

Seeing Hagar the Theologian: The Interpretation of Genesis 16

Matthew P. Anstey

1. Introduction

Although there is broad agreement that theology is central to the church's endeavour, biblical scholars – who rarely identify themselves as theologians – in addition to the demanding task of interpretation face the problem of determining precisely how ancient scriptural words shape our words about God, hoping all the while that their exegetical labours won't be in theological vain.

Christian scholars of the Hebrew Bible encounter particular difficulties in this regard, for a raft of philosophical, historical, and ecclesial reasons. But putting these aside (in a decidedly postmodern moment!), the Hebrew Bible itself is not exactly bursting with theological insights that seamlessly integrate with contemporary theological discourse. Rather, we encounter so-called fathers of the faith like Abraham and Jacob lying and stealing, bribing and bashing their way through life's difficulties, with only occasional epiphanies.

Yet out of this brutal environment unexpectedly emerges a marginal character like Hagar (Gen 16; 21), who in two brief narratives speaks not only *to* God but also in profound and sophisticated ways *about* God.

Thus I am interested in how the story of Hagar *qua theologian* might inform our thinking about the theological process – about who can do theology, how it is done, and where it emerges from. The present paper explores an interpretation of Genesis 16 with these questions in mind.¹

¹ Thanks to David Neville and Toby Tan for comments on an earlier version. I treat Genesis 16 as a literary unity (see also note 26) and, following Thomas B Dozeman's compelling comparison of Moses and Hagar, Genesis 22 not as a doublet but as the second scene of the developing Hagar story. See Dozeman, 'The wilderness and salvation history in the Hagar story', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 1998, 117(1), 23-43.

2. Scene 1—Sarah and Hagar (Gen 16:1-6)

The story of Hagar in Genesis 16 is told in three scenes, verses 1-6, verses 7-14, and verses 15-16. It is a progression of what I will call ‘Seeings’.

Verses 1-2

1 Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar. 2 And Sarai said to Abram, ‘Look, please, Yahweh has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall be built up² by her.’ And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

Our tale begins with Sarai’s (whom I shall call Sarah) dilemma of barrenness and her plan to overcome it using Hagar. Sarah announces this plan to Abram (whom I shall call Abraham) her husband, having blamed Yahweh for her predicament. In response to this, Abraham, in the first of many intertextual allusions, ‘listens to his wife’ just as Adam listens to Eve in Gen 3:17.

Thus we are here introduced to our four protagonists—Sarah, Abraham, Hagar, and Yahweh. Yahweh, usually translated as ‘The LORD’, is the personal name for God, but its precise meaning is unknown (see Exod 3). This uncertainty about God’s name is crucial to the narrative zenith reached in verse 13.

The story is dominated by these four characters and their tangled relationships—husband and wife; wife and slave-girl³; Yahweh and Sarah; Hagar and Yahweh. The story immerses us immediately into hotly contested spaces, where women and man and God will surprise and unsettle us with their words and deeds.

Sarah is the first person in our story to see something, thus providing Seeing #1—‘Look, please, I am barren!’ These are Sarah’s first words in the

² The Hebrew has a play on words, as *be built up* from the verb *banah* sounds like *I will be ‘sonned’*, from the noun *banim* ‘sons’.

³ Irmtraud Fischer, *Women who Wrestled with God: Biblical Stories of Israel's Beginnings* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), 14, notes that in Gen 16:1, the first word is Sarah and the last is Hagar; they are presented literally as polar opposites.

Hebrew Bible and they are a deliberate echo of Abraham's first words to Sarah: 'Look, please, you are beautiful!' (Gen 12:11).⁴

Verses 3-4

3 So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. 4 He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and she saw that she had conceived, and her mistress was insignificant in her eyes.

Wife takes, wife gives, husband listens to wife, husband 'eats', and all hell breaks loose. Yes, our crafty story teller is alluding to the temptation story in Genesis 3. Adam eats the fruit, Abraham 'eats' Hagar. This reinforces the insignificant status of Hagar in the eyes of Abraham and Sarah; she is little more than a convenient means for Sarah to attain her socioeconomic (and other) ends.

This allusion also discloses the narrator's negative appraisal of the whole affair: what Sarah and Abraham are up to is what exactly what Eve and Adam got up to (and we know how disastrous *that* was!). Although the practice of surrogacy was widespread,⁵ the narrator is perhaps intimating that this married couple is acting out of fear, trying to organise God's economy on God's behalf. After ten years of frustrated waiting, Sarah takes matters into her own hands.

