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Genesis hermeneutics: Agar the slave woman who gives a name to god

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Abstract

Hagar is a woman and a slave, she is also a foreigner, an expatriate and the surrogate of Sara, Abraham's legitimate wife. However, Hagar and later her son Ishmael would underestimate Sara and Isaac, triggering their own escape and exclusion twice into the desert. The text develops a hermeneutic analysis, recognizing that any attempt at interpretation is a principle of dialogue whose objective is reflection on the relationship between the human being (Agar) and God, overcoming all social, ethnic or gender barriers. God exists for the ordinary human because that God is sensitive to his own being, to his own misery. It is the God who sees me, who redeems me, who exempts me from death.

Keywords: Hagar; God; Hermeneutics; Genesis; Charity

1. Introduction

The story of Agar, in Genesis (chapters 16 and 21), tells of the life of an Egyptian slave who is given over by her employer to conceive a child with her husband, since she was unable to get pregnant. God had promised descendants to Abraham, her husband, but despite the passing of time, this promise was not carried out. Hagar is a slave woman, she is also a foreigner, an expatriate and would become a surrogate for Sara, Abraham's legitimate wife. However, Hagar and later her son would so underestimate Sarah and Isaac that they would trigger their own escape and exclusion twice into the desert (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Genesis. 16:1-15).

Hagar flees for the first time towards the desert, there the Angel of God appears to her and asks her "where do you come from and where are you going?", the only answer was "I am escaping from my lady Saray". The Angel told her to return to the protection of Abraham's house, which is logical in her state since she would not survive in the desert, and also promised to give offspring to the son she was going to give birth to, who would be called Ishmael. (meaning "God hears"). Hagar is the only woman in the Old Testament to whom the Angel of God appears, receiving a great promise (Kraye, 2022). She returns home, gives birth and raises her son there as Abraham's firstborn.

In Genesis 16:1–16 Sarah tells Abraham: The Lord has made me barren. Therefore, go and lie down with my slave Hagar. Perhaps through her I will be able to have children. Abraham accepts the proposal and is related to Hagar, the Egyptian slave. The story tells us that when Agar realized that she was pregnant, she began to look down on her owner Sara. Then Sara tells Abraham: You are to blame for my insult! I put my slave in your arms, and now that she looks pregnant, she looks down on me. May the Lord judge between you and me! Your slave is in your hands —Abraham would answer—; do with her what seems good to you. In such a way, Sara begins to mistreat Hagar, causing her to flee into the desert. There, next to a spring, the angel of the Lord found her and would ask her: Hagar, Saray's slave, where do you come from and where are you going? I'm running away from my owner Sara—she replies. Go back to her and submit to her authority," the angel told her. I will multiply your offspring in such a way that they cannot be counted in the desert (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Genesis. 16:10).

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You are pregnant, and you will give birth to a son, and you will name him Ishmael because the Lord has heard your affliction. He will be a man as indomitable as a wild donkey. He will fight everyone, and everyone will fight him; and he will live in conflict with all his brothers. As the Lord had spoken to her, Hagar named him "The God who sees me," for she said to herself, "Now I have seen him who sees me." That is also why the well that is between Cades and Béred is known by the name of «Well of the Living One who sees me». Finally, Hagar bore Abraham a son, whom he named Ishmael. Abraham was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born.

From Genesis, chapter 21:8-21 begins the narrative of a second time in which God would hear Ishmael crying abandoned under a bush and through the Angel would rebuke him. What's wrong with you, Hagar? Do not be afraid. Go look for the child, while he discovered a well of water that would quench his thirst. Abraham and Sara, with God's good pleasure, will have a son together, Isaac, and when he grows up when he would be weaned, in celebration Abraham organizes a banquet. That day Sara would observe that the son of Agar the Egyptian, mocked her son Isaac, then she said to Abraham: Throw out this servant and her son, because the son of this servant will not inherit with Isaac my son. This saying seemed very serious to Abraham because of his son. Then God said to Abraham: Do not think it serious because of the boy and your maid; In everything that Sarah tells you, listen to her voice, because in Isaac your offspring will be called. And also, of the son of the servant I will make a nation, because he is your descendant. So, Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and delivered the boy to her, and sent her away. And she went out and wandered in the desert of Beersheba. Then the water ran out, and he threw the boy under a bush; he went and sat opposite, a bowshot's distance away; because he said: I will not see when the boy dies. And when she sat opposite, the boy raised his voice and cried. God heard the boy's voice; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her: What ails you, Hagar? Do not worry; because God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Rise up, lift up the boy, and hold him with your hand, for I will make a great nation out of him. Then God opened his eyes, and he saw a fountain of water; and she went and filled the receptacle with water, and gave the boy a drink. And God was with the boy; and he grew up, and dwelt in the desert of Paran, and was an archer, and his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Genesis. 21:8-21).

