter with him. Though many others in the Old Testament will find that God comes to them when they are in just such a dire need or distress as hers, none has exactly Hagar's experience. Each encounter with God is unique. Each leaves its own mark upon the one whom God meets. Only in Hagar's case, she leaves *her* mark on God. He goes on his way with a new name.

Let no one underestimate how extraordinary this naming is. We had to examine the parallels to Hagar's annunciation scene in order to appreciate how remarkable hers is. So here we must briefly consider two other passages to demonstrate the singularity of Hagar's act, and the extent of her daring.

After wrestling with God all night at the river Jabbok, Jacob names the spot, Peniel, or 'The face of God' (Gen. 32.30). After coming so close to sacrificing Isaac, but being given a ram to slaughter instead, Abraham names the place, 'The Lord Sees' (22.14).¹⁸ Abraham's name is very close to the one Hagar gives God. Yet, like Jacob, Abraham names the *place* of encounter. Neither of them dares to name the God who has met them there. Elsewhere Abraham calls *upon* the name of God (12.8; 13.4; 21.33), but that is a very different exercise. Moreover, Hagar does not name her God as an aside, or declare his identity to herself after he has left the stage. She names him to his face: 'You are the God who Sees Me.' The phrase the narrator uses for the naming is the usual one in Hebrew narrative. It is the same as the one used, for example, when the man in the Garden named his wife Eve, or Eve herself named her third son Seth. Soon it will be used for the naming of Ishmael, and again for the naming of Isaac.

This astonishing story is nearly at an end, but it has one more

surprise still in store for us. Hagar has one more thing to say: 'Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?' (16.13b). Unfortunately, the second part of this question in the Hebrew is unintelligible. There are places in the Old Testament where the text as we have it is clearly damaged or corrupt, and this is one of them. The 'and remained alive after seeing him' is a translation of Wellhausen's attempt to arrive at the original form of the text.¹⁹ If we follow his lead, then Hagar's astonishment is similar to Jacob's at Peniel: 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved' (Gen 32.30). It reminds us of Isaiah's reaction when he has a vision of God in the temple in Jerusalem: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!' (Isa. 6.5). The huge sense of awe that could overwhelm the ancient Israelites in the presence of their God is nowhere more powerfully expressed than in the words that God speaks to Moses when he asks to see his glory: 'You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live' (Exod. 33.20). They are echoed by Manoah near the end of the annunciation scene in Judges 13: 'And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, for we have seen God"' (13.22). To say 'and remained alive after seeing him' is precisely what we might expect Hagar to say in the circumstances. For the circumstances are quite clear: she has seen God. On *that* score the Hebrew presents no difficulties. So, without any doubt at all, Hagar joins a very select band of people in the Bible of whom it is said plainly that they 'see' God. Abraham is not among them. Three times the narrative has God appearing to him (12.7; 17.1; 18.1), but none of those passages say in so many words that he saw him. The great Moses sees him, together with his brother Aaron, his nephews Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel (Exod. 24.9-10). Yet at the Burning Bush, Moses hides his face, for he is afraid to look upon him (Exod. 3.6), and though on Sinai God speaks to him 'face to face, as one speaks to a friend' (Exod. 33.11), when he asks to see his glory, God shields him with his hand as he passes by, so that he sees only his back and not his face (Exod. 33.18-23). It is possible to say that Sarah sees him when he comes to the tent in the form of three men, for, as we know, her fear may indicate she has penetrated the disguise. Jacob, Manoah and his wife, and Isaiah 'see' him, and so does Amos (see Amos 9.1), Ezekiel (Ezek. 1.4-28), Job (Job 42.5) and Daniel (Dan. 7.9-10). Mary, the mother of Jesus, does not see him, for only God's messenger, Gabriel, meets with her, and in fact it is not clear from Luke's story that she does more than hear his words. For

New Testament counterparts to Hagar's vision, we have to turn to the story of the Transfiguration (Mark 9.2-8 and parallels), to Luke's stories of the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7.55-6), or the conversion of Paul (Acts 9.3-5; 22.6-8; 26.13-15), or to the experience of the writer of the Book of Revelation (Rev. 1.12-18).

