

REFLECTION SUNDAY 25 JUNE 2023 HAGAR AND ISHMAEL

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This story is a difficult text from which to preach, for it appears to approve of the harsh treatment of Hagar and her son, Ishmael, a treatment many of us would consider unjust. Walter Brueggemann et al say that, “the ancient writer (the Elohist) however, had a different perspective and seems to have recounted the story as an example of God’s mercy.”

There’s a Sunday school song that some of you may have sung when you were young “Father Abraham had many sons, had many sons had father Abraham, I am one of them and so are you, so let’s just praise the Lord”. I dread to sing it now as I’m sure many of you would too. Ishmael being the first son and Isaac the second son were the progeny that gave birth to two major nations. In religious terms you could say Islam and Judaism and Christianity. Abraham is the father of the three Abrahamic faiths but I would include both Hagar and Sarah in the equation for without them there would have been no sons to be born.

Hagar and Ishmael in the biblical narrative are often ignored by biblical interpreters because they are usually understood as minor characters within the story. However, reading Genesis 21 and Genesis 22 in light of each other shows that Hagar and Ishmael are heroic characters, not secondary figures. As the book of Genesis carefully selects the words to draw out the parallels between Gen. 21:8–21 and Gen. 22:1–9, which encourages us to understand the two accounts together rather than as separate unrelated accounts. Hagar and Abraham are narratively bound together as parents who have to see the

life-threatening trial of their sons. The book of Genesis portrays Hagar and Ishmael's suffering in the wilderness as equally significant as Abraham and Isaac's suffering on the mount of Moriah.

Susan Piggott says that most readers of the Old Testament know the matriarchs Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah along with their counterpart patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). But fewer know the other matriarch, Hagar, the Egyptian, wife of Abraham and mother of Ishmael. If they know her, they often have negative misconceptions about Hagar and Ishmael. But when one reads the stories of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21 carefully and without modern prejudices, one discovers that Genesis portrays neither Hagar nor Ishmael negatively. In fact, Hagar is exceptional among the matriarchs in that she is actually a Mother Patriarch, being promised multiplied seed (just like the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac) and providing for Ishmael's future as a patriarch would. Her son, Ishmael, mirrors Isaac in numerous ways and, like Jacob, he is the father of twelve princes. Hagar, the ultimate "other" as an Egyptian, is also the ultimate mother. She should be accorded her place as the mother of a nation and, indeed, a patriarch/matriarch in her own right.

Abraham was childless. He was a prophet of God and, having left his native land, he was concerned about who would take the prophetic office after him, and whether he would be a father one day. His wife's servant Hagar, who was gifted to her, was given to Abraham to bear a child. According to modern research, Hagar was not a concubine but a princess, the daughter of the king of Egypt.<ref>Muhammad Ashraf Chheenah, (2nd Ed. 2016) [Hagar the Princess], the Mother of the Arabs and Ishmael the Father of Twelve Princes, Hagar

subsequently bore a child who would grow to be righteous and ready to suffer and endure. Hagar named him [[Ishmael in Islam], meaning "God has heard."

Abraham, as the senior male figure, exercises life and death authority over the members of his family. Sarah, for her part, is queen of the harem and is thus able to wield influence over Abraham as Hagar cannot. Jealousy over Hagar and fear that the older child, Ishmael, might someday lay claim to his patrimony in such a manner as to exclude Isaac – these are the compelling reasons why Sarah demands their expulsion from the family. Yet even as God consents to the plan, God assures Abraham that Ishmael, too, will be the ancestor of a “nation” (Gen.21:13)

Islamic scholar Muhammad Saed Abdul-Rahman states the following using the Arabic name Haajar for Hagar; "After Haajar gave birth to Ismaa'eel, Saarah began to feel jealous, so she asked Ibrahim to send them away from her. Allah revealed to Ibrahim that he should take Haajar and the infant Ismaa'eel and take them to Makkah. So he took them and left Haajar and her child Ismaa'eel in a bleak, isolated place in which there was no water, then he left them and went back to [[Canaan]] (Parts of present day - Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Palestinian territories). Haajar said to him, 'For whom are you leaving us in this forsaken valley?' But Ibrahim went and left her, and she said, 'Has Allah commanded you to do this?' He said, 'Yes.' She said, 'Then Allah will not cause us to be lost.'"

