

HAGAR IN FINLAND?

From exegesis to inter-contextual analysis

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1. *The working model*

The story of Hagar in Genesis 16 and 21 illustrates both classical exegetical and recent contextual questions. This article covers the major exegetical results but also aims to read the stories using what is here called *inter-contextual analysis*, which aims to offer a tool to connect the text with ancient *and* the present reality in order to read the Hagar story in both contexts. Thus Hagar, an Egyptian slave and a victim of oppressive acts, is also seen as a forerunner of and companion to all immigrant women who live and work in forced reality.

The contextual view in the article is predominantly European and especially Finnish, but some global aspects will also be brought into the analysis. The working order – to start with the contextual issues – follows the order introduced by Liberation theology.¹ This means that the description of the current social location will precede the other sections, as well as the exegetical analysis, in order to raise questions and perspectives retained during the analysis.

The second methodological principle is the relation between text, interpretation and context. The writing process of biblical texts did not occur in a social vacuum and, also, its current contextual reading invites remembering of a mixture of actors and socio-cultural aspects. The inter-contextual analysis aims to bring to the dialogue at least four of those most central views, roles and actors. They do not exclude other important aspects or ignore the more nuanced division of voices

¹ Carlos Mesters, *Defenseless Flower. A New Reading of the Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989[1983]), 90-93; Cristopher Rowland, "Introduction: the theology of liberation" in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (ed. Cristopher Rowland; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-16; Kari Latvus, *Arjen teologia. Johdatus kontekstuaaliseen raamatuntulkintaan* [Theology of Everyday. Introduction to Contextual Hermeneutics] (Helsinki: Kirjapaja, 2002), 51-54, 172-186.

involved in the process of transmission and interpretation. On the contrary: these aspects are chosen on methodological grounds in order to represent the central views, which are as follows:²

- questions of the poor 1, views behind the biblical texts;
- interpreter(s) 1, views of the writer(s) of the Bible;
- interpreter 2, author of this study;
- poor 2, views of persons who are considered poor today.

Each actor has his or her own social location, or context. Thus the working method can also be called *a four-context model*.³

2. The context of poor and immigrant females in Finland

Gender and poverty

Poverty and social exclusion may look like gender-neutral terms but in fact they are strongly gender-related issues. Gender can be described as a key concept in understanding social exclusion. Gender is one of the central questions and its importance is even greater if we focus on history. In a historical sense the roles of men and women have been very different and these ancient models still have great influence. Most of the earlier periods of history (and perhaps even current ones) have been marked in many cultures by male dominance, the patriarchal system dominating the family and society – not to forget the world of the Hebrew Bible.⁴

When the phenomenon of poverty is currently, globally observed there can be no doubt about the significance of gender issue. According to various UN reports the number of women living in poverty is higher than men. Women do not have equal educational opportunities and they are more often targets of family violence. Although the imbalance between the genders still clearly

² The reality is much more complex because the approach ignores the possible plurality of voices of poor 1, interpreter 1 and poor 2. Also the chain of tradents between the ancient text and the modern world is excluded in the model. This does not claim that other tradents did not exist but their roles are not discussed if not explicitly needed in the analysis.

³ An introduction to the *four-context model* is available in a forthcoming article by Kari Latvus, “*Reading the Hebrew Bible Poverty Texts. Some proposals for a method.*”

⁴ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Yahweh the Patriarch: Ancient Images of God and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 81-98.

exists there are also trends which indicate gradual, positive developments as well. Urbanisation has occasionally created new threats to women (street violence, etc.) but has also opened up better chances for education and employment.⁵

Another recent UN report documents the increasing visibility of female poverty to be obvious in developing countries.⁶ In Europe the gender issue is significant as well. An example of this is the single-parent family: often a single parent means a single mother. In several European countries single parenthood is also a probable indicator of living in poverty.⁷

In a global perspective, Finland and the other Nordic countries can be seen as forerunners in improving and developing the rights of women. Finland was among the first nations to give women the right to vote and be eligible for public office in the year 1906. Not only women rights issues but also families' economic needs have given women easier access to labour markets outside the family, and have forced the development of state and private day-care systems. However, although the principle of equal pay for equal work was accepted in 1962, women are still paid less and in some sectors the difference is remarkable.