Yet Jacob has to leave Peniel, and go on to the meeting with Esau which he so much dreads. Peter, James and John have to come down the mountain away from the bright glory of its summit, to be confronted at once by noise and argument, by the helplessness of their fellow disciples when dealing with an epileptic boy, and by Jesus' own exasperation and his accusing them of belonging to a 'faithless generation' (see Mark 9.14ff. and parallels). So, now, after all this, after all *this*, Hagar must return to Sarai and Abram. For the moment we hear nothing more about Sarai's treatment of her. We are told that she bears Abram a son, and that he names him Ishmael. But that is enough for her to be brought down to earth with a cruel bump. For was she not promised by God that *she* would name the child? As Phyllis Trible says, Abram's action 'strips Hagar of the power that God gave her'.²⁰ She is no longer a madonna. She is back in the costume of the slave. We hear nothing about any joy of hers at Ishmael's birth. Her mistress, by way of contrast, will make the welkin ring when Isaac is born. We have come back to where we began, and if, when the curtain rises on Hagar's third scene, we find ourselves in the company of Abraham and Sarah also, as indeed we do, then Hagar's future, at least in the short term, looks bleak.

Rejection

(Gen. 21.8-14)

Our worst fears are fulfilled. As we have seen already, the conflict between Hagar and Sarah (as she is now) breaks out with renewed ferocity at the feast made to celebrate Isaac's weaning. The first clash between them was provoked by Hagar herself. This one is sparked off by her son. Hagar is not involved at all. She is not a Rebekah. She does not egg Ishmael on to claim his rightful place in the family as the elder son, as Rebekah will one day be the power behind Jacob's throne and engineer a plot to secure for him all Esau's privileges. Yet she is at once caught up in the punishment: 'Cast out this slave-woman with her son' (21.10). Though she asserts her authority as Hagar's mistress by ordering Abraham to

get rid of her, Sarah demonstrates by her choice of words that, as far as she is concerned at least, the relationship between them is already at an end. Though Hagar was told by God to return to her mistress, Sarah here cannot find the grace to acknowledge her as her slave. She has already rejected her before she opens her mouth. The order to expel her simply makes the rejection audible and seeks to make the break final. It will succeed.

In the first story Sarai appealed to God to judge between her and her husband, and, by implication, called on Abram to exercise his authority and put Hagar in her place. Abram, so unresponsive to Sarai's accusations, so deaf to her pain, nevertheless was quick to recognize the unspoken claim upon him and at once restored Hagar to Sarai's control. He remained aloof, unfeeling. Now, however, with the relationship between his two wives broken beyond repair, he cannot shrug off his responsibilities so easily. Then no son was yet born to him. Now he has two to think of. 'The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son' (21.11). As Sharon Jeanson points out, it is not clear which son he is so concerned about.²¹ Most commentators assume he means Ishmael. But it could be that Sarah has made him aware of the threat Ishmael poses to Isaac. One thing seems clear: he is not concerned about his wife Hagar. He does not appear to spare her a thought. He rejected her before by putting her back in Sarai's hands. Now he appears to reject her again. Yet God responds to his distress by imputing to him feelings for Hagar that he has not expressed: 'But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave-woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you"' (21.12). Who are we to believe, God or the narrator? Though God suggests Abraham's first thoughts are still for his son (it remains unclear which son), are we to think Abraham is distressed for Hagar after all? Are we to suppose that he who, in the words of the psalmist, 'knows the secrets of the heart' (Ps. 44.21) is aware of the man's true feelings for the woman who is still his wife? Or is he reminding him that he *ought* to be concerned for her, just as he will suggest to Jonah that he ought to feel sorry for the plant destroyed by the worm when clearly the prophet has no pity for it at all?²² Again, we cannot be sure. But we can and should be disconcerted by the way God refers to Hagar. Like Sarah, he does not use her name. Even when God is talking of her, her anonymity continues to underline her lack of status, her powerlessness, her not counting for anything. God, *this* God, the one who met her in the desert and heaped astonishing honours upon her, does not even

