

Searching for Hagar

By: Charles McCollough, Ph.D.

How these sculptures came to be

This project of creating 12 terra cotta relief sculptures for the seminary classroom where the Hebrew Bible is taught was recommended by the Arts Committee chaired by Heather Elkins, Professor of Worship, Preaching and the Arts and authorized by Dean Maxine Beach.

McCollough began the work in September 2007 by actively participating in the introductory lectures and seminars on the Hebrew Bible taught by Professor Danna Nolan Fewell. He focused on the assigned readings in Genesis chapters 16, 21, and 25 which tell the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac. He got to know students in the class and eventually asked some of them to pose as models for the sculptures. The students enthusiastically agreed and provided many visual ideas for the pieces as they assumed the postures and expressions of the biblical figures in each scene. The pieces were completed in September 2008 and installed in room 101 in January 2009.

The Art Committee suggested a focus on Hagar because of her neglect, and even abuse, throughout Christian history (see Galatians 4:24-5) This attention to Hagar models respect for the Islamic tradition which considers Hagar to be the Mother of Islam. This attention to her presence in the biblical story also critiques a tradition of interpretation that is patriarchal, and kyriarchial, imposing a non-African bias on the texts. For these reasons, ten of the twelve sculptures contain images of Hagar in which she is presented in a primary light.

As sculptures were sketched in clay, photos of them were reviewed by students and the finished pieces were often shared in Professor Fewell's class.

(Donna Powel poses as Hagar naming God as El-roi, the God of seeing.)



Descriptions of the Sculptural Images

Sarai offers Hagar to Abram gesturing with her left hand and clutching Hagar aggressively with her right hand. Sarai is thin and older; but as Abram's wife, she is dominant and relatively well off. She wears shoes, whereas Hagar as a slave is barefooted.



Hagar is presented positively carrying out a useful task, preparing to milk a goat. She and the goat express her innocence and vulnerability.

Abram is larger and dominates the scene as the privileged patriarch even though the drama is between Sarai and Hagar. He holds the "shield" of Yahweh, (See Genesis 15:01) who is the source and being of the image and story, and literally the ground that holds the images of the relief sculpture. But Abram is torn between the women, trying to see both sides. He holds onto his God with one hand but willingly reaches for Hagar with the other. He accepts Sarai's offer of Hagar. As a slave Hagar has no choice. By our standards she is raped.

*Sarai said to Avram:
Now here, YHWH has obstructed me
from bearing;
pray, come in to my maid,
perhaps I may be built-up-with-sons
through her!
Avram hearkened to Sarai's voice;
Genesis 16:2*

Sarai clenches her fists in a jealous rage at Hagar who taunts her with a finger pointing to Sarai's barren womb. Hagar's smiling face and her other hand embracing her womb show contempt for Sarai.

Abram holds onto this God with one hand but lifts the other in dismay. He expresses his bewilderment at his fighting "wives."

The donkey picks up the theme with his mocking laughter.



*He came in to Hagar, and she became pregnant.
But when she saw that she was pregnant, her mistress became of light-worth in her eyes.*

Genesis 16:4



Sarai clutches Hagar's head scarf with her right hand and beats her with a stick in her left hand. The dog joins in the "harsh" treatment by tearing at Hagar's skirt.

Hagar cries out because of the beating and the humiliation of her uncovered head which she holds with her left hand while protecting her womb and unborn with her right hand.

Abram turns his back on this abuse, clinging to his God.

*Avram said to Sarai:
Here, your maid is in your hand, deal with her
however seems good in your eyes.*

*Sarai afflicted her,
so that she had to flee from her.*

Genesis 16:06

Hagar escapes the harsh treatment of Sarai and Abram and flees to the wilderness on the way to Shur. Here an “angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water.” The spring, protected by a stone wall, suggests an oasis where palm trees grow and deer drink.

Hagar looks back with fear still protecting her unborn. She is sculpted in high relief, whereas the angel of the Lord is cut into the background. The angel is figured as a silhouette against the sun, both in negative space. These cuts into the clay suggest a sphere or world separate from the mundane world of Hagar.

The angel gestures with hands asking her where she came from and where she is going.



He said:
*Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence do you come,
whither are you going?*

She said:
I am fleeing from Sarai my mistress.

Genesis 16:8



Hagar turns away from the angel and continues to hold her womb with one hand, her head with the other. These gestures suggest the bad news and the good: a return to abusive slavery but also the promise of a multitude from her womb, a very great honor in ancient biblical times.

To show the passage of time, the sculpture has the sun begin to set and the deer are leaping away from the stream.

The angel points one finger ordering her return and the other offering the promise of a multitude. The palm trees weep with Hagar's immediate plight.

*YHWH's messenger said to her:
Return to your mistress and let yourself
be afflicted under her hand!*

