Hagar's New Religion

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Can the Middle East conflict be understood? If it can, a likely starting point is the story of Ishmael. The early split between Isaac and Ishmael lives again in the argument over who owns the Promised Land. Ishmael was disinherited, but his progeny are there today, and they complain that the return to the Land of Isaac's descendants is unfair and criminal.

In the Christian interpretation, Ishmael is Abraham's "Plan B"—in case the promised birth should be too difficult for God. As such, he is the personification of "human religion," in which humans try to win approval by religious effort—in case God should not be good enough to save us as a gift. Human religion works against the gospel and violates the real intent of *Torah,* as Christians see it, which is that humans can do nothing to achieve righteousness, and that our attempts to do so are an affront to God.

This message is mightily resisted by the fallen human spirit, and one manifestation is Islam's fight against the Christian gospel and the Jewish Zionism. Both fights are energized by religious guilt, which human religion never overcomes. Guilt within is shifted to others and becomes blame and condemnation. This deadly energy goes so far as to produce thousands of people willing to die and kill in the cause of resistance to the religions and power of the West.

There are other resistances to the power and plan of God, and this is where things get complicated. I have spent most of the decade since 9-11 thinking and writing about how the Ishmael story explains the conflict, but there have been surprises. One is that the liberals and leftists of the West tend to join the Islamist war on Jews, Christians and the West, at least with a sympathy vote. This is easy to observe but difficult to put into a theory. The second surprise is that the Islamists and Muslims in general believe in God and his divine standards, so it is hard to see that they are resisting the power of God. They believe even in submission, the meaning of *islam*, but they have not submitted to God's plan for the Jews, nor to the fact that they cannot save themselves.

These become just one problem if we ask, What do the liberals and the Islamists have in common, given that they are so different on the surface? The answer is that they both are resisting the power of God, but one through humanistic secularism and the other through human religion. Both are humanistic, but Muslims do not appear to be so. This brings up again the second surprising problem, How can Muslims work against God while being deeply theistic in their world view and practice?

Facing this problem, I found myself using the phrase, "alternative transcendence." The liberals, with their postmodern positions, do not believe in transcendence, that is, Truth and moral absolutes, nor a divine will for history, while Muslims do. But if they still are more alike than different, then the "Transcendent" of the Muslims must be a different thing than the "Transcendent" to whom Jews and the Christians bow, which the liberal West rejects. This difference shows also because the God of the Bible chose to preserve and restore Israel, while the Muslims think this is a huge mistake, their catastrophe.

The problem, then, is to get wisdom on how the Muslims ventured into their new kind of transcendence that supports their objection to the Gospel and Zionism. The story is in Genesis 16 and 21, and I call it "Hagar's New Religion." For me, this is not an event in ancient history, although there is a real connection between the story of Ishmael and the identity of the Arabs. Instead, it is a revealed therapeutic analysis of the Middle East problem, brought out in a closely detailed look at the scripture. It is forced upon us, in fact, by difficulties in the text that lead to an interpretation quite different from what has so far been offered.

Ishmael is the main character, but he has no speaking part in Genesis, and we know the story through his mother, Hagar. She was Sarah's Egyptian handmaid, and infertile Sarah proposed to get a child through her, so Abraham and Hagar produced Ishmael. But when she became pregnant Hagar had scorn for her barren mistress, and Sarah complained to Abraham, who passively let her do as she pleased. She was harsh with Hagar, who ran away. The angel of God accosted Hagar and asked her where she was coming from and where she was going. She

said she was running away from her mistress, and he sent her back; he also named her unborn child, Ishmael, or "God Hears." He said that Ishmael would struggle with his kinsmen. (Gen. 16.11,12) Hagar then made a statement we will examine closely below, because it shows us the alternative transcendence operating in the Middle East conflict.

In Genesis 21, Isaac has been born and weaned, and at the celebration young Ishmael is seen mocking Isaac. We now have two instances of how the power of the flesh, cultivated by human religion, lacks respect for the power of the Spirit. But Sarah objected again to Abraham, and after talking to God he reluctantly put Hagar and Ishmael out of the household. This is where Paul gives his allegorical application and says that—as I would put it—*human religion* cannot inherit with *divine promise*. (Gal. 4.21-31) But Hagar and Ishmael are rescued by God and shown the well that will sustain them. Islam celebrates this rescue in the ritual of the Hajj.

