SISTERHOOD IN THE WILDERNESS: BIBLICAL PARADIGMS AND FEMINIST IDENTITY POLITICS IN READINGS OF HAGAR AND SARAH

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The ambivalent relationship of feminist biblical scholarship is well expressed by Alicia Suskin Ostriker: “[i]f the Bible is a flaming sword forbidding our entrance to the garden, it is also a burning bush urging us toward freedom. It is what we wrestle with all night and from which we may, if we demand it, wrest a blessing.”¹ For many feminist interpreters, wrestling a blessing from the biblical text means recovering the lost stories of the women who are mentioned only fleetingly amidst a narrative more concerned with a male god’s dealings with the men of Israel. This constitutes a reclaiming of female biblical characters, celebrating their strengths and exploring their motives, giving voice where before there was silence. Yet when feminists foreground the women’s story of Genesis 16:1–21 and 21:9–21 they may end up clasping a curse as well as a blessing. The story of Hagar and Sarah is challenging for those who want to emphasise positive images of women’s relationships in the biblical traditions.

Hagar and Sarah² are significant in feminist biblical reception history, as mothers of nations who are granted important roles and developed characterization in the Genesis narrative. Hagar names God and is the first person in the Bible to see God and live. Sarah is enshrined in memory as the mother of the people of Israel. Yet these two female figures, who share a story and a husband, never talk to one another; the biblical narrative and subsequent interpretation places them in opposition to each other. Feminist religious discourse³ has been accused of a tendency towards innocence, of wanting to present women in the best possible

² In Genesis 16, her name is ‘Sarai,’ but by chapter 22 it has changed to ‘Sarah.’ I use Sarai/Sarah (and Abram/Abraham) depending on which particular text is being discussed. When speaking of the stories as a whole, I use ‘Sarah’ and ‘Abraham.’ When considering secondary sources, I use the version of the name used by the writer to whom I am referring.
³ The two projects of biblical scholarship and theology have been more readily and comfortably intertwined in the feminist strands of both disciplines.
light, and to explain away women’s wrongdoing in terms of the unjust system of patriarchy. For black womanist thinkers, this is part of white feminism’s refusal to accept itself as part of another unjust system—that of racism and imperialism—in universalizing ‘women’s experience’ of patriarchy and not acknowledging the social and economic differences between women. Whilst feminist thought has, in the last twenty-five years or so, made significant strides in recognising and contending with ‘the challenge of difference’, this is an ongoing struggle, and white and Jewish feminist readings of Sarah display a residual anxiety and guilt over her treatment of Hagar, with shades of justification that may stretch beyond the confines of the text itself to touch on contemporary political relations. This is not only because today’s pale-skinned reader may imagine Sarah as similar to herself, whereas the Egyptian Hagar is dark-skinned and other. It is also perhaps related to how the conflicted sisterhood between Hagar and Sarah has been deployed to symbolize the relationship between white feminism and black womanism, with the former made to acknowledge its own privilege, and complicity in the oppression of other women. Hagar—slave, surrogate and survivor—has been a paradigmatic figure in African-American womanist theology. Sarah’s treatment of her has also been read as representative of privileged white women’s oppression of women of colour.

The Genesis story, and its afterlives, is complicated. The ‘other’, excluded from the camp and from the blessing that God grants only to one of Abraham’s sons, has in Christian interpretation been read as a justification of the slave trade and apartheid, but also as a demonstration of the inferiority of the Jews. Any reading of Hagar and Sarah that aims to speak to contemporary identity politics needs to take into consideration the fact of Sarah’s Jewishness in order not to reinforce both anti-semitism and white hegemony by continuing the trajectory of Christian appropriation of the Hebrew Scriptures, in which Abraham and Sarah become exemplary of white European Christian ideology. But to foreground Sarah’s Jewishness is to lead us to another political and religious conflict of today’s world, that which, since that “violent rupture that we know, by shorthand, as ‘9/11’”, has come to define today’s world. In Islam, Hagar is the foremother, and

4 See Cain Hope Felder, Race, Racism and the Biblical Narratives (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).