Sarah as victim and perpetrator: Whiteness, power, and memory in the matriarchal narrative

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Abstract
Womanist biblical interpretation tradition calls for white women to see themselves, not as the marginalized character, but as the text’s oppressor. The text, and a community who reads that same text and has daily experiences of oppression, asks white women to recognize that, because of our position in society, we have wittingly or unwittingly been in the role of Sarah more often than we have been in the role of Hagar. Therefore, we have a responsibility to take that reality seriously by acknowledging it, delving deeper, being receptive to challenge, and allowing it to transform how we view, and operate within, the world. This article expands on and models this approach by acknowledging the ways in which the Sarah narrative has been read by white women, with a particular view to nineteenth-century historical readings in the context of American slavery as well as with an awareness of whiteness and white privilege. It seeks to dig deeper into the text to understand the fullness of Sarah’s experience as both victim and perpetrator, to hear the challenge to whiteness and privilege, and to find a way to read the text that speaks to the lived experience of the oppressed as well as giving challenge to the privileged.

Keywords
#BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, Hagar, liberation, The Handmaid’s Tale, white privilege

Introduction
As a scholar trained in feminist and liberation theology and a devotee of theologians such as Delores Williams and Phyllis Trible, I find Hagar’s story much more compelling than Sarah’s. I want to identify with Hagar and her story; I do not want to identify with Sarah and her story. As readers, we are justified in wanting to identify with or prefer Hagar. The narrative constructs it as such. It follows Hagar rather than focusing on Sarah’s tent in the aftermath of Hagar’s two dramatic departures. We read how God sees and God hears Hagar (Gen 16:7–13); she is the first woman to receive an annunciation and blessing directly from God (Gen 16:11–12), and she is the only woman who is detailed as naming a place after a divine vision in the Hebrew Bible (Gen 16:13–14).1

But my desire to identify with Hagar over Sarah is wishful thinking. Womanist biblical interpretation tradition calls for white women like me “to realign our imaginations, and see ourselves not as the marginalized character, but in the role of the text’s oppressor.”\(^2\) The text, and a community who reads that same text and has daily experiences of oppression, asks me to recognize that, because of my position as a white woman, I have wittingly or unwittingly been in the role of Sarah more often than I have been in the role of Hagar.\(^3\) In this story between Sarah and Hagar, Sarah is the oppressor. In this story, I am Sarah.

My responsibility is to take that reality seriously by acknowledging it, delving deeper, being receptive to challenge, and allowing it to transform me. Therefore, this article is my attempt to model this approach: to acknowledge the ways in which the Sarah narrative has been read by white women, to dig deeper into the text to understand the fullness of Sarah’s experience as both victim and perpetrator, to hear challenge to my own whiteness and privilege, and to find a way to read the text that speaks to the lived experience of the oppressed as well as giving challenge to the privileged.

**Unpacking the baggage of the text**

A few principles will guide my approach to the Sarah narrative. First, the text has meaning as it applies to us as readers; otherwise it is empty and without significance. This story, and the Hebrew Bible as a whole, has stood the test of time because, despite its archaic nature, it is remarkably contemporary. As Gerald Bruns writes, “We take the text in relation to ourselves, understanding ourselves in this light, even as our situation throws its light upon the text, allowing it to disclose itself differently, perhaps in unheard-of ways.”\(^4\) Similarly, Judith Plaskow argues that in order for the text to become ours, “it must answer our questions and share our values; if we wrestle with it, it can and will yield meaning.”\(^5\) The importance of the narrative in this instance is that it highlights “the humanity of its characters” and functions as a medium through which we can participate in moral reflection. Stories have always had this function, argues Martha Nussbaum, as the role of literature is to provide a space in which “we investigate and try out some of life’s possibilities.”\(^6\)

The meaningful stories are the ones that we try out and find that they fit our experience in some shape or form.

Second, despite its meaningful application to our lives, the text asserts a particular view of the world that may or may not be correct. The tension here is found in what the text expects us to do

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and what we actually do. This is seemingly contradictory to Plaskow’s assertion above: sometimes the text does not share our values, and yet we insert our values into it despite its intentions and we find the text instructive anyway. The narration of the Sarah story has certain expectations of the reader: to sympathize with Sarah’s childlessness; to be concerned when she is endangered in Pharaoh and Abimalech’s courts; to have compassion for Hagar but, ultimately, to show commiseration and loyalty to Sarah. Erich Auerbach writes that the biblical text does not “court our favor” or seek to cajole, delight, or thrill us. Instead, Auerbach argues, it “seek[s] to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.” Therefore, Scripture “exerts a tyranny on readers and forces them to subscribe to its own world as the only true and just world.” Modern “bottom-up” biblical hermeneutics such as womanist, liberation, and feminist approaches embrace this rebellion, understanding that we are working with a text that has obvious tensions on issues such as patriarchy, misogyny, violence, racism, slavery, homophobia, genocide, and xenophobia and yet still has authority for us as believers.

Third, the text seeks to affirm an identity and heritage of a particular community. The Hebrew Bible was drawn together over centuries to form a sacred text for a “religious community with a specific identity.” James Okoye writes that it is a “story of a people with their God” and that whereas “parts of the story are open to the inclusion of all peoples … the narrative is first and foremost a story of Israel written with an overriding nationalistic focus.” Therefore, the text’s loyalty to Sarah is understandable, owing to the fact that it wants readers to see her, not Hagar, as a matriarch of Israel.

Finally, because of its intrinsic bias, we need to approach the text with suspicion. If we want the text to be meaningful and to rise above its identity-based focus towards exclusivity, the feminist hermeneutic of suspicion is required because it forces us to ask: for whom and for what purpose is the story being told in this way? Sarah is the dominant female character in the text, and reading it with a view toward the experience of the “subordinated and marginalized character” of Hagar is a suspicious, subversive, and necessary act if we want the text to speak to our current context.

