A Bosadi (Womanhood) reading of Genesis 16

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ABSTRACT

The received interpretations of the Bible in African contexts in South Africa have always been foreign. The colonisers not only colonised the land, even the interpretation of the Bible was colonised. The received interpretations of Genesis 16 serve as a case in point in this paper. As a point of departure, the colonial/missionary reading of Genesis 16 is given. This is followed by a counter-reading: A Bosadi (Womanhood) reading of the same text with a view to making it accessible to its African-South African female readers in a more relevant way.

In our country with its fairly young democracy, in a context which emphasises the rights of each human being, it makes a lot of sense to speak of one’s own reading of the text of the Bible. Such a reading is necessary because it is actually long overdue. Why? As this paper will reveal, many Africans in South Africa are still comfortable with colonial/missionary-oriented sermons, commentaries, theologies and the like. This paper attempts to re-read the text of Genesis 16 in a way that will make sense to its African-South African female readers. I wish to argue that this text, like many others, has always been (interpreted) clad in European garments: that is why the received interpretation did not always match the lifestyle of the recipients, because the garments were foreign. I hope to remove this foreign clothing and dress the interpretation properly so that it can be recognised by its recipients - the women of Africa in South Africa.

I have chosen the text of Genesis 16 as my point of focus for the following reasons:

- A superficial reading of the text shows that it is a story of a certain kind of woman-to-woman relationship in a world in which the protagonists appeared to have been ‘resident aliens’. We may thus at this early stage argue that it is an apparently female text or a text reflecting ‘female’ voices (even though they are filtered). This text will focus mainly on the woman-to-woman relationship, particularly on how it may be judged from a Bosadi (Womanhood) perspective.
In a country with a history of segregating people according to their race, a country in which one's humanity was determined first and foremost by one's race or ethnicity, a text like Genesis 16 carries with it a host of associations. It contains a story in which a woman from an 'outside' race and from a lower socio-economic stratum is marginalised or exploited first and foremost by another woman, her mistress, and her master-husband. This situation cannot help but remind readers with such a history (cf Black South African female readers in this context) of the painful memories of that history. The words of Renita Weems are worthy of note in this regard:

But it would not be totally fair to make the Old Testament story carry all the weight of the history of race relationships in the modern world. Yet the similarities between the biblical story and the reality of the relationships in the modern world across racial lines among women today are undeniable (1988:2 - my emphasis).

In the light of such a history, how ought African-South African women to respond to this story?

As a point of departure, I shall give a short portrayal of what I perceive as a missionary/colonial reading of Genesis 16, a portrayal revealing how we have received this story through the years. Sources for this reading are basically commentaries by white male authors, together with the reception of this story in our churches and in our Religious Education and our Biblical Studies syllabi. The last named, as one could expect, were designed by the same people.

I shall then proceed to give a reading which I think will make sense to African female readers in South Africa. I prefer to call this approach, a Bosadi (Womanhood) reading. This is a reading informed, amongst others, by the experiences of African-South African female readers, women who, for most of the history of this country, have been marginalised from many activities of South African public life, not excluding the practice of theology.

I therefore hope to represent many un-heard voices, voices which wait to be heard by those who have ears.

A MISSIONARY/COLONIAL READING OF GENESIS 16

As with many or almost all the commentaries (sermons, Bible studies, lectures) one has received in schools and tertiary institutions, emphasis has mainly been on the text rather than on the context of the modern reader of a Biblical text. In the past, a reading of Genesis 16 did not escape such an emphasis. The text was typically read as the story of two women, one of whom we have always disdained, and perhaps we have also wondered why God should have honoured such a disobedient slave (cf Wood 1975:72). Why should a slave, an Egyptian, one from outside the 'chosen' race, have such courage to look with contempt at Sarai, the wife of Abram, the man chosen by God, the man of faith?

One commentator has referred to Hagar as a defiant and uncontrollable young woman (Speiser 1962:121). In the same way, Von Rad calls her a 'rebellious and proud mother' of Ishmael (1963:189). Tamez argues: 'Hagar will be for traditional Bible study a negative model, because she became rebellious and wouldn't submit to Sarah's wishes' (1986:6).

