

Trauma and Narrative Wreckage in the Biblical Story of Hagar

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The story of Hagar (Genesis 16 and 12) figures prominently in Bible's patriarchal narratives of both the elected and rejected with respect to divine promise. As the story of an abused foreign woman cast out into an inhospitable wilderness along with her son, the story raises troubling questions about the portrayal of domestic violence perpetuated by those otherwise celebrated as "faithful" within biblical narratives: Abraham and his wife Sarah. In response to the relative silence on the topic of domestic violence among clergy and leaders of churches, synagogues, and other "sacred spaces", this paper explores a reading of Hagar's story that reclaims her value as a human being. With the help of post-Shoah reading sensitivities that expose strategies of dehumanization, this reading makes visible the way in which the ancient writer/reactor of Genesis performs as an advocate for Hagar in the face of the abuse heaped upon her. In so doing, Hagar's story is transformed from a narrative about a rejected "other" into one that exposes abuse by the so-called "elected." Thus read, the story provides support and encouragement for victims in contemporary religious cultures to step forward and tell their stories.

Keywords: domestic violence, church leaders, Hagar, patriarch, clergy, narrative, post-Shoah, Holocaust narrative

Introduction

Coercion. Coldness. Abandonment. Apprehension. Deprivation. Dehumanization. Insecurity. Indifference. Rape. Repeat. Smack. Silence.

Domestic abuse impacts one in four women in the United States.¹ An estimated ninety percent of domestic abuse incidents do not wind up in court because victims are reluctant to testify against their abusers.² A simple Google search of key words, such as "domestic violence", and "church leaders", painfully exposes the scars of domestic violence in the wider Christian church culture. Equally disturbing is a growing recognition that church leaders perpetuate domestic violence by being ill prepared to recognize and counsel individuals caught up in repetitive abusive cycles.³ A common thread running through many articles on the problem of domestic violence and churches is that abuse is most at home in the world of silence: "not talking about it", and ministers not feeling comfortable "preaching on it".⁴ According to *Lifeway* research, only six percent of pastors raise the issue of domestic violence in sermons as frequently as once per month or more, despite the fact that more than seventy

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¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/januaryfebruary/three-views-after-domestic-violence-why-should-christian-wi.html>.

² Stephanie M. Crumpton, "After the 911 Call: A Pastoral Theologian Reflects on Family Violence Advocacy." *Cross Currents* 63, no. 2 (June 2013): 131-137; <http://boz.religionnews.com/2014/09/12/whyistayed-churches-support-spousal-abuse/>.

³ Joyce Neergaard et al. "Women Experiencing Intimate Partner Violence: Effects of Confiding in Religious Leaders." *Pastoral Psychology* 55, No. 6 (July 2007): 773-787.

<http://www.lifeway.com/pastorstoday/2014/09/25/domestic-violence-and-a-pastors-response/>.

⁴ <http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/life/entertainment/story/2014/nov/23/unholy-subject/275132/>.

percent of pastors personally know of someone in their congregation or family who has experienced domestic violence.⁵

As a teacher and professor of sacred text in the church and in the academy, my questions surrounding the destructive silence on domestic violence center on the way in which Christian communities absorb how to read and respond to scripture. I find the academic conversation surrounding post-Shoah (or Holocaust) readings of biblical texts to be particularly useful in illuminating the complexity of trauma and suffering.⁶ In the main, this area of research addresses the ways in which Hebrew scripture performs in wake of the Shoah, the most profound trauma in past century affecting the people through whom these sacred texts originated. Drawing upon Emmanuel Levinas's phenomenological articulation of "responsibility to the other" biblical scholars such as Tod Linafelt, Marvin Sweeney, Emil Fackenheim, Danna Nolan Fewell, Gary Phillipshave brought fresh insight into the trauma-shaped narratives of the Hebrew Bible.⁷ At once rich in meaning yet profoundly disorienting, these scholars (and many others as well) have demonstrated how reading the narratives of the Hebrew Bible in light of the harsh realities of the Shoah means leaving the familiarity of its stories in order to grapple with the trauma, often useless suffering, and choice-less choices, calling to us, like Abel's blood, from its textual groundings. Thus, reading after the Shoah sides with the victims. In so doing, interpretive strategies that foreclose on the complexities of the traumatic situations by taking refuge instead in reductive explanations how these stories serve a grander theological purpose become visible. For example, Paul Ricoeur points to way in which reading the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible through the familiar theological scheme of "Salvation History" prompts the reader to turn away from considering the difficult plight of the dis-elected and the conquered—those not a part of the chosen people that ultimately bring redemption in the end (any number of faceless groups such as the Canaanites, Moabites, and Ammonites may be adduced).⁸