Meeting Sarah again for the first time

For the purposes of this article, I will focus on the portions of the narrative pertaining to or involving Sarah in the context of Hagar and the endangered ancestress narratives in Gen 11:29–21:34. We are introduced to Sarah with these details: her husband’s name, her name, her father’s name, her siblings’ names, and that she is barren and without child. The theme of infertility runs throughout the matriarch narratives (Gen 11:30; 25:21; 30:1–2), and Sarah is the first barren woman we meet. The narrator obviously wants us to understand, despite knowing how the story will end, that Sarah’s infertility and the future of Abraham’s lineage is a threat upon which the story will focus.

Nevertheless, what do we know of Sarah’s sense of self? In the early part of the story, we know that she is aware of and mourns the fact that she is unable to have a child (Gen 11:30), that she is the wife of Abraham—a man of means (Gen 13:2)—that as the wife of Abraham, she is ruled at his whim (Gen 12:5), and that she is the mistress of at least one slave named Hagar (Gen 16:1).

Because of womanist theological influences, the racial, gendered, and political implications of slavery and surrogacy in this narrative immediately capture my attention. Some scholars refer to

the dynamic between Sarah and Hagar as rivalry, but I disagree. Rivalry assumes a measure (or hope) of equality. We see rivalry later between Rachel and Leah in Genesis 29, but the story of Sarah and Hagar is not a story of rivalry. It is a story about threat and survival.

On a personal level, we relate to this story because these two women “feel like actual people, women we might know, each with her own reason for bitterness.” What we see in this narrative is humanity in all of its glory and ugliness. In the context of Sarah as a character here, we are able to empathize with her pain, frustration, and abuse, celebrate with her triumph in bearing a child, and recoil at her cruelty and inability to take responsibility for the pain she has caused others.

If it has become common practice to learn from negative examples in Scripture—Jacob tricking Isaac and usurping his brother’s role as heir (Gen 27); David killing Uriah because of lust for Bathsheba (2 Sam 11); Moses’ short temper (Exod 32; Num 20); or Abraham lying about Sarah being his sister—are we not allowed to read female characters in the same way? Much of feminist hermeneutics tends to hold the female characters up as oft-ignored heroines and/or victims of patriarchy, but the women in these stories, though admittedly not given as much attention in the text as their male counterparts, are still human beings who are just as flawed, fearful, dominating, and/or abusive in their own controlled domains.

It is no surprise that this story also has implications for our current world. The political dimensions of the Sarah and Hagar narrative are numerous, but how this incapacity to live together well has informed not only relations between Muslims and both Jews and Christians, but also race relations and patriarchy. In the context of #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, and the recent television adaptation of Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the abuses of racism, patriarchy, and exploitation of women should be in the forefront of our minds when we read the Sarah narrative.

In relation to *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the text takes on new light if we read it from Serena Joy’s perspective rather than Offred’s. Serena Joy is the commandant’s wife, unable to bear a child, and a woman of stature and influence in a context of extreme patriarchy. Under her mastery is Offred, the handmaid (i.e., surrogacy slave), whose name describes her status (“of Fred”). Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin argues that *The Handmaid’s Tale* “is a dark midrash … on the patriarchal tales of Genesis,” highlighting the “pain and humiliation” patriarchal systems produce. Like Serena Joy, Sarah becomes “angry and threatened by the presence” of Hagar, who succeeds in conceiving Abraham’s child. One woman’s success, in this case, highlights another woman’s failure, and gender does not assume solidarity.

The Sarah text as well as *The Handmaid’s Tale* sets these women against each other narratively speaking, but there is a disparity of power. Both Serena Joy’s own victimization at the hand of the regime of Gilead and Sarah’s at the hand of Abraham are apparent. They are subject to the whims, desires, and power of the men they encounter, expected to submit and fulfill their duties as a woman (including having children).

Yet, despite that victimization, Sarah’s/Serena Joy’s complicity in participating in and upholding the abusive, patriarchal system is also fully visible. There are strata within the system, and though they sit lower than the men, they also sit above the handmaid/slave under their control. In this case, Sarah/Serena Joy is both a puppet of the system and an independent actor, choosing to participate in her own subjugation and that of others who struggle to survive to ensure her own

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16. Similarly, Hagar’s name means “stranger,” so it is possible that we actually never know if the name “Hagar” was truly the handmaid’s real name or simply the one she was given in the context of this story.
18. Salkin, “‘The Handmaid’s Tale.’”
status and well-being. This is a story in which the oppressed becomes the oppressor, blinded to the suffering of others by her own issues and those of her class/status.

This blindness can be read as a crime, the culpability for which is rightly leveled at white women. Our privilege, despite our oppression within a patriarchal system, makes us blind and frequently undermines the bonding potential of gender solidarity across class and racial lines. On a philosophical level, privilege is relative. Yet, one of the conundrums of the 2016 United States presidential election was the clear affirmation that white women consistently vote against their own self-interest in order to maintain a system that gives them and their men privilege over another: namely women and men of color.

Reading the Sarah/Hagar story through the lens of American slavery

Stephen Fowl and L. Gregory Jones argue that “[h]ermeneutics is inevitably, though not restrictively, a ‘political’ discipline.” Reading a text with integrity calls us to be sensitive to the interplay of power as well as the ways in which the text colludes and/or resists present and/or past politics. James Okoye asks an important question in relation to how we read the Sarah/Hagar text: “… is this text a pharmacon or a toxin, that is, does this text contain elements that can be used to kill, dehumanize, or marginalize others?” Unfortunately, the answer is yes.

