



*Lost Women
of the Bible*

The Women We Thought
We Knew

CAROLYN
CUSTIS JAMES

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 ZONDERVAN®



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Hagar

THE INVISIBLE
WOMAN—

Girls are not important. They do not count.”

You might expect to hear that kind of anti-female rhetoric around an elementary schoolyard—the Tom Sawyer nastiness that irks little girls and prompts adults to wink philosophically. After all, “boys will be boys.” This remark, however, didn’t come from a worked-up adolescent taunting his female classmates. Nor was it a cocky adolescent team captain’s rationale for preferring boys over girls when choosing sides for a game. This was the calm, matter-of-fact conviction of a grown man, an Afghan soldier, who was talking about his own sisters. He meant exactly what he said.¹

The war in Afghanistan touched us all. One of the most shocking cultural differences to parade across our TV screens was how harshly women were treated under the Taliban. Americans on the political right and left were horrified to see women imprisoned in what looked to us like a “body bag for the living.” We were intrigued and appalled by those faceless blue shapes

that seemed to be everywhere in Afghanistan. What was it like to view life through the mesh of the blue burkas the Taliban regime compelled women to wear? In their culture, it was a fact of life—“Girls do not count.”

We may pride ourselves that in the more enlightened and progressive West we’ve moved beyond such primitive attitudes. But even here that same message has a way of getting through to us. Do women count? We have our doubts when we hear one of those tasteless jokes or wisecracks about women—“just meant in fun.” The notion resides in our pocketbooks when we bring home lower pay than men for doing the same job. We wonder secretly in the church when women’s gifts and ministries are valued less than men’s or when “kingdom work” is portrayed in manly terms and located outside the home. It hits us hardest when we’re going through some personal crisis where we feel like a prop in someone else’s story or when God himself seems too busy helping others to pay much attention to us. Let’s be honest. Many of us, when we stop to consider our place in the world (not just in Afghanistan), have wondered at one time or another, Do I really count?

DROPPING BELOW ZERO

In the case of Hagar, Sarah’s handmaid, there was no debate. Hagar did not count. Perhaps in another place and time, or under different circumstances, she might have received a little more respect from others and had a better opinion of herself. In the Bible, however, by the time she enters the story, she is already at rock bottom. Sarah, we are told, “had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar.” Hagar was a slave.

We tend to read those simple and direct words about Hagar without emotion. However, those same words would evoke bitter emotions in Hagar. She was a lost soul right from the start—stuck on the wrong side of the racial divide, uncomfortable inside her

own skin, and trapped within a cultural system that stripped her of her rights, her dignity, and her freedom. I fear contemporary Christians have added insult to her injuries by allowing her to lie flat on the pages of our Bibles as some lifeless cardboard character. She seems so small and insignificant, almost invisible, alongside the larger figures in her story—the legendary Abraham and Sarah. She’s a messy complication in the major plot involving her mistress. The loss is mostly ours, for in losing Hagar, a powerful healing message that women hunger for today quietly slips through our fingers.

If the childless Sarah scored a zero in the ancient culture, Hagar fell into the minus column. Although she shared with Sarah the disadvantages every woman experienced in the patriarchal culture, Hagar was far more vulnerable. She was an Egyptian, a Gentile, a foreigner. Hagar was on the outside looking in. Her gender and her race alone were enough to complicate her life. But these were minor compared to her social status as a slave.

Most biblical scholars believe Hagar entered the Genesis narrative anonymously several chapters earlier when Pharaoh was enriching Abraham for the privilege of marrying his “sister” Sarah. Pharaoh treated Abraham well for Sarah’s sake, giving him “sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and *maidservants*, and camels” (Genesis 12:16, emphasis added). Hagar may well have been an item on the inventory of property that changed hands between Pharaoh and Abraham. What a horror to wake up one morning to the news that you’re heading for the auction block, that before the day is out you’ll be wrenched from the people you know and love, degraded by being lined up with cattle and other livestock, and placed in the hands of a stranger. In his writings, the former American slave Frederick Douglass relived that dehumanizing experience from his personal history:

Men and women, young and old, married and single; moral and intellectual beings, in open contempt of their humanity, leveled

at a blow with horses, sheep, horned cattle and swine! Horses and men—cattle and women—pigs and children—all holding the same rank in the scale of social existence; and all subjected to the same narrow inspection, to ascertain their value in gold and silver—the only standard of worth applied by slaveholders to slaves!²

The kinds of flashbacks a slave would have were as bad as any post-war trauma suffered by military veterans. To give a small taste of how bad it could get, another former slave described nightmarish images of powerlessness, heartless haggling over family members, and the crushing and often permanent separations from precious loved ones.

