

Can Egyptian Christian Women Identify with Hagar?

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Abstract: Egyptian Christians face a serious challenge when they read the stories of Hagar and Sarah. This challenge has to do with the tension between the political and the religious aspects of the identity of Christian Egyptians. While ethnically they are related to Hagar because she was an Egyptian, they are religiously related to Sarah because she is a great grandmother of Christ. In this paper I argue that Egyptian Christian women, despite the hermeneutical and ethno-religious obstacles, can identify with Hagar, as well as Sarah, and find their story to be relevant to the Egyptian context, and a basis for coexistence, understanding, and solidarity among the whole Egyptian community.

Keywords: Hagar, Christian, Women, Islam

"Hagar does not belong to us... she is the great grandmother of Muslims." I still remember these words that my grandmother used to say. In fact, I can affirm that these words reflect the dominant attitude among Egyptian Christians, especially the women, toward Hagar. Therefore, when Egyptian Christian women read the biblical traditions concerning Hagar and Sarah¹ in Genesis 16 and 21, they identify themselves with the latter, although they are presumably ethnically related to the former. For me, however, reading African-American literature and theology helped me to think critically about our Egyptian Christian stereotype of Hagar and Sarah. At that point, I recognized that Egyptian Christians face a serious challenge when they read the stories of Hagar and Sarah. This challenge has to do with the tension between the political and the religious aspects of the identity of Christian Egyptians.

¹ Although Abraham and Sarah were called Abram and Sarai in Genesis 16, in this paper, I will mainly refer to them as Abraham and Sarah.

While ethnically we are related to Hagar because she was an Egyptian, we are religiously related to Sarah because she is a great grandmother of Christ. In this paper I argue that Egyptian Christian women, despite the hermeneutical and ethno-religious obstacles, can identify with Hagar, as well as Sarah, and find their story to be relevant to their Egyptian context, and a basis for coexistence, understanding, and solidarity among the whole Egyptian community.

In order to support my argument, I will present some examples of the Egyptian Christian readings of the Hagar-Sarah story. Then, I will explore Hagar's status in the Islamic thought, and how it influences the Egyptian Christian attitude toward her. After that, I will engage with some interpretations of Hagar's story in the African American womanist writings. Finally, I will attempt to present a different approach to the Hagar-Sarah story, by which the Egyptian Christian woman can keep her positive self-perception and dynamic feminine identity as manifested in both Hagar and Sarah. Moreover, I will investigate the possibility of the use of Hagar and Sarah story to establish a common ground for tolerance, understanding, and solidarity among all Egyptians.

One of the main factors that influenced the Egyptian Christian perception of the biblical Hagar and Sarah is the allegorical reading of Paul in Galatians 4:21-31.

As John Thompson writes;

“Of all the stories in Scripture, Hagar's alone receives an allegorical interpretation which is canonically approved-licensed, so to speak, by St. Paul. Christian interpreters after Paul knew only one text of Genesis, and that was the one already glossed and interpreted in a way that did not flatter Hagar or her son. Consequently, to attend at all to the historical dimension of the story in Genesis would require

resisting two impulses, both Pauline: first, to read that story solely in terms of its typological significance, and second, to see Hagar and Ishmael solely as villains."²

Thompson's analysis of this hermeneutical problem, I suggest, probably describes the situation in Egypt. Egyptian Christian interpretations of the Hagar and Sarah story focused on the allegorical understanding of Paul. Hence, based on this typological exegesis, Father Tadros Malaty,³ in his very widespread Arabic Commentary on Genesis, condemns Sarai's request of Abram to have intercourse with her slave Hagar. For this was a resort to the human method, and not faith, in order to fulfill God's promise of having a child. However, this weakness was used for the glory of God. Hagar became an allegory for Israel. However, Sarah became an allegory for the Church of the New Testament. Hagar is the law (nomos), and Sarah is grace and faith. Hagar is the slave and her children (Israel) will forever be slaves, while Sarah is the free and her children (the church) will be free.⁴ The author describes Hagar as "evil and alien from the faithful life of Abraham. Therefore, God ordered Abraham to expel her."⁵ It is obvious from this commentary that the author depends on the Galatians passage more than Genesis 16, 21.

The allegorical exegesis by the Egyptian church, however, is even harsher toward Hagar than Paul's exegesis. Father Antonios Fakry states Hagar was a sinner

² John L. Thompson, "Hagar, Victim or Villain? Three Sixteenth-Century Views," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59, no. 2 (1997)

³ Father Tadros Malaty is a prominent Coptic Orthodox priest. He published commentaries for all the biblical books. One main feature of his interpretation is his reliance on the writings of the Coptic and Eastern Fathers.