A quick survey of how this text has been read and imagined historically highlights a close link between this narrative and American chattel slavery. Slavery is rife throughout this narrative that describes Abraham and Sarah as wealthy slaveholders. In her powerful work, A Bell Buried Deep, poet Veronica Golos envisions this story situated “in the antebellum American south, where the characters are Sarah, her slave Harriet, and her nameless husband,” wherein the story “involves a whipping scene, a childbirth scene, [and] … an escape scene.” In Gen 16:6–14, Hagar is a runaway slave, attempting to escape the bonds of servitude and surrogacy. We understand Hagar’s actions because, as Renita Weems writes, “to be under the power of a resentful woman can be a dangerous thing.” Moreover, James Okoye observes that “[l]ike every slave when oppression becomes unbearable, Hagar damned the consequences and fled from Sarah’s face,” setting her eyes “toward freedom in Egypt, her homeland.” Additionally, Okoye notes the irony in this text in that Sarah abuses an Egyptian slave in the same way the Egyptians will later do to Sarah’s descendants.

Sarah’s role as matriarch has been adopted historically by white women—women who were complicit in slavery and the lynchings of black men and women. Sarah as matriarch gave them permission to support and participate in a system of oppression and white supremacy. Marion Ann Taylor and Heather E. Weir have collected historical essays written by leading women in the

nineteenth century about the women of Genesis, and in their collection they note that “American women read the story of Hagar in light of the institution of American slavery” [and] “imagined Hagar as a black slave woman, [with] Sarah and Abraham as white slave owners.”27 As an example, Grace Aguilar writes in her 1845 essay, “The Women of Israel”:

… the words of the angel are quite sufficient proof that Hagar had been wrong, and Sarai’s chastisement just, or he would not have commanded her, as Sarai’s bondwoman, to return and submit herself to her mistress’s power, without any reservation whatever. It must indeed have been a bitterly painful disappointment to Sarai, that instead of receiving increased gratitude and affection from one whom she had so raised and cherished, she was despised with an insolence that, unless checked, might bring discord and misery in a household which had before been so blessed with peace and love.28

Aguilar clearly sees Hagar as the uppity, insolent slave, daring to desire more than her station allows, with Sarah as the benevolent, caring mistress forced to abuse her slave as a disciplinary act. Sarah’s actions were justified in that it was her job to keep Hagar in check. Interestingly, Aguilar later notes Abraham’s complicity in the matter by saying that he “knew, too, that [Sarah] was not likely to inflict more punishment than was deserved, particularly on a favorite slave.”29

This theme of affection and favoritism is especially disturbing in Aguilar’s essay, importing emotion into the text that is just not there, and therefore highlighting the attitudes Aguilar has in relation to slavery and slaveholders that inform her reading. She writes further: “We know that Hagar had been her favorite slave; it was impossible for one affectionate as was Sarah, to have regarded Ishmael as her son for thirteen or fourteen years and not yet have loved him, though of course with less intensity than his father.”30

Similarly, these nineteenth-century essays highlight Hagar’s station. Overall, Taylor and Weir note that the historical essays are “comfortable with the idea that Hagar should return to Sarah because it was wrong to abandon one’s station in life.”31 Susan Warner, in her 1866 essay “Walks from Eden,” admits Sarah’s cruelty but argues that ultimately Hagar deserves it for rising above her station:

However, the Lord gave Hagar the blessing of being a mother; and when she had the premise of it, very naturally she assumed a position which was not her right. She despised her former mistress, and would not take orders from her meekly, but carried her pretty black head high … It was a little cruel to Hagar; but then Abraham did not know that Sarah would use her power so harshly … Sarah ‘afflicted her,’ the Hebrew has it; punished her well for her impertinence and presumption, I suppose.32

Unsurprisingly, Hagar is damned no matter what, since her other alleged sin lies within the racist stereotype of hypersexuality. Aguilar wrote of Hagar bringing “discord and misery in a household … so blessed with peace and love,” essentially describing Hagar as a homewrecker.33 Similarly, the famous abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe, in her 1877 essay “Footsteps of the Master,” refers to Hagar’s actions as “the fiery, indomitable passions of the slave-woman [that] again break forth and threaten the peace of the home.”34 But this reading is not restricted to nineteenth-century women.

Juliana Claassens notes that a tenth-century rabbinic midrash of this text also characterizes Hagar’s fertility and ethnicity as evidence of her promiscuity and hypersexuality.35

As to the theme of Hagar as a runaway slave, it is disturbing but important for us to note that in the Genesis 16 text, God appears to side with Sarah the oppressor by commanding pregnant Hagar to return and submit to supposed further abuse. Phyllis Trible refers to this text as one of the “texts of terror,” and sees it as oppositional to the Exodus tradition, in which God is perceived to identify with the suffering of slaves and acts to secure their deliverance from bondage.36 In keeping with Trible’s interpretation, white American slaveholders in the nineteenth century read this text as confirmation that slavery was a God-ordained institution, and that God sides with their interest in commanding return and submission to disobedient slaves. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld notes that according to slaveholders’ readings of Genesis 9, Hagar (an Egyptian) “was African, a descendant of Ham, destined for subjection to Sarah, just as their African slaves were in subjection.”37

Moreover, in the context of slavery, James Okoye observes that Hagar’s journey is a contrasting preamble to Israel’s own spiritual journey:

As a maid in bondage, she flees from suffering. Yet she experiences exodus without liberation, revelation without salvation, wilderness without covenant, wanderings without land, promise without fulfillment, and unmerited exile without return.38

While this juxtaposition in the narrative structure is valuable, it comes at a cost for readers of color who must adjust their hermeneutical practices in order to find meaning in Hagar’s experience. Okoye argues, “African American biblical interpretation does not interpret texts, but life with the aid of texts.”39 Perhaps it is because of this that womanist theologian Delores Williams sees an emphasis on survival and quality of life over liberation in relation to Hagar’s flight. She notes that in God’s commands to Hagar to return and submit, God is neither “concerned with nor involved in liberation,” but instead “wants Hagar to secure her and her child’s well-being by using the resources” that the wealth of Abraham makes available.40 Hagar complies with God’s command and thus ensures survival and future well-being via God’s promise of her son’s generational inheritance.