We have always identified ourselves first with the Abram (male) character. It is a fact that men are, in most cases, portrayed in a positive light in the Bible. This is not the case with women. We would identify ourselves with Sarai, basically because of the role women play in Israelite history, the history we have also come to embrace as our own. So closely have we identified ourselves with these characters that their wrongs have been defended in one way or another or even ignored. Gallares is right when she argues that most Bible studies would focus more on Abraham and Sarah and their roles in the foundation of the faith of Israel: 'This particular bias has unconsciously programmed us to identify ourselves more with Sarah rather than with Hagar' (1992:7-8).

Our reading would go further in questioning why Sarai became impatient though a promise about the son had already been made. Why is she faithless? Interestingly, we would not question the faithlessness of Abram in heeding Sarai's advice regarding a new way of acquiring an heir, but we would question the morality behind the advice/instruction given to Abram by his wife to have sexual relations with a 'wife' other than his own. Hamilton (1990:444) argues that other ancient texts have provided parallels to what the modern reader might consider 'blatant immorality'. The question posed is: Which modern reader does this commentator have in mind? Would those of us who grew up in settings where there were substitute wives given for the purposes of child-bearing also fall in his category of 'modern reader'. One is also reminded of Buttrick (1952:60) who comments on Genesis 16:5 as follows: The verse throws a significant light upon the tensions...
inevitable in a polygamous household.' Is this statement not throwing light upon the negative view a foreigner (Buttrick) has of a culture which condones polygamous marriages? How can a white person, and a man for that matter, speak with authority about what he calls the 'inevitable' tensions of a polygamous marriage? Is this not evidence that the missionaries not only conquered the territories of African people in the name of Christ, but also in the same name, conquered their culture and re-defined it for them?

Because of attitudes traditionally held toward Biblical characters (including Hagar) from outside Israel, it is no wonder that we fail to question the atrocities committed by the mistress on her 'slave', or broadly speaking, the atrocities committed by the powerful on the powerless. This is ironic because in reality African women in South Africa formed and still form part of the latter group, the powerless. Tamez mentions that the texts are constructed in such a way that subordination of the powerless by the powerful appears to be natural (1986:6).

Tamez notes that we have identified ourselves with Sarah for the following reasons:
1. The stories are so constructed as to lead the reader to identify with Sarai because of the crucial role she plays in the history of Israel.
2. The story continually emphasises the submission of workers to employers and therefore the attitude of Sarah towards Hagar appears quite natural. Her warning to third-world female readers of this story is worth noting:

   ...right at the beginning we must recognize these two elements, and consciously distance ourselves from them, in order to read the text, or perhaps reconstruct it, from the perspective of third world women (1986:6).

Traditional interpretations favouring Abram and Sarai are notable in a number of commentaries on the text of Genesis 16.

According to Speiser (1962:119), in this episode, the J narrator intertwines twin themes, the societal and the personal, each tied up in its own way with the matter of Abraham's successor. The present material as it were creates a suspense: Heir from the slave woman? He entitles the episode 'The birth of Ishmael'.

The observation that Speiser (1962:116) entitles the episode 'The birth of Ishmael', shows that for him, what is central to this story is the birth of an heir (son) to Abram and not the poor treatment of Hagar.

As he concludes his commentary on the text, he argues that the author must not dwell too long on personalities. He notes: 'Presently he shifts to a different plane and larger issues. It is time to account for the piece of the Ishmaelites in the scheme of things . . . .' (1962:121 - emphasis mine).

For Tamez, however,

The appearance of Ishmael and Hagar in the patriarchal history is not a simple trick to add suspense or interest to the story. It may appear so from a literary perspective, but that is not its true significance. If this story was gathered through traditions and included in biblical history, it is because it has a lesson for us. The marginalised demand as first-born sons to be included in the history of salvation. They break the order of things. They complicate history (1986:9 - my emphasis).


Teubal notes:

From the Islamic point of view, regarding Hagar as a slave is a necessary consequence of the theory on which the Hebrew myth is based, the notion that Ishmael was of inferior origin. It is particularly easy to dismiss the presence of a matriarch if she is regarded as a slave-concubine, an inferior being (1990:49-50).