In this article, I explore that a post-Shoah reading of Hagar that opens her story to us as one of domestic violence at the hands of a celebrated patriarch and his wife. Such a reading turns the tables on more familiar readings that obscure the suffering of Hagar and her son Ishmael through Abraham in favor of underscoring the divine promise to Abraham of offspring through his wife Sarah. In addition, such a reading enables us to see the way in which the text advocates for Hagar in the mere fact of telling her story. Thus as readers, we come face to face with Hagar's suffering thought a narrative that Phyllis Trible has aptly described as a "text of terror".⁹ I provide an overview of some key elements that frame a post-Shoah reading and then evaluate the story of Hagar in the light of those elements. In so doing, I do not mean to imply that a post-Shoah reading can in any way be

⁵ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/29/pastors-domestic-violence_n_5538126.html.

⁶ I draw from the work of Arthur Frank who discusses the way in which the practice of various hermeneutics and reading strategies open stories to the dynamic interpretive process that takes place between storyteller and reader/interpreter. Frank's notion that storytelling prepares those who listen to encounter difficult situations is central to the concept of Torah as instruction with its complex interplay between law and story. With respect to stories and their characters and dialogues, Frank's assertions that stories resist any final interpreted, draws heavily from dialogic principles of the novel as set forth by Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin employs the term *utterance* to denote the basic unit of speech. Just as personalities never finalized so is the meaning of their utterances. Mikhail Bakhtin, *the Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263, 270-274, 478. Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: a Socio-Narratology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), ebook.

⁷ Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn, Gary A. Phillips, and David Jobling, *Levinas and Biblical Studies*, Semeia Studies 43 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Emil Fackenheim, *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust: A Re-reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading the Hebrew Bible after the Shoah: Engaging Holocaust Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 237-238.

⁹ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 9-35.

systematized or reduced to a “method”, but rather that readings of stories in light of the Shoah may comprise some of these elements.

Elements of “Post-Shoah” Readings

Totalities. Reading after the Shoah recognizes the presence of what Emmanuel Levinas terms “totalities” or those organizing schemes and stories that construct a unified whole at the expense of individual difference.¹⁰ The mechanized extermination European Jewry at the hands of the Nazi regime demonstrates the capacity of human beings to construct the “totality” of an ideal group of people at the cost of an entire race who does not fit the scheme. Levinas recognizes that totalities provide structures necessary for society to function (such as legal systems), but cautions that members of a society must be mindful of who benefits and who is marginalized by these totalities. In this way, Levinas discusses justice as a working out of responsibilities within these totalities, so that the needs of individual societal members are met.¹¹

Thus, a post-Shoah reading is wary of interpretive schemes that press stories and their characters into an organized digestible whole. To read after the Shoah is an act of resistance but not only to dominant or deeply entrenched theological readings. Reading with the Shoah in mind resists the temptation to avoid problematic aspects of a story particularly where divine motives and action are in view. Reading in this way wrestles with traumatic events that may entirely or in part be brought about by a problematic presence or absence of the divine. However, such attention is by no means an effort to digest the event in any conclusive way but rather bear witness to it.