Let's now consider Hagar, whose name sounds like Hebrew for 'the refugee'.⁶ She is from Egypt, a land already known to Abraham and Sarah as dangerous (Gen 12:17), and now, it seems, a fertile land, with obviously fertile woman,⁷ as Hagar conceives with ease. But without warning our

⁴ Fischer, *Women who Wrestled with God*, 15, suggests that Abraham and Sarah begin these two conversations with their respective problems, namely, Sarah's beauty and Sarah's barrenness.

⁵ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, WBC 2 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 7.

⁶ In Hebrew, 'Hagar' is *hagor*, and 'the refugee/sojourner/resident alien' is *hagger* or *haggor* (participle). See Paul Hughes, 'Seeing Hagar seeing God: *Leitwort* and petite narrative in Genesis 16:1-16' *Didaskalia* 1997, 8:43-59.

⁷ Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 279.

narrator doubles back on this very point: '*she conceived; and she saw that she had conceived*'.

Thus we notice Seeing #2—Hagar, we are to realize in this narrative hiccup, is a woman who *sees* things. And then Seeing #3—Hagar looked down on Sarah: 'her mistress was insignificant in her eyes'.

Verses 5-6

5 Then Sarai said to Abram, 'My violence is because of you! I myself gave my slave-girl to your lap, and when she saw that she had conceived, I became insignificant in her eyes. May Yahweh judge between me and you!' 6 And Abram said to Sarai, 'Look! Your slave-girl is in your hand; do to her the good that is in your eyes.' Then Sarai oppressed her, and she ran away from her.

This story began as a tale about the dilemma of barrenness facing matriarch Sarah, but it seems to be becoming more a story about *seeing*: about how Sarah says to Abraham *Look! I'm barren*; how Hagar *sees* the baby in her womb and so *looks down* on Sarah.

And then Seeing #4—not only does Hagar look down on Sarah but Sarah sees this, 'I became insignificant *in her eyes*'. Despite the success of her plan, Sarah received more than she bargained for when Hagar's pregnancy unsettled the power relations between the two women.

And then Seeing #5—Abraham replies to Sarah, in effect, *Look! She's all yours!* Abraham and Sarah cannot see Hagar as an equal, but only as an irksome problem.

And then Seeing #6—Sarah could only *see* Hagar as an object to be taken and traded, despised and demeaned, a twisted implementation of 'doing the "good" that is in your eyes', justified to herself by blaming Abraham for the deteriorating situation: 'My violence⁸ is because of you!'

Scene 1 ends sorrowfully: Marital discord, Sarah's oppression of Hagar and Hagar's hasty exit. So much for Sarah's aspiration to be built up through Hagar. Sarah has torn Hagar down and in sheer desperation Hagar has fled

⁸ The use of the word 'violence' (*homas*) is yet another intertextual allusion. 'Violence' prompts the flood (Gen 6:13) and 'violence' describes the slaughter of the Hittites by Levi and Simeon (Gen 49:5). This underlines the narrator's negative evaluation of Sarah and Abraham.

to the wilderness, barefoot and pregnant, exposing herself to the perils of the desert in the short term and, in the long term, to perilous punishments meted out for running away.⁹

The narrator has set it up beautifully, because an aching question clearly revolves around our fourth protagonist, Yahweh, who so far only been invoked as the one to blame for the predicament (v 1) and the one to judge between Abraham and Sarah (v 5): *what will Yahweh do?* The delicious irony is that Yahweh will judge in favour of Hagar, who (literally and literarily!) lies between Sarah and Abraham.

3. Scene 2—Hagar and (the angel of) Yahweh (Gen 16:7-14)

Verse 7

7 The angel of Yahweh found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.

Scene 1 opens with an interior barren womb and scene 2 opens with an exterior barren wilderness, linking the scenes antithetically (and scene 3, vv. 15-16, also opens with a womb, this time fruitful). The narrator overlays this theme with the dominant motif of seeing, for we have here Seeing #7—the Hebrew word for ‘spring’ also means ‘eye’—‘The angel of Yahweh found her by an “eye” of water in the wilderness, the “eye” on the way to Shur.’ Seeing Hagar is seen beside an eye—if we readers don’t get it now, we never will.

