

Notes for Scriptural Reasoning

Sarah and Hagar

The Scriptural Reasoning Society

Some Christian interpretations of the Sarah and Hagar story

1. Paul in Galatians (see text bundle), and others later, interprets the story as an allegory and employs it as **anti-Jewish polemic**.

2. The Church Fathers in defence of chastity.

Tertullian (d. ca 220) says it was only after circumcision that Abraham took a second wife; both circumcision and second marriage are to be rejected.

Origen (mid C3) says that the plural marriages in the OT here and elsewhere stand for 'multiplicity of virtues'.

Clement (d. ca 215) says (approvingly) that A and Sarah lived together as bother and sister, as A claims in Gen 20.1-2.

Augustine (d.430), **in defence of the Old Testament**. He says Christians should take as 'figurative' anything in scripture 'which cannot in a literal sense be attributed to an upright character or to a pure faith'. Excuses A's taking a second wife by saying mores were different then – and, anyway, unlike contemporary men, he was not motivated by lust.

....and **against the Donatist heresy**, to justify punitive measures, Augustine says Sarah was right in her treatment of Hagar, who was a 'haughty handmaid'.

3. Luther (d.1546) writes a commentary on Genesis that is a diatribe **against papists, Jews and Turks** (=Muslims). He idealises Abraham and Sarah, but calls Hagar an 'example of the carnal human being who cannot be improved by chastisement or by kindness', kidnaps Abraham's child, and is 'the cause of all the sins of the family'. He links her to the contemporary Turks who have mistreated the Christians they have captured.

Calvin (d.1564) takes a more balanced view of the two women, criticizing both and idealising Abraham, in the service of **patriarchal family values**.

4. A modern (womanist) African American approach; an appropriation of Hagar (and Ishmael) as typifying the black American nation, and woman's agency in its development, **living by the values of survival and the search for quality of life**. Some see Ishmael as the abandoned African American youth.

5. How might we together develop a shared interpretation of the story so as to bring it to a happier conclusion in our life together? We are all children of struggle, who have inherited the conflict between the two women and their sons. We might ask *What drives the women apart? What clues does the story provide for dealing with the enmity that continues today in our life and in our world?*

- They are kept apart by the constraints of a patriarchal society, though Hagar ends by forming a new household of her own and doing well. Maybe we need to look together at alternative patterns of family and community life that honour woman's contribution – both in terms of motherhood and the use of other gifts.
- The competition between the women is reflected in the competition between the three faiths. But God's care for Hagar as well as Sarah's side of the family suggests that God's promise is for everyone. Can we learn to replace a chosenness that cuts us off from others with a distinctiveness that opens itself to difference?
- Sarah's inhospitality in casting Hagar out contrasts with God's gracious hospitality to Hagar in the desert, where God shows solidarity with the outcast. Can we turn our enmity into solidarity with and hospitality towards those who are 'in the wilderness'?

These notes draw heavily on *Hagar, Sarah and their children*, ed Phyllis Trible and Letty M Russell, Westminster John Knox, 2006.

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