Renaming What Is Happening. A post-Shoah reading sees through the ruse of manipulating others by naming things other than what they are. As Isaiah would say, “calling good evil and evil good.”¹² Such schemes employed by the Nazi’s are well known: Telling the Jews they were relocated to work camps in Eastern Europe when in reality they were (often) being taken to the death camps; hurrying Jews arriving at Auschwitz into mass showers that, in reality, were gas chambers; informing the citizens of large cities such as Warsaw that Jews were being relocated into Ghettos for health reasons; propaganda films that portrayed an opulent life for Jews in the Ghettos when in reality most of them were starving.

Such recasting of events did not stop after Auschwitz. Early popularization of Holocaust literature, such as the famed *Diary of Anne Frank* arose because of the way in which the story was repositioned: a story of a young girl who faced adversity rather than a young girl who was victimized by her betrayers and ultimately starved to death in the camps. As Gene Plunka demonstrates in his 2009 analysis of major theater productions about the Holocaust, an unfiltered story of Anne Frank would have been commercially unviable. An unedited

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982), 85-92; Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961), 33-52; O.E. Ajzenstat, “Beyond Totality: The Shoah and the Biblical Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Strange Fire*, ed. Tod Linafelt (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 106-120.

¹¹ What may be less familiar is the complicity of German “Christian” scholarship in assisting Hitler’s research section on the Final Solution to *Die Judenfrage* or “what to do with European Jews?” As recounted in Robert Erickson’s *Theologians under Hitler*, theological leaders such as Paul Althaus, Emmanuel Hirsch, and Gerhart Kittle (author of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*) provided theological justification and support for dehumanizing the Jews rather than speaking out against Nazi ideology—precisely the opposite of what one would have expected of Christian leaders faced with the totality of Nazism. Most familiar with theological resistance to the Nazi state recall Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was eventually executed for his association with extended family members involved in the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler in July of 1944. Robert Erickson, *Theologians under Hitler* (London: New Haven Press, 1985), 28-78.

¹² “Ah, you who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!” Isaiah 5:20, NRSV.

staging of the story in the early 1950s was risky, because it was too ethnically Jewish (and therefore associated with communism in the McCarthy era) for the standard American audience. Instead Anne was given a more palatable “feel-good” makeover by husband-and-wife Hollywood screenwriters Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett who had a hand such popular films as *It’s a Wonderful Life*.¹³ But most importantly, who would go to the theater to see the portrayal of an unexpurgated Anne: a tortured young girl hiding in family annex who subsequently starved in Bergen-Belsen?¹⁴

Commonplace Thoughtlessness. Hannah Arendt’s notion of the “banality of evil”, arising from her reporting of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem for the *New Yorker* in 1960, provides insight into the mindset of those who perpetuate unthinkable violence. She concludes that the man perhaps most responsible for the execution of the Final Solution was not a “MacBeth” or “out to prove himself a villain”, but an astonishingly average man who was merely thoughtless and unimaginative.¹⁵ It was Eichmann’s justification for his actions—that he was simply doing what his superiors told him to do, following the script, not realizing what he was doing—that so arrested Arendt prompting her to reflect on the sheer commonplace of thoughtlessness that underlies abuse.¹⁶ She writes:

That such remoteness from reality and such thoughtlessness can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together which, perhaps, are inherent in man—that was, in fact, the lesson one could learn in Jerusalem. But it was a lesson, neither an explanation of the phenomenon nor a theory about it.¹⁷ (Arendt, 1963, p. 287)

