

Hagar In The Wilderness

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Introduction

So often as we read Scripture we are surprised by the unexpected twist in a story, the inexplicable outcome or the puzzling turn of events. It is of the very essence of biblical literature that we should be surprised in this way for the nature of revelation is mysterious, unpredictable and seemingly capricious. There is a need then for openness and imagination as we approach a text bringing not only our intellect but also our own life story to the narrative that is before us.

I have been exploring both the real setting and the metaphorical use of **wilderness** in the biblical literature. It is an ambivalent motif for the biblical writers. For on the one hand its primary focus is found in the journey of the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt towards the liberation of the Promised Land. On the other hand this journey is clearly fraught with danger, deprivation and despair. It is this very ambiguity which makes wilderness a popular motif in other stories from the Torah, in prophecy and in the later writings.

Let us remind ourselves of the characteristics of Israel's formative wilderness experience. Israel's journey through the wilderness was a time of struggle and testing. The very life of the people was at risk through lack of food and water. As they faced these crises their faith in the God of Moses wavered – could such a God be trusted? Surely they were better off under slavery in Egypt? Their confusion and fear is symbolised by the very wilderness they inhabit. The harshness of their lives is reflected in the harshness of the landscape. The wilderness is threatening in its vast unknownness. There is no hiding place here, no easy escape and few resources. The wilderness is beyond human control and that is both its danger and its fascination.

Yet within this very setting comes an encounter with God and a revelation of the covenant within which the people of Israel are called to live. It is a time of transformation when a straggly bunch of slaves becomes a people called to live in covenantal relationship with their liberating God. Stripped of human resources and alienated from the familiar fleshpots of Egypt, they are dependent on grace and promise, and with an urgency not previously encountered. Their identity, indeed their very life, is forged from this divine encounter.

It is a pivotal event which is recalled time and again in the biblical literature. The wilderness setting is the backdrop to many critical moments in people's lives. In this paper I want to look specifically at the impact which the wilderness landscape has on the story of Hagar. Let us turn now to Hagar and see how this landscape shapes and influences her story.

Hagar—Act One

The first act of Hagar’s story is found in Genesis 16. Many studies of the story of Hagar focus on the changing relationship between Sarai (as she is known at this point) and Hagar. At first Hagar is the answer to Sarai’s problem of infertility following the custom of surrogate motherhood attested to in ancient law codes (Van Seters 1975: 68-71). Sarai says to Abram:

You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her (Gen. 16.2).

With Hagar’s conception of a child come status and pride for Hagar, and jealousy and fear for Sarai. “How dare this upstart slave-girl look at me with such contempt – the child she is carrying should by rights be mine!” Sarai retaliates by complaining to Abram:

May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me! (Gen. 16.5).

Abram’s response is one of disengagement – “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.” The narrative becomes stark and spare at this point: “Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her” (Gen. 16.6).

But Hagar is found – discovered by “the angel of the Lord” – a phrase repeated three times in the following verses and an obvious image for the divine presence who is directly referred to later in verse 13. The narrator is quite specific about her whereabouts – “By a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur” (Gen. 16.7). Now it is this very specificity about the wilderness location that seems to me a signal of its importance as a motif in the otherwise brief telling of this story. It is

significant that Hagar is found not only in the wilderness but by a spring, the spring on the way to Shur.

Several insights can be discerned as to the impact of the wilderness landscape on this first act of Hagar's story:

A Spring On The Way To Shur: A Memory Of Liberation And Life

Springs and wells are commonly used metaphors in biblical literature for fertility and fullness of life. Obviously the physical presence of a well in a desert landscape was a welcome sight to the nomad or traveller. So, for example, there are clear messages of future fertility when Abraham's servant, who is commissioned to find a wife for Isaac, sees Rebekah at the local well. The repetition of the word "spring" four times (Gen. 24. 16, 29, 30, 42, 45) and its central role in that story all signal future fertility, despite Rebekah's initial barrenness.

