Hagar and the Protestant Woman's Body:

How Can Storytelling Create Negative Self-Image?

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Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said 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." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. (Genesis 16:1-2)[1]

Genesis 16: 1-2 tells a story of two women whose primary purpose is to produce a son for Abraham, Sarah's husband. Theologians, pastors, and everyday Christians all interpret it in a variety of ways. Depending on the way in which they do so, I argue that this passage invokes in modern Protestant women, especially young women and women of color, a sense of bodily shame and negative self-worth. The story of Sarah and Hagar is especially applicable because of its intersectionality of race, gender, and class. Hagar holds a lower societal position than Sarah and Abraham, and this influences the way in which Hagar's body is viewed and used.

In order to examine how conservative interpretations of biblical stories like Hagar's influence women's perception of their bodies, one must review the different theologies surrounding the story of Hagar. The more traditional approach to the passage focuses more on Sarah and her infertility. In this approach, Hagar plays the role of a side character. In recent years, feminist and womanist (Black feminist) scholars have begun to look at the story of Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar from a new perspective.

These scholars see Genesis 16:1-2 as a story of oppression and relate it to modern questions such as those of surrogacy and intersectionality. Marianne Kartzow has contributed to the conversation about Hagar through her discussions about reproductive slavery and surrogacy. Kartzow states that at the time, "the most serious and frequent disability for women was infertility," and we see this as Sarah struggles to bear a child.[2] Kartzow then illuminates how the

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[1] Gen. 16:1-2 NRSV

[2] Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, "Reproductive Capital and Slave Surrogacy: Thinking about/with/beyond Hagar," in *Bodies, Borders, Believers*, ed. Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, Anne Hege Grung, Anna Rebecca Solevåg (Cambridge:The Lutterworth Press, 2016), 402.

importance of fertility motivates Sarah to tell her husband Abraham to "go in to" her slave Hagar. Kartzow claims that "they did not have surrogacy and IVF as we have, but they had female slaves, owned bodies that could contribute to whatever the owners needed, including the production of children."[3] Theologians, pastors, and Sunday school teachers have traditionally painted Sarah as the victim of infertility later blessed by God. However, this type of interpretation centers Hagar as the victim of slavery who ultimately provides for Sarah and Abraham.

Furthermore, Kartzow illuminates her interpretation of Genesis 16 through a New Testament verse, 1 Timothy 2:15, which states: "Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty."[4] 1 Timothy 2:15 argues that women find their worth and salvation through childbirth. Kartzow connects this verse to the story of Sarah and Hagar, who also find worth through childbirth. She claims that "it is the slaveholding women who are saved through their slave-girls' reproductive work."[5] While Sarah may ultimately be saved, Hagar is left in the dark. She fulfilled her purpose, but lost her autonomy at the same time.

Through this focus on Hagar, Kartzow takes a modern and intersectional approach to the biblical story, including themes of feminism, race (Hagar was Egyptian and a foreigner), and class. Kartzow states that "to be a woman is one thing: a woman in biblical times who is also a slave both experiences and is categorised completely differently from a freeborn or privileged woman."[6] In order to look at the issue of Hagar, one must acknowledge the role intersectionality

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[3] Kartzow, "Reproductive Capital,"406.
[4] Marianne Bjelland Kartzow, "Reproductive Salvation and Slavery: Reading 1 Timothy 2:15 with Hagar and Mary," *Neotestamentica* 50, no. 1 (2016): 89.
1 Timothy 2:15 NRSV.
[5] Kartzow, "Reproductive Salvation," 95.
[6] Kartzow, "Reproductive Salvation," 92.

has. To only focus on Hagar's female identity and the issues that arise from it would ignore the other power structures at play.

Like Kartzow, theologian Musa W. Dube takes a feminist approach to the passage. Dube examines how the story of Sarah and Hagar prioritizes men and their interests. Dube observes that "it does not occur to Sarah that Abraham may be the cause of their lack of children. This is in line not only with many other biblical stories, but the social thinking of many societies – that is, infertility is usually associated with women."[7] By assuming that Sarah is barren and not Abraham, one creates a misogynist narrative, demonstrating how Abraham holds a position of power. While Sarah also holds a position of power as a slaveholder, she continues to be an oppressed member of society. Furthermore, Dube claims that because Abraham needed Sarah to produce a son, "power is hardly in the hands of Sarah, despite the presentation of the story."[8] We can also see the importance of producing a son when Sarah and Abraham force Hagar and her son Ishmael to leave, and "Abraham is grieved, not for Hagar, but for Ishmael, his son."[9] In Sarah and Hagar's story, men are prioritized, and women exist to serve those men.