Ambiguity. Not all Nazis denied responsibility for their actions in the Shoah. Albert Speer, Hitler’s chief architect whose projects included the Nuremberg Stadium, the Nazi Headquarters in Munich and the Chancellery in Berlin was the only surviving Nazi leader to admit his guilt at the Nuremberg war-crime trials in 1945-1946. However, his *New York Times* obituary notes an ambiguity characterizing the remainder of his life: on the one hand, attempts to explain the horrors of the Shoah and on the other writing of memoirs that seemed remote and detached, “self-serving, showing the pure technician unmoved by human misery.”¹⁸ Luc Tuymans’ 1990 portrait of Speer marks the eerie ambiguity of the Shoah that resists any firm classification of the inner-life of the perpetrators of its horrors.¹⁹ The look on Speer’s face causes us to wonder if he is resting, reflecting with regret upon his crimes, or as art reviewer Kelly Klassmeyer writes, “secretly reliving his Master Race glory days in the dark recesses of his mind”?²⁰

As such, a post-Shoah reading resists any final “once for all” assessment of a character in a story. In facing crimes of unprecedented proportions committed by otherwise ordinary people against their human beings, one can no longer be sure of how to evaluate the capabilities of one’s neighbor, colleague, friend, or even relative, those one thinks they know reasonably well. Tuymans’ portrait of Speer portrays an unsettling reality in the aftermath of the Shoah: an erosion of confidence in being able to “read” the face of someone, even someone well known, with any confidence. The “look” on the face becomes frighteningly ambiguous. We may recognize the

¹³ Gene A. Plunka, *Holocaust Drama: The Theater of Atrocity* (London: Cambridge Press, 2009), 102-103.

¹⁴ Plunka, 104-105.

¹⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), 287.

¹⁶ Arendt, 288.

¹⁷ Arendt, 288.

¹⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/02/obituaries/albert-speer-dies-at-76-close-associate-of-hitler.html>.

¹⁹ Belgian artist Luc Tuymans is known for his paintings of modern life and memory. His works explore contemporary problematic topics such as the Holocaust, Nationalism and 9/11. Commentary on Tuymans portraits may be found in Toby Kamps and Robert Stoor, *Portraits. Luc Tuymans* (Houston: Menil Collection, 2013). Notes here extracted from the brochure at the Menil Collection’s exhibit of Luc Tuymans “Nice”, September 27, 2014-January 5, 2014.

²⁰ See Photo of Albert Speer’s portrait by Luc Tuymans in Attachment 1; Kelly Klassmeyer, “Luc Tuymans: Nice is just that and nothing more.”

familiarity of the person's face, a face that may communicate an affable and kind nature, but how can one ever really know what comprises the interior of a person or what that person may be moved to do? Thus, we hover between what think we see and darker, dangerous, and more troubling options that may lie beneath the glance.

Narrative Wreckage. Finally, sociologist Arthur Frank speaks of the moment of trauma in a person's life as a moment of "narrative wreckage": The point where the past does not lead up to the present and where the future is hardly imaginable.²¹ Such a description fits the narratives of many Holocaust survivors and victims of other forms of trauma. Narrative wreckage names the points of a "life collapse". In post-Shoah language, if one's own story is a type of totality or narrative that holds one's identity together, the traumatic moment is one that so wrecks the narrative that one loses all sense of direction and identity. Frank contends that it is only through telling one's story, "This is what happened to me," with the gaps, ragged endings, and questions that one regains a new sense of identity. One's sense of self is rebuilt through the telling of story that validates "My story is worth telling," and through the one reading or listening, "My story is worth being heard."

Thus, in examining a biblical text with sensitivity to "totalities", obfuscation of meaning by not calling things by their proper names, the effect of thoughtlessness, and the notion of "narrative wreckage", and ambiguous appearances, how might the story Hagar speak to us about the traumatized? Specifically, how does such a reading of the story of Hagar inform how we conceive of responses to victims of domestic violence?