Reading the Sarah/Hagar story through an awareness of whiteness

In my own white Baptist tradition, my experience has been that white women are implicitly taught to identify with Sarah. She is seen as the matriarch of our inherited faith tradition and the one in the story from whom we descend. Paul’s assertion of Sarah and Abraham as ancestors of Christian faith in Galatians 3–4 furthers this claim to heritage while also asserting the subservience and baseness of Hagar and her descendants as slaves. For those who pay any attention to Hagar, our heart may go out to her and notice the unfairness of the situation, but we are pointed to the bigger picture of Sarah’s impending progeny and her role in the establishment of the house of Israel above all else.

The bigger picture of establishing the house of Israel is pervasive, serving to justify and collude with abusive power throughout the Hebrew Bible and, if read in isolation, becomes a blinker of nationalism, disabling the reader from seeing the narrative with a wider view. The text comes with

37. Sakenfeld, Just Wives, 18–19.
its own particular set of perspectives and aims, and it is our job as readers to be suspicious of and question those. In the same way, whiteness can blind us to the oppression and injustice in the text, reinforcing a privileged worldview and assumptions of others’ experiences and readings, whereas an informed reading seeks to account for these and see beyond them.

The Genesis account is primarily interested in illustrating the revelation of YHWH to Abraham, canonizing a national epic and extolling the heritage of Abraham’s faith through Isaac and his descendants. 41 James Okoye keenly observes that “the history and interests of Hagar and her progeny have been co-opted and subordinated to those of Sarah and her progeny.” 42 Here we see the development of an ideology related to God’s blessing, inheritance of land, and being a chosen people for the nation of Israel.

The God Hagar meets in the desert and names El Roi (“God of seeing” or “God who sees”; Gen 16:13) may (not) be that same God, but her version of God is “displaced and subsumed” by YHWH over the following chapters in such a way as to write Ishmael out of direct inheritance. We must remember as readers, however, that it is not in Sarah’s, or Israel’s, interest to recognize the legitimacy of Ishmael’s inheritance claim. Because the narrator treats Ishmael as more the son of Hagar and less the son of Abraham, Ishmael is sidelined, driven into the desert to be “a wild ass of a man with the hand of all against him” (Gen 13:12) despite having been Abraham’s legitimate firstborn son and circumcised, marking him as a part of the covenant made between Abraham and YHWH in Genesis 17. This story feels rigged against Hagar and Ishmael, supplying Israel (and us as readers) with convenient justifications for setting one’s self, tribe, nation, or even our theological understanding over and above the interests of another. 43

Concurrently, how this text is also read within white culture enables it to become a national epic for whiteness and white supremacy. In every instance in which I have heard this story referred to publicly, it is read by giving Sarah (and Abraham) the benefit of the doubt, seeing Sarah as the heroine or protagonist in the story. As our matriarch, she can’t be that bad, can she? Furthermore, despite the fact that Abraham and Sarah originated from the Fertile Crescent area of the ancient Near East, every Sunday School flannel board or illustration of them (and other major biblical characters) I have ever seen have depicted Abraham and Sarah as white.

Scholars define whiteness as a multi-dimensional entity in that it “is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege … a ‘standpoint,’ a place from which White people look at [themselves], at others, and at society … [and it] is a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.” 44 Whiteness has informed the reading of this text, fulfilling the promise of white privilege by claiming it as white people’s own “cultural turf,” giving us permission to “freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms” established by viewing Sarah as the matriarch and dominant voice in the narrative. 45 Sarah is never held

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43. Okoye notes: “The fact may have been that the exclusion of Ishmael from the inheritance seemed right to an editor who saw the material uniquely from the perspective of Israel”; “Sarah and Hagar,” 172.
to account for her actions; she is presumed innocent or at least given a pass, and her legacy (this article notwithstanding) is largely untarnished.

White privilege taught me that national heritage or “civilization” is what it is because white people made it that way.\(^46\) As a result, we read Sarah’s behavior at least as understandable, “morally neutral, normative, and average,” if not heroic—an ideal to which we should aspire, from which we have benefited, and that which benefits others.\(^47\) We neglect to notice that the benefit we recognize she brings to us as matriarch is based on a reading informed by culture and whiteness, wherein the racism we encounter not only puts Hagar at a disadvantage, but elevates Sarah’s privilege through her access to and use of power.\(^48\)

It is because of this awareness that I am reluctant to read Hagar as having wronged Sarah. Though some feminist readings emphasize wrong committed by both women,\(^49\) there is enough debate about the verb *qalal* (“to become trifling, of little account” as in “Sarah became small in Hagar’s eyes” in Gen 16:4) to create space to give Hagar the benefit of the doubt. It is often translated as “Hagar regarded Sarah with contempt,” which may or may not be fair. As readers, we only hear about Hagar through the narrator or Sarah’s voice and, even if Hagar were guilty of condescension, one should be reluctant to judge Hagar, as Sarah proves herself worthy of it in how she treats Hagar later. To be “wronged” in a way for Sarah to behave as she did would imply an equality that is missing from the text. What if Hagar were simply proud of being pregnant and achieving what had been asked of her and Sarah took it as Hagar becoming ‘uppity’?\(^50\) In light of #BlackLivesMatter, white people calling the cops on black people for simply living their lives, and innumerable stories of racism, assault, and harassment in the news today, it behooves us to be aware of whiteness and err on the side of believing the oppressed instead. I hear the Sarah and Hagar story when I read Guilaine Kinouani’s words:

> I am scared of white women. I am not scared of white women for I believe they are monsters or necessarily more dangerous or violent than any other group of women or human beings. I don’t believe so. I am scared of white women as a group, for what they can do to me and get away with. I am scared of what society allows white women to do to black women and to other women of colour without ever being held to account. Without losing an ounce of that socially presumed innocence, or suffer any dent in the credibility of their sisterhood claims. And in truth, I’m scared because in this white patriarchal society, it is white women who have inflicted the most harm onto me.\(^51\)

Whiteness has assumed ownership of Sarah’s story, and, even though it is difficult to admit, white feminists like me look to Hagar and focus on her exploitation and abuse because we want to be on her side and show our “wokeness” rather than focusing on the ways Sarah’s part of the story questions us about our whiteness, use of power, and complicity in systems of oppression.

