Along a desert road, beside a remote, unnamed well, the angel of the Lord approaches a pregnant, abused, runaway slave named Hagar. The young woman has reached a breaking point. Wrapped in doubts and their own agenda, her masters, Abram and Sarai, had given her no choice but to become a surrogate mother to their child. Once she conceived, conflict arose between Hagar and Sarai. With Abram’s blessing, Sarai attacked Hagar with disproportionate cruelty, reasserting her position of power over her. Hagar was abused and mistreated so severely that she fled into the wilderness. Hagar’s life has now been irreversibly altered, and her future looks bleak. No doubt it surprises her that anyone—especially the angel of the Lord—would notice her.

How differently he speaks than her human masters! “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?” (Gen. 16:8). The Lord knows she is a slave, yet calls her by name. Surely it is strange to answer a personal question when she is accustomed to simply obeying instructions. Responding to the Lord’s question, Hagar jumps straight to her situation: “I’m running from my mistress Sarai” (Gen. 16:8). A woman in her position has no social or economic clout. Consequently, Hagar faces two undesirable options: return and suffer Sarai’s abuse, or brave the long road through the wilderness to Shur. The desert spreads in every direction. Hagar only sees dead ends, but the angel of the Lord sees another way.
The angel’s response sounds harsh, even cruel: “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” One cannot help but question—is God sending her back to submit to abuse? It is unlikely that a young, pregnant, runaway slave woman will survive the journey through the wilds of Canaan to a foreign land. Knowing this, God does not abandon Hagar in the wilderness to succumb to the elements, wild animals, or worse at the hands of other travelers. He profoundly values her and the child she is carrying. In the midst of hopelessness and desperation, God sees Hagar—the runaway, the slave, the victim of abuse.

The Lord offers a promise with the instruction to return to Abram and Sarai’s household: “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count” (Gen. 16:9). The meaning is abundantly clear—Hagar will live to see the birth of her child and reap a blessed future. Remarkably, God’s promise to the slave woman is similar to God’s promise to Abram: “a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir... Look up at the sky and count the stars... So shall your offspring be” (Gen. 15:4–5). Hagar will become the mother of a mighty nation whose people will be as numerous as the grains of sand in the desert.

The angel continues, revealing that Hagar will give birth to a son: “You shall name him Ishmael [meaning “God hears”], for the Lord has heard of your misery. He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers” (Gen. 16:11–12). No doubt, this is a questionable title for an unborn baby, but in biblical times as in present-day Israel, the wild ass evades harnesses and human domination. Ishmael will not be oppressed by slavery; he will be freer than free, entirely untamed.1 And considering that the laws of the day supported biological sons over surrogate sons, it is no surprise that Ishmael will live at odds with half-brothers, who will displace him from sole inheritance rights to Abraham’s estate. Ishmael’s life will not always be easy, but God will bless him. In the midst of a crisis pregnancy, God sees Hagar and her unborn child, and offers hope.

Hagar enters a relationship with God that reshapes her identity and her perspective of her circumstance. She is no longer just a slave, but an heir to God’s promise. There, beside the well, she proclaims, “You are the God who sees me... I have now seen the One who sees me” (Gen. 16:13). She names the Lord “the God Who Sees.” Hagar—the only person in Bible history to give a name to God—discovers that God sees and hears abused women.2 She spreads word of the God she has met beside the well. Her experience at the well becomes so widely known that, in time, the well comes to be called Beer Lahai Roi, meaning “spring of the living one who sees me.” Acting in faith, Hagar returns to Abram and Sarai’s household with a different perspective. Their household offers peace and provisions enough for her to safely carry and deliver her child, Ishmael. There is no serious conflict between Sarai and Hagar for the next fourteen years. Abraham, now known as Abraham, cares deeply for Ishmael, to the point of asking the Lord to allow the boy to be his promised son. He circumcises Ishmael, ensuring that the boy bears the sign of God’s covenant promise for generations to come. Abraham is content for Ishmael to carry forward God’s promise, but the birth of Isaac complicates matters.

After fourteen years, polygamous family dynamics reach a breaking point, and things get messy once again. Sarah draws a line when fourteen year-old Ishmael mocks the newly-weaned Isaac. “Get rid of that slave woman and her son,” she says, “for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac” (Gen. 21:10). Wavering about what to do, Abraham expels Hagar and Ishmael from the household, but only after God promises to make Ishmael’s descendants a nation. In the midst of a dysfunctional family, would God still see Hagar and Ishmael?

Cast out into the wilderness once again, Hagar feels abandoned by God. And this time there is no well; only dry sand. As the sun burns high and the water runs out, she leaves her son by a bush. She can’t bear to watch him die, so she walks a short distance away to mourn. But once again, God sees and hears. The angel 1, 2 For more on Hagar, Ishmael, and abuse, see CBE founder Catherine Clark Kroeger’s thoughts in “And Hagar Went Back: Responding to Abuse” in Christian Ethics Today, (Spring 2008). Find it at cbeinternational.org/Hagar.
of the Lord finds her and comforts her, “Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying... Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation” (Gen. 21:17–18). It is time for God to fulfill his promise. God opens Hagar’s eyes, and she sees a well of water. She fills the skin with water and carries it to her son. Both mother and child survive, and in an act of splendid redemption, God makes their descendants a great nation.

In the midst of profound despair, when all hope seems lost, God sees Hagar and keeps his promise.

Ultimately, Hagar’s story is more than the story of a slave and her son. It is a story of God’s care for those who have no earthly hope. On the heels of miserable treatment, perhaps at the hands of pious and religious people, abuse victims may be amazed to realize that they are not alone after all. In their most trying hours, they may discover the Lord whispering to them by name, intimately concerned for them. When they suffer because of events beyond their control, when they are cast out, and when they give up on life itself, they may be shocked that God hears their cries. When they experience setbacks, it may delight them to know that the Lord walks the winding path of recovery with them, and has promised new life in Christ.

There is a God who sees us amidst the messiness of life—whether we are victims of abuse or pregnant teenagers with nowhere to turn, whether we’ve been disowned by our families or we’ve given up hope. No matter what our situation, let us never lose hope in the promise that “in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Rom. 8:37). And most of all, let us remember that our God is the same God who saw Hagar in her distress. Ours is a God who sees.

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