⁴ Tadros Malaty, "Commentary on Genesis," St. George, http://www.popekirillos.org/ar/bible/oldtestement_commentary_Fr_Tadros_Yakoup_tafseer_abona_tadros/Genesis.htm. Father Malaty claims that he relies in his interpretation of this allegory on John Chrysostom. He, however, does not mention any citations.

⁵ Ibid

and committed the sin of pride, and left the house of Abram, which symbolizes the church. But Hagar survives because of the mercy of God on sinners. So, God orders Hagar to return to Abram's house.⁶ Fakry uses Genesis 16:12 to negatively allude to the Arabs. He says that Ishmael is the father of all Bedouin Arabs.⁷ So, Ishmael was "a wild fighter who used his sword to beat, conquer, and rob his enemies, as his descendents are doing against their enemies."⁸ Fakry also argues that Sarah's demand that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael was "in a prophetic spirit."⁹ Therefore, the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael was an allegory to the disappearance of Israel (God's People according to the flesh), and the appearance of the Church (God's People according to the promise).¹⁰

The issue becomes more complicated because Muslims praise Hagar and elevate her to a higher degree than Christian Egyptians do. Egyptian Muslims believe Hagar and Ishmael are the ancestors of Muhammad and Islam. Most of the Islamic data about Hagar and Ishmael come from the hadith¹¹ and from the later exegetical resources.¹² The hadith states that the desert place where God ordered Abraham to take Hagar and Ishmael and leave them alone was Mecca, allegedly

⁶ Antonios Fakry, *Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Cairo: St. Mary the Virgin, 1997), 153-55

⁷ Here, Fakry means the ancient inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula.

⁸ Fakry, *Bible Commentary: Genesis*, 157. This is an indirect allusion to the aggressiveness of Arabs. The Egyptian Christian reader, I suggest, would understand this allusion to be about the Islamic conquest of Egypt. It may also remind the reader of some sectarian attacks in Egypt against the Copts throughout history.

⁹ *Ibid*, 182

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 183

¹¹ Hadith is a tradition based on reports of the sayings and activities of Muhammad the prophet of Islam and his companions.

¹² Hibba Abugideiri, "Hagar: A Historical Model for "Gender Jihad"," in *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Yvonne Y Haddad and John L Esposito (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001), 83-85

where they lived.¹³ After Hagar's death, Abraham starts visiting his son but before each visit he informed Sarah his wife. In one of the visits Abraham and Ishmael apparently built together the Kaaba (the most sacred site in Islam).¹⁴ In the latter traditions, however, Hagar is not only a devout wife and mother, but also has a royal connection as the pharaoh's daughter.¹⁵ Hagar also came to be known as "the mother of Arabs."¹⁶ She became the ancestor of Abraham's heirs, the Muslims, because Muhammad the prophet of Islam was presumably her descendant.¹⁷ This notion explains the Egyptian Christian perspective about Hagar as the mother of all Arab Muslims. That, in turn, increases the feeling of estrangement from Egyptian Christians, especially women, toward Hagar.

Consequently, Egyptian Christians who suffer by the hands of certain Muslims, refuse to acknowledge Hagar who suffered by the hands of Sarah. Although Hagar is not just close to them ethnically (both being Egyptians), she is also close to them in terms of the cultural location, Egyptian Christians denounce Hagar because she is elevated by their Muslim opponents.¹⁸ Yet, through engaging with other Christian contextual traditions, Egyptian Christians have the opportunity to approach this story from a different perspective. Arguably, the African-American tradition is the most appropriate one with which Egyptian Christians can identify.

¹³ Al-Bukhari, *Sahih Al-Bukhari* (Cairo: Dar El-'lm El-Hadith, 2008), 55:583-84

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 55:584

¹⁵ Bruce S Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 77

¹⁶ Phyllis Tribble and Letty M Russell, "Unto the Thousandth Generation," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Tribble and Letty M Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 9

¹⁷ Abugideiri, "Hagar: A Historical Model for "Gender Jihad," 81-82

¹⁸ Safwat Marzouk, Interview by author, Princeton, NJ, November 20, 2010.