Because of the scarcity of water in the desert, it was not long before both mother and son suffered immense thirst. Thus, Hagar ran between the [[Safa and Marwa]] hills in search of water for her son. With their water and food

were exhausted, Hagar and Ishmael face a certain death, and the mother cannot bear to watch her child's final moments. After the seventh run between the two hills, an [[angel]] appeared before her. He helped her and told her that God had heard Ishmael's crying and would provide them with water. God responds to their peril and opens Hagar's eyes so that she can see the nearby well. At that point, God caused a spring to burst forth from the ground, where Ishmael's heel lay, and thereafter Mecca became known for its excellence and abundance of water. The well was subsequently named [Zamzam Well], and has become a holy source of water.

Being Refugee's Hagar and Ishmael fall into the category of being a refugee having been cast out of the home they had with Abraham, they were banished to the desert homeless with no knowing of where they were going to go to whom they could seek and find refuge with.

Earlier last week a fishing trawler sank off the coast of Kalamata, Greece. The worn out vessel carried a human cargo. Its passengers had paid a high price for their fares. Two days later only 104 of the reported 700 passengers have been found alive. According to a Greek official, the smuggler captain had declined help offered by the coastguard. The boat had come from Libya where the smuggling industry thrives on the desperation of people anxious to find safety, loved ones and new opportunities in Europe. When we remember all those women and children who drowned in the Greek sea recently they are the Hagar's and Ishmael's that made up the total of 78 people who lost their lives on the Greek sea and the 500 unaccounted. People forced out of their homes due to warfare, inhuman treatment, unjust structures, oppression, dictatorships, terrorism. The obstacles to resettlement are great and the

mental and physical toll of the process is immense. In the same week the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) released alarming new figures stating that 108.4 million people were displaced in 2022, by May reaching over 110 million because of the conflict in Syria. Many more people are leaving because it is no longer safe to stay at home. They are trying to escape rape, torture, kidnapping, murder and persecution but getting out is harder than ever as more countries tighten their borders.

What does this mean for us here in Aotearoa? New Zealand will continue to accept 1,500 refugees a year under the Refugee Quota Programme from 2022/23 to 2024/25.

The proportion of places allocated to the Middle East and Africa international allocations has increased from 15% to 20% respectively, along with the number of emergency and urgent resettlement places (up from 35 to 100 people annually).

Following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, New Zealand set aside a number of places specifically for Afghan refugees to be resettled from 2023/24. The Government has decided to bring this forward a year to match referral capacity and support well managed settlement across communities in New Zealand. The number of places specifically allocated in 2022/23 for Afghan refugees is 200.

This year New Zealand will resettle 200 Syrian refugees (including Kurdish minorities) located in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon through this sub-category.

Each Sunday we pray for the refugees in Nauru. There are contradictory reports on the Regional Processing Centre's status. One of reports state that

currently, refugees on Nauru are all living in the Nauruan community, with no one living in the Regional Processing Centre since the end of March 2019. Yet according to the Guardian, on the 23rd May this year 2023 there are still 22 refugees living in the RPC Nauru's government has avowedly refused to let anyone stay longer than five years and that no refugees will be resettled permanently on Nauru. I talked with my dear friend in Nauru last night. She said there are only 15 men left at the RPC mainly from Sri Lanka and all of them are living very comfortably in the family homes that are now vacant. They have 2 bedroom homes, washing machines, fridges. They are happy and have their own shop from which they sell meat pies, tinned foods, noodles to the workers at RPC. They use their allowances to build their business.

So, that is definitely good news on the Nauru RPC. and I'll finish my reflection on this positive note. Amen.