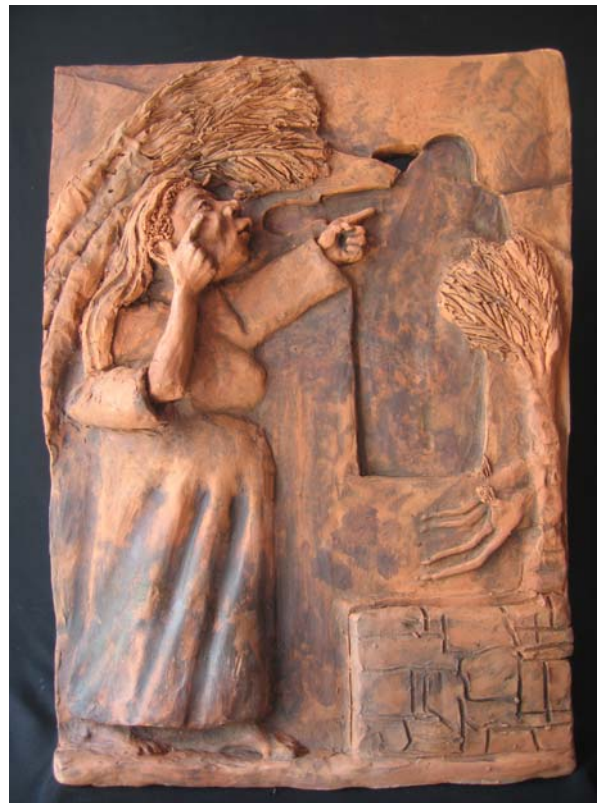
Genesis 16:9

The sun is almost set and the deer are almost gone,
but Hagar turns to face the angel as do the trees.
She dares to name God, not an accepted act in the
ancient Hebrew religion. However, Hagar is an
Egyptian, and their gods had names.

She points to her eye and names the Lord,
“El-roi,” the God of seeing or the God who sees.”
The meaning of this name is still debated by scholars,
but one interpretation suggests a balance of
Yahweh’s powers of seeing with Yahweh’s power of
hearing, which is the meaning of *Ishmael*,
soon to be born to Hagar.

Yahweh not only hears our cries but also sees our
plight and saves us. Thus the angel gestures with an
open and receiving hand.

*Now she called the name of YHWH, the one
who was speaking to her:
You God of seeing!
For she said:
Have I actually gone on seeing here
after his seeing me?
Genesis 16:13*



This two-piece relief represents the appearance of three angels who announce the miraculous birth of a child to Sarah. (This visitation follows the renaming of Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah when the covenant is made with Yahweh. Circumcision then becomes the sign of this covenant between Yahweh and Abraham, who is ninety nine years old. (17:1-22)



The location of this visit is the Oaks of Mamre. Between the two oak trees is the blinding sun, “in the heat of the day.” (18:01) The sun renders the three angels in silhouette. Abraham is at the “entrance of his tent.” (18:01) He bows down in avid respect to the “men.”

Sarah is inside the tent curtains trying to hide her laughter (“Laughter” is the meaning of the name they give to this son, Isaac.) She also holds her womb for she cannot believe she can have a child at her age of ninety.

Now YHWH was seen by him by the oaks
of Mamre as he was sitting at the entrance to
his tent at the heat of the day.

*I will return, yes, return to you
when time revives,*

and Sara your wife will have a son!

Now Sara was listening at the entrance to the
tent, which was behind him.

Sara laughed within herself, saying:

*After I have become worn, is there to be pleasure
for me? And my lord is old!*

Genesis 18:1,10,12



This scene is full of happiness. Sarah has had her miraculous birth and Abraham laughs with joy and pride. Now he has two sons. Isaac is cuddled by Sarah and Ishmael dances with his mother, Hagar. But the joy is short-lived.

Sara became pregnant and bore Avraham a son in his old age, at the set-time of which God had spoken to him.

Genesis 21:2

When Isaac was weaned, Abraham held a feast to celebrate it. But when Sarah saw the boys playing together, she demanded that Abraham “cast out” Hagar and Ishmael so that Isaac would have no competition for the inheritance.

Abraham passively looks into the distance and holds onto his God. Hagar is given a mere skin of water and some bread which she carries while pulling Ishmael with her. The boys are still playing happily, unaware of the death sentence in the wilderness being initiated. Sarah holds Isaac tightly and sends them out with her condemning finger.

*She said to Avraham:
Drive out this slave-woman
and her son,
for the son of this slave-woman shall not
share-inheritance with my son, with Yitzhak!
Genesis 21:10*



The water and bread quickly run out, and Hagar and Ishmael face a certain death. Hagar cannot bear to see her son die. So she leaves him at the distance of a bow shot. The sculpture has vultures flying, sitting in trees and beside Ishmael waiting for him to die so they can feast on him.

Both cry out for God to save them. Help is on the way but out of their sight. A caravan of camels is suggested in the upper right corner and a hole in the rocks beneath Ishmael hints at the possibility of water.

*And went and sat by herself, at-a-distance,
as far away as a bowshot,
for she said to herself:
Let me not see the child die!
So she sat at-a-distance, and lifted up her
voice and wept.*

Genesis 21:16





The camel train arrives; one camel drinks from the well in the lower right. Another is fed in the distance. The dead tree has come alive, the vultures are gone, and Hagar pours water into Ishmael's cupped hands.

God has heard their cries and has saved them.

*God opened her eyes,
and she saw a well of water;
she went, filled the skin with water,
and gave the lad to drink.
Genesis 21:19*

Many years pass, and Abraham makes a covenant with Abimelech and offers Isaac as a sacrifice to God who saves him at the last minute. Sarah dies and Isaac marries Rebecca. Abraham takes another wife but when he finally dies, Isaac and Ishmael bury him with Sarah in the cave of Mespelah. This sculpture celebrates the reunion of Isaac and Ishmael. The latter holds a bow symbolizing his life in the wilderness where he “became an expert with the bow.” (Genesis 21:20) and was to be a “wild ass of a man.” (Genesis 21:12) So his is much larger than Isaac, who gestures a farewell to their father.

This work also celebrates the common heritage of Islam from Hagar and Ishmael, and Judaism and Christianity from Sarah and Isaac. They are united at the grave of Abraham.

*A hundred years and seventy years and five
years, then he expired. Avraham died at a
good ripe age,
old and satisfied (in days),
and was gathered to his kinspeople.
Yitzhak and Yishmael his sons buried him, in
the cave of Makhpela,
in the field of Efron
son of Tzohar the Hittite,
that faces Mamre,
the field that Avraham had acquired from
the Sons of Het.*

Genesis 24:8-10