My brothers and sisters were bid off first, and one by one, while my mother, paralyzed with grief, held me by the hand. Her turn came and she was bought by Isaac Riley of Montgomery County. Then I was offered.... My mother, half distracted with the thought of parting forever from all her children, pushed through the crowd while the bidding for me was going on, to the spot where Riley was standing. She fell at his feet, and clung to his knees, entreating him in tones that a mother could only command, to buy her baby as well as herself, and spare to her one, at least, of her little ones.... This man disengaged himself from her with ... violent blows and kicks.... I must have been then between five and six years old.³

Like the slaves in America's history, Hagar was an African slave. How she became a slave, no one will ever know. Was she a "spoil" of war, or was she stolen away by some other method? Did her parents sell her to cover their indebtedness? Was she born into slavery as the child of slaves? Was she torn from her weeping mother's arms? The only surviving piece of demographics regarding Hagar was her Egyptian nationality. Other than that, there is nothing. She was cut off from family, friends, her country, even from her private history. Utterly alone in the world, with no one to speak out for her or to protect her from harm, Hagar faced

a life sentence of catering to the biddings of others, caring for the wealthy, and serving their whims. Who was looking after Hagar?

THE INVISIBLE WOMAN

Hagar was human property and did not even have rights over her own body. Those rights belonged to another. One can only imagine what went through Hagar's mind when she was told of Sarah's plan to use her as a surrogate mother. Sarah, as far as we can tell, showed no regard for Hagar's human dignity or acknowledged that her handmaid had the same feelings, hopes, and longings as any other woman. The young slave girl was nothing more than Sarah's last chance of becoming a mother. Sarah added to Hagar's job description the task of bearing a child by her aging husband.

This revolting situation is slightly tempered, from our twenty-first-century point of view at least, if we keep Hagar's picture in its ancient frame. In her day, the prevalence of polygamy meant multiple wives and concubines were commonplace. They were often a necessity to preserve and build a family, especially where the primary wife was barren. No doubt a lot of young women grew up knowing they would inevitably land in one of those "secondary" slots in a household. Furthermore, modern notions of independence and individualism were completely foreign to the ancient mind. Fathers arranged marriages, often for the benefit of the family. Sometimes a daughter's wishes were consulted (for example when Rebekah married Isaac, Genesis 24). More often, the decision was out of a young woman's hands (sometimes even out of a young man's), as fathers negotiated and arranged the marriages of their children. Sarah's actions wouldn't have seemed quite so outrageous in the ancient Near East—although this doesn't make the reproductive assignment any less hurtful to Hagar.

It is important (and encouraging) that the biblical narrator regards the actions of Sarah and Abraham with deep disapproval. Viewed from heaven's perspective, the scene is filled with darkness and chaos. It's almost a replay of the moment Eve "took" and ate the fruit, then "gave" some to her husband. The narrator employs the same language. Sarah "*took* her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and *gave* her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she [Sarah's Egyptian slave girl] conceived" (Genesis 16:3–4, emphasis added).

Viewed from Sarah's perspective, this was a culturally acceptable course of action. Some even believe Sarah may have been obligated or duty bound to step aside and let a younger woman do what she was incapable of doing, namely, conceive a child for her husband. Ancient Near Eastern laws actually authorized a barren wife to use her maidservant in this capacity. What is worse, these laws stipulated that afterward, the child belonged to the barren woman, who then had the power to sell or keep her maidservant. The law was on Sarah's side. Hagar was alone and had no voice.

