

performative, ritual, and dramatic features of Esther and the extra-literary forms of life that the book of Esther enjoys in Jewish civilization. Although Carruthers analyzes several *purimshpiels* as well as Christian and secular Esther plays, drama does not come forward as a distinctive mode of collaborative human expression with its roots in ritual and liturgy. Instead, drama is for Carruthers simply another form of text, to be read thematically next to sermons, novels, and Bible commentaries.

Despite its shortcomings, Carruthers' book succeeds admirably in achieving the task set by Blackwell's *Bible Commentary* series, which "is based on the premise that how people have interpreted the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant" (p. xiii). In *Esther Through the Centuries*, Carruthers has assembled a veritable banquet of historical responses to this intriguing tale of intermarriage, political protest, and national survival, staking out promising new territory for scholars interested in pursuing the many trails left by Esther in the histories of the Jews and their neighbors.

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### Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives

*Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, eds. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, xii + 211 pgs.*

*Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children* comprises essays that emerged out of the 2004 Phyllis Trible Lecture Series held at the Divinity School of Wake Forest University. Conference presenters revised their papers, and additional scholars were asked to contribute to the volume, spanning ancient, medieval, and contemporary exegetical and theological treatments of Hagar and Sarah in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Although the works vary in emphasis, and even more so in quality, the contributors touch upon and in some instances fully engage feminist readings of the Sarah and Hagar narrative. Even understandings of the narrative's role in interpretive traditions are examined by and large through a feminist lens, so much so that a more apt subtitle would include "feminist perspectives."

The first chapter orients readers to the design and content of the book. In providing an overview of the three religions, the editors hope to set a context for reading the essays, which are also previewed in this chapter. Chapters 2 through 8 are divided into three units. Part 1—"Hagar and Sarah in Genesis and Galatians"—consists of Tribble's "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing" and "Twists and Turns in Paul's Allegory," by Letty M. Russell. Tribble's text-based, rhetorical analysis yields insight into the suspenseful family narrative of blessings and banishment, righteousness and rejection. Tribble uncovers irony, for example, in Hagar's exalted status despite the fact that of the five characters, "she is the only one for whom God does not use 'bless' and the only one not carried through to death" (p. 61). Even though Scripture accords her neither a blessed life nor a resting place, she is the recipient of a host of other distinctions. As Tribble observes, "She is the first person in the Bible to flee oppression; the first runaway slave; the first person whom a messenger of God visits; the first woman to receive an annunciation; the only woman to receive a divine promise of descendants; the only person to name God..." (ibid.).

Russell explores the twists and turns of the Hagar and Sarah story in Paul's allegory. Before focusing on feminist and womanist scholars who offer alternative readings of Paul's rendition of the Hagar and Sarah story, Russell examines several treatments by male scholars concerned with Paul's rhetorical theology. Hans Dieter Betz, J. Louis Martyn, and Richard B. Hays investigate the Letter to the Galatians in its Jewish and Hellenistic contexts and argue that Paul is involved in intra-Church disputes. "The scholars," she writes, "are listening to the accusations of Paul's opponents through his answers and seem to agree that Paul is concerned that his mission to the Gentiles not be inhibited by those whose mission is to convert them to practices of Judaism, such as circumcision and observance of the Sabbath and of major Jewish festivals, as a guide of conduct for the newly baptized congregations (4:10)" (p. 81). Feminist and womanist scholars, however, turn their interpretive gaze toward the impact Paul's rhetoric had on the marginalized members of Greco-Roman society. Thus, for example, Russell calls attention to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's "Paul and the Politics of Interpretation," which argues that Paul's rhetoric is liberating for the marginalized groups to whom he addresses his message. Others such as Cynthia Briggs Kitteridge and Elizabeth A. Castelli introduce gender in their analysis of Paul's rhetoric. This angle is reflective of a shift in scholarship to read Paul not in terms of theology but in terms of social, cultural, and historical concerns. The attempt here is to reconstruct the early faith communities and how they might have heard Paul's allegory. Studies attuned to slavery, gender, and power structures

pervasive in Greco-Roman society reflect a general trend to situate texts in cultural contexts.