I found in the African-American women's experience a revealing reading of Hagar's story. Delores Williams writes:

For more than a hundred years Hagar – the African slave of the Hebrew woman Sarah – has appeared in the deposits of African-American culture. Sculptors, writers, poets, scholars, preachers and just plain folks have passed along the biblical figure Hagar to generation after generation of black folks.¹⁹

What is suggested here is that the story of Hagar has always been inspirational for African-Americans. That is especially the case when it comes to womanist theologians and writers.²⁰ In what follows, I am going to briefly explore the writings of Delores Williams and Renita Weems. Both of them, I believe, present a deep and significant womanist perspective about the story and character of Hagar.

In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams finds in the Hagar stories in Genesis many similarities with the African-American women either during the slavery era or present time.²¹ These convergences encourage Williams to dedicate her book to investigating the "Hagar-centered tradition of African-American biblical appropriation."²² Throughout her book, Williams investigates God's response to Hagar's predicaments. An additional aspect of Hagar's predicament is the alienation we experience from her because of Paul's allegorical understanding of Hagar and

¹⁹ Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 2. In the endnote, Williams mentions many examples of African-American Hagar-centered art and literature. See note 2 in *ibid*, 245.

²⁰ The term "Womanist" was coined by Alice Walker. According to Walker, a womanist is a Black feminist or feminist of color. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Garden* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii

²¹ *Ibid*, 3,5

²² *Ibid*, 4

her progeny.²³ With the exploration of many historical, cultural, racial, and religious aspects of the Hagar stories, Williams presents what she names as "survival/quality-of-life tradition of African-American biblical appropriation."²⁴ In this, she explains that the God of womanist theology is "not just a God of liberation, but also a God who is interested in the survival and quality of life of black women."²⁵

Monica Coleman suggests that Williams' reading of the Hagar story can help us to identify characteristics of "making a way out of no way." For Coleman this notion of "making a way out of no way" is the articulation of the womanist perspective about salvation.²⁶ It involves "God's presentation of unforeseen possibilities; human agency; the goal of justice, survival and quality of life; and a challenge of the existing order."²⁷ Coleman argues that, when reading the Hagar story alongside the ministry of Jesus, Williams brings "theory of salvation" into view. In that theory "God gives individuals the vision to see the resources that promote their survival, quality of life, and right relations with the self, the world and God."²⁸

²³ Ibid, 4-5. It should be noticed that, according to Williams, African-Americans focused mainly on "the Hagar who appeared in the Hebrew testament." She adds that she did not find any "African-American sources that connect Hagar with Paul or with events in the Christian testament." (See *ibid*, 246.) This trend in African-American tradition, I argue, is one of the main differences from what I have mentioned earlier about the Egyptian Christian reading of Hagar's story.

²⁴ Ibid, 6

²⁵ Monica A Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 23. See also Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 5-6.

²⁶ Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 34-35

²⁷ Ibid, 93. See also Monica A. Coleman, "An Exchange of Gifts: Process and Womanist Theologies," in *Handbook of Process Theology*, ed. Jay B McDaniel and Donna Bowman (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 165

²⁸ Coleman, *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, 24

In a chapter in her book entitled *A Mistress, A Maid, And No Mercy*,²⁹ Renita Weems explores different racial, economic, social, and political readings of the story of Hagar and Sarah. Weems reads in the story many aspects of the suffering of the black women at the hands of the white women during and after the era of slavery.³⁰ However, the story is not only about "ethnic prejudice," but also the "economic stratification of women."³¹ It is about Sarah, who uses her financial, professional, or academic power to exploit another woman.³²

Moreover, we can read in this story, according to Weems, a social aspect in which two women are involved with the same man.³³ Weems, however, highlights that in patriarchal society, women from different races, economic and social classes, or religions have more in common as women than that which divides them.³⁴ Indeed, Weems, though sympathizing with Sarai (Sarah) for her barrenness, harshly criticizes her. Weems describes Sarah as an exploiter who, though God had shown mercy to her, was not willing to show mercy to another woman.³⁵ Weems also criticizes Hagar, though less aggressively, for her passivity and contempt for Sarah.³⁶ But, Weems recognizes that the message of the story for us is more important than just condemnation or admiration. It is about the need of women for solidarity with each other as an oppressed class. Women need to forgive and support each other.