So too here in the story of Hagar, the discovery of her at a spring signals to the reader, not only that there is a healthy child within her but also that there is life ahead of her despite the despair of her current situation.

In a similar way the specific location of Shur prompts the reader to remember the pivotal moment in biblical literature connected with Shur. As the people of Israel are freed from slavery in Egypt, Moses orders them to set out from the Red Sea and they enter into the wilderness of Shur (Ex. 15.22). Their first challenge is the bitter water at Marah which by divine assistance is made sweet.

So the mention of the wilderness on the way to Shur alerts the reader that this is the beginning of a liberative journey for Hagar in the same way that it was the beginning of such a journey for the people of Israel. Such a signal is further reinforced by the word used of Sarai's treatment of Hagar meaning "to afflict, deal harshly with" (see also Gen. 16. 11), which is the same word used in the Exodus story of Pharaoh's treatment of the Israelites (Ex. 3. 7) (Daube in Dozeman 1998: 28). Narrative connections are being made between Hagar's plight and that of the people of Israel (Trible 1984: 14). This is all the more surprising when we remember that Hagar is an Egyptian herself and the mother of the Ishmaelites, traditional enemies of Israel.

So with this specific wilderness location and its memory of liberation and life, we are drawn deeper into Hagar's story.

Human Limitation: Identity In The Real World

The angel's first words to Hagar are her name and status. This is the first time she is addressed or even referred to by name. To Sarai she is "my slave girl". To Abram she is "your maid". Neither dignify Hagar by using her name. But the angel addresses her directly: "Hagar, slave girl of Sarai." The angel's message is, "Go back." How can it be the divine will to send Hagar back to submit to her mistress? Are we not in the presence of a liberating God? Aren't the signs of wilderness and spring pointing us to exodus and new life?

Again, perhaps the reality and the symbolism of wilderness can help us to understand Hagar's story at this point. Hagar has run away but the message of the wilderness is that there is no escape. The harshness of the wilderness landscape means there is no escape from human limitation, no escape from life and its problems, no escape from oneself.

Look again at the angel's opening questions: "Where have you come from and where are you going?" These are "no escape" questions and Hagar responds to the integrity of the wilderness setting by answering truthfully and honestly. These are identity questions. In every culture, where you have come from is a vital part of who you are. For example, in the formal setting of a Maori *powhiri* (welcoming ceremony), where you come from in terms of family, *marae*, canoe, mountain and river are a key part of your identity and identification.

So for Hagar there is no escape. Her encounter with the angel of the Lord offers no "quick fix" solution, no rescue. Perhaps this too explains Abram's apparent passivity and indifference to her plight as he defers to Sarai. Hagar must face reality. The wilderness offers no distractions, rather it strips away masks and pretence and demands that we face life as it is. Significantly Sarai is reduced to silence at this point.

Yet neither we nor Hagar are left completely in despair. For in the wilderness sensory awareness is heightened. The clutter and busyness of her life are removed so that she both hears and sees more clearly. She sees herself and her situation more clearly but more than this, Hagar is the first and only woman in scripture to encounter the divine

and name God as "God of seeing" or "God who sees" (Trible 1984: 18). The seeing and hearing are reciprocal between God and Hagar.

The divine encounter has come in the midst of wilderness struggle. Hagar is emboldened: "Have I really seen God and remained alive?" So we move now to explore in more detail this third feature of the wilderness landscape.

The Divine Encounter: Promise And Participation

Alongside the call to return to Sarai and submit to her is a promise, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude" (Gen. 16. 10). But isn't this the same promise that has been given to Abram? (Gen. 15. 5) How can that promise of innumerable descendants also be given to a slave-woman and an Egyptian at that? Besides this there is also a birthing announcement complete with naming formula: "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction" (Gen. 15. 11). Again this promise echoes the experience of the people of Israel who are heard and seen by God in their affliction.

The final revelation discloses the nature of this son and on first reading it may seem somewhat disturbing:

He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin" (Gen. 15. 12).