Hagar, moreover was ‘on the way to *Shur*.’ Here we have an Israelite *oppressing* an *Egyptian*, who *flees* from her, and ends up *in the wilderness* near *Shur*, the very place where the Israelites end up after *they* flee from oppressive Egypt.¹⁰

⁹ Although Fischer, *Women who Wrestled with God*, 16–17, points out that it is not clear in the Hebrew Bible how the Israelites then treated runaway slaves (cf. Deut 23:16–17; Exod 21:7–11). Wilma Ann Bailey ‘Hagar: A model for an Anabaptist feminist?’ *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 1994 68(2), 219–228, also points out, as do others, that Hagar does not passively accept her abusive situation but takes decisive and risky action to escape it.

¹⁰ Exod 15:22 ‘Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water.’

So not only are Sarah and Abraham painted in Eve and Adam's fateful colours, they are also portrayed as a mirror image of Pharaoh, instigators of this inverse Exodus, oppressing (12:6) Hagar,¹¹ who has become like Israel, fleeing from servitude into the wilderness, soon to receive a divine visitation and blessing from the angel of Yahweh. Thus another narratological thread weaving this story is its ubiquitous intertextuality (Adam and Eve; Israel and Egypt; Hagar and Moses [cf. fn. 1]; and so forth).

Observe moreover that the angel of Yahweh turns out to be Yahweh. This ambiguity of identity between Yahweh and Yahweh's angel is a deliberate way of maintaining the tension between encountering God but not encountering God *directly*.¹² Henceforth I refer to Yahweh and Yahweh's angel interchangeably.

Verse 8

8 And he said, 'Hagar. Slave-girl of Sarai. Where have you come from and where are you going?' She said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.'

Seeing #8 is the only implicit one I identify: The angel of Yahweh *sees* Hagar. Yahweh sees *Hagar*, and calls her by name.¹³ Not straight to the point, or predicament, as we tend to do, but to the person. Hagar finds

¹¹ A practice forbidden explicitly in Lev 19:34, 'The refugee (*hagger*) living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were refugees in Egypt. I am Yahweh your God.' For summary of inverse Exodus interpretations, see Dozeman, 'The wilderness and salvation history', 28–29.

¹² An idea developed wonderfully by James L. Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the lost world of the Bible* (New York: The Free Press, 2003). He writes (24) '...the moment of confusion begins to come into somewhat clearer focus. It seems to straddle two realms: what we might call regular reality and the supernatural ... Indeed, the moment of confusion always leads to that sudden *click* whereby an ordinary encounter turns out to be something else entirely. *It is all about perception*, something that suddenly opens in the human mind.' (My emphasis).

¹³ Bruce Waltke and Cathi Fredericks, *Genesis: A commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 254, state, 'This is the only known instance in ancient Near Eastern literature where the deity addresses a woman by name.' If this is true, it makes it all the more remarkable.

herself seen and named by Yahweh's angel. Finally, after being purchased, owned, taken, given, 'eaten', oppressed, and exiled, someone calls her by name.

The whole story pauses abruptly on this one detail.

Hagar—the name bestowed by parents long ago, for Hagar is an orphan.

Hagar—the name no husband whispers in sweet delight, for Hagar is to be a single mother.

Hagar—the name long since forgotten by her Egyptian friends, for Hagar is a refugee.

Hagar—the name of she who sees.

Yahweh's angel asks, 'Hagar. Slave-girl of Sarah. Where have you come from and where are you going?' A conversation is opened up by the question, and Hagar is invited to respond. And Hagar's first word is 'I'm running away'. Hagar speaks a true word about herself, assuming a responsibility for herself far surpassing her intertextual helpmate's 'I was naked and hid' (Gen 3:10)!

Verses 9-12

9 And the angel of Yahweh said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her hand.'

10 And the angel of Yahweh said to her, 'I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted.'

11 And the angel of Yahweh said to her, 'Look! You have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for Yahweh has listened to your affliction. 12 He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand on everyone, and everyone's hand on him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin.'

Hagar does not answer the question, *Where are you going?*, but Yahweh does offer an answer: a command to return and a promise for her unborn son. Seeing #9 is tucked away in the promise: "Look! You have conceived!"—there are unrealised potentials here Hagar.

Yahweh's answer is typical of Hebrew Bible stories—earth-shattering intimate revelation followed by the nitty-gritty. 'Hagar, I have called you, you have answered. Let's get down to business. Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her hands.'

But is not Yahweh sending Hagar back to an oppressive situation? Fischer puts it bluntly: 'YHWH is presented as the guarantor of a hierarchical social order that approves of repression. The image of God that is thus drawn is diametrically opposite to that of YHWH, the God of the Exodus from slavery.'¹⁴

Perhaps, but four textual details raise doubts over such a reading.