remind Abraham that she is his wife. He gives her the bitter title Sarah gave her in her fear and anger: he calls her Abraham's 'slave-woman' (notice he does not call her Sarah's slave; it would seem he also recognizes the completeness of the breakdown of their relationship). Phyllis Trible's comment is fair: 'If Abraham neglected Hagar, God belittles her.'²³ Indeed, as God's speech proceeds, we see that though he might imply at the start that Abraham ought to be concerned for Hagar, he himself thinks only of Isaac and Ishmael. He reassures Abraham that the promises are still safe with Isaac, and that those he made with regard to Ishmael²⁴ will also be fulfilled. There is no assurance about Hagar. She is yet further diminished by the end of the speech.²⁵ She was promised in the desert that God would multiply *her* offspring. Now he promises that Ishmael will be the ancestor of a nation because he is *Abraham's* son. As Abram handed Hagar back to Sarai in the first scene, as God in the second issued her with the dark command to return to her mistress's abuse, so now, in the third, God tells Abraham to obey Sarah's orders, and again puts Hagar at her mercy. Once more God seems to be on the side of the oppressor. When Hagar and Ishmael are expelled and sent away to die in the desert, it is not just Sarah and Abraham who are responsible for their plight, but God also. He appears to add his cruelty to theirs. However, once again, when Hagar and her son are on their own, God will come to their rescue. Quickly he will resume his normal guise and be the saviour of the oppressed. Why once more this change in him? Why this alarming inconsistency? I believe the answer is to be found in his promises and the limits they keep.

When he is in the presence of Sarah and Abraham, God inhabits the world of the promises to them and their descendants, and is bound by them. Though he has fine things in store for Ishmael also, the richest of his blessings are reserved for Isaac and the people that will eventually spring from him. The land of Canaan will be for them, not for the Ishmaelites. The covenant and the relationship it expresses will be with them, not with the bedouin. Only the people of Israel will be given his torah at Sinai. Only they will be given a David, and the promise that his dynasty will last for ever. There is an exclusiveness about these promises of God which cannot be denied, and so long as she keeps company with Abraham and Sarah, Hagar will find herself excluded. She does not belong to their world. She does not have a place in the brightest of their promises. The story of the people of God will go on without her, and after the end of Genesis 21 will not spare her another thought.²⁶ In *Lo and Behold!* we said this of Esau: 'He remains a

bystander on the edge of God's purposes, and one who has suffered grievously that those purposes might go forward.²⁷ After Hagar's story is over we might well say the same of her.

But we have not yet reached the end of it, nor are we quite at the end of this scene. First we must hear of Abraham's reaction to God's speech and of the immediate outcome for Hagar and Ishmael: 'So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba' (21.14). In the very next chapter Abraham will again get up early in the morning and make elaborate preparations for travel. Following a command he has received from God, he will take Isaac with him and journey for three days towards what he is certain will be the boy's death. At the last moment 'the messenger of the Lord' will call to him from heaven and save the child. He will look up and see a ram, and will sacrifice that in Isaac's stead. Hagar's last scene will contain further anticipations of that story, but in the preparations for her departure we have one already. She, too, is leaving as a result of a divine command, though the command has not been issued to her directly – it was Abraham who was told to do whatever Sarah told him. Thanks to Abraham she takes with her bread and water, the symbols of life, not the fire and the knife and the wood for sacrifice that Abraham will take for Isaac's death. Hagar's supplies represent the only tokens of love – or is it merely pity? – that Abraham ever gives her. Like the loincloths the woman and man make for themselves in the Garden, they will turn out to be pathetically inadequate. Abraham will go on a fearsome journey. Hagar and her son are sent away to a fearsome place, notorious for its harsh conditions and lack of water. But they will not go on a journey. In her second scene we found her on the way to Shur. She was on a particular route, and one which was for her the way home, the way back to Egypt. Now she and her child have nowhere to go. When God sends Abraham to the land of Moriah to sacrifice his son, he has a particular purpose for him in mind. He is testing him to discover where his true attachments lie. God is instrumental in sending Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert of Beer-sheba, but he has no immediate purpose for either of them. They are but bystanders on the edge of his larger purposes, and for the time being can only wander aimlessly about until the food and water and they themselves are exhausted.

Their wanderings bring to mind another range of stories. In the book of Exodus the Israelites will be sent away²⁸ from Egypt, and

will also find themselves wandering in the desert, and will soon become desperately short of water. Hagar's last scene, like her second, will echo those stories also.