But when we compare this with Hagar's situation who is literally "in the hand of Sarai" (Gen. 16. 6), the message can be seen as one of transformation from slavery to freedom.

While Hagar must remain "in the hand of Sarai," Ishmael will be free to raise his own

hand and respond to the raised hands of his kin, signalling the traditional enmity between Israelite and Ishmaelite.

For this transformation to occur, however, Hagar must participate in the promise, play her part by holding on to the promise and returning to Sarai. Hagar must trust the promise she has received by facing the reality of her situation and by acting on the message she has received. She will indeed go back to Sarai and give birth to the son she has been promised but it is Abram who will name him Ishmael. It is Abraham too who will circumcise the boy, making him a child of the covenant (Gen.17. 10-11, 25-26).

So the wilderness features prompt the reader to remember the significance of the seminal wilderness experience of the people of Israel. A spring on the way to Shur recalls the memory of liberation and life. The experience of human limitation reminds us of our true identity in the real world where there is no escape and no rescue. There is, however, a heightened sensory awareness to counter the despair of loneliness and limitation of the wilderness. This allows for/provides an openness to divine encounter where God is recognised and named and where a promise of transformation is disclosed which calls for active participation in its fulfilment.

Hagar—Act Two

Let us turn briefly to the second act of Hagar's story which is found in Genesis 21. By this stage Hagar's son, Ishmael, and Sarah's son, Isaac, have been born and trouble is brewing again. Much has been made of the deteriorating relationship between Sarah and Hagar, and of Abraham's weakness in going along with Sarah's desire for him to banish

"this slave woman with her son" (Gen.21. 10). Notice again that there is no mention of personal names. Despite his distress and on receiving divine confirmation, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away with only bread and a skin of water. We read that Hagar "departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba" (Gen.21. 14).

So here we are again in the wilderness and we can trace the significance of similar wilderness features in act two. On this occasion the wilderness is no chosen escape route for Hagar, rather she is forced to "wander" with no well in sight. The promises received in the wilderness previously seem empty now, and despair and desperation envelop her as the water in the skin disappears. She leaves the child under a bush so as not "to look on the death of a child" (Gen. 21. 16). The stark reality of human limitation in its ultimate form – death – breaks in on Hagar and she weeps.

God hears, not Hagar's weeping, but the voice of the boy, thus reflecting the meaning of his name: Ishmael. Another divine encounter occurs in the wilderness and the angelic revelation confirms the promise to Hagar concerning her son. Again there is heightened sensory awareness as God opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well of water, the literal sign of life. Participation is required as she fills the skin with water and gives the boy a drink.

The final scene sees the fulfilment of the promise of transformation as Ishmael grows up free and, through the participation again of Hagar, a wife is found for him from the land of Egypt, signalling the growth of many descendants. As we might have guessed in reading the cues of the narrative strategy, all this takes place in the wilderness:

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran (Gen. 21. 20-21).

What conclusions can we draw from this wilderness exploration? I believe the recurring motif of the wilderness in the story of Hagar does more than pre-figure the liberative acts of God in Israel's formative history in the wilderness.

Hagar's experience draws us more deeply into the terror and vulnerability of wilderness. Sometimes we go there seeking an escape from life, its pain and its suffering, but wilderness will have none of it. The wilderness strips us of our meagre defences and resources, our masks and our pretence so that we face reality – the reality of human limitation and frailty – the silence of despair and emptiness and absence. At this point there is room for grace, for heightened sensory awareness, for an encounter with the divine, and the promise of transformation if we are willing to participate in it.

Divine encounter then is inseparable from wilderness struggle. And let us not forget whose story this is for here is the twist in the tail. It is Hagar, an Egyptian, an alien, an enemy, not the chosen people of Israel, who is found in the wilderness. It is Hagar, a slave, confused and desperate, not the freed people of Israel who is given a promise of transformation. It is Hagar, a woman, not a man who encounters the divine and names God.

This is indeed a highly subversive story.

References

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