Unfortunately, Russell seems to categorize Pauline scholarship very simplistically: male scholars ignore cultural issues, and the few who do not fall short. According to Russell, Richard A. Horsely, who examines Paul's supposed construction of a counterimperial society in light of hierarchical Roman imperial systems, "fails to investigate the brutal military force institutionalized in the slave system of captured populations in his research on the political and religious imperial social structures" (p. 85). Women scholars, on the other hand, are concerned with recovering the voices of the marginalized and are sensitive to power dynamics. To be sure, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is a leading figure in reexamining Pauline rhetoric, and several women have followed suit. And, while it is true that the women scholars discussed in the article offer different readings of Paul's rendition of the Hagar and Sarah narrative, to claim that this is so because feminist and womanist scholars ask "new questions from the margin of established Euro-American, male biblical interpretation" (p. 91) is highly misleading and grossly overgeneralized. Scholars of both genders to varying degrees employ a hermeneutic of suspicion and reflect—for better or worse—current trends in biblical scholarship.

Part 2—"Hagar and Sarah in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Traditions"—commences with a survey of Jewish interpretation from the second century B.C.E. through the contemporary period. Reinhartz and Walfish discuss Josephus' and Philo's treatment of the story as well as rabbinic and medieval references to Sarah and Hagar. The authors note, for example, that regarding the moral issues at stake in the biblical story of Sarah and Hagar, the rabbis adjudicate on behalf of the Israelite matriarch. Indeed, this should be of no surprise to anyone familiar with the midrashic enterprise. Yet the rabbis do not portray Hagar in an entirely negative light. Rabbinic approaches to biblical figures must take into account philological as well as theological factors, not just the need to exonerate Jewish ancestors.

In every instance, as Reinhartz and Walfish demonstrate, the women are subject to the needs and desires of interpreters, even contemporary exegetes. In fact, the story is "a precursor of and an analogy to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" (p. 120). For example, in her poem, *Achti*, in which Sarah implores Hagar for forgiveness, Lynn Gottlieb intends for Jews and Palestinians to draw on their common humanity and end the cycle of violence.

Moving from the Jewish to the Christian tradition, Elizabeth Clark details the interpretive fate of Hagar and Sarah in patristic exegesis.

As might be expected, for theological and ecclesiastical purposes, the Church Fathers deployed the narrative in a manner seemingly callous to contemporary readers. Hagar and Sarah become codes for “synagogue” and “church,” the former fallow, the latter fertile with Gentile believers. Allegory, moreover, was used to asceticize the story. Among others, Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215 C.E.) portrays Sarah and Abraham as an asexual couple. By harking back to Abraham’s claim to Abimelech, king of Gerar (Genesis 20:1–2), that Sarah is really his sister, Clement makes a case for the chastity of wives. That Sarah “laughed” when the visitors told her she would bear a son is not, according to him, a sign of her disbelief but rather of her “shame at sexual intercourse” (p. 132). Other Church Fathers, however, eschewed such ascetically inclined interpretations. One such exegete was Ambrose of Milan. Despite his several treatises extolling virginity, he points to the wives of the patriarchs as exemplars of the virtues of marriage. Others, too, such as John Chrysostom refer to this narrative in order to illustrate not only proper wifely conduct but also proper husbandly behavior. Clark’s review of the Church Fathers’ use of the Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham narrative is exceedingly enlightening and demonstrates ways in which writers attempted to exert Christianity’s superiority over Judaism through interpretation.