Our blindness to whiteness in the ways we read this text is, in some ways, reasonable given our cultural context. For white people, whiteness is rarely recognized or named and is assumed as “a

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\(^{46}\) McIntosh, “White Privilege,” 2–5. This assumption related to heritage and civilization is number 7 on McIntosh’s list of 46 assumptions related to white privilege.

\(^{47}\) McIntosh, “White Privilege,” 2.

\(^{48}\) McIntosh, “White Privilege,” 1.


universal reference point.”52 We are simply not taught to see it. Robin DiAngelo argues white people assume they are the norm, representing the universality of humanity, “while people of color … are never just people but always … racialized … [as] black people, Asian people, etc.”53 Whiteness sees race as residing in people of color, not in whites, and it is people of color who are expected to carry its “social burden.”54 In this way, Hagar becomes black because she is a slave and is the one cast out. Sarah is white because this is her (our) story and she is the slave’s master. DiAngelo continues:

Everywhere we look, we see our own racial image reflected back to us—in our heroes and heroines, in standards of beauty, in our role-models and teachers, in our textbooks and historical memory, in the media, in religious iconography including the image of god himself, etc. In virtually any situation or image deemed valuable in dominant society, whites belong.55

The interplay between agency and election within this narrative is interesting as it further highlights the dynamics of power and dominance. Surrogacy functions as a means to explore this theme, wherein the body of a slave woman is chosen to bear a child as a surrogate for a woman of wealth and high status.56 Sarah’s agency is in choosing Hagar to bear the child for her, but also in choosing never to accept the child as her own as is her legal right within the tradition of surrogacy at the time.57 Sarah’s focus in her act of choosing Hagar is upon herself, “so that I [Sarah] may be built up through her [Hagar]” (Gen 16:2). Motherhood will secure her status and confirm her identity, and Hagar “is seen as a possession, a disposable commodity,” whose “feelings are of no consequence in the transaction.”58 Okoye notes that, throughout the entire narrative, Sarah never once speaks directly to Hagar.59 What little agency Hagar has in Genesis 16 is in running away and then choosing to return at God’s command to ensure the survival of and future for herself and her child. Later, however, in Gen 21:21, Hagar’s final act is an act of agency in her choosing an Egyptian wife for Ishmael, and “so securing his (and her own) future.”60

Both women are chosen as matriarchs—mothers of men who will be the fathers of generations of people. God recognizes both Sarah and Hagar and their children, chooses them, and provides for them, but whiteness focuses the attention on Sarah’s election rather than God’s recognition and provision for Hagar. James Okoye notes that within the African American hermeneutical tradition, Hagar’s story illustrates a “God [who] is not an abstract idea but a personal God who has been the only one who was with them, who gave them a feeling of ‘somebodyness,’ and who became the bedrock of black identity and sanity.”61 Despite this, the dominant culture of whiteness subverts Hagar’s El Roi and presents this same God as one who commands their submission and servitude.62

Genesis 21:12 confirms this subversion of Hagar’s narrative to the privilege and power of Sarah. There, God essentially gives carte blanche to Sarah’s plan to banish Hagar and Ishmael once and

57. Ishmael is depicted as Hagar’s son, not Sarah’s, even though the law at the time would have made him Sarah’s. Hagar was simply a surrogate. So why did Sarah not assume her right to the child? Because the narrative would have been confused? Perhaps in telling the origin story of Israel, a conflict was needed, and it confused the narrative purpose for Sarah to stake a claim to Hagar’s child, forcing a “Sophie’s choice” dilemma later, with the insistence that Israel proceeds from the covenant made with Isaac and not Ishmael.
for all. We all understand the instinct of a mother to protect her child’s interests, but some (white?) feminist readers have interpreted this as Sarah understanding God’s will for Isaac, perhaps better than Abraham did, and acting accordingly. Is it possible that there is a self-righteousness that white feminist women see in Sarah that resonates? Does she confirm our delusion that we know better, that we orchestrate the real work being done, and without us everything would fall apart? Furthermore, at this point, Sarah knew that God had elected Isaac, and that God miraculously seems to keep promises. Was the threat of Ishmael, then, a real or perceived one? How much of this entire scenario, and the suffering that came as a result, is owing to Sarah’s own fragility?

**Encountering Sarah’s pain**

Clearly, there is pain in this Genesis text on the parts of both Sarah and Hagar. Though I am particularly sensitive to Hagar’s pain, to deny Sarah’s pain does a disservice to her and to the text. A false equivalency of pain and suffering must be avoided, however. Even in the context of the ancient Near East, the pain of childlessness is not equivalent to the pain of slavery and forced surrogacy. Here, a sensitivity to whiteness and white privilege is once again important in how we approach the text, as often white people telling the story of pain “can take up so much space … [because they] are so used to being heard and understood,” whereas “people of color are used to not being heard and are very aware of how much space they take up.”

Nevertheless, the first personal detail we are given about Sarah is that she is barren and has no child. This is the first appearance of the theme of barrenness in relation to the three central matriarchs of Genesis (Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel). Despite God’s eventual provision of heirs through these women, their inability to conceive and bear children was a legitimate source of pain.

The Hebrew word for barren (*aqarah*) is used in reference to female infertility, and derives from a root literally meaning “uprooted” or “without roots.” Irene Pabst highlights that this lack of roots “recalls the image of destruction, of no future, and mirrors the low social standing of barren women in ancient societies.” The imperative to bear children, according to Pabst, represents “patriarchal imaginations of women” and female sexuality of the time where the prevailing male idea is that women “want to have children at any cost.”