A second encounter with God

(Gen. 21.15–21)

The start of the scene could not be more stark. The narrator does not bother to describe her wandering about with her child. He does not tell us how far they went, or how long they were able to carry on. With the sureness of touch of a master storyteller, he brings us straight to the point where the crisis reaches its climax. The water runs out.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, 'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. (21.15–16)

In *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Susan Niditch reminds us of the associations in literature between fertility and water. They represent, she suggests, 'ancient intuitive acknowledgements of our watery origins on earth and in mother, and of the source of life upon which we continue to depend'.²⁹ In the case of Genesis she directs our attention to the story of Rebekah meeting Abraham's servant beside a well, when he is searching for a suitable wife for Isaac (24.10–27), and to that other well where Jacob falls in love with Rachel (29.1–12). She also points us towards the two scenes of Hagar in the desert. We will recall that in chapter 16 God met her 'by a spring of water'. That water did indeed remind us of fertility. She was carrying Ishmael in her womb at the time, and she received a promise from God that he would multiply her offspring so that they would be far too many to count. Now, however, in the apparently arid desert of Beer-sheba, a lack of water seems to spell an end to all that. Hagar's period of fertility appears to have come to an end. She is not on the way home now, and there is no convenient spring. The end of the way home surely means death for her, for her son, and for the promises that God gave her beside the spring. The Hebrew of verse 15 already has the smell of death about it. When it says she 'cast' her son under

a bush, it uses a verb which is commonly used elsewhere in the Old Testament for the throwing down of dead bodies. Hagar casts Ishmael aside as if he were a corpse. But how different is this 'rejection' from those she herself has suffered! It is a token of her love for the child, not of her contempt. It is an expression of concern, not only for herself and her own feelings, but for the boy also. She can do no more for him. Any power she had has now gone with the water. All she can do is put him in the shade and sit waiting for his death where she will not be able to see or hear too much. She is not at all concerned for her own plight, beyond her grief at the loss of her child. So concentrated is her attention on Ishmael, that we have to use our imaginations to realize that she is sitting waiting for her own death also. She shows the selflessness of the mother whose child is in grave danger, and who quite forgets any threat to herself.

The insertion of the detail of 'the distance of a bowshot' seems curious at first sight. Everything else in the narrative plainly contributes to the pathos of the scene and to the sense of impending tragedy. This alone seems superfluous. But it is not. After this scene is over, the narrator will tell us what becomes of Hagar and her son. It turns out that Ishmael will become 'an expert with the bow' (21.20). Hagar's sitting at that particular distance is thus prophetic. Just as Abraham's and then Sarah's laughter at the prospect of their having a child reassured us that Isaac, 'Laughter', would be born against all the odds, so Hagar's putting a bowshot's distance between her and Ishmael hints to us that they have a future after all. Yet we only pick up the hint once we get to the end of the story! For the moment, if we are looking for straws to clutch, all we have is the child's name, Ishmael, 'God Hears'. But in these verses his name is not used.

'For she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child"' (21.16). That is Hagar's only speech in this whole chapter. In the company of Sarah and Abraham, she was given nothing to say, as was the case in the opening scene of her story. God will soon come to her again, but this time she will not engage in dialogue with him. She will, in fact, have nothing more to say. These words of utter despair, in which she cannot bring herself even to speak her son's name, are the last ones we hear from her lips.

But they are not to be the last words of her life. The story continues with, 'And God heard . . .' The Hebrew, following its usual custom, puts the verb before the subject: 'And heard God . . .' The word for 'heard' and the first two letters of the word for God spell out Ishmael's name. Curiously, Ishmael is not named

directly at any juncture in the scene, but this play on his name is the point on which it all turns.

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' (21.17-18)

The story of Hagar was especially attractive to the seventeenth-century artist Rembrandt, and he devoted an etching and a number of drawings to her, most of them depicting the moment of Abraham's dismissal, or else dealing with this encounter with 'the messenger'. As we might expect, Rembrandt shows the messenger as having a human form with wings, and as coming down from the sky. In fact, the narrator reveals to us by the way he introduces the encounter that the one meeting with Hagar is again God himself, for it is he who hears the crying.