The final article in this section, “Islamic Hagar and Her Family,” by Riffat Hassan, discusses the “normative” Islamic view of Sarah and Hagar, both of whom, although not mentioned by name in the Qur’an, are discussed in collections of *hadith* (sayings of the prophet Muhammad) and *tafsir* (quranic exegesis). Post-Scriptural traditions do not depict an explicit tension between the matriarchs. There is no mention of Sarah’s request that Abraham cast out “the maidservant and her son.” Rather, God commands Abraham to leave Hagar and Ishmael in the desert. Placing her complete trust in God’s will, Hagar is a model, steadfast believer who overcomes physical hardship and emotional challenges. Because of her faith, the angel Gabriel guides her to the spring of Zam-zam, and she and her son survive. Ishmael grows up to marry a woman from the Jurhum tribe and helps his father build the Ka’bah, the sanctuary in Mecca.

The story of Hagar is triumphal. Left in the wilderness with a thirsty child and no water, she ran frantically in search of water, never surrendering to death. Her saga is commemorated during hajj, when millions of pilgrims run or walk seven times between the hills of Marwa and Safa and drink from the waters of Zam-zam. Moreover, Hagar is associated with the notion of “hijrah,” or going into exile for the sake of God.

Although Hassan extends the narrative’s staying power to all women who have faced oppression, not just “Muslim daughters of Hagar,” the

story resonates with men as well as women, as attested in the ritual of hajj. It is noteworthy that other feminist scholars in the volume also seem to limit the impact of Hagar's triumph over adversity to women, despite its wider reach.

In addition to examining Hagar in classical Muslim texts, Hassan also discusses the role of Abraham and the near sacrifice of Ishmael, an event Muslims throughout the world commemorate on the occasion of 'Eid al-Adha' (Feast of the Sacrifice). Although it is commonly assumed by Muslims today that God asked Abraham to sacrifice Ishmael, not Isaac as in the Jewish and Christian traditions, as Reuven Firestone has ably demonstrated,<sup>1</sup> this was not always the case. That is to say, there are various renditions of the near sacrifice of Abraham's son that name Isaac as the intended sacrifice.

Be that as it may, Hassan's cursory discussion of Islamic traditions dealing with Hagar and Abraham and Ishmael provides a welcome entrée into Islamic sources.

The final section—"Hagar and Sarah in Continuing Conversation"—is entirely devoted to contemporary approaches to the story. According to Dolores S. Williams in "Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation," for well over two hundred years African Americans have appropriated the biblical figure Hagar. Williams discusses in particular the narrative's efficacy in the construction of womanist theology, the primary audience of which is the African American community, although womanist theologians invite others into the dialogue. In this interpretive framework, Hagar is an analogue for African American womanhood. Williams calls our attention to how Hagar's plight resonates with the experience of African American women: "Like Hagar, some African American slave women experienced upper-class white women taking their children away from them" (p. 181). She understands the narrative as a convergence of religion and politics that has empowered African American women whose confession of faith in God's sustaining power is passed on orally from generation to generation.

Williams offers a new interpretive strategy, "proto-ge-sis," which employs interdisciplinary methods in order to "analyze all the African American deposits of culture in which the Hagar references appear from slave-time to the present day. Proto-ge-sis is a womanist theologian's way of leading

<sup>1</sup> Reuven Firestone, "Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice (Al-Dhabih, Qur'an 37:99–113): Issues in Qur'anic Exegesis," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 34 (1989), pp. 95–131; Firestone, "Merit, Mimesis, and Martyrdom: Aspects of Shi'ite Meta-historical Exegesis on Abraham's Sacrifice in Light of Jewish, Christian, and Sunni Muslim Tradition," *JAAR* 66 (1998), pp. 93–116; Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1990).

the community into cultural self-study” (p. 178). The elaborate method of exegesis Williams outlines takes as its starting point the cultural deposits of that which is African American in order to uncover “some of the ideas and beliefs about women and religion that African American culture has carried in its stream over time” (p. 180). Other than the fact that proto-gensis focuses solely on the African American experience, it is unclear how it differs distinctly from other interdisciplinary forms of exegesis, especially those pressed, as in this case, into the service of constructive theology.