Most commentators take note that what Sarai did (cf using Hagar as a surrogate mother) made sense in the light of the legal systems of the time (cf Von Rad 1963: 186-187; Wood 1975:71; Hamilton 1990:444; Speiser 1962:118). Von Rad argues: 'From the legal and moral stand point, therefore, Sarah's proposal was completely according to custom' (1963:186). He goes further to argue that it was necessary that Hagar should have been ordered to go back as '... Yahweh will not condone the breach of legal regulations'. No attention is however given to the perspective from which those laws were given. Is it not perhaps a perspective shared by those who formulated the laws, those in a position of power? Gallare's' comment in this regard is worthy of note:

Throughout the period covered by the Old and the New Testaments, slavery was common.... The slaves at that time were considered properties. They had no
rights, although they were governed by some laws on slavery. Most of these laws favored the masters, however, rather than the slaves themselves (1992:12 - my emphasis).

According to Von Rad (1963:191-192), the primary point in the narrative is that God follows the one who goes forth from Abraham's house too, a point reinforcing the notion that the story is often read from Abram's perspective. Von Rad assumes that Hagar is blessed or experiences the manifestation of the deity because of Abraham. Hagar cannot stand on her own and be viewed and also be blessed as an individual by God (apart from her relationship with her master-husband, Abram). It is interesting to note, however, that for the first time in the narrative (cf Gn 16:8), a character, an angel of YHWH for that matter, calls Hagar by name, a point affirming the individuality of Hagar the person, not Hagar the handmaid of Abram's house. The assumption that one in a powerless position is blessed because of one's identity with another in a powerful position reminds one of the notion of 'chosenness' that the missionaries propagated as they spread the gospel. Their recipients, who were basically viewed as 'others' in relation to God's promises in the Bible, had to be viewed in relation to them. In the view of the missionaries, these recipients had first and foremost to wear Western garments (to do away with the so-called heathen African customs for example) in order to be acknowledged by God. The words of Teresa Hings are worthy of note here:

The conquest of Africa often implied an erasing of most of what Africans held dear. The missionaries, in the name of Christ, sought to create a spiritual and cultural tabula rasa upon which they could inscribe a new culture, a new spirituality (1992:187).

Obviously, this new culture and the new spirituality are Western.

On the other hand, Savina Tebail re-reads the text from a woman's perspective. For her, emphasis would not be on Abram or the house of Abram (as in Von Rad's case above), but on Sarai, the Matriach. She argues for example, that Sarah was not overly concerned with getting an heir for Abram (cf Gn 16:2). Sarai would like Abram to co-habit with her נְאֵרָה not Abram's, so that she may be built up (נְאֵרָה) through her.

From the preceding analysis, it is revealed that whatever their commentaries regarding Genesis 16, they are written from the point of view of Abram and Sarai; the point of view of the powerful. A general trend is that attention is focused more on the text, its literary technicalities, its historical background, commentaries on its key-words and so forth. Though such approaches have their own strengths, they also have serious limitations, particularly for the powerless.

The main disadvantage of such approaches is that the Biblical text remains the possession of a few elite; it remains an object of intellectual gymnastics for a few academics whom history has advantaged with tools for approaching the text that way.

What about the many non-literate, passionate Bible readers who do not have such skills? What about the many African-South African female Bible readers for whom the Bible is not just an object of sophisticated, and sometimes controversial Bible studies but a foundational source for their spirituality?

One other disadvantage of such approaches is that they are detached from reality. The context of the reader is scarcely addressed.

Next, I wish to read this text from a Bosadi (Womanhood) perspective, a woman's liberation perspective which takes seriously, the unique experiences of African women in South Africa.

A brief commentary about this perspective will suffice (cf Masenyi [ngwana Mphatlele] 1996:156-162).

B A BOSADI (WOMANHOOD) APPROACH

The word bosadi comes from the Northern Sotho word mosadi which means a woman. The word mosadi comes from the root -sadi, which means womanhood or private parts of a woman. The abstract noun bosadix means womanhood, it has to do with what ideal womanhood is in this culture.

A Bosadi (Womanhood) approach takes seriously the context of an African-South African woman, a woman with unique experiences. I wish to foreground and claim the experience of those who have been invisible in South African history. Delores Williams (1993:4) is right when she says that one way to claim experience is to name it. She argues that naming helps to establish some permanence and visibility for women's experience in history. In the following lines, I wish to give a brief outline of the Bosadi perspective as one of the ways of claiming as well as naming the African-South African woman's experience. It is this approach that I shall then use to re-read the text of Genesis 16.
A Bosadi perspective acknowledges the uniqueness of the context of an African-South African woman, a context characterised by, amongst others, the following types of oppressions: sexism in a larger society; sexism from the African culture; classism and post-apartheid racism. Such a context will in one way or another shape the way an African woman interacts with the Bible. As a mosadi reader reads the Bible, for example, she will not only spot the androcentric elements in the text but also consider elements of class. Such problematic elements will be criticised and in that way the Bible will be re-read in a new and meaningful way.