One of Rembrandt's most eloquent treatments of the scene shows his angel reaching out to touch the distraught Hagar on the shoulder. With the other arm he points to a well of water, which soon we and Hagar will discover has been there all the time. Rembrandt has so positioned the figures that the angel seems about to embrace her in his arms.

He has, alas, used artist's licence. In Hagar's first encounter with God, he came so close that she could 'see' him and even give him a name. This time he keeps his distance, as again he will when Abraham has the knife poised at Isaac's throat. Hidden from our sight in the periphrasis, 'the messenger of God', he keeps himself from Hagar's view also, and calls to her from his own domain. His wide universe of hope and promise reaches out to the small world of her despair and transforms it, but there is no longer the intimacy of their first meeting. The promise that Ishmael will become a great nation is repeated, but there is no dialogue, no expression of awe and astonishment on Hagar's part, no daring to give God a name. When we recall how few parallels we could find in the biblical literature for her first encounter, we realize that this one is also quite remarkable. Here, too, God does Hagar very great honour. Nevertheless, this encounter, for all Rembrandt could do with it, lacks the immediacy, the terror of the first, and leaves its awesomeness understated.

In one important respect Rembrandt's drawing is true to the

biblical text. He shows his angel paying heed to Hagar. Ishmael is asleep (another bit of artistic licence) in the bottom right-hand corner, but the angel's attention is focused on the mother, and it is to her that he is speaking. Some commentators and translators have taken too much notice of the fact that God hears the crying of her son. Indeed, some of them have found the shift from the mention of Hagar's weeping to God's responding to Ishmael so abrupt that they have declared the Hebrew text of the end of verse 16 corrupt, and have altered it to make Ishmael lift up his voice and weep.³⁰ Instead of 'And as she sat opposite him, *she* lifted up *her* voice and wept', they have 'And as she sat opposite him, *the child* lifted up *his* voice and wept.' Thus, as Phyllis Trible remarks, they have robbed Hagar of her grief.³¹ Rembrandt in a few lines gives it wonderful expression, and so keeps closer to the text than does the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament), the RSV, the JB, or such commentators as Gerhard von Rad and Claus Westermann!

By responding to the little boy's³² cries (21.17), God is only directing his concern to where Hagar's own attention is focused. The mother is anxious not for herself, but for her child. Hagar in her grief is self-effacing, and God acknowledges that. By paying heed to the child, he is paying heed to the mother, and that he makes plain by his addressing his speech to her. Yet, as Phyllis Trible notes,³³ his arrival in the story does mark a shift away from Hagar to her son. We can see that most clearly if we compare the end of verse 17 with its parallel in Luke's Gospel. For, although Luke found the pattern for his story of the annunciation to Mary most especially in Hagar's first meeting with God, he based some of the details on this second scene. After Gabriel's initial greeting, Luke's story proceeds as follows:

'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High . . .' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be . . .?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you . . .' (Luke 1.30-5)

Hagar's story also has 'Do not be afraid', but continues with, 'for God has heard the voice of the boy'. While Luke keeps our eyes focused on Mary, the narrator in Genesis turns them away from Hagar towards the son. While Luke allows Mary to speak, the storyteller here has Hagar remain silent.

But, of course, there is a crucial difference between the two scenes. Mary does not have a boy dying beneath a desert bush. Hagar 'listens to a deity who is concerned primarily with her son,' says Phyllis Trible.³⁴ That is too simple. In Hagar's circumstances, if God were to be 'concerned primarily' with her, then she would surely tell him to stop worrying about her and go and help her son. We have already seen where her own mind is fixed, and at the end of the scene we are given further evidence pointing in the same direction. When, after he has finished talking with her, God opens her eyes and shows her a well nearby, she goes and fills the skin with water and gives Ishmael a drink. There is no mention of her quenching her own thirst. God attends to her needs as much as Ishmael's when he tells her to go across to the child and lift him up and hold him tight. He continues to attend to her when he promises again that Ishmael will become a nation. To a mother of a child on the edge of death, that is fine music to the ear! She can resume her role as the boy's mother; for a second time, through the gift of water, she can give him life; once more she can dream the dreams about him that God first put in her head before he was born. What seems at first sight a shift in the story that diminishes Hagar, ends up leading to the restoration of her dignity and her proper authority, and then the re-emergence of that defiance which we glimpsed briefly in her first scene. For her story ends with this: 'God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt' (21.20-1). Three quarters of the talk is about Ishmael, and reflects the experiences the Israelites were to have of the bedouin. At first it seems Hagar has disappeared from the narrative altogether. It appears that only Ishmael counts for anything, that in the end the narrator and his God are interested only in him. But at its very end the story returns to her and to her initiative.