First, 'Return and submit *yourself*'. The Hebrew is fairly clear on this *yourself*—the verb form implies an intentional effort by Hagar; she is the agent of the verb. This is important because it means Yahweh asks Hagar to return to community in an active and not a passive way.¹⁵

Secondly, the angel announces that 'Yahweh has listened to your affliction,' a clear allusion to the oppressed Israelites in Egypt (Exod 3:7; 4:31; Deut 26:7; Neh 9:9), whom Yahweh delivered.

Thirdly, each section of Yahweh's speech begins, 'And the angel of Yahweh said to her...'. This emphatic repetition suggests that *the promised future is worth the risk of return*.

Fourthly, from the opening personal address and open questions, to the final promise, the overall impression is that to Yahweh Hagar is not just a

¹⁴ Fischer, *Women who Wrestled with God*, 19. More severe is Tribble: 'This Egyptian slave woman is stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted for the transgressions of Israel.' (Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror: Literary-feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Overtures to Biblical Theology 13. [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984], 28).

¹⁵ Toba Spitzer, "'Where do you come from, and where are you going?': Hagar and Sarah encounter God", *The Reconstructionist* 1998, 63:10, correctly notes that 'Tribble misses the subtlety in the narrative. The messenger is telling Hagar that she is out of place; ... But in the use of the *hitpa'el* form of the verb 'to submit'—that is, in telling Hagar to '*hitani*', to cause herself to submit to Sarai's mistreatment—the *malakh* [messenger] implicitly continues to recognize Hagar's agency and personhood'. See also J. Gerald Janzen, "Hagar in Paul's eyes and in the eyes of Yahweh (Genesis 16): A study in horizons," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 1999, 13, 1-22; Bailey 'Hagar: A model for an Anabaptist feminist?', 223.

I agree with Tribble, *Texts of terror*, 29, that we must 'answer for the terror in Hagar's story. To neglect the theological challenge she represents is to falsify faith.' However, I do not think the text requires us to blame *God* for the terror. The narrator lays the blame firmly with human choices and attitudes.

slave. She is fundamentally a self-determining woman, with opinions, responsibilities, and wisdom.

These details together provide impetus for a reading that alleviates the harshness, something perhaps along the lines of the following:

‘Go back to your mistress. Submit yourself to her hand, and see what happens. It sounds brutal, but things will change, particularly once Ishmael is born. Abraham took you in and has legal obligations to care for you, despite his appalling track-record. Think of it this way: I am returning you to community, broken though it is.’

‘And Hagar, you are not returning empty-handed: I am giving you a promise: I have heard your suffering, your pain, so I want you to call your son Ishmael—*God hears*. And Hagar, he’s going to be *free*, free as a wild animal,¹⁶ free from his brothers. But a warning: this freedom will lead to conflict,¹⁷ because they won’t be able to control him. So return with this promise in your keeping.’

Not a bad promise for an Egyptian slave-girl!

And then comes the climax of the story—WWHD? What will Hagar do?

Hagar, having been seen and named and questioned and commanded and given a promise, *responds with questioning faith*.

Verse 13

¹⁶ *Wild ass* is a positive image of an undomesticated animal.

¹⁷ The difficult phrase in Hebrew that describes Ishmael’s relationship with his brothers—‘he shall live at odds with (*sal-pāney*) all his kin’—is ironically iconic of the difficulty the relationship has turned out to be. ‘At odds with’ can also be translated as ‘opposite’, ‘in the view of’, ‘against’, and other ways. It is hard to decide on a negative (majority) or positive (minority) meaning. As in many other such cases of ambiguity, I am tempted to think the semantic slippage is deliberate. Ishmael will live *with—in the view of—opposite—against* all his kin. How true this has been. David J. Zucker, ‘Conflicting conclusions: The hatred of Issac and Ishmael’, *Judaism* 1990, 39:37-46, helpfully discusses the history of the scriptural interpretation of the conflict between Isaac and Ishmael and argues for a less conflictual relationship than often understood.

13 So she called the name of Yahweh, who was speaking to her, ‘You are “God-sees-me”’; for she said, ‘Have I really here seen after he saw me?’¹⁸

Our story culminates in Seeing #10—‘You are God-sees-me ... Is this real?’ The story has been a crescendo of ‘seeings’. From the first word of Sarah, ‘Look! I’m barren!’ to Yahweh’s seeing of Hagar in the desert, these are all preparations for Hagar’s extraordinary naming of Yahweh as *God-sees-me!*

Let’s dwell on Hagar’s remarkable response.