A serious question in Finland remains the violence faced by women. According to statistics, about one fifth of Finnish women have experienced violence at home: in practical terms this means partner violence. The question of family violence is a global problem but Finland's ranking in the statistics is the worst among western nations.⁸

Female immigration in Finland

Another area that must be mentioned is the context of immigrated women – note that, for

⁵ *State of World Population 2007. Unleashing the Potential of Urban Growth* (<http://www.unfpa.org> accessed 10.1.2008). Maria Pilar Aquino, "The Feminist option for the Poor and Oppressed in the Context of Globalization" in *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology*, ed. Daniel Groody (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 2007), 199-201.

⁶ *The "Feminization of Poverty" and Women's Human Rights* (<http://portal.unesco.org>; accessed 9.1.2008)

⁷ David Byrne, *Social exclusion*. Second Edition (Maidenhead: Open University Press 2006), 99-101.

⁸ Markku Heiskanen, Minna Piispa, *Faith, hope, battering: a survey of men's violence against women in Finland* (Helsinki: Statistics Finland, 1998); Minna Piispa & Markku Heiskanen & Juha Kääriäinen & Reino Sirén, *Naisiin kohdistunut väkivalta* [Violence against women] (OPTL:N Julkaisuja 225. Helsinki 2005). – The research data was collected in postal inquires. The response rate was in 1998 70% (sample 7100) and in 2005 62% (sample 7213).

our topic and in any event, Hagar was an Egyptian living in Israel, with a history of “immigration”. Due to diverse ethnic backgrounds and motivations immigrant women in Finland do not form a homogenous social group. Some live well (e.g. those integrated into working life) whereas others may be struggling to find their place in society (e.g. unemployed refugees). Among the women in the most difficult situation are those who have no proper knowledge of the Finnish language and who are unemployed. Behind the refugee phenomenon are a variety of reasons such as war, and political or religious oppression. Worth remembering is the rather large number of international marriages: about 20 000 Finnish-born males have immigrant spouses, most often from Russia, Estonia or Thailand. The May 2009 report of the Ministry of the Interior reminds us about the reality of violence and oppression in which hundreds of these women live.⁹ In addition, different versions of the sexual abuse of women—and forced sexual abuse can certainly be seen as a form of modern slavery—are still a well-known global problem, and Finland is not free of this phenomenon.

The reality of immigrant women in Finland is documented in the study *Maahanmuuttajanaiset: Kotoutuminen, perhe ja työ* [Immigrant Women, Integration, Family and Work], edited by Tuomas Martikainen and Marja Tiilikainen.¹⁰ This collection of research articles illustrates the reality of female immigrants in Finland using several methodological points of view. The total (but growing) number of immigrants in Finland is relatively low, about 4% (218 626 in year 2008) of the population, and their reality as immigrants is well documented. Immigration to Finland has been caused by several reasons such as employment, education, marriage or seeking asylum – and last but not the least is the group of ethnic returnees from the former Soviet Union. Refugees have come from Europe (the former Yugoslavia), Africa (Somalia, Ruanda, and Sudan) or Asia (Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Vietnam).

Noora Ellonen and Kaija Korhonen’s article focuses on violence against immigrant women. In it, they offer a survey of earlier research and analyse the data of physical violence

⁹ *Helsingin Sanomat* 17.5.2009.

¹⁰ *Maahanmuuttajanaiset: Kotoutuminen, perhe ja työ* [Immigrant Women, Integration, Family and Work] ed. Tuomas Martikainen and Marja Tiilikainen (Väestöliitto. Väestötutkimuslaitoksen julkaisusarja D 46/2007. Helsinki 2007).

against immigrant women in Finland in 2005. The data is based on 1254 reports of complaints made to police in 2005.¹¹

The article describes three different versions of violence: sexual violence, other forms of physical violence, and threatening with violence. Under sexual violence the major issues were acts against children, and young women (aged 18-29). Also rape, forced sexual acts and sexual abuse were mentioned on several occasions. In most of the cases the person accused was a member of the family or another known person. In the category “other forms of physical violence” more than half of the cases involved assault and one-third simple assault.

The total number of reports corresponds statistically to the number of immigrated women in Finland. The reality behind the official numbers may be even worse among those not knowing their legal rights, having limited language skills, or accepting violence as part of patriarchal culture.