In the company of Sarah and Abraham she could take no initiative at all, except once to run away. In her first encounter with God she was able to give him the name El-Roi. In the desert for a second time, she took over the running of the story. She put Ishmael aside in the shade, she went and sat down where she could not see him die, she spoke her grief, she lifted up her voice and wept. When God answered from heaven he encouraged her to continue in this vein, and enlarged her acting on her own initiative into the exercising of true freedom. Before he entered the story, she could take decisions for herself, but still had no more power than when she was a slave of Sarah's. All she could do was wait

for her son's death, and make her own a little more bearable. She had simply exchanged one harsh mistress for another. Instead of Sarah, she was at the mercy of the desert. With the lifting up of her son, the taking of his hand, the putting of water to his lips, she has at last become a free woman. She will have no more to do with slavery. She will have no more to do with Sarah or Abraham. This time there is no divine command to return. The desert changes from a place where she and Ishmael are sure to die to one where they can live and thrive. Though they have no Promised Land, the wilderness becomes their home, and eventually, in taking a wife for her son from Egypt, she returns to her own roots and allows her own people to help determine the character of the nation that will spring from her.

Although Rebekah will be behind Jacob's being sent by Isaac to find a wife among her people (see Gen. 27.46-28.5), no other woman in the Bible will choose a wife for her son. It will be Abraham who secures, through the good offices of his trusted servant, that same Rebekah as a wife for Isaac (24.1-67).

In the two scenes set in the desert Hagar plays several roles that elsewhere are played by Abraham or by the Israelites of the Exodus. The embryo in her womb in the earlier of them, and the child riding on her shoulder in the second, has no father to care for him. Hagar and Ishmael, alone together in the desert, constitute a one-parent family. And so Hagar the mother must there perform the roles of the father also. For that reason it is not surprising that she enjoys some privileges that belong elsewhere to Abraham, and sometimes apes or foreshadows his actions. Nor is it so remarkable that she should in the desert gain a status and an honour that Sarah, her mistress, nowhere receives, for Sarah never appears in the narrative away from the company of men.

Yet let us not fail to underline the significance of the roles she plays, or the extraordinary nature of the particular honour she achieves. We have said enough already about the privileges heaped upon her, but a few final remarks must be made about her roles. She is not simply father to her son as well as mother. She reminds us of a particular father, the one who is the father of her own child, the one who is destined to be the father of the people of God. If Abraham has any counterpart in these narratives, it is Hagar, the Egyptian slave, not Sarah. It is Hagar to whom God appears, and who speaks with him and receives his promises. It is Hagar whose second encounter with him will so clearly anticipate the story of the binding of Isaac and what, in the judgement of the narrator, is Abraham's finest hour. And not content with giving her Abraham's

part, the narrator has her play the Israelites themselves, and in a way that looks forward to the events that will lie at the heart of their gospel, those of the Exodus. God will hear their cries also; he will come to their rescue; he will provide them with water when none is to be found (see Exod. 15.22-5; 17.1-7; Num. 20.2-11). Hagar will not repay him with bitter complaints and accusations as they will, and the selflessness she shows when Ishmael is dying of thirst will put them to shame.

Susan Niditch says of Genesis 21, 'While reading this story one has the distinct feeling it is being told from Hagar and Ishmael's point of view.'³⁵ I do not share her feeling until the last scene in the desert, but there it is surely supported by the text, which in its few masterly lines allows us to come so close to their hopelessness, and finally to rejoice with them in their triumph.

In telling Hagar's story the narrator has carefully ordered his plot and his words so that they will readily evoke our sympathy for her and her son. And yet he has included it in a narrative that traces the origins of the Israelite people, and will soon record how grievously they suffer at the hands of Hagar's own people, the Egyptians. His generosity is yet one more surprise this astonishing tale has to offer its readers.