

The First Thing. A poem by Mohja Kahf

I am Hagar the immigrant

There came to me the revelation
of the water

I left the world of Abraham,
jugs sealed with cork,
cooking-grease jars,
Sarah's careful kitchen fires

I walked across a razor-sharp horizon,
slates of earth, sediment
of ancient seas

to stand along at this frontier:
where the shape of the cup of morning is strange
and dome of sky, mat of earth have shifted,
where God does not have a house yet
and times of prayer have not been appointed,

where the only water is buried deep
under hard ground and I must find it
or my child will die, my people
remain unborn
The first thing
the founder does
is look for water.¹

The first thing the founder does is look for water. How many of us think “founder” when we consider Hagar’s story? Though it’s there in plain sight in our biblical text, it’s not really the story we’re conditioned to hear. In fact, we’re not really conditioned to hear much when it comes to Hagar, used as she is as a chess piece in the larger story of Abraham, of the patriarchs, of the founding of the people of Israel.

We first hear of her when Sarai gave her to Abram as a wife so that she might provide her with the child she so desperately wanted. We don’t know how she came to be a slave in the household of Sarai and Abram, though we do know that they had travelled to Egypt and that Sarai had spent time in Pharaoh’s household after being passed off as Abram’s sister (another chess piece). In some traditions Hagar is a princess, the daughter of Pharaoh, given to Abram as a gift. Whatever the story, her life was not hers alone to own.

When she became pregnant, the story goes, she began to disrespect Sarai and so Sarai in turn treated her harshly, so harshly that Hagar ran away into the wilderness and there had an intimate encounter with God who sent her back to her mistress, and yet not without giving her the blessing of an annunciation from a divine messenger, "I will give you many children, so many they can't be counted! You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son. You will name him Ishmael, or 'God hears' because the Lord has heard about your harsh treatment." So Hagar returned to Abram's household and gave birth.

Later when Isaac was born, where our story picks up today, Hagar and Ishmael were banished for good from the house at Sarah's command. Early one morning Abraham gave some bread and a flask of water to Hager, put the boy in her shoulder sling and sent her away, into the wilderness, to live or die, only God knows. Dying of thirst and heartbroken as her son lies on the brink of death, Hagar cries out in anguish and grief. God hears the boy's cries, promises to make of him a great nation, and then opens her eyes to see the water that will save their lives. As the story goes, God remained with the boy from then on. Hagar, when he was of age, found him an Egyptian wife, and in so doing she becomes the mother, the founder, of a nation, of a people.

Slave, property, victim, subservient, chess piece, princess, strong, resilient, resister, founder of a nation, mother of a people. There's so much more to this story than meets the eye!

Do you wonder what else we're conditioned not to hear, not to see, not to read in these pages of scripture? There is so much here that's easy to miss. Hagar is, in fact, "the first person in the Bible whom a divine messenger visits [after Eve spoke to God in the garden], and the only person who dares to name a deity."² Jacob may have asked for a name when he wrestled with the stranger in the night, but Hagar is the one to say the words, "You are 'El Roi,' the God who sees, the God whom I've seen. She sees the Lord and lives to tell about it. Moses was only allowed to see God's glory from behind. Elijah hid at a cave entrance and heard only a still small voice. Hagar encountered God and said, "You are 'El Roi."

Hagar is also "the first woman to hear an annunciation (You will give birth to a son and name him Ishmael.)" Mary, the mother of our Lord - her annunciation comes much later. And it is Hagar who is the "only [woman in all of scripture] to receive the divine promise of descendants."³ That seems to be otherwise reserved for the men, but Hagar is told, "I will give you many children. So many they cannot be counted" and "I will make of your first born a great nation!"

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Not too long ago, I heard a talk by Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie about the danger of the single story.⁴ I am going to share some excerpts here, though I highly recommend watching the entire lecture. She said, "I grew up on a university campus in eastern Nigeria. My mother says that I started reading at the age of two, although I think four is probably closer to the truth. So I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books.

I was also an early writer, and when I began to write, at about the age of seven, stories in pencil with crayon illustrations that my poor mother was obligated to read, I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out.

Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to...

Now, I loved those American and British books I read. They stirred my imagination. They opened up new worlds for me. But the unintended consequence was that I did not know that people like me could exist in literature. So what the discovery of African writers did for me was this: It saved me from having a single story of what books are.

I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So, the year I turned eight, we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor. My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing." So I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked

if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals...

So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become... The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story... The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar...Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity."

After all this, my point today is this: We know what it is like to be crammed and flattened into a single story, to be shackled and imprisoned by it, some of us much more than others. And we know that we are all so much more than any single story that is told about us by others, by those we know, by those we don't know, by that part of ourselves that is hell bent on keeping us small and insignificant or larger than life and protected by the confusion of our own complexity. We are much more than any single story. And so is every one else. Every other single living person. And so we don't have the right to define or compose anyone else's story - to make them a single story - flattened and one dimensional, but instead we are meant to know each other's stories in all their rich complexity.

Hagar's story reminds us of this, however one dimensionally our scripture might reveal it. God's insistent presence in Hagar's story reminds us of this. And it reminds us that just as God was with Abraham and Sarah, who became the patriarch and matriarch of the people of Israel, our spiritual ancestors, God was also with Hagar, who became the matriarch - the founder of a people - the ancestor of Mohammad and the people of Islam, who are also our spiritual ancestors. Our stories are in their stories. Their stories are in our stories, and God is insistently, lovingly with us all in all our complex, tragic, beautiful, multi-dimensional, grace-filled, love soaked stories. God is in them all.

¹ Mohja Kahf, "The First Thing," *Hagar Poems*. University of Arkansas Press; 1 edition (July 1, 2016).

² Phillis Tribble, "Bible in the Round," *Liberating Eschatology*. Margaret Farley and Serene Jones, editors. Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY (1999), p. 50.

³ Tribble.

⁴ Chimamanda Adichie. The Danger of a Single Story. July 2009. TEDGlobal 2009.
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/details