²⁹ Renita J Weems, "A Mistress, a Maid, and No Mercy," in *Just a Sister Away: Understanding the Timeless Connection between Women of Today and Women in the Bible* (San Diego, CA: Warner Books, 2005)

³⁰ *Ibid*, 6-9

³¹ *Ibid*, 9-11

³² *Ibid*, 14

³³ *Ibid*, 17

³⁴ *Ibid*, 12

³⁵ *Ibid*, 15-16

³⁶ *Ibid*, 5,12,16

Moreover, they need to "respect the genuine differences in one another and to see them as the strength of our coalition, not the bane of our existence."³⁷

Delores Williams writes that, "the womanist theologian assumes that she has the license to create new language and new categories and to develop analytical tools appropriate for conveying the results of her research to the community."³⁸ I agree with this assumption, and the same license is much needed in the Egyptian Christian community. For a long time, our community has relied mainly on patriarchal reading of the bible. This reading has little to say about the suffering of the Christian woman. Below, I propose a reading of the story of Hagar and Sarah from a perspective of the Egyptian Christian woman.³⁹

In Egypt, as many other patriarchal societies, "woman's self worth and social status pivoted around her family – mainly the reputation of her husband and the number of children she had borne, preferably males."⁴⁰ In Egypt, to be a barren woman means that you have to lead a life of shame and deep feelings of loneliness and inadequacy. Sarah is not only the infertile woman, but also the threatened woman who knows that her life depends mainly on the satisfaction and approval of her husband. Similar to Sarah, many Egyptian women, Christians and Muslims alike,

³⁷ Ibid, 18

³⁸ Delores Williams, "Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation," in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 172

³⁹ In what follows, I will depend on the method of biblical appropriation from the writings of Williams.

⁴⁰ Weems, "A Mistress, a Maid, and No Mercy," 2

accept very humiliating and painful compromises with their husbands in order to protect the stability of their families.⁴¹

But also, like Sarah, the Egyptian Christian woman sometimes rejects her sister, who is different in religion, or social and economic class, or who may be in competition with her. In the view of the Egyptian Christian woman, Sarah believed that her abuse of Hagar was justified by God, and they then similarly justify their own denigration for Muslim Egyptian women. But, this is not what the bible is saying. We need to remember Peter's words in Acts that God "shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."⁴²

The Egyptian Christian woman, like Sarah, sometimes uses "another woman for her own purposes, but she would not condescend to speak up on behalf of the evicted woman in her hour of abandonment."⁴³ Like Sarah, we all forget that we have a greater bond with each other than what divides us. Egyptian women share in the suffering imposed by patriarchal traditions, and have the same need to resist oppression and acquire self-esteem in a patriarchal society. Moreover, all Egyptian women share the need for God's intervention and grace.

Egyptian Christian women can also identify with Hagar, because Hagar was Egyptian as they are. Like Hagar, the Egyptian Christian woman is often used, or even abused, by men and women around her who do not acknowledge her work,

⁴¹ For instance, many infertile Muslim women in Egypt accept polygamy as a better option than divorce. Egyptian women often tolerate domestic abuse, or even the husband's extra-marital affairs. This attitude is a result of the Egyptian patriarchal traditions that put the burden of protecting the family solely on the wife.

⁴² Acts 10:34-35 (NRSV)

⁴³ Weems, "A Mistress, a Maid, and No Mercy," 16

sacrifice, even her person. I have heard many women complain that their husbands or families treat them as property not as human beings. Like Hagar, many Egyptian Christian women have suffered from domestic violence and abuse. When they complain to the church, they hear the same answer: "Return to your mistress (or husband) and submit to her (him)."⁴⁴

Like Hagar, many Christian women complain that their own Muslim "Sarahs" are mistreating them because they are Christians. There are many stories about discrimination at the workplace by Muslim colleagues and bosses (mainly Muslim women) on the basis of religion. For the Christian woman, the usual resolution is to resign or move on to a new job.⁴⁵ That, in turn, could put the Christian women in very bad situation of financial and social crises, the same like Hagar's.

Moreover, the Egyptian Christian woman can identify with Hagar, as both of them suffer from the misleading patriarchal interpretations of the bible. As Hagar was denounced in our biblical interpretations and sermons, women in general also experience a similar denigration. This perception contributes to the thinking in the Egyptian Church that women are the main reason for the fall. Thus, they cannot teach or be ordained in churches. Moreover, they are considered unclean during

⁴⁴ Gen. 16:9. It is worth mentioning that the Coptic Church refuses any license for divorce and remarriage. The Church based its strict decision on its interpretation of the biblical command about divorce (ex. Mat. 5:32; 19:9). However, in many cases that decision permits abusive husbands to victimize their wives, who have no other choice but to suffer and submit to their husbands.