There is already much research surrounding Christian women's self esteem, body image, and sexuality. For example, scholar Heather Jacobson draws on prior research finding that Christians tend to view their body more negatively when they believe the body and soul are separate, and that the world and body are both "inherently evil."[10] This belief is called radical dualism. On the other hand, Christians who view their bodies as "worthy and acceptable in God's

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[7] Musa W. Dube, "Religion, Race, Gender and Identity" in *Biblical Studies, Theology, Religion and Philosophy*, ed. James N. Amanze, F. Nkomazana, O. N. Kealotswe (Kenya: Zapf Chancery Publishers Africa Ltd, 2010), 109.
[8] Dube, "Religion," 111.
[9] Dube, "Religion," 110.
[10] Heather L. Jacobson et al., "Temple or Prison: Religious Beliefs and Attitudes Toward the Body", *Journal of Religion and Health* 55, no. 6 (2016): 2155.

eyes" are more likely to have positive self-esteem.[11] The authors conclude that a radical dualistic view increases feelings of bodily shame. This radical dualism relates to the way the women's presence in Genesis 16 can be interpreted (even if it is not how it *should* be interpreted): as vessels for a more important being, and not as important beings themselves.

In addition to beliefs of radical dualism, scholars have found that the church influences body and self image as well. Sonya Sharma explores the impact of the Protestant community on young women in "Young Women, Sexuality and Protestant Church Community." Sharma claims that Protestant teachings present a very limited view of sexuality for women despite the fact that many young women in the Church feel a strong sense of community. This contributes to a duality of both empowerment and oppression. Sharma finds that "young women discussed the sense of being monitored by others, self-scrutiny and not disclosing sexual events for fear of being judged."[12] The community among women serves a double edged sword: it "gives them a form of femininity that can offer a structure they desire in the face of mainstream femininity," but also provides harsh accountability that leaves women unsure of their sexuality and worth.[13]

In a church community that empowers and oppresses women at the same time, the women must find a way to justify that oppressive behavior. Sociologists John P. Bartkowski and John P. Hoffman explore the ways Protestant women view both the bible and gender in "Gender, Religious Tradition, and Biblical Literalism." They describe how women who support gender traditionalism do so in response to beliefs in biblical inerrancy. Bartkowski and Hoffman argue that "women are relatively more inclined than men to embrace a literalist ideology in patriarchal religious organizations," and that women adopt this literalist ideology in response to their lack of

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[11] Jacobson et al., "Temple or Prison," 2156.
[12] Sonya Sharma, "Young Women, Sexuality and Protestant Church Community," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 15, no. 4 (November 2008): 351.
[13] Sharma, "Young Women," 353.

leadership roles at church.[14] On the other hand, men are able to conform to patriarchal standards simply because of the strength of their denominational affiliation, according to Bartkowski and Lynn M. Hempel in later research.[15] These findings are particularly important to the discussion I present here. Because women in conservative Protestant churches often interpret the Bible literally, they might interpret the story of Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar to mean that their value is solely in how they serve the patriarchy (ie, through producing sons).

Given this prior research and conversation, I argue that the traditional interpretation of Genesis 16:1-2 is an example of a harmful theology for Protestant women. Male centered stories like that of Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar can influence how Protestant women view their bodies and purpose. Young women and women of color are especially vulnerable to these theologies. The story of Hagar does not only prioritize men, it prioritizes those of the upper class and members of a national majority as well. Hagar is not a member of any of these groups. In order to examine how the story of Hagar can illuminate the negative body and self image many Protestant women feel, one must dissect the story itself. My analysis of Genesis 16:1-2 will demonstrate how Abraham's possession and control over the women is central to the passage, and how both Sarah and Hagar experience struggles rooted in gender.

The passage immediately relies on ideas of gender roles and possession when it introduces Sarah as "Abram's wife."[16] This label at the very beginning of the verse places Sarah under the ownership and control of Abraham: she is not simply Sarah but Sarah, wife of Abraham. Genesis 16:1 presents a common biblical concept that continues today in which

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[14] John P. Hoffman and John P. Bartkowski. "Gender, Religious Tradition and Biblical Literalism," *Social forces* 86, no. 3 (2008): 1.
[15] John P. Bartkowski and Lynn M. Hempel, "Sex and Gender Traditionalism Among Conservative Protestants: Does the Difference Make a Difference?," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 4 (2009): 805.
[16] Gen. 16:1 NRSV.

women are property of their husbands. Despite the commonality of this concept, its immediate use in this particular story shows the importance of gender to the narrative, and how Abraham holds the power throughout the story.

After the verse introduces Sarah as Abraham's wife, the verse states that she "bore him no children."[17] This continues the idea that Sarah is Abraham's property, and that she functions and lives for his benefit. If Sarah were to bear children, they would be Abraham's, not hers. The wording of the verse demonstrates this, as well as the focus on Sarah's childbearing *for* Abraham. The verse does not say that she could not bear children for herself, but that she could not give *him* children. The emphasis on her failure to produce a son for Abraham positions her as unable to serve her husband, and as a result, failing her primary task as a wife. Wording like this contributes to the idea that women exist to serve men, in this case through providing her husband with a child (preferably a male heir to Abraham's line and legacy).