Reading the Story of Hagar as Witness to Her Suffering

Turning to the story of Hagar, dominant biblical and theological interpretations of the story of Hagar generally follow the apostle Paul's Galatian explanation of the story as an allegory: Hagar bearing children for slavery, and Sarah bearing children of freedom (Gal 4:25-26). In Paul's reading of Hagar as an allegory, he encourages the Galatian fellowship to side with Isaac, born of Sarah, and share in the inheritance of the free woman. In making his argument for Galatian freedom in Christ, Paul leans on the "driving out" of Hagar,

Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman. So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman. (Gal 4:30)

Thus, the suffering of Hagar in the story is swallowed up in Paul's larger theological arc of freedom in Christ.

Aside from whatever merits may accrue to Paul's larger theological message to the Galatians, a post-Shoah sensitivity to a reading of Hagar's story brings us face to face with her traumatic domestic realities. Delores Williams names Hagar's predicament as involving, "slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, rape, domestic violence, homelessness, motherhood, single-parenting and radical encounters with God." Thus we meet Hagar in the moments that forever changed her life. As the story reveals, the incident between herself Abraham and Sarah forever wrecked the narrative of her prior life, moving her into another story that she must now discover.

Believing that YHWH has prevented her from having a child and therefore diminishing her as a woman because of her inability to have children,²² Sarai, traffics her Egyptian slave, Hagar, by ordering her to become

²¹ Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), ebook.

²² The notion that the deity (God) gives and/or denies fertility is common in the Old Testament (Gen 25:21; Deut 28:11; Ps 113:9). A wealthy woman who was childless using a surrogate to provide the family with heirs was commonplace and well attested in the ancient world. Thus from the point of view of social mores at the time, Sarai and Hagar's actions were reasonable although still problematic. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, (Nashville: Nelson Publishers, 1994), 6-8. So Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 191-192.

a wife and surrogate child bearer by “going into” her husband Abram (Gen 16:3-4). Ancient customs involving surrogate mothering aside, domestic violence begins, as Sarai trades on the currency of her servant’s sexuality and fertility to build up her own self worth.²³ As an Egyptian in the position of servitude to a wealthy patriarch and his wife, Hagar was essentially powerless and had no real choice, but to comply with an act that could kill her given the high mortality rates of women in child bearing during that time.²⁴

When Hagar conceives and looks upon Sarai with contempt, the power dynamic between the two reverses. Sarai interprets Hagar’s look as one of (perhaps) haughty superiority and proceeds to treat her brutally and violently.²⁵ Evidently, Sarai’s treatment was so severe that Hagar deemed it better to run away into an inhospitable wilderness (where she may not survive) than to stay and face repetitive abuse.²⁶ In the face of such a choice-less choice, the father of her child, Abram, abdicates responsibility for her and does nothing to protect her or her unborn child and defers to his wife, “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.” (Gen 16:6).

Yet despite its dangers, the wilderness proves to be something of an ambiguous space for Hagar. She sees God and receives the news and an astonishing blessing that her offspring will be greatly multiplied (Gen 16:11, 13). However, she also hears what must have been unthinkable to her: She must return to the scene of violence as the angel of YHWH says to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her.” (Gen 16:9). Was such a command for her and her child’s protection from certain death in the wilderness? Or, was Abram’s need to be with his first-born child more important than Hagar’s suffering at the hands of her mistress? Who would advocate for Hagar once she returned?

Sarah bears Isaac and violence continues in Genesis 21 with an altercation between Isaac and Ishmael (Gen 21:9). As a result, Sarah orders Abraham to cast out the slave woman along with her son on the grounds that Ishmael should not inherit along with Isaac (Gen 21:10). Even though Abraham was distressed at Sarah’s order on the account of Hagar and Ishmael’s fate, God once again tells Abraham to do what Sarah says as Abraham’s offspring will be through Isaac (Gen 21:11-13). Abraham reluctantly complies and sends Hagar away to wander in the wilderness of Beer-sheba with bread and a skin of water (Gen 21:14).²⁷