This story is usually taken as showing the mercy of God. She was privileged as a woman and a slave to have God speak to her, and especially as an Egyptian, since Egypt becomes a symbol of captivity to sin. And she survived the face-to-face encounter, which ranks her with Moses and a few others as great recipients of the grace of God. I think scripture works at many levels, so this passage does deliver an encouragement to the downtrodden. But there is a more serious side to it. Hagar is not an innocent victim; she flees the household of Sarah due to mistreatment brought on by her own contempt for her barren mistress. Hagar the Egyptian is symbolically associated with human strength, and that strength gives birth to contempt for the barren Sarah, who waits for God's promise. The pattern repeats when Ishmael mocks the young Isaac, who is the Promise fulfilled. This is the warfare of the flesh against the spirit; the son born in the ordinary way is persecuting the son born by the Spirit, as Paul said in Galatians 4:28.

When the angel of God finds Hagar running away, he asks, "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" (16:8 RSV) The two-part question suggests that what Hagar is running *from* is important, that she is *reacting*, and then that she does not know the results of her choice (where she is going), so she should return. Since this is the parting of the cousins now interacting in the Middle East, it could be taken as an admonition to the Arabs that the Jews

really do have the answer. Although they are not missionaries, the Jews claim to have *Torah*, God's message to the world. So if Hagar is figuratively departing from *Torah*, then she is something more than a victim of mistreatment. She is reacting against God's way of treating the human race, but justifying it as her response to mistreatment. She is like a rebellious child, justifying herself by blaming her parents.

The angel of the LORD tells Hagar that she is pregnant with a son who will become a great nation fraught with conflict. The name means "God Hears" and is given because "the LORD has heard of your misery." The reference for "your misery" is Hagar's alienated condition, and the promise of being heard looks forward also to the later rescue of mother and son, when God will hear their cries. Immediately following is the historical prophecy: "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 [or to the east of] all his brothers." (Gen. 16:11,12 NIV)

The promise is that historical Ishmaelites, the Arab Muslims of our time, will be heard regarding their affliction in the conflicts they experience. The *kinder, gentler* reading of the story in which Hagar receives a great mercy can be applied to our time. But this interpretation does not remove the negative statement about conflict. If Israelis speaking today of the "Ishmaelim" among them really thought that God hears the cries of the Palestinians, their hearts might be softened toward them, and this, of course, is what the world largely thinks should happen, especially with the sympathy vote coming from the Left. Yet the promise of being heard by God carries with it a tough-love kind of accountability. Conservative commentators find that Palestinians have a cultivated sense of victimhood, and this dysfunctional response could be put on the table by a stern but loving God.

There are two textual reasons for seeing Ishmael and Hagar in this not so innocent way. First, the account of the conversation and Hagar's response to it is full of difficulties for the translators. It simply is not clear what happened to Hagar and how she responded. Secondly, her response is unlike that of any other biblical character and has serious theological results.

The difficulty affecting translators comes in Genesis 16:13, after God's words about Ishmael and the nation he will become. The New Jewish Publication Society version reads, "And she called the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are El-roi,' by which she meant, 'Have I not gone on seeing after He saw me!'" But the JPS notes, regarding the last part of the verse, that the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain. It is hesitant on the first part, too, leaving the Hebrew *El-roi* untranslated and adding in a note, "Apparently 'God of Seeing'."

The New International Version reads: "She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.'" The next verse says that the well was called *Beer Lahai Roi*, "the well of the living one that sees me." But a note adds that she may have said "I have now seen *the back of* the One who sees me." (my emphasis)

The Robert Alter translation reads this way: "And she called the name of the Lord who had addressed her, 'El-Roi,' for she said, 'Did I not go on seeing here after He saw me?' Therefore is the well called Beer-Lahai-Roi . . .." Here the possible "seen the back of" becomes the fact that she goes on seeing (she lives) *after* he saw her. The Everett Fox translation says the same thing but turns it into a question: "Have I actually gone on seeing here after his seeing me?"

The English Standard Version (ESV) has, "So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are a God of seeing,' for she said, 'Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.'" The "looks after me" would no doubt be misleading if taken as the idiom that means "cares for me"; it must be more literal than that and remains strangely unclear. It gets worse in the note, where the editors give the Hebrew as "Have I really seen him here who sees me? or Would I have looked here for the one who sees me?"