The mosadi reader will also be attracted by texts which shed light on foreigners, those who are deemed outsiders from the chosen race of Israel, the Gentiles. Such an interest in foreigners stems from my observation that a South African woman has been marked by foreignness in South African history: coming from outside the 'chosen' white race, with a 'foreign' culture, having a 'foreign' sex (both in larger society and in the African community), most of them belonging to a 'foreign' class.

The Bosadi approach acknowledges that there are apparent points of resemblances between the Old Testament/Israelite world-view and the African world-view (cf Maseny 1989). Such resemblances will be isolated and applied (where possible) in an empowering way to the lives of people today.

As part of the analysis of the context of the interpreter, a Bosadi approach also brings to light the significance of the element of faith in the life of an African woman in her encounters with the Bible. This faith aspect (cf also Bosch 1991:442-443; Ukpog 1995:3-14) may not be ignored because, for an average African-South African Christian woman reader, the Bible is not merely a book for critical scholarly arguments; it is regarded as the Word of God capable of transforming life and addressing different life situations through faith in the Christ who is proclaimed in the Bible.

Like any women's liberation approach, the Bosadi approach foregrounds the liberatory elements of the Bible and challenges as well as resists oppressive ones. In that way it becomes clear that the Modimo (God) proclaimed in it, hates oppression but loves justice.

This approach is not only critical of the Biblical text, it also approaches the African culture critically. It acknowledges that this culture, like any other culture, has both positive as well as negative elements. Those elements that are detrimental to the well-being of African women, like the sexism inherent in this culture, are challenged and resisted, while positive ones like the significance of the family for Africans (cf Mbiti 1989:104-106), the botho/Ubuntu (humanness) spirit, the spirit of corporeality, will be retrieved and used profitably for the good of all people.

Such a retrieval of the lost positive elements of the African culture is necessitated by the negative way in which Africans in the country have been made to view their culture by foreigners (cf the missionaries for example), a way which unfortunately led to a loss of a sense of self-esteem among many of us. Hence the need to reclaim what legitimately belongs to us, and to call ourselves by our own names.

Before we re-read the text of Genesis 16 from a Bosadi liberation perspective, a brief note on Genesis 16 will be in order at this stage.

C A NOTE ON GENESIS 16

Genesis 16 forms part of the patriarchal narratives. The patriarchal period has most often been dated either to some part of the Middle Bronze Age (c 2000-1500 BCE) or to an advanced Late Bronze Age (c 1550-1150 BCE). It should however be borne in mind that there are no extra-Biblical texts of sufficient direct relevance to test the value of the Old Testament as a reliable historical source in the period before about 900 BC, the opening of the Davidic Monarchy.

One other problem regarding the dating of the Biblical texts is that they comprise interwoven episodes which originated in different regions at different times. To exacerbate the situation, the episodes were composed by different authors and editors (cf Teubal 1990:4-5). For example, Genesis 16 is generally attributed to the J source with verses 3, 15 and 16 attributed to the E source.

Having said all this, one would like to argue that the inclusion of this story in this part of the canon shows that it had a role to play in its original setting, whatever the setting was. The inclusion of a 'female' story in particular, in a predominantly male scripture might serve to reinforce the proposition that the story definitely had a role to play in that history. Though women were not part of the official male cult, or though their spirituality was not publicly acclaimed, they had a role to play in the community of their time.

Elis Tamez (1986:5) notes that the events reworked in the Bible were originally grounded in particular meanings. She goes on to argue that . . .
They are re-read not with the intellectual curiosity to understand the past, but with the need to respond to life situations today. Our present, according to Carlos Mesters, enters and functions as filter, criterion, and light in the search for meaning in biblical texts.

That will also be my approach as I read the text of Genesis 16 in this paper. My present experiences as an African woman in South Africa will basically inform my reading of this text as a way of appropriating it in a meaningful way in my life.

