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## **Hagar the forgotten woman**

**based on Genesis 21:8-21**

**by Ralph Milton**

*When I first published Family Story Bible, it was generally praised because of its sensitive and fresh retelling of Bible stories for children. But one reviewer hammered it because it left out the story of Hagar, to whom our Arabic brothers and sisters trace their lineage. He was right of course.*

*Yes, I could protest that Hagar was also left out of the Common Lectionary, (it has since been added) and has been virtually ignored by the entire Christian community. But that was no excuse. In the second edition of the book, Hagar was there. Along with my apology.*

*The stories in the Family Story Bible are of course, written for children. This story assumes an adult audience.*

Hagar sat on a small rock in the blazing sun, rocking back and forth, back and forth, clutching her arms about herself, trying not to hear the distant wail of her son, her dying son.

A body-wracking sob escaped, and then a cry, and then a scream of terror and anger directed at anything, everything, directed at God, though Hagar knew that God was nowhere near.

The wail of her child stopped. He would die soon, then she would die, and it would be all over. Then out from nowhere that she knew came another scream, a screech, a cry of anger, of defiance, perhaps hate. Hate at God? Why not? What had God done for her except lead her into hope, then throw her out into the unforgiving desert with her son to die.

They say your whole life plays before you, just before you die. You see it all in panorama, all the good and bad of it, all the hope and hate of it.

And Hagar saw the child she was, taken from a home she later learned was Egypt, sold as a slave to Sarah on whom she waited hand and foot for years and years. Old

Sarah. Barren Sarah. Sarah without child, who argued and cajoled at God to give her children.

Just fourteen years ago, it seemed like yesterday, Sarah grabbed her slave girl's arm, pushed her roughly into her tent and said to husband Abraham. "Here. Take this slave girl. Make her pregnant. If I can't bear a child for you, she can. But it will be my child. Do you hear that, slave?" Hagar nodded. Hagar had no choice.

Hagar was a slave, and so she bore the child as she was told. She nursed the boy. She loved the boy. But Sarah made it clear. "That's not your child."

And Hagar should have known. Slaves don't taunt their owners. But her contempt of Sarah grew faster than the child within her belly. "You're right," she snarled at Sarah. "He's *your* child, O barren one."

And Sarah lashed right back in anger. Abused and battered, Hagar fled into the desert. It didn't seem as bad that time. Hagar felt the love of God inside her then, and when she prayed, she seemed to feel an answer. "Give Sarah a bit of time to cool down, and then go back," God said. "You will bear your child. Give him the name of Ishmael, which means, God hears. God will hear you, Hagar. Your child shall grow up strong, and you shall hold his children on your knee. You and Ishmael will be forebears of a kind and gentle people."

Hagar tried to stay as far away from Sarah as she could, tried not to show the young son Ishmael to the angry matriarch. And for awhile it worked.

Then one day the rumors flew around the tents of Abraham and Sarah's tribe – rumors of angels visiting, rumors of Sarah and of Abraham laughing loud and long at the ludicrous good news that Sarah would bear a son.

"Great news," thought Hagar. "Great news for everyone, but not for me and not for my son Ishmael," now grown into his early teens. While joy and promise sang from every tent as Sarah birthed a son named Isaac, a son named Laughter, Hagar did not laugh. A sense of deep foreboding filled her soul.

The toddler Isaac wandered happily from tent to tent, and Ishmael was a kind and gentle lad who saw the baby fall, and hurt his knee a little, and picked him up to comfort him. When Sarah walked around the tent, she saw Ishmael with her Isaac, and screamed and cried and once again told Hagar to "Get out! I don't want to ever set eyes on you again. Get out!"

"But Sarah," Abraham tried to say, "It was you who brought Hagar to me. It was you who said that we should have a child through her. And now you want to throw them out? It isn't right!"

"That bastard boy of yours is old enough to take your place, old man," Sarah hissed. "If you die, he could inherit everything, and your son Isaac, the child God sent to us, would be out on his ear. So get rid of her and the boy now. Right now."

Abraham talked to God. "If I send Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert they will die," he said. "What should I do?"

"Send them," God replied. "I'll work it out."

"Sure, God, you'll work it out!" Hagar screamed at the blazing, copper sky. "Can you see my son over there. He's quiet now. Maybe he's dead already. I put him, half dead over there by that bush because I couldn't bear to watch him die. The child I bore so Abraham could have a son. Abraham sent us out here, with one lousy skin of water.

Hardly any food. Well, we always do as we're told God. You want us to come out here and die, we come out here and die. Is this your idea of a good time, God?"

"Go and hold the boy," a voice within her seemed to say. "Go and put your arms around the boy."

Hagar stumbled over rocks and thorns to take the long thin body of her son into her arms. She could not tell if Ishmael was still alive. She poured her mother love into the boy, and cried her tears, and through them saw not far from where she sat, a well.

Through the water of her tears she saw a well. Water.

She almost dropped the boy in her hurry to fill the skin with water, then to press it to the thin cracked lips of Ishmael, who at first responded not at all. But then there was some movement, and slowly bit by bit he drank, and Hagar's hopes renewed.

Hagar's hopes renewed, then crashed once more as she remembered who she was, a slave, and where she was. Nowhere.

Again she cried, she looked toward the well, and from the deepest well within her soul she heard a voice. "From you and Ishmael shall come a people," said the voice of God within her. "You will survive. Your son will grow. And he will have a wife and you shall then be grandmother to a fine and gentle race of people; a race of people who will know the pain that you have known; a race of people who will stand weeping outside the tents of wealthy men."

"You shall live, my child," she whispered to the boy she held so close to her. "You shall live, my Ishmael, and you shall grow, and you and I shall be the forebears of a fine and gentle race of people." And then she added in a firm and hopeful voice: "A race of people who will suffer and survive."

Then Hagar drank some water for herself. She drank it deep, and knew that even though it would not be through Abraham and Sarah and their race, Hagar and her son Ishmael were loved of God, and children of the promise.

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,  
all of them available through Wood Lake Publishing.  
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