Violence against women is a global phenomenon but it seems that immigrant women are in an especially vulnerable position because they have often limited access to the needed information, as well as fewer contacts and safety nets. The violence can easily disappear into the cultural differences and be more easily understood as part of a certain culture. According to a UN declaration (1995) violence against women comprises physical, sexual and mental dimensions; intimidation or limiting of freedom are also included under the heading “violence”. The Finnish point of view is that cultural background or cultural traditions cannot make violent acts legal or acceptable in any form.¹²

3. An exegetical analysis of the Hagar stories (Gen. 16; 21:8-21)

¹¹ Noora Ellonen & Kaija Korhonen, “Maahanmuuttajanaiset väkivallan kohteena” [Immigrant women as a target of violence] in *Maahanmuuttajanaiset: Kotoutuminen, perhe ja työ* [Immigrant Women, Integration, Family and Work], ed. Tuomas Martikainen and Marja Tiilikainen (Väestöliitto. Väestötutkimuslaitoksen julkaisusarja D 46/2007. Helsinki 2007).

¹² Ellonen & Korhonen, “Maahanmuuttajanaiset”, 164-166, 183-185.

The Hagar stories have been read and studied well and from various perspectives.¹³ The following exegetical analysis offers historical and diachronic perspectives to Genesis 16 and 21. This is needed before we are ready to enter the inter-contextual analysis. The exegetical analysis follows the classical methods of observing the text and reminds us that seldom are there shortcuts to contemporary contextual interpretation; and, especially in chapters 16 and 21, there are good reasons to believe that the diachronic view will enhance the understanding of the plot. This approach reveals the differences between the chapters and, moreover, clarifies the development process, especially in ch. 16, thus giving a more logical explanation to the different attitudes towards Hagar (especially in Gen. 16:9-12).¹⁴ For those readers who are more interested in contextual analysis and who do not wish to follow a full discussion of diachronic research history but are satisfied with the results, skipping to the *Summary: The text's growth process* is recommended.

[NOTICE: The detailed exegesis is not available in this version: see the final publication]

Summary and Conclusions: The growth process of the text

The Hagar stories in chapters 16 and 21 offer a classical challenge of the Pentateuch, with inconsequence in the plot and repetition in the storytelling. Most obviously this can be seen when Hagar is twice threatened in the wilderness: first when pregnant and later with the child. Hagar is twice treated harshly, expelled, and then receives mercy and blessing from God. Can these characteristics be explained by diachronic exegetical analysis? A positive answer seems to be possible.

¹³ A bibliography and evaluation of earlier (especially 16th century) as well as recent history of the (especially feminist) interpretation of the Hagar stories is offered by John L. Thompson, "Hagar, Victim or Villain? Three Sixteenth-Century Views". *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 59 (1997), 213-233. About Hagar in art see Phyllis Silverman Kramer, "The Dismissal of Hagar in Five Art Works of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" in A. Brenner (ed.), *Genesis. A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1998), 195-217.

¹⁴ A synchronic approach is offered by Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "Hagar Requitte", *JSOT* 87 (2000) 75-109 and Mignon R. Jacobs, *Gender, Power, and Persuasion. The Genesis Narratives and Contemporary Portraits* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2007), 129-155. See also the study by Terence E. Fretheim, *Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007) which analyses Genesis as a (canonical) narrative.

The traditional answer based on the Documentary Hypothesis, as represented especially by von Rad and Westermann, explained quite many of the peculiarities. The theory was, however, based on an assumption that both stories existed independently either in literary (JE hypothesis) or in oral versions (Westermann). Severe critics (van Seters, Knauf and Levin) of this traditional view argue that the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in chap. 21 is more likely a later exposition based on the story in chap. 16. The literary dependency of 21:8-21 on chap. 16 implies a rather late dating of 21:8-21 and 16:9.

According to a wide consensus the Hagar story in chap. 16* belongs to the earliest literary Non-P layer of Genesis named as J or Yahwist (van Seters: the sources of J). Some verses or parts of verses (16:1a, 3) probably come from P but in a wider sense Hagar is not an issue in P. Furthermore, it seems obvious that in chap. 16 there are some other minor additions like 16:9 and 16:10, both inserted with exactly similar introductions to the oracle of the angel: “and the angel of the LORD said to her” (hwby K) l m hl r m) yw).

The J story in chap. 16 contained a version about Abraham’s son with an Egyptian slave and counted Hagar and Ishmael to be part of the family. Actually the marriage with an Egyptian slave already belonged to the pre-Yahwistic tradition. Similarly, the pre-exilic (early) layer of the laws of Deuteronomy accepted marriage with a foreigner (Deut. 21:10-14).¹⁵ J’s attitudes towards foreigners in chap. 16* may thus refer not so much to an exilic dating as supposed by van Seters and Levin, but to the pre-exilic period. The major arguments for the late dating given by van Seters actually refer to chap. 21, not to chapter 16. According to Levin the pre-J layer (sources of J) already contained the information that Abraham had an Egyptian slave as a wife. The Yahwist seemed to have a dual attitude towards Hagar: on the one hand the text emphasized the power and affliction used by Sarah, but on the other also paid attention to the divine blessing received by Hagar.