This biblical passage from Genesis is inscribed in the historical theological context of the Jewish and Catholic religion. Its authorship is attributed to Moses between the years 1491 and 1450 a. C (Nelson, 2006). Absorbed in the pretense of conceiving a transforming experience through the action of understanding, and despite the express ambiguity of the text (Onwukwe, 2022), I decided to choose the hermeneutic method as a scalpel that intends to dissect the historical and ethnological reality of the text. Biblical, looking for guidelines, patterns and explanatory hypotheses that lead us to reveal the meaning of historical reality, in dissatisfied rebellion before the finiteness of understanding. Recognizing that every attempt at interpretation is a principle of dialogue and that every experience is an event or linguistic turn, as Hans Georg Gadamer (1992) argued. In the dialogic evolution we include three succinct axes: the historical, the ethnological and the theological. The objective of the study is committed to reflecting on the importance of the relationship between the human being (Hagar) and God, overcoming all social, ethnic or gender barriers. God exists for the ordinary human because that God is sensitive to his own being, to his own misery. It is the God who sees me, who redeems me, who exempts me from death. Can a subject like this be considered irrelevant in this time of grief and abandonment?

2. The slave woman who gives a name to god

Hagar is a slave woman, she is also a foreigner, an expatriate and the surrogate of Sara, Abraham's legitimate wife. However, Hagar and later her son would so underestimate Sarah and Isaac that they would trigger their own escape and exclusion twice into the desert.

Hagar is called twice by the Angel of the Lord, who is the messenger of God. The first time the Angel tells her that the Lord has heard her affliction. He tells her to return from the desert and submit to Sara, in turn revealing that she is pregnant by someone who should be called Ishmael. As the Lord had spoken to her through the Angel, Hagar named him "The God who sees me", for she said to herself: "Now I have seen the one who sees me".

The second time God would hear Ishmael crying abandoned under a bush and through the Angel would rebuke him. What's wrong with you, Hagar? Do not be afraid. Go look for the child, while he discovered a well of water that would quench his thirst.

2.1. Historical axis

Hagar is the first and only woman who names God (González, 2008). But Hagar is not just any woman, she is a slave, she is a foreigner on Hebrew soil, she is Egyptian, a town that has had a complex relationship with the Jews and, finally, has engendered the son of Abraham the prophet, exercising surrogate motherhood, which was an ancient Marriage practice

that is already mentioned in the cuneiform tablets discovered in the Kültepe-Kanesh site, in Turkey four thousand years ago. The tablets specify that the husband has the choice of resorting to a hierodule or a slave in case his legitimate wife cannot give him offspring, in order to obtain a legitimate heir, while in compensation, the pregnant woman receives donations or freedom. Also in the Code of Hammurabi (1750 BC) the possibility of resorting to a slave for reproductive purposes is examined, adding that the slave may not be sold later. Consequently, surrogacy existed before the Christian era, confirming the idea of Gadamer (1992): "History does not properly belong to human beings, but they are the ones that belong to it"

2.2. Anthropological axis

Hagar is a young woman, probably a teenager and the daughter of an Egyptian hierarch who offered her as a sign of friendship to Abraham. Her life as an expatriate in a strange (Hebrew) culture, belonging to a privileged social class and another religion, in her original Egypt, can contextualize the protest reaction against Sara. She perceives herself as strange and accessory despite being under the protection of the patriarch. Being chosen as a surrogate mother allows her to assume a leading role in the family, being the opportunity to compensate for the probable social omission and isolation in which she is perceived. Ethnologically, it represents the (dis)encounter of two very dissimilar cultures, and recreates for us the learning condition of interculturality that is still manifested today. Today Israel legally assumes surrogate motherhood and in 1996 establishes in its legal framework that the surrogate must be an Israeli woman. Likewise, the religion of the mother and the pregnant woman must be the same, since Judaism is transmitted through the maternal route.

2.3. Theological axis

Agar represents the confirmation that there are no secondary human beings for God. He sends out his Angels twice to guide and protect his characters. He expresses mercy by opening her eyes to find vital water in the desert and rebuking her to follow her path with the great hope of a new people: "Get up, lift up the boy, and hold him with your hand, because I will make him a great nation". Hagar is redeemed as the mother of a new nation. She is recognized and she witnesses it from the first meeting with the Angel, when in a very human action and apparently typical of her character, she testifies that she has been seen by the great God, moreover, Hagar names the God of the Hebrews. "The one who sees me." It is a name that allows you to nominate the other, but also to self-identify, reaffirm, the other exists because he is sensitive to his own being: he is, the king or the God who sees me, who identifies me among the crowd, who redeems me, who recognizes me and offers me one of the best gifts that a human being, regardless of their origin, can receive: acceptance, empathy and charity.

3. Conclusion

The Biblical story of Hagar presents her as a foreign (Egyptian) woman and slave, expatriate and surrogate mother of Sarah, Abraham's legitimate wife. Hagar and her son Ishmael would underestimate Sara and Issac, triggering a conflict that is resolved with their exclusion from the tribe. Hagar's uniqueness is in the nomination she makes of the Hebrew God: "The God who sees me." "Now I have seen him who sees me." In a description that allows him to nominate the foreign God (Hebrew), but also allows him to self-identify, reaffirm, redeem himself in the face of his abandonment, a God who offers him charity, acceptance and empathy, reaffirming the creed of mercy to his neighbor without any discrimination. , maxim of the nascent religion, Christianity.

Compliance with ethical standards

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