4. Hagar’s Assertion

Here we have a slave. She’s pregnant. She’s Egyptian. She’s an orphan, a refugee, a nascent single mum. She’s in the wilderness alone, fleeing,

¹⁸ Scholars struggle with the Hebrew of the question, ‘Have I really in this place seen after he saw me?’ (Th. Booij, ‘Hagar’s words in Genesis XVI 13b’ *Vetus Testamentum* 1980, 30(1), 1-7; A. Schoors ‘A tiqqun sopherim in Genesis XVI 13b?’ *Vetus Testamentum* 1982, 32(4), 494-495). The NRSV, for example, has ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’ It does this by emending the Hebrew from ‘[to] here’ to ‘God’ and inserting ‘remained alive’, a proposal suggested first by Wellhausen.

However, I argue that the Hebrew can be translated as above, without emendation, if the following is accepted:

(a) *hālom* means locative ‘here’ (as also in Jdg 20:7; 2 Sam 7:18; 1 Chr 17:16; and possibly Psa 73:10), and not directional ‘to here’.

(b) *ʔahārey roʔiy* means ‘after he saw me’. Of the other 60 verbal forms following *ʔahārey* ‘after’ (Gen 5:4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 26, 30; 11:11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25; 13:14; 14:17; 18:12; 41:39; 46:30; 50:14; Exod 7:25; Lev 13:7, 55f; 14:48; 25:48; Num 7:88; 30:16; Deut 1:4; 12:30; 19:6; Jos 10:19; Ruth 2:3, 7; 1 Sam 1:9; 5:9; 2 Sam 1:10; 5:13; 17:21; 1 Ki 13:23, 31; 2 Ki 14:22; 2 Chr 25:14; 26:2; Jer 3:7; 12:15; 24:1; 28:12; 29:2; 31:19; 32:16; 34:8; 36:27; Ezek 46:12; Dan 8:1; Ho. 2:7, 15), all but Hos 2:7, 15 are predicative, and all have the temporal sense of English ‘after’. Thus the translation ‘after he saw me’ is perfectly acceptable, and a substantive translation ‘my seeing one’ (e.g. Waltke and Fredericks, *Genesis*, 255) is in fact less convincing.

(c) the focussing adjunct *gam* has scope over its following constituent, and hence means ‘really/even here’ (see Christo H J van der Merwe, *The Old Hebrew particle gam*. [St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1990]).

displaced, and what's more, she has been oppressed by none other than the Israelites! This much we have already learned.

But there is more to this remarkable woman, which reading further in Genesis reveals. She is the first person in the Bible to be visited by an angel, she is the first woman to receive an announcement of birth, and she is the only woman given a promise of unlimited descendents. But the really astonishing thing is that she is the first person to name God, that is, Hagar is the first *theologian*. And Hagar is the only person in all of scripture to give *Yahweh* a new name.¹⁹

Here we have the wrong person, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong education, the wrong gender, in the wrong ethnic group, with the wrong social status, bearing the wrong child—yet this woman Hagar speaks a true word about God, a true theological word. Her willingness to speak a true word about herself, 'I am running away,' was the necessary preparation for her to speak a true word about God, 'God-sees-me.'

This is Hagar's *credo*.

5. Hagar's Question

But the real genius of Hagar's response is the juxtaposition of assertion and question, of on one hand brazen belief, 'I'm going to give you a name, O Yahweh no-name: *God-sees-me!*' and, on the other, of puzzled disbelief, 'Did I really see God *here*, in this wasteland, after he saw me? Who am I kidding? I'm a pregnant Egyptian slave!' This verse also shows why we needed to stick with 'Yahweh' instead of 'The LORD', because the punch line requires it: *I'm going to give you a name, O Yahweh No-Name!*

¹⁹ Tribble, *Texts of terror*, 18, 'Hagar is a theologian'; Milton Schwantes, 'Hagar and Sarah', in *Faith born in the struggle for life: A rereading of Protestant faith in Latin America today*, edited Dow Kirkpatrick. translated Lewistine McCoy (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 76-83, 80, 'Finally, Hagar becomes a theologian. She interprets her meeting with Yahweh.' Nina Rulon-Miller, 'Hagar: A woman with an attitude', in *The World of Genesis: Persons, places, perspectives*, edited Philip Davies & David Clines (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1998), 76, also observes that 'Hagar is the only woman in the Bible to choose a wife for her son, and one from her native Egypt at that.' Spitzer, 'Where do you come from,' 11, contrasts Hagar, who names Yahweh directly, '*You are God-sees-me,*' with Jacob, who only names *the place*, 'Face of God' (Gen 32:31).