The English versions group themselves as saying three possible things. She has lived after seeing God, which commentators seem to prefer as the message. Or there is a question, and she *may have* seen him, which is most clear in the RSV: "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" This question could also be about whether she really has gone on seeing, that is, whether she has survived. The KJV has it this way: "Have I also here looked after him

that seeth me?" But the temporal "after" could also be spatial, which is the third possible reading, as in the NIV: she has "seen the back of" him. Young's Literal Translation gives us both the question and the spatial sense: "Even here have I looked behind my beholder?"

When scripture notes give alternate readings they can both be important, but this seems a special case, because the obscurity is remarkable. It is like a burst of static in the revelation. But if scripture is controlled by a sovereign God, word by word, then even this severe problem is part of the data being offered to us. One could surmise that the Spirit overseeing this knew that we could use the nice message about downtrodden Hagar but would need someday to dig deeper to ask, What has really gone on here?

Lest we think that scripture is always wide open to interpretation, consider the very similar story in Genesis 32. Jacob wrestles with an angel and has his name changed to *Israel*, and he calls the place *Peniel*, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared." There is no note from the translators, and you can read it in a dozen English versions and find no significant difference. So why did God cloud this other encounter in textual mystery?

I suggest that Hagar did not have a clear encounter with the God of the Bible. She was running from mistreatment by her mistress, whom she had scorned as barren, and she had a divine encounter, but she walked away with an unclear picture of the interaction. She gave God a name, *El-roi*, "the God who sees me," but the explanation for this name is based on her words about seeing God or having been seen by him, and those words are obscure. The Hebrew has no clear translation. It appears that Hagar had an experience that she herself did not understand, which therefore could not be put clearly into words.

The attempted translations give us glimpses into her experience. She thought she had seen God, but she is not sure she saw him, or not sure she is still alive—although her doubt here is more like an exclamation: *Am I really still alive?* So she is experiencing exultation mixed with uncertainty or confusion. But then she may have seen the *back* of God, that is, God turning away. This is the important reading, I believe, but it leads in several directions.

The Adam Clarke Commentary, of two centuries ago, remarks on how obscure and widely interpreted this clause is, but also suggests the reading, "Have I here also seen the LATTER PURPOSES or DESIGNS of him who seeth me?" Clarke points to her prophetic knowledge of Ishmael's future, which makes sense at the literal level, because Hagar was promised a future for him. It works in an esoteric sense, too: through a laborious historical process, the Ishmael identity is meant to show humans their true position with regard to transcendent power. This goes beyond the experience of a person and speaks of what the text is showing us today, the "latter purposes" that are the long term divine intent in the Ishmael narrative.

Clarke finds this "latter purposes" idea in the Hebrew word *acharey*, which is the source of the ambiguity about seeing "after" and seeing "behind." The word also appears in Exodus 33.23, where God tells Moses he cannot see his face, "for man shall not see me and live." God places Moses in the "cleft of the Rock," which Christians take as a Messianic allusion, while his glory passes by, and Moses is allowed only to see God's back. (Ex. 33:20-23)

The parallel to Moses may show that Hagar was specially blessed and elevated from her low position, as with the popular reading; she joins Moses in that small group of those who have seen God and lived. But it may also signal a dangerous kind of closeness, as with a counterfeit, since Moses brought the *Torah*, while the religion that will appear in remembrance of Hagar and Ishmael will honor Moses but have its own law. This is human religion and Muhammad is a second law-giver, but the law is no longer *Torah*. It is an accommodation of the human spirit in a revised theism that lacks the stumbling block of the cross.

Seeing the back of God could mean being in the place of Moses, but since Moses was hidden in the cleft of the rock, which is symbolic of Messiah, Hagar by herself is on shaky ground. She could be thinking that she saw the back of God, but she would have to be hidden in the cleft of the Rock, and there is no mention here of *him*.

Given the problems with putting Hagar in Moses' shoes, it makes more sense that she has experienced a *different* God. Taking the simple NIV reading, with its alternative inserted, "I have seen [the back of] the One who sees me," we could say that Hagar is experiencing a god

who does indeed pay attention to her, but he is a construct of her traumatic experience of rejection, first when Abraham allowed Sarah to chase her away, and then when Abraham at Sarah's request and with God's permission sent her and her son away. She has seen, as it were, a *shadow* of God, the memory of his rejection.