Meanwhile, when Sarah overhears that she is to bear a child, she responds with laughter, saying that she is “worn out” and “without pleasure” (Gen 18:12). There has been a significant amount of speculation as to her laughter and her meaning. Undoubtedly, her physical age and the reality that she is probably no longer menstruating plays a role in how she perceives her fertility. Nevertheless, there is a sexual connotation here as well, with a number of possibilities. It could imply that “Abraham never responds sexually to Sarah,” which could explain his willingness to endanger Sarah in his interactions with Pharaoh and Abimelech, while also explaining why there is never mention of Abraham “going in to” or “lying with” Sarah to result in Isaac’s conception. Another

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68. It should be noted that we are never given the details as to how Isaac is conceived. Ishmael’s conception is clear; Abraham had sex with Hagar. But we assume the same with Sarah and Abraham, though the text never actually says. See Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 137.
possibility is that the “emotional pain or stigma” of Sarah’s infertility “has made her life so bleak that pleasure is not possible.”

Furthermore, traditional interpretation of the text about the use of the term laughter (yishaq) in the context of Sarah’s laughter, particularly in Genesis 21, usually focuses on joy or relief that her infertility somehow ended up as a joke and that God has brought joy out of sorrow through the birth of Isaac. Such an interpretation might well be correct. Given the context of conflict and Sarah’s apparent sensitivities to how she is perceived, however, one wonders if the darker side of yishaq—a mocking, or someone as a laughingstock—is also used here. Is Sarah calling on others to rejoice with her or worried that she will be laughed at because she has borne a child?

**Abuse of privilege and power: Sarah as a victim**

Though Sarah’s barrenness is a source of pain, Sarah could also be seen as a victim. The duplicate endangerment of the ancestress motif in the Sarah narrative (Gen 12:10–20; 20:1–18) has been given significant attention in scholarship, but, as the narrator deems not to share Sarah’s words and actions, we are unable to say for sure what exactly her experience was. Nevertheless, as a woman in an extreme patriarchal culture, it would be reasonable to understand that Sarah was at least a victim of patriarchy. While Sarah is powerful, with status as a married woman of means and slaveholder, her gender and inability to produce an heir makes her vulnerable. Phyllis Trible emphasizes Abraham’s manipulation of Sarah in order to justify his actions and protect himself. She writes:

He disowns the beautiful Sarai as wife, calls her sister, and allows Pharaoh to use her, thereby ensuring his own survival, even his prosperity. For her sake Pharaoh dealt well with Abram (12:16) but also for her sake Yhw afflicth Pharaoh (12:17). Sarai remains the pivot in the story. At the end, Pharaoh reprimands Abram and holds him accountable for the use of his wife (12:18–20). Pharaoh respects another man’s property. Throughout it all, Sarai has neither voice nor choice. Though she is central in the episode, patriarchy marginalizes this manhandled woman.

It seems clear that Abraham is not asking Sarah to be an accomplice or approve his plan to present her as his sister to Pharaoh or Abimelech; he tells her what he expects of her and considers her dispensable. It is no surprise that in the context of the ancient Near East, women “are sexual objects used to curb men’s desires and bargaining chips used to secure men’s well-being.” As a result, Sarah is victimized in these two accounts, first by a husband who tosses her aside to save his own skin, and second by both Pharaoh and Abimelech, who both unwittingly take her as wife.

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73. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion*, 77, 80–81. Jacobs notes how Abraham perceives others as dispensable, arguing that he shows “little attachment to and places little value on people in his life, for example, Lot, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, even Isaac. He appears ready to part from them for some perceived plan or larger purpose” (80–81). This leads one to wonder further about Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22.
75. Jeansonne, *Women of Genesis*, 18. There is debate as to whether or not Sarah had sexual intercourse (consensually or not) with either man. Illness and plague visit both their houses as a result of her presence, but Abimelech swears he did not touch her, whereas Pharaoh does not make a similar declaration. In the context of Pharaoh, Zucker notes: “Although the rabbis suggest that Pharaoh only approached Sarah and did not have intercourse with her … the matter is not so clear-cut. And there seems to be little doubt that sexual intercourse occurred since Pharaoh states directly, ‘I took her to me as wife’ (Gen
Furthermore, Sarah is marginalized in two additional ways. First, Abraham never informs Sarah of God’s promise of a child; instead, she overhears it when the strangers visit in Genesis 18.76 For someone who so desperately wanted a child, is it not strange that she is not recorded as having received the good news from her husband? Second, when God announces that Sarah’s name will be changed from Sarai (Gen 17:15), it is Abraham who receives it, not Sarah.77 Is Sarah even aware at any point that her name has been changed without her consent? The text does not say. It is as if Sarah is written as a pawn—a vessel for the incubation of the child God promises to Abraham.

Regardless, God’s opinion and dedication to Abraham does not wane, and within the entire scope of this narrative we see a pattern whereby God is “portrayed as overlooking the faults of the favored and placing the harmed under the control of the one who is responsible for the harm,” as we see also in God’s command for Hagar to return and submit to Sarah.78 Though it may well be reflective of how the narrator understands how God works and the lengths to which God will go to establish the house of Israel, it is unsettling.

Finally, Sarah’s own witness to the wrong committed against her is somewhat confusing. She says, “may the wrong done to me be upon you” (Gen 16:5) in the context of Hagar’s pregnancy, and as readers we seem to be asked to assume the wrong in this case is Hagar’s lack of favor for Sarah. Yet, the word used for “wrong” (hamasi) “always has violent connotations,” according to Sharon Pace Jeansonne, so that this word emphasizes a particularly egregious wrong.79 Is the wrong spoken of here Sarah’s perceived diminishment in Hagar’s eyes? If so, such a word choice seems excessive. Perhaps it is an amalgamation of the wrongs she has endured: being barren, and having a coward for a husband who casts her aside, declaring her as his sister. Or could Sarah be exemplifying dramatic white fragility, crying foul to get her own way?80 Perhaps it is a mix of all the above.