⁴⁵ My mother had a similar experience when she was a school headmistress. She was accused by some Muslim female teachers of favoring Christian students. My mother endured a very difficult time of charges, accusations, and harassments. Finally, she found out that the only way to get out of this problem is through moving to another school.

certain times. All these assumptions about women come as a result of the patriarchal reading of certain passages of Scripture.⁴⁶

The stories of Hagar and Sarah do not finish with the suffering, Sarah from barrenness and Hagar from her banishment. Their stories have something to say about God's intervention in their lives, as well as in ours now. God intervened for the sake of Sarah, despite her doubts. Miraculously, God gave her the ability to bear a child when she was ninety years old. In Sarah's life, we can see that God brings "laughter" for the suffering woman. We can believe that this same God wants every Sarah of Egyptian women to have a better and happier life. Perhaps in the age of Patriarchs, this was the only way God could help Sarah to regain her self-esteem and respect for herself as a human being. However, the Church in Egypt today has to bear the responsibility for bringing hope, comfort and empowerment to those women who are suffering.

God intervened twice in Hagar's story. The first time is found in Genesis 16:7-12, in which, the angel of the Lord advises Hagar to return to her mistress. The second is in Genesis 21:17-19. That time God communicates with Hagar to encourage her and provide her with the supplies to be able to live alone with her son. There are many themes that can be applied to the life of Egyptian Christian women regarding God's intervention in Hagar's life. However, due to the limits of this paper, I will focus mainly on one urgent theme in our Church. This theme is "the need to distinguish between when to support submission, and when to encourage resistance and separation."

⁴⁶ Some of the biblical passages, which are misused by this kind of patriarchal misleading reading, are: Gen.3:1-7; Lev.15:19-24; 1 Tim2: 9-15.

For long time, our church in Egypt has kept teaching on the submission of women to men, of Christians to the state, of lay persons to church leaders, etc. The church considers submission as the only acceptable Christian behavior. Hagar's story, however, urges us to revise our theology of relationships. It helps us to see other alternatives that can be appropriated and supported by God. These alternatives may include resistance against humiliation and dehumanization of women in Egypt. They may also include separation of individuals who cannot coexist in reasonable civility or harmony. We as Egyptian Christians need to learn from Hagar's story that our God is not only the God who encourages us to submit and yield to our oppressors in order to save our lives, families, jobs, etc. Our God also is the God who helped Hagar to survive on her own, and thus can be seen as a God of resistance, human dignity, and new beginnings in unfamiliar, or challenger circumstances. As God was with Hagar and her son and provided their needs, the same God will be with us and support us when we need to resist and to leave our "comfort zone."

From the African-American and Egyptian Christian perspectives on Sarah and Hagar, several conclusions can be drawn. First, this story is on one level about "one woman's exploitation of another woman."⁴⁷ It is also about ethnic, religious and gender prejudice, economic stratification, and other social problems.⁴⁸ These dilemmas are relevant today in the life of many Egyptian women who can identify with Hagar or Sarah.

⁴⁷ Weems, "A Mistress, a Maid, and No Mercy," 14

⁴⁸ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 4

Second, for a long time, Christian Egyptian women have identified with Sarah as the righteous and "Christian" woman, versus Hagar, whom they have seen as an "evil" and "Muslim." However, reading the story from a different perspective can help us to recognize that both Hagar and Sarah were victims of the patriarchal culture, which they suffered from. That culture forced them also to sometimes be a victimizer of each other and of each other's children. Now, because we Egyptians still live in a patriarchal culture, each Egyptian woman may then identify with Hagar or Sarah, either victim or victimizer.

Third, and more hopefully, the story is also about God's intervention and encounter with Sarah and Hagar. It is about the God of Sarah who brings laughter and restores self-esteem and worthiness. It is about the God of Hagar who helps us by enabling us to survive even in circumstances that demand submission and surrender. But God also stands by us when it is time to resist and assert our independence.

Finally, I argue that we in Egypt, women and men, Christians and Muslims, now have an opportunity to rewrite our own Hagar and Sarah story, and diminish some of the divisions that have hurt our social relations. Our story would present the possibility of equality, justice, and dignity for all Egyptians regardless of religion, gender, or race. It would be about solidarity among every Hagar and Sarah in our society. Christian and Muslim, rich and poor, educated and non-educated, women and men, all of us need to support one another. With Weems we cry out that, "The future of our families depends upon our ability to bridge over the memories of our scars. The future of our people depends upon our willingness to tunnel through the

tragedies of our past encounters."⁴⁹ It is our responsibility to cast a new vision based on the re-interpretation of the story of Hagar and Sarah, and in so doing, to achieve a better life for the Isaacs and Ishmaels who will carry on a new tradition of tolerance and understanding.

⁴⁹ Weems, "A Mistress, a Maid, and No Mercy," 18

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