Some scholars have proposed that Genesis 16 and Genesis 21 are variations of the same story (cf Skinner 1963:285). Some have seen them as two different stories with similar themes (cf Buttrick 1952:604). I hold the latter position. One of the noteworthy differences between the two accounts of the Hagar-Sarai narrative is that the Hagar of E is a weak character. She allows herself to be tossed about by those in power. That, however, is not the case with the Hagar character in Genesis 16. She appears to be a strong, independent character (cf Teubal 1990; Waters 1991).

With this brief note on the main text of this paper, I now read Genesis 16 from a Bosadi woman's liberation perspective.

D A BOSADI READING OF GENESIS 16

As I read Genesis 16, informed by my experiences (past and present) as an African woman in a South African context, the following key points come to light. These points, in one way or another, have to do with the issue of power: (1) economic power; (2) surrogate motherhood (Go ba tla’tsaswadepe); and (3) foreignness.

1 Economic power

One aspect that made me interested in this story is its portrayal of women in a relationship. I am interested in such relationships to see if they cannot serve as a model for a South African woman living in the 1990s. The Hagar-Sarai narrative has eroded in favour of Western individualism, my attraction to such verses makes sense. More specifically, I was attracted to the story of two women who, although they shared the same plight in a world dominated by men, a world in which they were resident aliens, allowed the forces governing the status quo of the time as well as personal ill feelings to divide them even further.

I also noted that though they were both women, their experiences were different. The one (Sarai) is the mistress of the other (Hagar). The former is definitely more economically powerful than the latter, hence the fact that she could afford to own a slave. As we read the text, we are obliged to agree with Teubal (1990) that Hagar was not the NTR of Abram but that of Sarai. Though Sarai had two strikes against her; that of being a woman and that of being barren, she was economically powerful. As a result, she had the potential to negate, to some extent, those stumbling blocks in her life. Coupled with that is the fact that the customs of the time afforded women of her class such opportunities. A childless woman could give her slave girl/handmaid to the husband so that the latter could bear children for her. The children would belong to the mistress.

Some scholars (cf Waters 1991; Teubal 1990) have argued that Hagar had an economically superior status. Waters, for example, argues that Hagar (cf Gn 21:21), a woman who was able to get a wife for her son, could not have been an economically inferior person.

Though the status of Hagar as presented by the J narrator in Genesis 16 is more appealing compared with that of the E narrator in 21, one would still argue that the position of Hagar, at least as it is portrayed in Genesis 16, is that of somebody who was not economically powerful. If that were the case, I would argue, she would not have ‘opted’ for being the NTR of Sarai, and a foreign mistress to boot.

Though I acknowledge the fact that her relationship to Sarai is not that of a slave NTR (cf contrast with Gn 21), but that of a handmaid, NTR or even co-wife, the bottom line is that she is at the disposal of Sarai. If Sarai wants her to be wife of her husband, it happens, and Sarai can afflict her bitterly if she so wishes. Though Sarai is a woman, her class affords her an opportunity to manipulate this woman whose class is lower than hers. The words of Renita Weems are worthy of note in this regard:

In the instance of Hagar and Sarai, the owner took advantage of her economic leverage over the Egyptian slave woman. She exploited the slave woman's body for her own personal ambitions. But in trying to provide a son for her husband and secure respect for herself, Sarai almost lost a slave (1988:10).

What makes the powerlessness of Hagar glaring in this episode is that she is without a voice. The conspicuous voice in the opening verses of this episode is that of the economically powerful Sarai. Gossai (1995:6) is right when he argues:
The reality is that she is without a voice, unable to speak the language of power and domination, and has no advocate. The oppressed is left voiceless . . . . The irony is that the poor and powerless, arguably more than any other group need a voice, and they are the ones who are made voiceless.

Those of us whose situations resemble that of Hagar, are however encouraged by her boldness to resist the oppression/affliction she suffered from her mistress. She decided on her own to leave the house of bondage, a situation revealing that the oppressed have a responsibility and a role to play in their own liberation. The messenger of YHWH seems to endorse this move as he intervenes and from the encounter, this one, from an ‘outside’ race, class and sex becomes the first woman in the Bible to receive an announcement from YHWH.