We fallen humans live every one in the natural condition of feeling unaccepted. When we try to find the strength to win approval we are rebuffed, as with Ishmael and his mother. If we could conceive of a God who does hear us, and who does honor us in our attempts to earn his approval, then we could exult in the God who has *finally* heard us in our misery. But since there is no repentance in this conception, it does not address and cannot heal the alienation caused by our defensive attempt to live by our own strengths. We remain alienated, but we somehow construct a god who feels sorry for us, as we feel he always should have done.

This new god, then, is the god of the rejected. The construct derives emotionally from Hagar's harsh treatment by Sarah, but she does not admit that she was wrong to boast in her natural strength over barren Sarah. She is judged for her attitude, but she just feels wronged. And then Abraham rejects her, again manifesting the sound judgment of scripture that the enslaving principle of human religion cannot inherit the blessing. To her it is not judgment, but rejection, and in this she represents the defensive soul of humankind. "Seeing the back of him" is Hagar's memory of Abraham, her husband and lord, walking away from her and her helpless son in the desert. This is the psychological starting place of Islamism.

The second textual reason for making Hagar a villain in this story is that she named God *El-roi*, "the God who sees me." The encounter sounds at first like others in the Bible, where patriarchs see God face to face and live, setting up monuments and giving meaningful names to the places. And so Hagar is seen as an Egyptian woman and slave receiving extraordinary grace. *But no other Bible character gives God a name*. All the others name places because of their encounter with God, or they get new names from God, but none of them gives God a name.

Surprised at this fact, I looked around and found it confirmed in biblical scholarship, but no one seems to have found it important. But for Hagar to have named God, as no one else in the Bible has done, makes her either a great figure or a person making a great and far-reaching mistake.

Giving God a name is an attempt to have power over him. Since the real God can never be overpowered, giving him a name is constructing an idol, an idea of God in which we humans do retain or regain some of our power. We construe God in such a way that we can satisfy his requirements and keep our pride intact, but this becomes a construct, a psychological process in which an idea "comes alive" for us. My claim about Hagar is that *El-roi* is an experience in which what appears to be God is *seeing* her in her misery, while not bringing her to conviction of sin, but excusing her. He becomes her justification in her complaint, and this is the alternative transcendence that anchors Islamism.

The problem of naming God is very serious in Judaism. Moses did not try to give God a name. He only asked to be given one, and he was. Moses was *barefoot* — disempowered —and on holy ground, facing divine *unapproachability*. He was told, "I am that I am," or, more forcibly, "I will be who I will be." This has a "hands-off" tone to it. "You cannot name me in such a way that gives you any hope of being in control of who I will be in your life! I will be who I will be!" (Ex. 3:14)

Many Jews will not pronounce this name at all. Some will address "*Hashem*," which means "the Name." They can refer to "the Tetragrammaton" and might spell it out audibly, but the actual pronunciation is considered to be unknown, and thus out of extreme respect it is *unpronounceable*. Most English Bibles have "LORD" where the tetragrammaton exists, and some use the Hebrew "ADONAI." Many Jews also will not write out the word 'God' but will substitute 'G-d' out of extreme respect for the Name.

Given that Hagar is the only person in scripture who gives God a name, and given that Judaism will not even pronounce the Name that G-d gave himself when Moses *asked* for a name,

I find it plausible that Hagar represents an unhealthy deviation from biblical theism. We have an idea what that deviation is, because we have this story about rejection. Humans feel rejected by God, and we invent a god who, rather than showing us the reason for rejection and the way to be saved from it, shows himself as the god who understands our discontent and is with us in our fight against the unfairness of their situation. The "God hears" of Ishmael's name becomes dysfunctional as, "God sees me in my unfair treatment." This sanctifies the process of passing blame to others and honors our status as victim.

Guilt run deep in the human psyche, and shifting the blame is a popular way to feel accepted. *The God Who Sees Me* sees me as a victim, and as a victim I am on the right side of the moral question; I am the good guy, and *they* are the bad, so I am justified. Hagar could easily slip into this error, since there was the promise of being heard. But God said she should return to Sarah and *submit* to her, and his diagnosis of her problem was *convicting*; so she misheard him and concluded that he had seen and approved her as she was, rebellion included. Her scorning of barren Sarah and Ishmael's mocking of the child of promise—these are part of what is now approved and given a life of its own. This is Hagar's new religion.