Viewed from Hagar's perspective, the whole affair only underscored her insignificance as a person. She had no meaning or value in herself. She was beneficial to Sarah and Abraham only because she was capable of making a baby. As a person, Hagar was invisible. No one anticipated how the dynamics between the two women would explode when Sarah's scheme succeeded. As it turned out, Hagar's "pride and her mistress's antagonism" placed the two women on a collision course.⁴

THE PRICE OF PERSONHOOD

In a slightly strange way, Hagar reminds me of a Saudi woman I used to observe in Oxford who was covered from head to ankle in a coal-black burka. Oxford is in many ways an international crossroads. Walking around town on errands when we were liv-

ing there, I passed women whose dress revealed the country they were from. This Saudi woman was usually pushing a stroller containing her small child, as she made her way down the road at breakneck speed. I learned from watching her—this woman whose name I didn't know and whose face I never saw—that it takes a lot to squelch the spirit of a woman. Below the hem of her mandatory burka, glistening defiantly as she raced along, was a pair of fiery red patent leather shoes.

Hagar had lots of reasons to feel beaten down, but when she discovered she was pregnant, one might say, she put on her fiery red patent leather shoes. Although her legal status was unchanged, her social standing was transformed. She succeeded where Sarah failed. She conceived a child. Not only was she validated as a woman by her pregnancy, she was carrying Abraham's offspring. Though her actions proved unwise, risky, and heartlessly insensitive, it was perhaps an indication of Hagar's strong spirit that her triumph led her to scorn the barren Sarah.

The wounded older woman lashed out with a vengeance against her insolent maid. How ironic that Sarah was oblivious to the wrongs she had committed against Hagar, yet acutely sensitive to Hagar's offense against her. This troubling picture is worthy of sober reflection, when we remember the Word of God is a mirror that reflects our own souls. Sarah described Hagar's contempt against her as "violence"—the same word that described conditions in the world before the great flood.⁵ Her handmaid's unguarded moment of triumph was short-lived, for Sarah unleashed such fury against her handmaid that the younger woman feared for her life. Abraham was passive in the face of this family crisis, which caused the cycle of wrongs to spiral wildly out of control. Hagar was the mother of his child and deserved his protection, but he did not give it. Sarah, his wife of many years, was in indescribable pain and actually turned to Abraham for intervention. But instead of working to establish peace in his divided home by seeking God's help, giving godly guidance and

reassurance to Sarah, and by restraining Hagar from any further incident, Abraham offered little more than a shrug. To Sarah, he said, “Your servant is in your hands. Do with her whatever you think best” (Genesis 16:6). His withdrawal opened the door for Sarah’s harsh mistreatment of Hagar, who fled for her life into the wilderness in the general direction of Egypt. Truly a black moment in the history of the chosen family. And the Blessed Alliance sinks to new lows in the whole Hagar episode of the Abraham story. Instead of working together to advance God’s purposes, God’s people are in disarray, inflicting injuries upon one another.

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

In a strange twist of fate, the crisis that appeared to signal the end of Hagar’s life was in fact the real beginning. Like the rejected Samaritan woman (John 4) who found her life when she encountered Jesus at Jacob’s well, so Hagar found her life near a spring of water in the first of two encounters with the Angel of the Lord.

Historically, the church has always held that these Old Testament appearances of the Angel of the Lord—and there are several—were actually pre-incarnate appearances of the Son of God. Usually in these encounters, a person didn’t realize at first who they were actually seeing. Only as the conversation progressed (and sometimes only after it was over) did it dawn on them that they had seen the Angel of the Lord. What this divine encounter will do for Hagar is difficult to quantify, but many believe this is when Hagar embraced the God of Abraham. She was in great peril—pregnant, afflicted, humiliated, frightened, and alone. Her sense of herself and of her value as a human being had bottomed out.

The Angel’s encounter with Hagar gives an early hint of Paul’s word to the Galatians, that “there is neither Jew nor [Gentile], slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ

Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). Hagar was disenfranchised on all three counts, for she was a Gentile, a slave, and a woman. She came to this moment as Sarah’s abused and rejected slave girl. But to the Angel of the Lord she was God’s image bearer with great value, dignity, and purpose.