After establishing Sarah as Abraham's wife who has yet to fulfill her primary role as child bearer, Genesis 16:1 introduces Hagar. Hagar serves Sarah as her "Egyptian slave girl."[18] Previous literature discusses the importance of these three different identities Hagar is labeled with: her race and nationality (Egyptian), her class (slave), and her gender (female). Hagar reflects the intersectionality of race, gender, and class found in Genesis 16:1-2, and she clearly belongs to a lower position in society than Sarah, and especially Abraham. While I focus on the role gender plays in this story, Hagar's belonging to different classes and nationalities largely influences the expectations and roles Sarah and Abraham place upon her. Among these three categories, Sarah and Hagar only share the same gender identity.

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[17] Gen. 16:1 NRSV.
[18] Gen. 16:1 NRSV.

Continuing into the second verse of Genesis 16, Sarah tells Abraham that "the Lord has prevented me from bearing children."[19] This verse may not directly contribute to the portrayal of gender in this story, but it adds God as an acting character. Sarah may simply be infertile due to her age, but she labels this infertility as God's doing and desire. There is also the chance that Sarah blames her infertility on the Lord as a way to keep herself from feeling shame. The discussion surrounding the gender (or lack thereof) of God is robust, but if we consider God as male, as many conservative churches do, this is another instance of male dominance over the female body in the passage. In addition, God's role adds another layer to the issue of infertility which many women face. Is infertility, which occurs often among women especially in biblical times, something God's doing causes directly? While this is a deeply theological question, it leads to the question of why God might prevent (or in the case of Sarah, delay) childbirth, one of women's primary purposes according to the same scripture.

Given the background of Sarah's infertility, she continues on to tell Abraham to "go in to my slave-girl, may it be that I shall obtain children by her."[20] The use of "go in to" results in a one-sided portrayal of sex. It creates an image of Abraham forcing himself upon, and "in to" Hagar, while she is forced to submit, due to her position as an "Egyptian slave girl." Hagar loses her bodily autonomy through these words and through the actions that follow. Of course, this verbiage may result from an issue of mistranslation, but nevertheless, it is what modern churches read and what, I argue, contributes towards the Protestant woman's body and self image. When the Bible depicts sex as a one-sided action for the benefit of the man and not the woman, it constricts women's point of view regarding the purpose of sex and of their own purpose. Furthermore, Sarah's claim that she "shall obtain children by [Hagar]" promotes the narrative

[19] Gen. 16:2 NRSV.
[20] Gen. 16:2 NRSV.

that Hagar's body is not her own, and that Hagar's purpose is to provide children for Sarah, Abraham, and God.[21]

Hagar's problem helps to convey the modern Protestant woman's lack of positive self image. When women are more likely to trust in biblical inerrancy, biblical stories in which female bodies serve men will continue to push the narrative that the woman's body does not exist for the woman herself, but as a vessel to serve male interests. Released from this obligation, women might be able to view their bodies from a positive point of view, and as a gift from God. Prior scholarly conversation and research shows how Protestant women often struggle with these issues of body image due to feeling monitored by their communities, and that beliefs centering the body as a vessel are more likely to result in negative self image.[22]

Hagar's story illustrates how these beliefs are formed, and how they reduce women's bodily autonomy. While this conversation is illuminating and certainly productive for the modern day Protestant community, it must be held while keeping Hagar herself in mind: let us not lower her autonomy further by reducing her to an academic conversation. The impact of harmful theology has real effects in the present day, just as it did in Hagar's time.

In order to keep these harmful theologies from continuing, we can look to womanist scholars such as Delores Williams for new perspectives of Hagar's story. Delores Williams wrote Sisters in the Wilderness, which compares Hagar's experience to that of African American women.[23] Williams also looks not only to Hagar's victimhood, but also to her strength, survival, and role as the matriarch of a new tribe, as read in Genesis 16:10.[24] Furthermore, Hagar is the

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[21] Gen. 16:2 NRSV.
[22] Sharma, "Young Women," 351.
Hoffman, "Gender, Religious Tradition and Biblical Literalism," 1.
[23] Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk* (New York: Orbis Books, 1993).
[24] Ellen Wondra, "Review of: *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk*, by Delores Williams," *Anglican Theological Review* 77, no. 1.

only person in the Bible to give God a name (Genesis 16:13).[25] While theologians and churchgoers can read Hagar as a side character or a victim, we can also read her as a character of strength and determination. Perhaps, instead of negating the importance of the story, one should instead focus on the verses that follow Genesis 16:1-2 to draw inspiration and to find a story still worth reading after thousands of years.

Genesis 16:10 NRSV.

[25] Genesis 16:13 NRSV.

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Gen. 16:1-2 NRSV.

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