Abuse of privilege and power: Sarah as a perpetrator

We often re-enact the abuses done to us. We are not heard and so we scream, silencing and ignoring others equally (or more) deserving. We endure injustices placed upon our bodies, our psyches, our families, and our people, and when given access to power, we turn those injustices onto someone else. The oppressed becomes the oppressor and power corrupts. It is a story as old as time, found throughout our sacred text and throughout our national and personal histories.

Sarah’s power is the fulcrum in her relationship with Hagar. The dynamic is very clear here: “[h]ad the situation been reversed, and Hagar was the infertile maid, she could not have called upon Sarah to bear her children.”81 Sarah’s privilege and status give her the power to force Hagar to serve as surrogate.82 Mignon Jacobs notes that Sarah’s power, like that of the other Genesis women

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76. Misogynist readings of the text criticize Sarah for laughing, but never criticize Abraham for falling to the ground in laughter for the same reason in Gen 17:17.
78. Jacobs, Gender, Power, and Persuasion, 98.
82. Jacobs, Gender, Power, and Persuasion, 135.
struggling with infertility, enables her to “procure an outcome … [to] address her infertility, and even then she would still have power in other aspects of her life.”

Furthermore, Sarah uses her power to perpetrate abuse and injustice against not only Hagar but also Ishmael. She gives Hagar to Abraham without Hagar’s consent. She abuses Hagar to such an extent to cause Hagar to risk her own life and that of her unborn child to escape. She disowns the child born as a result of her machinations. Then, years later, she casts Hagar and Ishmael out, away from the wealth and resources of Abraham to fend for themselves, putting their lives at risk without a safety net or concern for their well-being. Debate about Sarah’s motivations aside, these actions are abusive. Obviously, social mores at the time found forced surrogacy a legal and acceptable alternative to barrenness, but the negotiation of power and rights must still be taken into account in our contemporary reading.

Surely it is no coincidence that the narrator chooses Genesis 21 to detail an act of profound inhospitality perpetrated by Sarah (with Abraham’s consent and complicity), where Hagar and Ishmael are “[s]ent off into the inhospitable wilderness … apparently [to] lose their way, and run out of water.” As readers, we have just read of Abraham’s extreme hospitality to the three strangers in Genesis 18, and a profound and disturbing narrative of the consequences of inhospitality in Sodom in Genesis 19. Now, two chapters later, Sarah does the same to Hagar and Ishmael, knowing full well the dangers of denying hospitality and turning someone out into the desert without a protective escort. Whatever hospitality Sarah had has turned to hostility.

The comparative use of language related to Abraham and Sarah’s behavior is striking. Just as Abraham acts unilaterally by not seeking Sarah’s consent in the context of Egypt (Gen 12) and Gerar (Gen 20), Sarah likewise does not seek Hagar’s consent to surrogacy, and acts unilaterally in Genesis 16. Sarah is guilty of Abraham’s crime: unconcerned with “what this intimate encounter might mean for the other parties involved, but only with what he or she stands to gain.” Moreover, Mignon Jacobs emphasizes power here as well, and asks, “What happens when someone of limited power (or the presumed powerless) has the opportunity to wield power?” Jacobs notes that “Sarah is repeatedly ‘taken’ (laqah) (Gen 11:31; 12:5; 12:15, 19; 12:19–20),” and then later, in Genesis 16, “Sarah manifests her power over Hagar when she ‘takes’ (laqah) Hagar and ‘gives’ (natan) her to Abraham.”

Similarly, Judy Klitsner points out that Sarah’s plea to Abraham in Gen 16:2 (Hinneh na … bo na, “look … please go”) “recalls the syntactic construction used by Abraham in his short speech to Sarah as they approached the Egyptian border” in Gen 12:11, 13 (Hinneh na … imri na, “look … please say …”). Klitsner notes that “[i]n what is perhaps a belated reaction to her silent compliance until now, Sarah replicates Abraham’s speaking style for her own divergent purposes.” Is Sarah mimicking or mocking Abraham, either consciously or unconsciously? By mimicking, has she adopted a means of communicating modeled by Abraham in order to get her way? Or by mocking, is she reminding him of the episode a decade or more earlier, where she in effect was “pimped out to Pharaoh” and, in essence, emotionally blackmailing him (again) to get her own way?

83. Jacobs, Gender, Power, and Persuasion, 135.
Curiously, once Sarah has achieved her objective to conceive a child via her maid/surrogate Hagar and Abraham, Sarah’s mission diverges and is less clear. Once Hagar is pregnant and fails to bow satisfactorily to Sarah’s dominance, Sarah is said to “afflict” (\textit{’anah}) Hagar, with the narrator using the same word used later in Exod 1:11–12 and Deut 26:26 to describe the violence and oppression used against Israel when they are held as slaves in Egypt.\textsuperscript{91} Phyllis Trible notes that here that Sarah, the “blessed and exalted” one, has, in effect, become “malicious and tyrannical.”\textsuperscript{92} Further, a Jungian analysis of the text describes Sarah’s actions as doing “everything she can to encumber Hagar and embitter her life … [taking] revenge on Hagar for her own outraged femininity.”\textsuperscript{93} Such a reading implies that Sarah’s rage is uncontrollable—a rage that may or may not be solely focused on Hagar but on the accumulation of wrongs and slights endured. Regardless, Sarah’s arrogance keeps her from seeing Hagar as a person who “possesses her own will and desire,” signaling that Sarah is so “unaware, immature, and controlled by her impulses” that she is unable “to anticipate and analyze the consequences of her actions.”\textsuperscript{94}

There is also a language of contrast that bears noting in Sarah’s exertion of power and authority in Genesis 21, whereby she incites the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. She uses the phrases “this slave-girl and her son” and “with my son, with Isaac” to distinguish difference and inequality by objectification and the non-naming of both Hagar and Ishmael. It is clear that Sarah’s attachment is to Isaac, to the exclusion of Hagar and Ishmael.\textsuperscript{95} This is despite the fact that, if the timeline of the text is to be believed, Hagar has been with Abraham and Sarah for over thirty years, and Ishmael has grown into a young man of at least fourteen years of age. Hagar and Ishmael are not random strangers, but one could argue that Sarah, over the course of those years and evidenced by her actions, has not made any attempt to know either Hagar or Ishmael in any meaningful way.