The reading I propose clearly identifies verse 13 as the climax, because it is the culmination of the *Seeings* that run through the chapter,²⁰ and is followed by the epilogue (vv 15–16). Many commentators argue that Genesis 16 is about rivalry between Sarah and Hagar or about uneven power relations between Hagar and Abraham/Sarah, and most commentators hardly notice the concentration of *seeing* vocabulary, let alone its culmination in v 13.²¹

I submit that the passage is not primarily concerned with these issues, but uses them as a way to reflect on the who and where and how of God's revelation. That is, the emphasis is decidedly *theological*—questioning faith encounters God on the margins and enters a conversation in which questions are posed, promises received, belief strengthened, theology is hand-crafted, *and*, in which astonishment and disbelief are safely voiced.

Hagar offers an unsheltered declaration of perceptive insight into the nature of God, windswept by uncertainty and doubt.

²⁰ Unfortunately the difficulties of the Hebrew of this verse (see note 18) seem to lead to a petering out of exegetical oomph in treating verse 13, most strikingly seen in Brueggemann's unfortunate conclusion: 'The disclosure was not greatly valued in the tradition and is best left in its obscurity' (Walter Brueggemann *Genesis* [Interpretation, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982], 153).

²¹ For example, Fischer, *Women who wrestled with God*, Kass, *The beginning of wisdom*, Reis, *Reading the lines*, Rulon-Miller, 'Hagar: A woman with an attitude', Tribble, *Texts of terror*, Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis*, (2nd edition, London: SCM Press, 1963), Waltke and Fredericks, *Genesis*, Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*. The most astonishing lapse in this regard, however belongs to Devora Steinmetz, *From father to son: Kinship, conflict, and continuity in Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 77–78, who writes, 'Hagar believes that God has 'seen' her and that she, in turn, has 'seen' God (16:13). But God has not seen her and she, we must conclude, has not seen God. Hagar is blind to divine destiny; she cannot accept affliction in the present, because she does not possess a vision for the future (16:9–10). She is, indeed, directionless, just as she will wander later in the desert (21:14), she has no sense of direction now.' I am bewildered by such a reading, but it does have a midrashic precursor in *Genesis Rabbah* 45:10 (Soncino translation), 'God never condescended to hold converse with a woman save that righteous woman [i.e. Sarah]'. At least Hughes, 'Seeing Hagar seeing God', identifies seeing as a *leitmotif*, though he does not in my opinion bring out its full interpretative significance.

Before leaving scene 2, however, we are given an unexpected detail, replete with one final Seeing:

14 Therefore the well was called 'Well of the Living One Who Sees Me.'²² Look!²³ It is between Kadesh and Bered.

Therefore the well was named. From theological vistas to geographical minutiae—'Let's name the well here!' But more rests on this *therefore* than we realise. When our theological landscape changes, our physical landscape follows suit. Wherever faith is renewed, place is renewed. There is a deep thread that runs between physiological (seeing), psychological (believing), and physical (drawing water).

And then the passage provides a truly puzzling Seeing #11: 'Look! The well is between Kadesh and Bered'. At this point scholars go in search of their atlases, busting to tell readers the longitude and latitude of the well. I suggest something more playful, more *midrashic* . . .

In this final Seeing the narrator addresses *the reader*, inviting them to join in on the seeing. This makes me wonder if its location indicates some wry humour: Sarah (v. 5) asked for Yahweh to judge *between* Abraham and Sarah—Yahweh appeared *between* Kadesh, meaning 'sacred', and Bered, reminiscent of Barad, 'hailstorm'! Perhaps, then, the in-between location of Hagar's revelation subtly suggests that the judging truth of Yahweh is not to be found on one side against another (Sarah *or* Abraham), but between the holy and the hailstorm, between purity and pandemonium . . .

6. Scene 3—Abraham and Hagar (Gen 16:15-16)

15 Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

²² As many commentators note, the 'One Who Sees Me' (Hebrew = *roʾi* in the name of the well (v 14) substantiates the translation of El-Roi, *ʾel roʾi*, as 'God sees me' (v 13).

²³ Most translations (e.g. NIV; RSV; NRSV; NJB; ESV) omit this unexpected *Look!*. Both the KJV and NKJV include it to their credit.

And then, the story ends—Ishmael’s birth, Abraham’s eighty-sixth birthday. The stories of God’s people, despite their often extraordinary insights, emerge from and return to mundane, daily life.