In the wilderness, as the water runs out, Hagar experiences the trauma of the near death of her child (Gen 21:15-16). As both Hagar and the boy cry out, God hears and opens Hagar’s eyes to see a well of water to give to Ishmael. The text reports that God was with the boy, he lived in the wilderness, became an expert with a bow, and his Hagar found a wife for him from the land of Egypt (Gen 21:17-20). As the story of Hagar and Ishmael ends rather abruptly, we are left with a host of questions concerning the fate of Hagar and her plight in the

²³ In claiming Hagar as a surrogate to bear her child, Sarai trades on Hagar’s sexuality as Abram traded on Sarai’s for his own security at the hands of Pharaoh (Genesis 12). Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible’s First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 44-45.

²⁴ “Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up; a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when glutted with food; an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maid when she succeeds her mistress” (Prov 30:21-23), NRSV. The Proverb advises the problem that may accrue to the mistress when her maid succeeds her, most likely in view here is pregnancy. The Proverb recalls the story of Hagar and Sarai when Hagar conceives and looks upon her mistress with contempt (Gen 16:4-6). <http://feminismandreligion.com/2012/01/26/hagar-a-portrait-of-a-victim-of-domestic-violence-and-rape/>.

²⁵ BDB, 776. The Hebrew word “anah” indicates severe affliction, bondage, humbling or mistreatment, also see Exod 1:11, 12; 22:21, 22:22.

²⁶ Miguel A. de la Torre, *Genesis* (Louisville: John Knox Westminster, 2011), 176-178.

²⁷ The story of Hagar is no less problematic for Abram as the text indicates his grief at the prospect of sending Hagar and his first-born son into the wilderness with little chance of survival. Charlotte Gordon, *The Woman Who Named God* (New York, Hachette, 2009), 3.

wilderness as she found her way back to Egypt. What do we make of this story?

Despite the story's rather jagged ending, the fact that we have the story at all indicates the value of Hagar and her plight. The biblical witness could have simply narrated the story of God's promise to Abram and its fulfillment through Sarah and left out the troubling details of the Patriarchal couple's mistreatment of one in their household. But it didn't. Acting as an advocate for an abused woman, the author/redactor gives Hagar a voice and we hear her speak in moments of desperation in the wilderness. Her words have staying power as she comes the first person to give God a name "El roi", the "God who sees".

Just as the author/redactor of sacred text enables us to "see" and "hear" the story of a woman in the midst of "narrative wreckage", the abused in contemporary churches need a sacred space wherein to tell their stories. A post-Shoah sensitivity to the story of Hagar enables us to see how the text models reclamation her story: accompanying her into the wilderness, and bearing witness to her suffering and that of her child. Thus read, the story of Hagar becomes a means of encouraging victims of domestic violence to tell their stories, expose the perpetrators, and thereby begin a road to a renewed sense of identity. As Frank proposes, the telling of the story and the reception of the story provides validation to the victim that their story is worth telling and worth hearing.²⁸

In addition, a post-Shoah reading strategy calls our attention to ruses used to manipulate others. In the story of Hagar, our attention centers on the shift in nomenclature for Hagar. She introduced to us in Gen 16:2 as a "slave girl", however when Sarai takes her and orders her to go into Abraham and conceive on her behalf, she is referred to as a "wife" (Gen 16:3). However, immediately upon falling into disfavor and from then on until the end of her story, she returns to being referred to as a "slave girl", a title by which even the angel of the Lord refers to her. Read through the lens of the Shoah, does the instability in Hagar's position suggest trickery on Sarah's part? Is it possible that Hagar was initially not at all inclined to "go into" to Abram? She is never asked about whether she would like to do so, only ordered. Was Sarah's giving her as a "wife" to Abram a trick to conceive a child on her behalf?