Finally, the narrator’s use of the verb “drive out” (\textit{garash}) to describe Sarah’s action both renounces Hagar and Ishmael and mirrors language used later for “the driving out of the indigenous nations of Canaan.”\textsuperscript{96} It is in this “driving out” of Hagar and Ishmael that Sarah also becomes a law breaker, violating the legal implications of surrogacy at the time. The practice of a barren woman offering a slave to her husband to bear a child was legislated in the Code of Hammurabi and ancient Nuzi law. Whereas daughters were seemingly worthless in this arrangement, a son conceived of this union was to be adopted by the barren woman and became her son, with all the rights and inheritances attached. The surrogate’s slave status, however, remains unchanged, save one detail: she cannot be cast out once she has fulfilled her duty and borne a son. Not only is there no textual evidence that Sarah ever adopted Ishmael, but also the expulsion of Hagar was against both custom and the law.\textsuperscript{97}

\textbf{Conclusion: Remembering the bad for the common good}

In re-visioning this story and the character of Sarah, it is important to remember her positive role within the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity. For many, Sarah has been a symbol of restoration, that her isolation in barrenness was not the end of her story. God remembers her, and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{91} Claassens, “Just Emotions,” 2; Weems, “Do You See What I See: Diversity in Interpretation,” \textit{Church and Society} 82 (1991): 36.
  \item \textsuperscript{92} Trible, “Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah,” 281.
  \item \textsuperscript{94} Jacobs, \textit{Gender, Power, and Persuasion}, 140, referencing Dreifuss and Riemer, \textit{Abraham}, 41–42.
  \item \textsuperscript{95} Trible, “Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah,” 284.
  \item \textsuperscript{96} Okoye, “Sarah and Hagar,” 171.
  \item \textsuperscript{97} Okoye, “Sarah and Hagar,” 173.
\end{itemize}
in the end she has a child to comfort her. Remembering Sarah and her pain enables us to remember other women who struggle under patriarchy, who struggle to have children, and who experience isolation and degradation, making their pain visible and relevant to how we construct meaning. Remembering God’s gift to her reminds us that God works both within and outside of our own machinations, to bring about God’s promise of life.

Memory is a complicated thing, however, and when we remember the good thing to the exclusion of the bad, it serves to skew our perspectives and induce blindness to the legacies of injustice perpetuated by that same memory. Our memory may not be the whole truth, and so we are called also to remember and bear witness to that which we do not know and have not experienced. Hagar’s continued presence in Sarah’s story acts “as a type of memorial,” calling our attention to her suffering, humanizing her abuse at the hand of Sarah, and reinforcing her experience in our consciousness. Perhaps the particular brilliance of this text lies in this aspect: the story is a “double-voiced production” in which both “a colonialist reading of excluded space in a conceived world of binaries” in Sarah’s perspective sits beside an imaginative spark toward another “inclusive possibility” in Hagar’s experience.

As we have seen, historically the Sarah/Hagar narrative has been used by slaveholders, white women, and white supremacists to skew the text toward whiteness in toxic ways for people of color. Delores Williams’s interpretation helpfully reminds us that those who are focused on sheer survival have little to no time and energy for also carrying the burden of their own liberation. Nevertheless, for readers of relative power and privilege, adopting Williams’s theology of survival in this story when our own survival is not at stake allows us to abdicate responsibility and perpetuate the role of Sarah. If I, as a white woman, am Sarah in this story, then I am called to recognize my power and do differently—to interrogate the ways in which I perpetuate injustice through personal behaviors and complicity in systemic abuse, and to work for positive, liberating change.

Though God may have directed Hagar toward survival by returning and submitting, those of us with privilege should interpret the distress we feel at such a command as a call to work tirelessly for liberation so that the Hagars of this world no longer need fear for their survival or well-being. In a time of abusive immigration policies, police shootings, #BlackLivesMatter, sexual violence, and other threats to life, the fight for survival is a reality for many people. In this text, Sarah and Abraham had the power to liberate, and they chose not to do so. The text implies that, if we are concerned about liberation, the responsibility lies with those who have power and privilege to bear witness in their lives and communities to a different story: a story recognizing Sarah and valuing Hagar, acknowledging the wrongs committed, enabling Hagar’s agency, giving space for Hagar to speak for herself, and using her privilege to support Hagar’s worth and need through reparative measures.

Artistic imagination has invested significant time in the reconciliation of these two women. We want to believe another world is possible: to fix the story, to take ownership and set it aright. Perhaps this is why the Jewish tradition reads their story each year on Rosh Hashanah in preparation for Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), when believers are expected “to [ask] forgiveness of those we have wronged.” Lynn Gottlieb imagines Sarah apologizing to Hagar in the form of a traditional, collective, confessional prayer for Yom Kippur. She writes:

Forgive me, Achti (Achti means ‘my sister’ in Arabic)

102. Sakenfeld, Just Wives, 22.
103. Ostriker, “The Face of the Other,” 120.
104. Ostriker, “The Face of the Other,” 120.
For the sin of neglect
For the sin of abuse
For the sin of arrogance
Forgive me, Achtì
For the sin of not knowing your name.\textsuperscript{105}

Let us open our eyes to our privilege and the ways in which we read the biblical text that perpetuate injustice. Let us remember redemption and injustice in equal measure. Let us repair by acceding our power over, and assuming power with. Let us care. Let us know and speak each other’s names.

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