But this ending discloses an absolutely critical detail. ‘*Abraham* named his son Ishmael.’ But who told him about this name? *Hagar*! Hagar did not just return to community, smug in her secret knowledge of the divine promise; rather she *shared* her word of God with Abraham. And Abraham *acted* on it.²⁴ Moreover we can presume from v. 12 that the community acted in naming the well after the story of an outsider’s encounter with Yahweh.

But something even more remarkable comes at the highpoint of the entire Abraham narrative, occurring over ten years later, in Genesis 22:14, at the end of the story of the near-sacrifice of Abraham’s other son, Isaac. For when God provides a ram, Abraham names that place *al a Hagar: Yahweh is seen*!²⁵

There is for me furthermore a poignancy in that after the binding of Isaac (Gen 22), which would have been a harrowing experience for Isaac, he is said to have settled at Hagar’s well, the Well of the Living One Who Sees Me (Gen 24:62; 25:11). Who knows what drew him to it.

It would seem therefore that Abraham’s own confession of faith was decisively shaped by Hagar’s testimony. But Jewish and Christian readers have generally failed to see any substantial connection between Hagar’s ‘God sees me’ and Abraham’s ‘Yahweh sees’. Perhaps we fear contemplating that the father of faith derived his theological outlook from *Hagar’s Desert Dogmatics*. Perhaps her infectious witness is too subtle—or too scandalous—for the confessing community to acknowledge.

7. Concluding Reflections

The reading I propose for this chapter (Gen 16) demonstrates that in its canonical form it is a coherent narrative, bound together by Seeings, crucial intertextual allusions, barrenness, and theological subtlety. Concomitantly, I suggest that those who use excavative critical methods that divide the text

²⁴ I find Tribble’s, *Texts of terror*, 19, contention that ‘the narrated ending continues to undermine Hagar’ unconvincing. Rather, the subtlety of the naming by Abraham with the name given in private to Hagar discloses Hagar’s ongoing influence in the community to which she returned.

²⁵ The Hebrew is *yhw h yero?eh*; *yero?eh* is the *niphal* (mediopassive) nonpast form of *r7h* ‘to see’. Unfortunately it is often translated as ‘Yahweh provides’, severing the significant intertextual link to Gen 16.

into diachronic layers undermine the rhetorical impact of this story;²⁶ and ironically, in their oft-stated attempt to get to the ‘real’ Hagar, dismember the text in a way that compromises Hagar’s theological gift to communities of faith.²⁷

What then can we say about this gift? Hagar the theologian teaches us five things that *matter* in the doing of theology.

1. *The marginalised matter*—Hagar is a wonderful testimony to God’s disregard for status and gender (and many other boundary markers) when it comes to doing theology. The narrator stresses Hagar’s *wrongness* as a prototypical recipient of divine visitation. In fact one would be hard-pressed to make Hagar *more* marginalized than she is, which is why her participation in the theology conversation indicates indisputably that all are invited.

Theological reflection is as much the prerogative of the underprivileged, the outcast, the outsiders as anyone else’s.

2. *Context matters*—Hagar’s theology emerges out of a response to God’s involvement in the concrete particulars of her context. What is it about being seen (and addressed) by God that leads to her naming of ‘God-sees-me’? Surely it is that to Sarah and Abraham she is invisible, except for her reproductive and economic utility. They do not see Hagar’s dignity (16:6). But God is distinguished by naming, ‘Hagar. Slave of Sarah’; by God’s commitment to reality, ‘Hagar. *Slave of Sarah ...*’, and to community, ‘Return!’; by God’s interest and attention, ‘Where have you come from and where are you going?’; and God’s promise to her unborn child and so to her future (vv. 11-12).

Hagar herself indicates the importance of context in several ways. First, her climactic question recognises her perceived unsuitability as a locus of revelation, ‘Have I *really/even here* seen?’ Secondly, she accepts her precarious social context ‘I’m running away’. Thirdly, she names the well, establishing it as an ongoing witness to an outsider’s encounter with God,

²⁶ Such methods in my view are better employed *between* units to ascertain compositional activity pertaining to entire books rather than *within* units to ascertain the compositional genealogy of a single unit.

²⁷ For example, Jo Ann Hackett, ‘Rehabilitating Hagar: Fragments of an epic pattern’ in *Gender and difference in Ancient Israel*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 12-27, states (24), ‘this scene is at its heart a classic portrayal of the abuse of absolute power’. Her article leaves the impression that besides this somewhat obvious remark, the excavated ‘fragments’ of a story now lost leaves little actual ‘rehabilitation’ for Hagar.