¹⁵ Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Deuteronomium* (EF 164, Darmsadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1982), 56. - Cf. Also Deut 20:14.

The literary character as well as the bias in chap. 21 do not allow locating it as a part of the same storytelling layer as chap. 16 but clearly locate it in the later literary layer.¹⁶ The origin of 21:8-21 can be best explained as a *midrash*¹⁷ which aims to clarify the foreign woman's position in Abraham's family – and, moreover, as a way to be separated from her. Using different terminology, building on the information given in chap. 16 and by introducing a more hostile attitude towards the poor Egyptian slave, the writer of chap. 21 expelled the foreign woman but allowed her to live in her own milieu. The writer partially shared the need of the early Deuteronomistic writer to take *all* the land as inheritance but disagreed with the need to destroy other inhabitants in war (Deut. 7:1-6; Josh. 24) and, especially, disagreed with the later Deuteronomistic aim of annihilating *the other* living nearby (Deut 20:10-14 *herem*).¹⁸

A further interesting parallel to Gen. 21:8-21 is in Ezra 9-10.¹⁹ Both texts represent a policy against marrying non-Israelites and how to solve the problem: to expel foreign women and children (10:3) in order to gain full possession of the land (9:10-13). However, unlike Ezra 9:10-14, Gen. 21:8-21 does not mention purity or uncleanness as a major problem.

The similarities and dissimilarities with the Deuteronomistic texts and Ezra 9-10 do not allow locating Gen. 21:8-21 precisely in one certain moment or to connect them with a single theological tradition in the Hebrew Bible. The rejection of the foreign slave gives, however, some clues for preferring a dating of Genesis 21 to the post-exilic rather than pre-exilic period and to support Knauf's late dating of. This raises the question of whether the expulsion story in 21:8-21

¹⁶ Cf. David Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis. Historical and Literary Approaches* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press 1996), 197-199. Carr argues that chs. 21 and 22 are literarily related to each other and are built on the compositional layer beginning in Gen. 12:1-8. These arguments do not exclude the possibility that verses 21:8-21 are a later insertion based on chap. 16.

¹⁷ A modern version of the *midrash* of Gen. 16 and 21 is written Danna Nolan Fewell, "Changing the Subject: Retelling the Story of Hagar the Egyptian" in A. Brenner (ed.), *Genesis. A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1998), 182-194.

¹⁸ Alexander Rofe, "The Laws of Warfare in the book of Deuteronomy: Their Origin, Intent and Positivity", *JSOT* 32 (1985), 23-44.

¹⁹ Ezra 9-10 seems to be dependent on Deut 7:1-6 but the prohibition of intermarriage in verses Deut 7:3-4a may also be a later insertion (Preuss, *Deuteronomium*, 49). According to Timo Veijola (*Das 5. Buch Mose. Deuteronomium. Kapitel 1,1 – 16, 17*. ATD 8,1. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2004, 193-199) the denial of mixed marriage (Ezra 9-10) was introduced by the late deuteronomistic group (DtrN) in the exilic/post-exilic period.

was actually a reaction to the real and acute post-exilic inheritance debate.

Finally, it is also worth underscoring the radical shift in attitudes. The earliest level, the sources of J, probably knew the tradition about the Egyptian slave who gave birth to Abraham's son. In the next layer J described the oppression, conflict, escape, and return. Without the follow-up in 21:8-21 Hagar and the son would have stayed with Abraham and would have been ignored in the story. Ultimately, in the last layer, the later (post-exilic) writer created a new version, *a midrash* that described how Hagar was expelled. The last one was a pure historical fiction which exposed the changed attitude towards other ethnic groups. Even marriage with a foreigner was no longer allowed and the semi-Israelite offspring had to go.

4. An inter-contextual analysis

The exegetical analysis concentrated on the writers' points of view (Context 2). The results follow more or less the conventional exegesis (if it still exists) and are valuable in themselves. The sphere is, however, limited and mostly ignores the issues of the ancient and present poor.

The following inter-contextual analysis continues the text analysis from different perspectives, especially the Poor 1 and Poor 2. The dialogue between different views is introduced by the researcher (context 3). Due to different perspectives on the same story, and in the interests of methodological clarity, a certain overlapping with the exegetical analysis cannot be avoided.