In a South African context, the story of Sarai and Hagar cannot but remind us of the past painful history of the power relationships between white women, who could also be designated women of class, and black women, who mostly formed part of (or were purposely made) members of the have-nots by the previous regimes. No wonder that in such settings, a Hagar, a domestic/slave or a notoriously known kele (a Northern Sotho adoptive from the English word ‘girl’) would always have been, or is always a black woman. A Sarai, or a missis/mistress in our text, would always be a white woman. So entrenched are these words in the vocabulary of African-South African women that there has been or there is still a tendency to refer to every white woman as a missis (mistress). The same unfortunate mentality has also been found among some white South African women who would expect blacks (both men and women) to call any white woman a missis. In our context these apparently innocent words, like ‘mistress’ and ‘girl’, are loaded. One is reminded of the words of Katy Taylor:

Sarah, despite being frequently put forward as an example of a strong biblical woman, is a much less helpful role model. She is nevertheless a salutary, if uncomfortable, reminder for many white women of our dual position as oppressor and oppressed (1994:561).

Having noted that, particularly in view of the changing/changed political context, I would agree with Weems (1988:11) that not one of us is safe from the ravages of a society which makes room for only a chosen few while the vast majority are kept at bay. She holds:

For those of us who are educated and employed, there is always a potential to be a Sarai; and lamentably, there are far too many opportunities in a capitalistic society for her to surface. Yet most of us are just a paycheck away from Hagar.

The question is: Is it necessary for women who find themselves in a relationship of power similar to that of Sarai and Hagar to behave as Sarai did? Shouldn’t they allow the bond that keeps them together as humans and women to remain intact without allowing any interference from outside voices? Brenner (1986:261) notes: ‘One would expect them to co-operate despite their differences, for they share a basic raison d’être. However, this is hardly the case. They do not get along together.’

Another notable point as one reads the Sarai-Hagar story is that of surrogate motherhood.

2 Surrogate motherhood (Go hlatwa diero)

It has already been noted that Sarai’s instructions to Abram to co-habit with her hipy for the purposes of child-bearing was acceptable in the light of the customs of the time. In a society which set great store by children, particularly sons for the perpetuation of the line, Sarai’s frustration at not being in a position to fulfill her expected role makes sense. Even Hagar’s feeling of pride after her pregnancy makes sense in this light. Though in Hagar’s case, we are not sure if her consent in the matter of acting as a surrogate mother was asked for. The problem with the Hagar character in this text, as we have already noted, is that she has no voice. To retrieve the latter, we have to try to reconstruct her story. It might be that she was informed of this right at the beginning of the contract when she was ‘bought’ as a handmaid. Unfortunately, we do not have details as to how she becomes part of Abram’s house: some scholars have suggested that she might have been acquired during Abraham’s Egyptian sojourn (Gn 12:10ff) though such claims have not been proved as objective historical fact (cf Waters 1991:196).

Tamez (1986:7-9) suggests that she could have been an 'apiri who sold herself to slavery due to extreme poverty. One thing certain is that in the present text, as against the E version of the story in Genesis 21, Hagar is not an ÑX (slave), she is a ÑN or a handmaid.

In 6:4, Hagar is actually a ÑN who is given to Abram as a wife (ÑX). It is
interesting to note with Teubal (1990:49-62) that in the book of Genesis, a woman who is given by a wife to her husband for child-bearing purposes, is always a נָןָן and never an נָוָ נ. If נָוָ נ is female slave or servant, then נָןָ נ is something else different from a slave or a servant. According to Teubal (1990:62), the term is best understood as meaning ‘companion’.

Hamilton (1990:446) notes that Hagar is one of three instances of concubine-wife in the book of Genesis where a man’s partner is both a נָוָ נ and an נָוָ נ. Genesis 16:3 calls Hagar Abram’s נָוָ נ while 25:6 calls her, as well as Keturah, Abraham’s נָוָ נ. This is unlike the rest of the Old Testament: where women are either wives or concubines. This may well indicate that the concubines of Abraham and Jacob were not נָוָ נ in the later sense of the word, but that no term was available for that type of concubinage, thus נָוָ נ and נָוָ נ were used as synonyms to describe these women in the patriarchal narratives.