Russell opens the final chapter with a reflection that reverberates throughout the collection—“The story of Hagar, Sarah, and their children is a story of struggle—struggle with each other and against patriarchal oppression” (p. 185). Indeed, Russell confesses, “I have often found myself conflicted and guilty over this story from Genesis and the enmity it has symbolized through the ages. I could see the way that Sarah and Hagar were trapped into competition because of oppressive patriarchal social structures. Yet I also knew that Sarah’s actions in casting out Hagar mirror many of the ways that I, as a white, North American, Christian woman have shared in patterns of privilege that use stereotypes of difference to oppress my sisters of color as well as my Jewish and my Muslim sisters” (pp. 195–196). While one respects Russell’s candid introspection, it is troubling that her ideologically laden interpretation is the most tangled of snares. She describes Sarah and Hagar as victims of “oppressive patriarchal social structures,” but perhaps feelings of jealousy, inadequacy, and powerlessness also give rise to the tragic situation. It is true that Sarah wielded power over Hagar, yet let us be mindful that Hagar, fertile and pregnant, had power over Sarah. The fraught dynamic between the women as well as the broader narrative’s emotional depth and potency are sideswiped when the focus remains strictly on “patriarchal social structures.”

Moreover, the assumption that Ishmael and Isaac struggle against each other only furthers a misreading of the biblical text. There is no mention of competition or warfare between the brothers. As I have demonstrated elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> the sibling rivalry between Ishmael and Isaac is neither divinely ordained nor explicit in the biblical narrative. In fact, they appear together only once in the narrative, when they bury their father, and the reference to the event is striking: “And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah...” (Genesis 25:9). The reversal of birth order, which we do not find in reference to Esau and Jacob, and the image of the two sons burying their father and living in

<sup>2</sup> Carol Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 2006).

proximity<sup>3</sup> evoke reunion, reconciliation, and renewal. Few exceptions notwithstanding, even rabbinic literature does not go to great lengths to play up a rivalry between the siblings.

Some essays in the collection end with a lament that tension between the metonymic Sarah and Hagar remains irreparable, which is followed by a hope for reconciliation. We must, according to Russell, address the “enmity begun in the Genesis story of Hagar and Sarah, magnified in Galatians, and set loose as a power for division in the present age” (p. 92). Others end with an indictment against patriarchy, the rabbis, or the Church Fathers. If one of the desiderata expressed throughout the volume is for the children of Sarah and Hagar—be they Arabs and Jews, Israeli Jews and Palestinians, or Jews, Christians, and Muslims—to live in peaceful coexistence, then we must reject the very paradigm of rivalry that the volume as a whole endorses despite attempting to traduce it. In other words, if we adopt an alternative reading of the story that allows us to appreciate the personal struggles each woman faces, a reading that focuses not on the enmity between them but rather on the emotions that lead to fear and loathing, a reading that highlights the common challenge and individual sacrifices each as a mother faces in order to secure her son’s survival, and if we understand the story of Ishmael and Isaac as one of reconciliation, then perhaps we can begin to move beyond the ideological strictures imposed upon the story’s past and present interpreters. Indeed, as Hassan notes, “Hagar does not see herself as a victim of Abraham and Sarah, or of a patriarchal, class- and race-conscious culture. She is a victor who, with the help of God and her own initiative, is able to transform a wilderness into the cradle of a new world dedicated to the fulfillment of God’s purpose on earth” (p. 155).

While the quality of the contributions may be uneven, the collection as a whole, shaped by the contours of feminist/womanist thought, offers a provocative approach to the study of the Hagar and Sarah narrative.

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<sup>3</sup> We know that Ishmael dwelt in the wilderness of Paran (Genesis 21:21), which is located in the Negeb, in the same vicinity as Beer-lahai-roi, that is, near Kadesh. There is no internal nor archaeological evidence that they are the same place; nonetheless, they both clearly refer to the southern region. In Genesis 25:11 we learn that Isaac dwells in Beer-lahai-roi, and the very next verse begins listing the generations of Ishmael, who, we are informed in Genesis 25:18, “... dwell from Havilah unto Shur that is before Egypt.” A careful reading of the texts supports the notion that they may have settled in the same area, unlike Esau and Jacob who part ways.