When one pulls back the temporal veil, the modern reader can see that Hagar matters deeply to God. She may have been invisible to everyone else, but she was neon bright on God’s radar screen. This wilderness meeting was no chance encounter. “The angel of the LORD *found* Hagar” (Genesis 16:7, emphasis added), the finding that comes from searching and seeking. She may have been running to escape injury or death with no clear idea of where she was going. But the terror that drove her into the wilderness drove her into the safe arms of the Angel. This rendezvous would utterly transform the life of a hopeless and unloved slave girl.

“Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?” (Genesis 16:8). In the Bible, Abraham and Sarah never addressed Hagar by name, but the Angel of the Lord called her name and knew everything about her. We can only imagine what such recognition meant to her. This is the perfect moment when we might expect the Angel of the Lord to emancipate Hagar from slavery, to change her rags into a beautiful gown and give her a life of her own. Instead, he does the opposite. He sends her back. “Go back to your mistress and submit to her,” literally, “put yourself under her hand.” If we truly grasp what drove Hagar out into the wilderness, these are harsh and terrifying instructions—not at all the way her instincts were leading her. But God calls his children to do things his way, and that often means going against the grain of our own hearts.

For Hagar, it meant returning to a situation that was both miserable and dangerous. This was not some suicidal plan of action—some self-inflicted martyrdom—locking Hagar into a hopelessly degrading situation. Certainly the Angel’s message for Hagar should *never* be interpreted as a reason for anyone to

return to an abusive situation. The specifics of Hagar's case are unusual, and God's purposes here are redemptive. He addressed the *ezer* in her, involved her in his purposes, and gave her a mission that required her to go back. Hagar's fledgling faith in God enabled her to obey.

This dejected woman heard from God that she and her unborn child were included in God's promises to Abraham. She was not peripheral to God's plan for Abraham or for Sarah—a strong hint that God intended all along to encompass Gentiles among his people. God had a plan for Hagar too. She learned she was carrying a son and that both she and her child would survive their tragedy. She was to return to her master and tell him God had named their son Ishmael. But she was bringing to Abraham and Sarah a whole lot more than this piece of prophetic news.

In her encounter with the Angel of God, Hagar received dignity and meaning. The simple but unchanging truth that God's eyes were fixed on her empowered her with a kind of freedom no one could ever take away. She was not alone. She *did* matter. This freed her to do the extraordinary—to love her neighbor, to put the interests of others ahead of herself (Philippians 2:3–4), and to reflect the image of God in her relationships.

God has always been in the business of changing lives. He calls his children to live in a radically different way than the rest of the world, so that it shocks us when we see Hagar returning to live as his image bearer in a difficult and uncertain situation. As with the Samaritan woman, Hagar will never be the same after her encounter with the Lord. He raised her actions to a new and higher level of significance. By serving Sarah, Hagar knows she is serving God.

HAGAR, THE THEOLOGIAN

At this early stage, Hagar's theology is elemental. But she has absorbed enough from this brief encounter with the Angel of the

Lord to face what lies ahead. Her next two actions reveal what real theology is all about. First, she does the unthinkable. *She* gives God a name. No one else in Scripture—male or female—ever names God. Hagar does. She names him El Roi: “the God who sees me.” The new name she gives to God expresses her most basic theological conviction: she is not invisible to God.

Second, Hagar *lived* her theology—took it with her into the hardest place of all. Knowing God’s eye was upon her emboldened her to do the impossible. She returned to Sarah, the woman she most feared and who had grievously wronged her. After years of slavery, Hagar’s return to Sarah was possibly the first truly free act of her life. Sarah thought she needed Hagar to secure a baby for her husband. Now Hagar has something Sarah needs a whole lot more than a child—the message that God’s eyes are on Sarah too. He sees, not as a disinterested spectator who just happens to have super vision, but with the concerned involvement and understanding of a loving parent who has a lot at stake in whatever happens to his child.