In the light of the preceding analysis on the terminology used to describe Hagar’s relationship with Sarai and Abram in Genesis 16, I hesitate to accept a low view of Hagar. I hesitate to call her Sarai’s domestic as the text does not reveal any menial domestic tasks that she performs in the house of Sarai. The act of service she is doing in this narrative is that of someone who comes to save the situation for her barren mistress. In the light of this elevated status, I would agree with Teubal (1990) that the issue of her becoming a surrogate mother was probably well agreed upon. The Hagar character, as portrayed in this episode, does not seem to have been the type who could have allowed herself to be tossed around by another person. Hence her feelings of pride after realising that she was expectant and her courage to leave the house of oppression for an unknown desert. Unlike the patriarch Abram, who left Ur for an unknown country with divine assurance, this is not the case with the foreign woman of Genesis 16.

The practice of the provision of a substitute wife in cases of barrenness, reminds the African-South African woman reader of the same practice in our culture, a culture, which like that of ancient Israel, values children highly. It is interesting to note that barrenness in the Northern Sotho culture for example, is also viewed as something coming from Modimo (God; cf also Sarai’s remarks in v 2). In cases of a couple who did not have children, it was first established whether it was the woman or the man who was barren. In the case of a barren woman, the family would first enlist the help of traditional doctors to help remedy the situation. If the condition persisted, the family, with the consent of the barren woman, would get a substitute wife (thatswadirope literally, the one who washes the thighs) from the family of the woman. The to-be acquired wife would also come voluntarily to her sister’s in-laws’ family to come and bear children on behalf of her sister. She, like Hagar, is given as a wife and not as a concubine or slave. In that way, she manages to make the married life of her sister worth living. In this way also, one woman who might have faced the tortures of being viewed as ‘other’ by those who had children, becomes protected by her concerned next of kin. This is what we call botso, an African notion for humanness . . . I am because we are.

3 Foreignness

One other issue that attracts me as a mosadi reader is the fact that she appears as a foreigner in this text: Hagar the Egyptian, Hagar the North African woman. She was a stranger in that she was not a member of the chosen race. The Hebrews/Israelites are told to shun many groups. Different reasons are given in these texts. The Midianites are presented as people to be destroyed by Israel (Nm 25:6, 16f; 31:1-2). The harsh treatment of the Edomites by the Israelites is based on the grounds that they refused them permission to pass through their territory while on their way to Canaan (cf Waters 1991:204).

Strangers in Israel suffered discrimination. They were counted amongst the least important - widows, orphans and the poor. It is also disturbing to note that Hebrew solidarity extended only to the Hebrew race (cf Tamez 1986:8). Waters (1991:203) notes that it has been ascertained that there is an increasing tendency within the development of the Old Testament to look with disdain upon the peoples of Africa.

If this observation is correct, we may not wonder why the handmaid of Sarai comes from an outside group. It also makes sense in the light of the preceding assertion that she comes from Africa. It must however be noted that other non-Israelite races could also have slaves, it was not only the prerogative of the Israelites. We know fairly well that the Hebrews were once slaves in Egypt. One wonders what type of treatment Hagar would have received if she were a Hebrew slave. We can speculate that it might have been lighter than that inflicted upon the foreign Hagar. Tamez (1986:8) notes:
Foreign slaves remained slaves in perpetuity, whereas Hebrew slaves could recover their liberty in the Jubilee Year. Hagar was destined to serve Sarah till she died, unless her owners should decide to give her her liberty.

So we note in the Old Testament text the role ethnic differences played in the lives of the people and that of the Israelis in particular. In modern terms as Waters (1991) notes, we would speak of racism - a tendency for one race to discriminate against the other on the basis of racial differences. It is ironic that it is usually typical for the race that poses as superior to believe that it is closer to God than one which is deemed inferior.

The encounter between Hagar the Egyptian, Hagar the North African and the angel of God, may empower those of us who have been designated heathens, to know that Modimo’s (God’s) way of looking at issues is not necessarily similar to those of humans. God, the maker of us all, has a place for each of us, in God’s plan of salvation irrespective of our ethnicity, class, race, sex and so forth.

The Hagar-Sarai narrative may have a message to women in a relationship of power, a relationship in which the one woman wields more power than the other one. May these women know that human virtues, like respect for the other (for you are, just because I am - refer to the botho concept cited above), justice and love, are of much more value than the craving for power and all that goes with it. We have been created in the image of our Maker, yet differently, for a purpose. Our differences, rather than alienating us from one another, should arouse in our inner beings the desire to come closer to one another in order to form one united human humanity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY