

Winter 2017

Interpretations of Hagar: Pathway to Healing in the Wake of Sexual Assault

Kelsey West

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/relgstudent>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Domestic and Intimate Partner Violence Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

West, Kelsey. "Interpretations of Hagar: Pathway to Healing in the Wake of Sexual Assault" (2017). *Religion: Student Scholarship & Creative Works*.

<http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/relgstudent/4>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion: Student Scholarship & Creative Works by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Interpretations of Hagar: Pathway to Healing in the Wake of Sexual Assault

Kelsey West
Augustana College
Religion Department Senior Inquiry
February 15, 2017

Introduction

About 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men in the United States will experience an attempted or completed sexual assault within their lifetime.¹ These statistics illustrate that virtually every individual is affected by sexual assault in some way, either personally or through someone they know. According to a Pew Research Center study, about 53% of surveyed Americans say that religion is very important in their lives.² With virtually every individual being affected by sexual assault, and 53% of people being religious in some way, more than half of Americans are affected directly or indirectly by both religion and sexual assault victimization, but there is little talk about the two in conjunction with each other. Religion and spirituality are important aspects to many survivors of sexual assault, so it is essential to discuss the changes in these after an assault, and how both religion and spirituality can work to support a survivor through recovery and healing.

Talking about illustrations of sexual assault within the Bible is extremely difficult, but it is necessary to do in order to break the silence surrounding the issue, and to find a way to re-interpret these stories in an empowering way for sexual assault survivors who look to the Bible for comfort and guidance. Sexual assault is an issue that not only uproots the religious beliefs once held for an individual, but it requires the person to integrate their personal experience with assault into their learning of the Bible and other religious factors.³ Largely, sexual assault is seen within the church as something that requires

¹ "Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics | RAINN," accessed December 21, 2016, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>.

² Street et al., "Religious Landscape Study," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, May 11, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

³ Beth R. Crisp, "Reading Scripture from a Hermeneutic of Rape," *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality* 7, no. 14 (March 2001): 23–42.

pastoral care or counseling.⁴ Beth Crisp proposes a hermeneutic of rape when reading any Bible story because of the overwhelming change that surviving this act has on a person and their support systems. By doing this, one reads every story in the Bible through the eyes of a sexual assault survivor, interprets how that experience may change the stories and what can be done to make them more applicable to survivors. This paper will use this lens to analyze Biblical stories and point out the problems with them, as well as to illustrate ways to retell them in a positive way for survivors. In the book of Genesis, the character of Hagar is victimized sexually by Abraham and then abused by Sarah. Abraham and Sarah, two characters with social power in the story and who are highly revered throughout Christian culture, are never punished for their abusive actions against Hagar. Many survivors of sexual assault may see themselves through the image of Hagar, someone who has been abused and mistreated. In fact, throughout Hagar's story it seems that she is the one who is continually punished and oppressed, and not her abusers.

Narratives within the Bible, such as this one, that allow for sexual mistreatment of women with no repercussions to the abuser reflect modern day circumstances as well. An example of this is the recent events with Brock Turner, who sexually assaulted a female that was passed out one night, but was given a sentence of 6 months and released after 3 because of his powerful role as a (former) swimmer at Stanford University.⁵ In this scenario, as in the story of Hagar, a white male with a positive, powerful image was allowed by society to sexually assault someone less powerful than himself, with few repercussions.

⁴ Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, ed., *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 223.

⁵ Janette Gagnon and Emanuella Grinberg CNN, "Mad about Brock Turner's Sentence? It's Not Uncommon," *CNN*, accessed January 20, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/02/us/brock-turner-college-athletes-sentence/index.html>.

Feminist scholars have worked to find empowerment in restructuring stories like Hagar's, and many others in the Bible. This paper will read these stories through the eyes of a sexual abuse survivor and use feminist re-interpretations in a way to that may be useful to the many women who are sexually abused and struggling with disempowering narratives of abuse within the Bible.

I. What is sexual assault?

Before going into the further discussion of Hagar's story, it must be made clear what sexual assault is, and how it impacts the lives of its victims. Sexual assault is defined as sexual contact or behavior that occurs without explicit consent of the victim; rape is one form of sexual assault that specifically refers to penetration without consent, and is often used as a legal term.⁶ Whether these acts are violent, attempted, committed by a stranger, to someone who is intoxicated or include some variable, they are deeply traumatic and uproot the life of the person who is victimized. About 94% of people who are raped experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, also commonly referred to as rape-trauma syndrome in survivors of assault.⁷ These symptoms can range from flashbacks, physiological and psychological distress and reactions to cues that resemble the traumatic event, avoidance of stimuli associated with the event or stimuli that may trigger distressing memories, negative beliefs about oneself, feelings of worthlessness, feelings of detachment and depression, and oftentimes suicide.⁸

⁶ "Sexual Assault | RAINN," accessed January 20, 2017, <https://www.rainn.org/articles/sexual-assault>.

⁷ "Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics | RAINN."

⁸ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM 5* (Washington, D.C: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

While it is possible to recover from the effects of a sexual assault, the persecution of many survivors by the media along with frequent victim blaming⁹ practices of our society make it difficult for people to come forward about their victimization in the first place, in addition to making it more difficult to recover. With adequate social support, understanding, and belief of those around her,¹⁰ a sexual abuse survivor has a much greater chance of positive recovery in a shorter time. Additionally, religion and spirituality are oftentimes cornerstones to a woman's survival techniques and her healing journey. For these reasons, religious support and understanding are incredibly important for survivors.

II. Hagar's Story

The main parts of Hagar's story in the Bible are found in Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:9-21. Hagar is the slave of Abraham and Sarah, who cannot conceive a child together, so in Genesis 16:2, Sarah tells Abraham "Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her".¹¹ Hagar's story continues when she becomes pregnant with Abraham's child. As a slave woman who is impregnated by a powerful Israelite lineage, she momentarily has power over Sarah, who could not get pregnant at the time.¹² Hagar's short moment of power over Sarah quickly dissipates when Sarah begins abusing her, causing Hagar to flee from the home. In Genesis 16:7, an angel of the Lord appears to Hagar and tells her to go

⁹ Victim blaming occurs when questions such as "What were you wearing?", "Why were you there?", "Where you drinking?" are asked of a survivor. These questions take the blame away from the perpetrator and place them on the victim. It is not a victim's fault or responsibility that they were assaulted, but the fault and responsibility of the abuser.

¹⁰ From here and forward in the paper I will use mainly feminine pronouns for reasons of clarity and consistency. However, many males experience sexual assault as well and should not be left out of this conversation.

¹¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*, Lgr edition (Colorado Springs, CO: Zondervan, 2015).

¹² *Ibid.*, Genesis 16:4.

and submit to Sarah, regardless of the abuse she may endure. The angel also tells Hagar to give her son the name Ishmael. The chapter ends with Hagar returning to Sarah and Abraham, and even though Hagar was told to give her son the name that the angel had instructed, it is Abraham that “gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne”,¹³ again taking away any power Hagar may momentarily have. Though Ishmael is given some social status through Abraham giving him his name instead of his slave mother, the angel of God offered Hagar this right, and Abraham takes it away from her. Ishmael is the blood of Abraham, and likely would have social status regardless of who verbally gave his name to him, so this seems like a further diminution to Hagar’s role in her own story when she has already been removed so much.

Hagar disappears from the narrative in the Bible until Genesis 21. Sarah, who has since conceived her own child, wants to exile Hagar, likely caused by the continuing tension in their relationship that started at the beginning of the narrative. While Abraham is at first hesitant, he agrees to once again listen to Sarah after God assures him that it is the right thing to do. Hagar and Ishmael are sent off the next morning with little food and water, and left to fend for themselves. Hagar again endures marginalization from being tossed out from her home with her child, with very minimal resources. Once the few supplies that Abraham gave her are gone, Hagar becomes very distressed. Again, an angel appears to her and this time promises that Ishmael will have many descendants, and water appears after the angel is gone. The story ends, saying, “God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in

¹³ Ibid., Genesis 16:16.

the desert and become an archer”.¹⁴ However, Hagar is left out of the story again, this time overshadowed by the promise of her son’s future.

There are many issues with a story like Hagar’s being in the Bible, which is a main source of comfort and guidance for many religious followers within Judaism and Christianity. People may identify with Hagar as a victim of sexual assault, but the way she mistreated time and again is damaging when read through a survivor’s eyes. As Tikva Frymer-Kensky explains in her section of the book *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*, “the Bible is more than a reclamation of the history of women in ancient Israel. The Bible is a work of art. It is a literary text that presents people and ideas in an artistic fashion”.¹⁵ The variety of usages the Bible provides for people is illustrative of the innately important nature it holds. However, there is a problem with a text of such great significance that allows for people to be mistreated sexually and emotionally, as Hagar is. While one may argue that some stories in the Bible illustrate the things that should not be done, Hagar’s story does not seem to reflect this kind of thinking. As the Bible is not likely to lose significance or be re-written anytime soon, interpretations and re-telling of the stories are imperative in giving power to the kinds of people who are mistreated within them. In addition, these interpretations also work to begin conversations in preaching or ministry that allow for a practical religious foundation, void of the oppression that is seen throughout certain Bible stories, including in Genesis with Hagar.

The reflection of the society that the Bible was written in that shows itself in the text should be acknowledged before getting into the analysis of the modern meanings of its

¹⁴ Ibid., Genesis 21:20.

¹⁵ Lynn Davidman and Shelly Tenenbaum, eds., *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 20.

stories today. There are very clear themes within the Bible that reflect the ideas that God intended for men to dominate women, that women should not trust their own judgment but be submissive to men, suffering is a Christian virtue and oftentimes it is women who are the designated 'sufferers', and that reconciliation and forgiving those who sin against an individual is an imperative belief for life.¹⁶ Heggen, a practicing counselor who works with survivors and abusers, notes that these beliefs of Biblical text are the ones she most often sees implicated in justifying abusive behavior of another person while still holding to Christian beliefs. While she illustrates how themes of the Bible can be implicated in perpetuating abuse today, empowerment and supporting survivors are becoming more prominent ideas in society as well. Marital rape was still legal in some states until 1993,¹⁷ and now media outlets are openly expressing widespread outrage at light sentencing of some sexual assault perpetrators.¹⁸ While there are still wide strides of improvements to make, when we look at a text like the Bible where women are often punished sexually or consistently subjected to submission to a male being, it is clear that there is still a lot of work to do. With this, we must begin to ask the question: "What does it do to those who have been actually raped and battered... to read sacred texts that justify rape" and the battering or humiliation of women in many ways?¹⁹ This is why re-examining Hagar's story and interpreting it in different ways is so important; it gives voice and power back to

¹⁶ Carolyn Holderread Heggen, "Religious Beliefs and Abuse," in *Women, Abuse, and the Bible: How Scripture Can Be Used to Hurt or Heal*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 15–27.

¹⁷ "Law Reform Efforts: Rape and Sexual Assault in United States of America | Impowr.org," accessed January 20, 2017, <http://www.impowr.org/content/law-reform-efforts-rape-and-sexual-assault-united-states-america>.

¹⁸ CNN, "Mad about Brock Turner's Sentence?"

¹⁹ Renita Weems, *Battered Love*, First Printing edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 2, 8.

Hagar, as well as back to the many women who can identify with her and the similar sexual violence endured.

I will first identify the main parts of Hagar's story that are problematic when encountered through the lens of a sexual abuse survivor today, and then I will begin to focus on illustrating the function of this story in a more empowering way. The first problematic part is the initial act of Sarah telling Abraham to use Hagar as a way for them to conceive a child. Hagar does not have a voice in this matter at all, meaning that she in no way consents to the act of sex with Abraham, or to allowing the child that she may conceive to be used as an heir to Sarah and Abraham. Since Hagar was a slave, her body would have belonged to her owner, which is likely why this aspect of the story may not often be identified as wrong.²⁰ However, reading the story through modern eyes, Sarah and Abraham use a less privileged, less powerful individual for their own gain; a concept that mirrors instances of sexual abuse in modern society. In addition, sex without consent is rape by our standards, and Hagar does not consent to having sex with Abraham. Abraham is one of the major male figures of great power in the Bible, so to read a story of him sexually assaulting Hagar and not being punished is traumatizing for survivors of abuse, who have experienced similar circumstances of being assaulted and their abusers going unpunished for their actions.

Abusers often use their privilege, such as athletic achievements, as precedent for forgiveness for committing a crime that permanently changes their victim's life. Unfortunately, our society often allows this to happen. Take for example, Jameis Winston, a

²⁰ Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, eds., *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, 1st ed (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 85.

prominent Florida State University football player who is now starting quarterback of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. While at Florida State, he was accused on two separate occasions of sexual assault, but continued to play football and the investigations against him were prematurely stopped.²¹ While the documentary, *The Hunting Ground*,²² shows the saddening impact on the life of one of his victims, Winston continues his life as a pro-football star that is glorified and loved by many. To see this idea reflected in the Bible justifies that it is okay to abuse if you are in a position of power, just as Abraham does in the story of Hagar. Abraham is never punished for his act of assault against Hagar, but is instead further praised and rewarded with descendants.

The second part of this story that is problematic is in Genesis 16: 7-14, when Hagar flees the home of Sarah and Abraham because of the abuse she has been enduring at the hands of Sarah. This is the first time an angel appears to Hagar, and she is one of the first women in the Bible to have a deity speak to her.²³ In addition, the deity that speaks to Hagar is the first one in this story to actually speak *to* her, not just about her. By speaking directly to Hagar and using her name, the angel recognizes Hagar's role as a person, not merely a slave, which is something that Sarah and Abraham never do.²⁴ This interaction illustrates that the text is not universally problematic; there are some empowering features in this story. However, this angel of the Lord then continues on to tell Hagar to "return to

²¹ Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering, "How Florida State Covered Up Two Rape Reports Against Jameis Winston," *Huffington Post*, March 11, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kirby-dick/how-florida-state-covered_b_9421824.html.

²² Kirby Dick, *The Hunting Ground*, Documentary, (2015).

²³ The exception to this is in Genesis 3:20 where Eve is cursed along with Adam.

²⁴ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 15.

your mistress and submit yourself under her hand”.²⁵ Essentially, the angel, who is speaking to Hagar for God, acknowledges that Hagar is being abused and tells her to go back and submit anyways. This reflects the pattern of abuse that many survivors endure, where they flee an abuser and return to them for any variety of reasons.

Statistics show that women will leave and then return to an abuser an average of seven times before they are able to successfully terminate the relationship.²⁶ This illustrates how many women may relate to this part of Hagar’s story, and why the angel of God telling Hagar to go back to her abusers may have a negative impact on their recovery. Though the angel does not explicitly give a reason for why Hagar should return, it can reasonably be assumed that it is because Hagar is pregnant and Abraham and Sarah want the baby and have power over her as a slave. A woman that is abused by her partner who reads this may see that God wants Hagar to return to her abusers because they have rights over her, and think that she should do the same. This passage neglects to care for Hagar’s safety and mental health, and instead once again glorifies Abraham and his wife because of their power over Hagar. While safety or mental health of women were likely not focused on when the Bible was written, they are significant concepts to be considered now, which is why the conversation around this passage is so necessary.

A last question to consider about Hagar’s story in Genesis is the relationship between her character and Sarah. It is partially Sarah’s idea to have Abraham conceive a child with Hagar in the hopes that it will bring status to herself. When Hagar becomes

²⁵ “Bible Gateway Passage: Genesis 16:9 - New King James Version,” *Bible Gateway*, accessed January 20, 2017,

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+16%3A9&version=NKJV>.

²⁶ “Domestic Abuse Shelter - A New Beginning,” accessed January 3, 2017,

<http://www.domesticabuseshelter.org/infodomesticviolence.htm>.

impregnated, Genesis 16:4 says that “her mistress became despised in her eyes”, which switches the role of power momentarily from Sarah to Hagar.²⁷ However, after Abraham tells his wife in Genesis 16:5 that she should “do to [Hagar] as you please”, so Sarah “dealt harshly with her, [and Hagar] fled from her presence”. Some scholars hypothesize that Sarah abuses Hagar in this fashion because she is jealous of the woman’s fertility.²⁸ Other scholars, such as Amy-Jill Levine,²⁹ believe that Sarah illustrates “white, colonialist, patriarchal” themes when she is subjected to the male dominated culture in her relationship with Abraham. Either way, Sarah played a main role in wanting Abraham to force pregnancy onto Hagar in the first place, so her scorn and mistreatment of Hagar seems unjustified here.

Sarah abuses Hagar because she is upset with her slave for the power switch that has occurred through no fault of Hagar herself. Sarah’s feelings towards Hagar reflect the concept of victim blaming, which is too often seen in modern society as well by further criticizing and punishing a victim for actions that they had no control of. Hagar is victimized by multiple outlets, just as women today are victimized in a similar fashion not only by their abuser, but through the blame and harshness of others as well. Therefore, seeing these same things in a Bible story being done by a powerful couple is disheartening for survivors.

Whether one believes that Sarah is reacting to Hagar’s despise for her from a perspective of the patriarchal, power-dominated society that she has been exposed to, her

²⁷ *The Holy Bible, New King James Version* (Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1982) Genesis 16:4.

²⁸ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, eds., *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

role in Hagar's abuse should not go unnoted. Despite the power restructuring and patriarchal culture Sarah may have been exposed to, the behavior she exhibits towards Hagar is wrong and can be related to the modern day victim blaming that survivors experience, which continues to bring importance to the interpretations of this story today and how this story can be made more empowering and hopeful for survivors.

III. Feminist critiques and re-interpretations

An overwhelming problem with Abraham impregnating Hagar is the absence of her consent into the entire ordeal. Many sources and religions disagree on definitions of consent, and who really has control over a woman's body. To complicate things, because Hagar was a slave woman and the story takes place thousands of years ago, historically speaking she did not have many rights to her own body. This leaves a lot of room for interpretation, or misinterpretation, today because of the differences in consent in modern society that change the way this story must be read.

Throughout the Bible, consent is not talked about in the same way it is today, but illustrated through determining who has the rights over a specific female's body. Whether a father, brother, husband, or some other male figure holds the rights to a woman's body, many Biblical stories may seem in damaging ways to survivors today when read through a hermeneutic of rape because of this idea. The major theme is that power of a woman's body is consistently held by sources other than herself,³⁰ and women are often judged based partially on their sexual potential and largely on how they can benefit the man they belong to reproductively. Hagar's sexuality as a slave woman would be held by her master, but

³⁰ Gail Corrington Streete, *The Strange Woman : Power and Sex in the Bible /*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky. : Westminster John Knox Press, c1997.).

because of her 'outside' status as an Egyptian woman and a slave, she threatens the integrity of the Israelite line of Abraham.³¹ Even by using this patriarchal ranking of a woman's honor, Hagar is still marginalized. Not to mention, the ranking of a woman's worth that is applied throughout the Bible in the ways previously explained is destructive to a modern woman's self-image and feelings of worth, and especially that of a sexual abuse survivor. Whether or not Abraham's actions were acceptable in the time the Bible was written, they fall woefully short of today's standards, and thus must be re-examined.

When looking through a lens of Judaism sexual ethics, while a man has a right to his wife sexually, rape is highly forbidden. This idea of not forcing oneself upon one's wife without her reciprocal desire is not a minority view of people, but a view that is reflected in the Talmud and of later Jewish law as well.³² In fact, Talmudic law may be one of the first that recognized marital rape as equally heinous and punishable as other types of rape. While the Talmudic law here speaks specifically of marital rape being forbidden, it also encapsulates other types of sexual assault as well, arguably the rape of someone less powerful than you who is not your wife, some like Hagar is to Abraham. In addition to the Jewish law perspective on rape as wrong, the Bible forbids rape as well.

Though not as explicitly stated as within Talmudic law, rape is forbidden in certain places within the Bible, such as Deuteronomy 22:25-27, where it states that a man who rapes a wed woman should be punished with death, and the woman should be considered innocent. Violence against any human being in general is forbidden, and rape is unmistakably a violent act towards another person, it would fall under these standards as

³¹ Ibid., 29.

³² Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1995), 114.

well.³³ This being said, there are many contradictions to these standards as well, such as a few verses later in Deuteronomy 22:28-29, where it states that if a man rapes an unwed woman he must pay her father and marry her without ever divorcing her. In this circumstance, a woman is victimized and then forced to stay with her abuser for the rest of her life, and he is arguably not punished for his act at all. Though one does have to factor in the culture in which the Bible was written, the mistreatment of women in certain Biblical passages is disconcerting when read through the eyes of a sexual abuse survivor. Illustrations of rape present themselves throughout the Bible and specifically in the story of Hagar, so how can we come to terms with a 'forbidden' act as terrible as sexual assault being present in the stories of the Bible which are supposed to form our morality? It is clear that emulation is not the proper way to utilize these stories, but a function of interpretation is much more appropriate when reading and using these stories in modern day religious practices.

Many scholars, such as J. Cheryl Exum,³⁴ prefer to look at the stories in the Bible as stories with literary meaning and implications, and not as real historical events. This is one way to analyze the story of Hagar and find meaning in it without accepting the idea that a God that is supposed to be praised allows for the oppression and violation of women like Hagar. In doing this type of literary restructuring and analysis, one can examine the texts of sexual aggression in a way that focuses on how women are the objects of male gaze,³⁵ and how to escape or cope with that in their own lives. As Exum explains in her chapter,

³³ J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration* (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2006).

³⁴ J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmmented Women: Feminist*, 1st edition (Valley Forge, Penn: Continuum, 1993).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

rightfully titled “Raped by the Pen”,³⁶ the literary creations of stories with violent rape such as in Hagar’s narrative represent a society and its norms, as well as the responses to violation of those norms. Stories like this reinforce gender roles and expectations of them, which is why a feminist response that focuses on the influence these stories have on culture, and not an analysis perspective of historical emulation, is necessary. Exum continues to analyze Biblical stories in a way that an English major may interpret a novel; she looks for themes and the implications of the text and what it means for people reading it. This kind of analysis is especially important when it comes to the Bible because of the wide range of uses the text has in religious life.

When doing this sort of literary portrayal and analysis that Exum describes with the story of Hagar, one can begin to see the story not as one that oppresses a slave woman, but one that empowers a survivor of sexual assault. While the beginning of the Genesis 16 story does not change much, the outcome for Hagar can be differentiated. Using Exum’s tactic of interpretation for the story it can be restructured in a way that emphasizes that Hagar runs away once and is sent back, but then is released from her abusive life with her son. Though they are forced to leave the comfort of a home that fulfills needs such as warmth, food, water, and more, they are no longer under the control of abuse and are able to make their own decisions for safety and for their future. In the end, Hagar lives out the rest of her life as a free woman, and her son is able to marry and have children of his own.

By focusing on a literary restructuring technique, one can shift the perspective of importance away from Abraham and Sarah, and instead focus on Hagar and the strength that she shows in her experiences of marginalization. While the Bible itself focuses heavily

³⁶ Exum, *Fragmented Women*.

on Hagar as a slave woman and her lack of power in this role, focusing on how she *escapes* from this emphasizes how the strength and empowerment of an individual can allow her to free herself from an abusive relationship and allow for a life of much more promise.

Changing the function in which this text is used through Exum's technique of focusing on the literary implications of the story is exactly the kind of interpretation that survivors of assault can feel empowered and welcomed by.

Throughout the story of Hagar, along with many other Biblical narratives, women tend to play a marginal role in the stories based around their sexuality and the more important male characters. While is this more noticeable in narratives such as the one in Genesis 19 with Lot, it is indeed present in a less-obvious way with Hagar. While many books within Genesis focus on showing power through threatened rape,³⁷ power and authority in Hagar's story is illustrated through sexual possession and having sexual property at one's disposal, which Abraham has with Hagar. Not only this, but it furthers the ideal that a woman does not have the right to her own body, but it is the male figures in her life that do. Ideological constructions like these are damaging to the future of society because they take away a woman's voice and power, and instead encourage silence. Silence about what she believes is okay to do with her body, silence about seeking help when she is hurt, and silence about being abused by someone more powerful than oneself. Because rape is largely about power and control and sexual gratification for the abuser,³⁸ having such stark power dynamics and illustrations of male dominance in stories of the Bible aides to perpetuate the modern day sexual violence that is seen today.

³⁷ Streete, *The Strange Woman*, 27.

³⁸ "Rape Is Not (Only) About Power; It's (Also) About Sex," *Psychology Today*, accessed February 15, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/insight-therapy/201602/rape-is-not-only-about-power-it-s-also-about-sex>.

Power dynamics such as these are harder to re-frame through a process such as the one Exum uses, but it is still important to do so in order to illustrate narratives in a useful way. Danna Nolan Fewell takes a different approach than Exum that includes a retelling of Genesis 16 and 21 that allows Hagar to be the main character in a story that is rightfully hers. The narrative begins with:

‘Where have you come from and where are you going?’ The first question was easy enough to answer. She was coming from a house of bondage where she had been passed back and forth between Abram’s bed and Sarai’s kitchen, where she had suffered abuse at the hands of her mistress while an indifferent Abram had turned his head. Despite the fact she was carrying his child.³⁹

This narrative illustrates clearly that Hagar suffers and brings a more honest illustration of a story of marginalization. This interpretation of Hagar’s character can be better understood by people who have suffered some of the same afflictions that Hagar does at the hands of both Abraham and Sarah. The story continues with dialogue that includes Hagar questioning why she should go back and suffer under the hands of Sarah and asking the angel of God, “Is this the way you deities get your entertainment?”⁴⁰ Though some may argue that this dialogue is colloquial and there is something that seems sinful about changing the roots of a Biblical story, the point of this restructuring is to understand the story from a different perspective. In fact, this explanation of Hagar’s story does not actually change the roots of her story, but retells it in a way that is more appropriate to modern times, and more inspiring to survivors of sexual assault.

³⁹ Danna Nolan Fewell, “Changing the Subject: Retelling the Story of Hagar the Egyptian,” in *Genesis: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner, 2 (England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1998).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

Fewell's narrative is not meant to *replace* the writing in Genesis, but to be a *companion* to it. This is helpful not only for the survivors who identify with the abuse that Hagar suffers, but for the people who do not as well. Fewell's interpretation shines a light onto the issues of abuse that are so often pushed aside or not considered. After reading Fewell's interpretation, anyone can go back to the books in Genesis and re-read Hagar's story with a new understanding and a new hermeneutic; one that considers the suffering that Hagar endures and that so many women in today's society endure as well.

The ending of Fewell's narrative of Hagar illustrates some of the true struggles and emotions that survivors of sexual assault today often encounter. Hagar feels resentment towards Sarah when she becomes pregnant with Isaac; bitterness towards Abraham when he sends her away with minimal supplies to survive. Left in the wilderness with her son, she breaks down into sobs, "bewildered and betrayed by the unkindness of the world around her".⁴¹ This scene is heart wrenchingly similar the experiences of many sexual assault survivors who have had their bodies and their rights taken away from them, and been repeatedly victimized as Hagar has. However, when the angel of God comes to Hagar in Fewell's story, more than just water is offered. Hagar realizes that so many things have happened to her that she could not control, but she has made it through each and every one of those obstacles. She may have suffered, she may have been broken, but she has repeatedly had the courage to get through it all. The story ends on a final note of Hagar finally seeing her worth and believing that she and her son are more than what has happened to them. They are free and together, and God is with them both. This is one incredible example of an oppressive, patriarchal story that victimizes women sexually

⁴¹ Ibid., 192.

without punishment turned into an empowering and hopeful narrative for survivors of sexual assault and abuse.

IV. Implications for Counseling

The reality is that rape is an overwhelmingly fundamental reality for many women that impacts how they feel about themselves and the world around them; including how they experience God and are able to relate to a religion.⁴² Scripture was not written for scholars to analyze it, but for people to turn to in a search to satisfy spiritual needs such as comfort, encouragement, inspiration, and healing.⁴³ However, when scripture is read from a historical-critical hermeneutic, the experiences of modern readers are often pushed aside. This is why feminist re-interpretations or foundations are so helpful in empowering women who read the Bible, as has been illustrated. Crisp⁴⁴ takes it one step further in arguing that the stories should be read and analyzed by survivors from the direct and personal perspective of rape in order to be fulfilling for the individual. This is the basis of developing counseling skills and techniques merging religion and sexual assault in order to nurture and promote healing for individuals who have experienced sexual assault.

Furthermore, there are many texts available to those in pastoral settings that are directly focused on care for sexual assault survivors in that setting. One such source, written by Jeanne Moessner⁴⁵ is written specifically for pastoral counselors and gives tips and strategies to use when working with someone who has been sexually assaulted. The main emphasis in this text, as well as in many other trainings about sexual assault

⁴² Crisp, "Reading Scripture from a Hermeneutic of Rape," 26.

⁴³ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁴ Crisp, "Reading Scripture from a Hermeneutic of Rape."

⁴⁵ Moessner, *Through the Eyes of Women*.

understanding, is to believe the person, not be judgmental of their situation, and to listen without pressuring the person to go out of their comfort zone. Pastors or other church leaders or members who openly show that they are supportive and present for survivors create a safe environment that allows for spiritual contact and recovery. Being able to illustrate knowledge and empathy about the impact of victimization from sexual assault, and being able to retell stories such as Hagar's is vital in supporting people impacted by sexual assault who look to the Bible for solace. This is a luxury that is not as easily accessible as it ideally should be for survivors.

Many people feel victimized further by the church or religious teachings after an assault for a variety of different reasons including being shunned, blamed, or ignored by people who are uninformed about sexual assault. However, integrating spirituality into the recovery process as positive coping has led to improved mental health, lower mortality, and less negative emotions in people who encounter major life stressors.⁴⁶ This clear positive impact that a positive religious or spiritual experience can have on recovery is important in educating people about the impact of sexual assault and reaching out to survivors. By making survivors feel safe and welcome to share their stories, an environment of healing and acceptance is created.

Many areas across the United States have rape crisis centers or counseling and advocacy services for survivors of sexual assault, and there are statewide coalitions against sexual assault across the entire country.⁴⁷ These programs are oftentimes vital to survivors

⁴⁶ Nichole A. Murray-Swank and Kenneth I. Pargament, "God, Where Are You?: Evaluating a Spiritually-Integrated Intervention for Sexual Abuse," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 8, no. 3 (September 2005): 191–203.

⁴⁷ "State Resources | RAINN," accessed February 15, 2017, <https://www.rainn.org/state-resources>.

as a non-judgmental support, advocate, and resource immediately after their trauma. Many of these centers have great support for survivors with many types of marginalization, but have difficulties integrating religion into their services. On the other hand, church members and pastoral care services are able to provide the spiritual or religious support needed, but are often at a loss when it comes to facing the problems of sexual assault head on. A world where these two institutions are able to work together on this problem would be one much more prepared to support the many people struggling after sexual assault victimization.

In addition, listening and empowering survivors of sexual assault may be the most effective ways to help aid a person's recovery. While healing from the wounds of the type of victimization associated with this terrible crime does not mean 'returning to normal', a person may grow and find new strengths within herself and her life. Just as Hagar realized the courage she has always had at the end of Fewell's narrative, many survivors have all the courage and strength they need to heal from their assault, and just need some positive supports to realize their potential. Whether it is through restructuring and retelling stories in the Bible that negatively illustrate the rights a woman has to her body, holding open conversations about sexual assault victimization and recovery, or reaching out to a survivor and letting them know you support them, social supports and religious acceptance of sexual assault are important factors in recovery that should not be ignored.

V. Conclusion

As mentioned, 1 in 6 women and 1 in 33 men in the United States will experience a completed or attempted sexual assault in their lifetimes.⁴⁸ These statistics show not only

⁴⁸ "Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics | RAINN."

the vast amount of people affected by this terrible act, but the large number of people who may turn to religious or secular counseling in order to work through the many problems that surface after a sexual assault. The necessity for talking about the Bible and the stories in it that perpetuate acts of sexual violence or oppression of women is becoming more and more important as our society continues to move forward in this realm. As Renita Weems states, “seeing ourselves through the eyes of a woman, however defiled, depraved, incorrigible, and battered, forces us to ponder what it means to be weak, vulnerable, helpless, without voice, and oppressed”.⁴⁹ Seeing the character of Hagar emulate the characteristics that so many sexual assault survivors struggle with can be empowering if the text is interpreted and talked about in an positive way, as seen through the texts of Exum and Fewell. Sexual assault is becoming more openly talked about within individuals and throughout the media, which is why the importance of it being openly talked about within the Church is essential right now. By retelling the story of Hagar in ways that give strength to survivors instead of ignoring it or disempowering them through the text that is written, religious texts such as this can be used with the stories of survivors and counseling methods. By doing this work, a comprehensive method can be established to help empower and promote healing for survivors of sexual assault. Religion should be a force that allows for healing and solace for survivors, not a place that illustrates further victimization.

⁴⁹ Weems, *Battered Love*, 113.

Bibliography

- American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM 5*. Washington, D.C: American Psychiatric Association, 2013.
- “Bible Gateway Passage: Genesis 16:9 - New King James Version.” *Bible Gateway*. Accessed January 20, 2017.
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+16%3A9&version=NKJV>.
- Boyarin, Daniel. *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1995.
- CNN, Janette Gagnon and Emanuella Grinberg. “Mad about Brock Turner’s Sentence? It’s Not Uncommon.” *CNN*. Accessed January 20, 2017.
<http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/02/us/brock-turner-college-athletes-sentence/index.html>.
- Crisp, Beth R. “Reading Scripture from a Hermeneutic of Rape.” *Theology & Sexuality: The Journal of the Institute for the Study of Christianity & Sexuality* 7, no. 14 (March 2001): 23–42.
- Davidman, Lynn, and Shelly Tenenbaum, eds. *Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
- Dick, Kirby. *The Hunting Ground*. Documentary, 2015.
- Dick, Kirby, and Amy Ziering. “How Florida State Covered Up Two Rape Reports Against Jameis Winston.” *Huffington Post*, March 11, 2016.
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kirby-dick/how-florida-state-covered_b_9421824.html.
- “Domestic Abuse Shelter - A New Beginning.” Accessed January 3, 2017.
<http://www.domesticabuseshelter.org/infodomesticviolence.htm>.
- Ellens, J. Harold. *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration*. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2006.
- Exum, J. Cheryl. *Fragmented Women: Feminist*. 1st edition. Valley Forge, Penn: Continuum, 1993.

- Fewell, Danna Nolan. "Changing the Subject: Retelling the Story of Hagar the Egyptian." In *Genesis: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, edited by Athalya Brenner. 2. England: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1998.
- Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck, and John L. Esposito, eds. *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001.
- Heggen, Carolyn Holderread. "Religious Beliefs and Abuse." In *Women, Abuse, and the Bible: How Scripture Can Be Used to Hurt or HEal*, edited by Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck, 15–27. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996.
- "Law Reform Efforts: Rape and Sexual Assault in United States of America | Impowr.org." Accessed January 20, 2017. <http://www.impowr.org/content/law-reform-efforts-rape-and-sexual-assault-united-states-america>.
- Moessner, Jeanne Stevenson, ed. *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.
- Murray-Swank, Nichole A., and Kenneth I. Pargament. "God, Where Are You?: Evaluating a Spiritually-Integrated Intervention for Sexual Abuse." *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 8, no. 3 (September 2005): 191–203.
- "Rape Is Not (Only) About Power; It's (Also) About Sex." *Psychology Today*. Accessed February 15, 2017. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/insight-therapy/201602/rape-is-not-only-about-power-it-s-also-about-sex>.
- "Sexual Assault | RAINN." Accessed January 20, 2017. <https://www.rainn.org/articles/sexual-assault>.
- "State Resources | RAINN." Accessed February 15, 2017. <https://www.rainn.org/state-resources>.
- Street, NW, Suite 800 Washington, and DC 20036 202 419 4300 | Main 202 419 4349 | Fax 202 419 4372 | Media Inquiries. "Religious Landscape Study." *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, May 11, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.
- Streete, Gail Corrington. *The Strange Woman : Power and Sex in the Bible /*. 1st ed. Louisville, Ky. : Westminster John Knox Press, c1997.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. Lgr edition. Colorado Springs, CO: Zondervan, 2015.

The Holy Bible, New King James Version. Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1982.

Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

Trible, Phyllis, and Letty M. Russell, eds. *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*. 1st ed. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

“Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics | RAINN.” Accessed December 21, 2016.
<https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>.

Weems, Renita. *Battered Love*. First Printing edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.