The thirteen years of silence that follow the birth of Ishmael—Abraham’s son—seem to indicate a measure of peace in Abraham’s household after Hagar’s return. One scholar speculates that this silence could be a hint that Abraham was finally protecting Hagar. I’d like to think the explanation is that Hagar took the initiative in making peace with Sarah. Of course, no one will ever know.

POCKET THEOLOGY FOR THE UNSEEN AND UNLOVED

Hagar has done for theology what Palm Pilots have done for computers—she made it personal. Before Hagar’s encounter with the Angel of the Lord, God is spoken of in large, majestic, sweeping terms as Elohim, the creator God, the judge of all the earth, Yahweh (or Jehovah) the covenant maker, the promise keeper, Shaddai (the Almighty), but not in the intimately personal terms that

Hagar used. Hagar advanced theology by revealing the intimate side of God. He is the God who never takes his eye off of his child. This was a truth that Abraham and Sarah needed to hear.

Hagar introduced God's people to the doctrine of God's omniscience—not simply that God knows everything, but that *he knows me*. Later, King David expanded this intimate view of God in his beautifully comforting Psalm 139: “Oh LORD, you have searched *me* and you know *me*” (emphasis added). Jesus took things even further when he taught his followers to call God by his family name, “Abba,” or “Papa”—the affectionate language of a little child who crawls up in her father's lap.

Professional theologians can write many pages in their systematic theology volumes about the doctrine of God's omniscience (pages well worth reading, by the way) in terms that sometimes sound grandiose and don't always touch down in such personal ways. Hagar took this staggering concept—that God knows everything about me—and made it compact enough to fit inside her pocket. “You are the God who sees me.” Invisible to Abraham and Sarah, now Hagar lived in the warmth of God's gaze. So far as she was concerned, nothing would ever be the same.

It helps a little to know that Hagar was now on a mission, that she possessed vital information about God's promises and about his character that Abraham and Sarah needed to know. Her story became part of the family heritage—the oral tradition that got passed from one generation to the next until Moses committed it to writing. Still, considering the risks, it boggles the mind that the Angel sent her back. It was so pointless when her unborn son Ishmael wasn't ultimately to be the son of promise and it was just a matter of time before Sarah and Abraham expelled Hagar and her child again. This was a losing enterprise for Hagar. Are we seeing just another round of benefits for Abraham and Sarah at Hagar's expense, or did God have anything in this for Hagar?

In her wilderness encounter with the Angel of the Lord, God gave Hagar two gifts. The first was the priceless discovery of

the knowledge that God was watching her, that she mattered to him, even if she didn't matter to another soul. Here was a priceless truth she would reach for again and again in the days ahead. His second gift didn't come wrapped in bright paper with a bow, but was priceless just the same. In sending her back to Abraham and Sarah, God was blessing Hagar again. God doesn't call us to himself without also calling us to his people. It is a mixed blessing for all of us, for the church isn't always the safest place. The people there aren't necessarily the ones we would choose for our friends, and, sadly, some of our most painful wounds come from our relationships with other believers. But these are the people we need and who also need us. We come to know God better and grow stronger as Christians when we are joined to the community of his people and we work together to know him.

Hagar had only begun to know her great God. She had so much more to learn, and there was so much she needed to understand. It puts things in perspective, even in light of Hagar's ultimate ejection, to realize God was sending her back to the two people best equipped to help her learn more about him. Only imagine what you could learn if you spent over fifteen years around Abraham and Sarah. Hagar would hear about the promises. She would learn the teachings Abraham passed on to Ishmael. Hagar had a front row seat for the spectacular birth of Isaac—the fulfillment of God's promise. But it was a two-way street. Hagar expanded their understanding of God too. She will always be best known for helping God's people—then and now—understand in such an intimate way that God sees me.

LESSONS FROM A SLAVE

In the very complexity of our lives, Hagar is also one of the best arguments for the importance of a vital practical theology for women. Whenever I talk to women's groups, I'm always taken aback by the impact of Hagar's message on women. I can talk

about a hundred other things, but when I'm finished, what they carry away in their pockets is a simple: "God sees me"—not as one of a sea of faces that he observes when his eyes scan the earth, but "me" all by myself, as though he had no one else to think about but me.