In the terms of this story, which is really a teaching about present human experience, Hagar has created a God of the Rejected. God's affirmation and upholding of the weak is crucial in biblical thought, but when humans *employ* that character trait to empower themselves, then the name has been carried off and enlisted into a dysfunctional fixation on how one or one's group has been wronged. The one who sees how we have been wronged is not the same as the one who hears of our misery, because our misery could be caused by us and healing might require repentance. But to be seen and affirmed *as wronged* is to be vindicated without repentance. The risk is that we are being affirmed by an egocentric facsimile of divine justice. This "god who sees me" is *my perception* of the justice of *my cause*. It empowers the fight of the human spirit against the power of God, which is visible in Palestine's "shaking off" (*intifada*) and those who support it.

In both parts of this story (Genesis 16 and 21), we hear of the *Well*. First an existing well is named Well-of-the-Living-One-who-Sees-Me (*Beer Lahai Roi*), based on the name Hagar gave to God (*El-roi*). It symbolizes a sustaining and yet unhealthy source for people who are seeing themselves as victims. It gives drink to that *need-to-be-seen* thirst, but it does not lead to genuine satisfaction of the real need, though most will see it as divine provision. In the second part of the story, the well is revealed to Hagar by the angel of God, and this saves Hagar and Ishmael from death. This is the well Muslims remember during the Hajj. Both parts of the story, then, are usually read as showing a distressed woman and child receiving help.

But we have seen already the difficult cracks in the story, and there are odd details in Genesis 21 that suggest, again, a hidden pathology being signaled here. Ishmael is about sixteen years old when he and Hagar are sent out of Abraham's household, and yet the text says that Abraham put a skin of water *and the boy* into her hands. I have seen a painting in which Ishmael appears to weigh about forty pounds and lies limply across her shoulder. Rabbinic literature suggests somewhere that he was ill due to the "evil eye" of Sarah upon him! Translators and commentators tend to skirt around this anomaly, but in any case, when Ishmael and his mother get to the place where the well will appear, she places him limply on the ground—in the King James version she "cast the child under one of the shrubs"—and goes away the distance of a bow shot and turns away, so she will not see him die. But how are we to understand this strangely lifeless state of Ishmael?

Hagar then begins to cry, but God hears *Ishmael's* cry. Most versions say this plainly, while some modify it, with support from the Septuagint, to say that Ishmael has cried out. Hagar is then told to go to him and lift him up and support him with her hand. Then the well is revealed, they drink, and Ishmael comes alive. He grows up and becomes an archer, and his mother gets him a wife from Egypt.

Anyone with a psychoanalytic bent could have a field day with these strange details. To me the story reiterates how Hagar has brought to life a new thing. She *saw* this god who *sees her* in her victimhood, and she then took her lifeless son, the fruit of Abraham's wrong choice and

the symbol of religious self-effort—"dead works"—and dragged him to this place where the well of victimhood could revive him. She gave up on him and turned away and wept. *She* wept, but God heard *him*; he came alive in her tears. She then picks him up and with her hands *shapes* him into the living evidence that we humans are victims of God. So Ishmael comes alive and grows into a powerful man and a great nation, but with victimhood stirred into him and serving as the source of his energy.

Two provisos are important as I end. First, there is a positive reading of the "God Hears" promise. God said to Hagar, "Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad *where he is*." In the *Complete Jewish Bible* the words are, "God has heard the voice of the boy *in his present situation*." (21:17, my emphasis) God *hears* Ishmael in that he knows the truth about what Ishmael represents. He knows what is growing out of the soil of rejection. And he knows the historical role that Ishmael will play, bringing the problem before the world. None of this says that cultivated victimhood is excused, vindicated, or glorified, only that it is what Ishmael will experience. Yet he is not a tragic figure, like Judas, because the promise of a convicting encounter with the real God lies ahead.

Secondly, the problem on view here—the idolatry of human religions—exists all over the map, not just in Islam. It is in Judaism as practiced and in most historical expressions of Christianity. I claim only that Islam is a clear case of human religion, for they do not pretend to be anything else. And this is politically visible, as if Islamism were the vehicle through which the whole world is being forced see the problem. Some might ask, Does this mean that *Allah* is not God? But what we call him is not the real issue. The question, faced by religious people everywhere, is whether we have reduced "God" or "Allah" to a set of humanly manageable practices, rather than bowing before him as the Living God.