Moreover, how do we read Hagar's looking with contempt upon her mistress? As with the ambiguity noted in the look on Thuymen's portrait of "Speer", might we entertain the possibility of deeper and darker emotions in Hagar's look upon Sarah? Is she now contemplating what now lies ahead of her as she realizes she will bear a child at the mercy of a Patriarch and his wife who treat her harshly? Is Hagar's look one of pride (as is often assumed)²⁹ or is it one of hurt or horror as if to say, "Look at what you have done to me. I didn't want this child?"

Arendt's work points us to the uncomfortable possibility that Hagar's expulsion from her home with Abraham and Sarah resulted from the thoughtlessness of Abraham merely following Sarah and the Almighty's order to do so "Cast out this slave woman with her son" (Gen 21:10). Was Abraham unaware of what awaited Hagar in the wilderness? Given the distress this caused Abraham as reported in the text, why did Abraham not put up a fight for Hagar and his first-born son, Ishmael? We know from the previous story of Lot that Abraham is clearly capable of protesting and bargaining with God to spare a family member (Gen 18:23-33). Abraham could have put up a fight by sparing Hagar from the life-threatening harshness of life in the wilderness. But he didn't. In the end, God spared both Lot and Hagar. Yet there is a chilling emptiness and banality about the way

²⁸ Frank, 54-55.

²⁹ "Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up: a slave when he becomes king, and a fool when glutted with food; an unloved woman when she gets a husband, and a maid when she succeeds her mistress." (Proverbs 30:21-23, NRSV)

in which Abraham turns away from advocating for Hagar. Is he so dominated by simply following Sarah's orders, or the voice of divine promise, that he simply doesn't realize how dehumanizing his actions are towards a woman with whom he had his first-born son? More disturbing still is the collision between the reported divine direction for Abraham to side with Sarah's abusive treatment and the laws of benevolence towards the stranger, the widow, and the orphan recorded in multiple places in the legal sections of the Torah.

As with Shoah stories like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the general public would rather turn away from the actual horrors of the story and not raise problematic questions. If the statistics are anywhere close to on point, the church-going public would, in all likelihood, rather not look directly at the suffering of Hagar and the abuse heaped on her by an otherwise celebrated patriarch, man of celebrated faith, his wife. Ministers would probably not be comfortable raising questions about Sarah's actions, Abraham's passivity, and the meaning of the Angel of the Lord's direction to Hagar to return to her mistress. It seems safer to concentrate on God's promise through Abram and Isaac as relayed in the New Testament leaving Hagar as the human artifact that illustrates unfortunate consequences of bad choices by others. After all, do not even good people (Abraham and Sarah) make mistakes that can ultimately be overturned by God? But is this kind of evasion conscionable in the light of domestic abuse in churches today?

Conclusion

Hannah Arendt reminds us that the commonplace of thoughtlessness and the lack of imagination to see what is actually happening in plain daylight underlie some of the greatest evil. Just as Hagar names God as "El-roi", the one who sees, so must one "see" Hagar. As one "sees" Hagar, one "sees" others in the church community thus moving from thoughtlessness to thoughtfulness hearing stories of victims as they emerge from the narrative wreckage of domestic trauma. Failure to name domestic abuse, failure to call its perpetrators to account, failure to speak frankly about the problem of domestic violence, and failure to meet victims in their wilderness of their "narrative wreckage," is to be complicit in violence. As noted in Tuymen's portrait of Albert Speer, is one's glance so easily read? Reading against the grain of "feel-good" well-rehearsed Bible stories in order to "see" the victimized has the potential to move congregants and communities sitting in the pews to become aware of others who may also be suffering in silence, hear their stories, and bear witness to their suffering.³⁰ "So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are 'El-roi'," for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" (Gen 16:13). Throughout the story world of Genesis 16 and 21, Hagar is the only human being who is "seen" by God. Herein is our cue.

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³⁰<http://www.crosswalk.com/family/marriage/relationships/3-reasons-why-we-have-to-start-talking-about-domestic-violence.html>.

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Appendix 1

“Albert Speer”

By Luc Tuymans (1990)