It just goes to show how lonely life can be amid the hustle and bustle of activities, errands, crowds, and friendships. Even inside a good marriage or close friendship, there's still a dimension of isolation we can't escape. For all of us there are plenty of wilderness experiences when we suffer symptoms of isolation and insignificance. For all of us, there are inevitable moments when, even surrounded by loving family and friends, we feel invisible or go through something alone. A surgery, a divorce, a death, a failure. Those sleepless nights, those closet moments, those tears we shed in private. What we wouldn't give to find Hagar's spring and to be found by the Angel of the Lord.

Hagar has more to teach us. Her story levels a devastating blow against anyone who tries to make the case that women don't count or that we are second-class citizens in God's kingdom. God simply couldn't have made a stronger statement of how much he values women and how central they are to what he is doing. Who can argue when God gives a woman like Hagar—a disenfranchised slave girl who is clinging to the bottom rung of the human ladder and utterly alone in life—this kind of one-on-one personal attention? God focuses on Hagar despite the fact that the child she carries is *not* the promised one and her story is only a messy interruption to the *real* story God is weaving. Yet he treats Hagar like she's the most important person in the world as he follows her into the wilderness to affirm his love for her and bring a sudden and permanent end to her aloneness.

God invests Hagar—along with other women—with enormous significance when he entrusts her with the revelation of new elements of the Abrahamic covenant. God might repeat the covenant to others. But here he *expands* it in a private appearance to

an unknown outsider, an Egyptian, a slave, and a woman. Many men in Scripture who secured more significant roles in the drama of redemptive history *never* had an encounter like this. Nor did any of the major matriarchs in Abraham's family.

Furthermore, Hagar was an early developer of Christian theology. Her life unveiled a side of God that was truly revolutionary. Up to this point, not even Abraham or Sarah talked about God in such intimate terms. Where would Christianity be if we were left with the impressions of Abraham and Sarah—of a God who speaks with grandiose promises and leaves you with more questions than answers; a God who talks to women as an aside through a tent door while he's conversing and dining with the men? There were hints of God's love and intimate involvement in the lives of certain major individuals before now, but through Hagar our understanding of God takes a giant leap forward. We gained a jaw-dropping sense of God's intimate interest and care for each person when one of the "little people" of human history got a raw deal. No one had experienced a caring close-up like this before.

As a final reminder, the power of Hagar's message for us would be thoroughly diluted if she had lived in another place and time. But against the backdrop of the patriarchal culture—where women were marginalized and the value of a slave as a person was below zero—the message of Hagar's story packs a stronger punch. Given the bigness of Abraham and the smallness of this young slave girl, this story shouts out loudly to Hagar and all of God's daughters: "Girls *do* count."

Next we will consider a woman who made sure she counted, but until recently has been routinely discounted as one of the "bad girls" of the Bible. In the opinion of many, Tamar was lost in more ways than one, and there are many who might consider the value of recovering her questionable at best.

FOCUS: The slave girl Hagar had a whole list of reasons for thinking she was invisible. It was easy to conclude from the way her life was going that she didn't matter to anyone. Her encounter with El Roi — "the God who sees me" — turned her around. Hagar teaches us a powerful lesson of just how profoundly important we are to God.

HAGAR'S STORY: Genesis 16:1–16; 21:8–21

FOR DISCUSSION, READ: Genesis 16:1–16

1. How was Hagar lost? What made her invisible?
2. Do you relate to Hagar's sense that she really didn't matter? Why?
3. How did Hagar's experiences with Sarah reinforce her sense that she didn't matter?
4. Why did the encounter with the Angel of the Lord change Hagar's perspective?
5. What gave Hagar the courage to return to Sarah?
6. What was Hagar's mission in returning? Beyond giving birth to a son, what significant contributions did Hagar make to Abraham and Sarah's understanding of God?
7. Why is Hagar a remarkable figure in biblical history? Why is her significance both unlikely and surprising, yet a perfect example of how God often works through women?
8. How is Hagar's story an encouragement to you?

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