‘re-membling’ herself into Israel’s geography and history. And finally, she obviously returns to Sarah and Abraham to bear Ishmael, to pass on his (and the well’s) name.

Furthermore, the motif of seeing—a neglected sense in much Protestant Christian theology as cogently argued by Balthasar²⁸—underscores the centrality of context, since an emphasis on hearing (Rom 10:17) privileges content over context. But seeing is more immediate, more contextual, less introspective than hearing.

Finally, the most important aspect of Hagar’s context is that her theological discourse occurs in the wilderness, a barren lonely place. Wilderness, both in Genesis and the rest of scripture is a place of spiritual and hence theological formation.²⁹ Wilderness retains its metaphorical allure even for modern, urban readers, many of whom have scant experience of desert conditions. Besides the obvious point that our disconnected and fragmented lives are regularly a form of relational wilderness, theological formation occurs frequently at those moments of dissonance between one’s personal faith and that which gives rise to faith, namely, one’s scriptural and ecclesial and cultural traditions.

One cannot identify unequivocally with all the expressions of faith in God’s story; for one’s faith to be one’s own and not an other’s, it must *be*, to the degree that its unique particularity becomes both a gift and a problem for communities of faith. And such theological dissonance is aligned with our experience(s) of wilderness, just as it was for Hagar, whom we imagine would have struggled to identify with the faith of Abraham and Sarah unequivocally.

3. *Reciprocity* matters—The motif of seeing draws the reader into a story world in which people selectively see and do not see one another. Thus seeing in Genesis 16 is not just noticing, but a *reciprocal attending to*, which leads to theological insight. Yahweh pays attention to Hagar, and it is Hagar’s reflection on this, ‘Have I really here *seen after he saw me*? (16:13b), that prompts her new name of God. Likewise, the theological conversation is framed by questions: ‘Where have you come from and where

²⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vols 1-2 (San Francisco: St Ignatius Press, 1982, 1984)

²⁹ Dozeman, ‘The wilderness and salvation history’, 43, concludes, ‘And [the wilderness] continues to play a central role in Torah as the location where God is encountered, where personal transformation takes place, and where community is formed.’

are you going?’ ends in ‘Have I really in this place seen after he saw me?’ Thus the reciprocal seeing is matched by reciprocal questioning and conversation.

Hagar participates in theological discourse precisely because Yahweh treats her with dignity and respect. Her response comes from a mutually respectful, non-accusing, open-ended conversation. They *saw* one another. And this reciprocity influenced her subsequent interaction with Abraham.

4. *Questioning matters*—there is a profound subtlety in the text regarding Hagar’s declaration/question due to the word *kiy* ‘for/because’. Verse 13 reads, ‘So she called the name of Yahweh, who was speaking to her, ‘You are ‘God-sees-me’’, *for (kiy)* she said, ‘Have I really in this place seen after he saw me?’’. Hagar names God *because* she first questioned herself and God and their interaction. She grounds her theological statement in her very own questioning.

Thus the question does not, as we often think, undermine her theology/faith, but undergirds it. Rather, Hagar legitimises an interrogative theological method.

5. *Community matters*—Hagar hand-crafts her theology in the wilderness, but it is *wilderness bounded by community*, albeit a dysfunctional one. Hagar comes from community and returns to community.³⁰ And more importantly, her theological wisdom rippled through the community in the acceptance of her name for the well, her name for Ishmael, and as I suggest, Abraham’s recapitulation of *Hagar’s* theology at the climax of the entire Abraham story (Gen 22:14), in calling the mountain ‘Yahweh is seen’. That Hagar’s story is in the canon also testifies to the memory of her encounter and its oral and written transmission among the Israelites.

Hagar shows that name-changing theology, despite its often eremitic genesis, is affected by, shared with, and ultimately transformative of one’s communities, even oppressive communities in need of liberation.

The memory of Hagar the Theologian is precious, provoking all who take her story seriously to rethink the what, the how, and the who of theology.

³⁰ And in Gen 21 returns a second time (see note 1) to wilderness and then to an alternative community—‘Ishmael lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt’ (Gen 21: 21).

Hagar the Theologian, I suggest, is a paradigm of the *Sitz im Leben* necessary for authentic theological and faith formation—marginalization, wilderness, encounter, self-appraisal, conversation, naming, doubting—and then, a return to one's fragmented community with a restorative word of God, a place-naming, person-naming, *God*-naming word, a word shared with contagious belief, even though in the same breath we pinch ourselves and speak our darkest fear—'Am I imagining this?'