Reading with Hagar, or the position of Poor 1

Do we have possibilities to analyse the poor *behind* the biblical story (context 1)? We can say that there is a difference between the Hagar described in the text and the Hagar beyond the text. The Hagar described in Genesis is a literary creation based on earlier tradition. Behind the tradition of Hagar there may well exist an historical Hagar, although mostly she is hidden from our eyes. In saying this I do not mean that the stories in Genesis happened as described. It seems even too much to say that the stories somehow described a history of existing families somewhere in the second *or*

first millennium. By saying that the historical Hagar may have existed I simply refer to the fact that the earliest layer of tradition knew her as a person. We may conclude that the marriage with an Egyptian slave called Hagar actually happened in the pre-exilic period, but should be careful to take further steps. Drawing a detailed family line or trying to date the century when Hagar lived goes far beyond the facts confirmed.

What we certainly have is the figure in the text. When we strive to go behind the text we are still mostly restricted to the information given by the biblical writer(s). Also, the narrative about Hagar is written from the rulers' ("oppressors' ") point of view.²⁰ The poor (in context 1) behind the text (in context 2) do not have their own and independent voice. Indirectly and on a general level, however, we are also able to have complementary information about slaves' social location in the Ancient Orient. Remembering these limitations, it seems to be highly valuable to try to see and read the story *from* Hagar's viewpoint and to read the text *with* an Egyptian slave called Hagar.

The poor behind the text do not speak but need an advocate. Thus the researcher has the role to support the weak and silent voices of the text in order to make them audible. In this role the researcher can speak on behalf of the poor (Hagar) to make her position real and visible.²¹ This requires that we must also be ready to reinvestigate biblical traditions critically and to reread them, because "the Bible continues to be an unsafe and a problematic text"²² for those on the margins either in the ancient or modern world. According to the perspective of gender, "the Old Testament is a collection of writings by males from a society dominated by males" and even "prophetic concern for the 'poor' should be understood essentially as concern for a poor man, and more particularly a 'brother'".²³

The fixed starting point for us is the text of Genesis, which includes the stories of Hagar. The general background of the Ancient Near East knows the reality of slavery as a part of normal

²⁰ Jasmine Jebakani, "Hagar: the Misery of Rejection" in *Black Theology in Britain* 5 (2000), 35.

²¹ Phyllis Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities. Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1997), 65-66.

²² R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002), 100.

²³ Bird, *Missing Persons*, 13, 78.

and accepted behaviour. The Code of Hammurabi, Egyptian laws or the laws of the Hebrew Bible acknowledged the existence of slavery. Slaves were mostly seen as objects of trade and means of labour. In the legislation the main interest was to secure ownership questions or responsibility in case of injuries. Usually it was a question about damaging other persons' property. Legislation did not protect the rights of slaves but the interests of owners.²⁴ Slavery was taken for granted by all without any call for its abolishment.²⁵

Thus the stories told in Genesis 16 and 21, the experience of a young woman who was sold as a slave in a foreign country, to be used as a concubine and facing mental and/or physical violence, is not an exceptional story but quite the opposite: probably a normal and realistic description in the Ancient world through the centuries. The current critical evaluation against slavery reflects the reality that slavery has been forbidden in most western countries since the first half of the 19th century.²⁶ Slavery in itself includes a negative and doubtful essence from the modern perspective - unlike in the texts of the Hebrew Bible.

In the stories of Genesis, Hagar has a key role but an extremely passive one. She is practically an object in the decision making. In chap. 16 her pregnancy triggers the overall development and changes the power relations in the family.²⁷ Hagar is a slave of Sarah but also a wife of Abraham. In any event Sarah, who was first willing to use Hagar to have a child, does not allow these changes. After gaining permission from Abraham and God, in 16:5-6 Sarah "dealt harshly with her". Actually the Hebrew expression (חנ(תּו) refers to violent and aggressive behaviour. The same verb is used concerning national oppression (Gen. 15:13; Exod. 1:11) and also sexual violence and rape (Gen. 34:2; Judg. 19:24). The question is: did Hagar earn this because of

²⁴ A good illustration of legal documents is H.D. Baker, "The degrees of freedom: slavery in mid-first millennium BC Babylonia" in *World Archeology* 33 (2001), 18-26.

²⁵ Innocenzo Cardellini, *Die biblischen "Sklaven"-Gesetze im Lichte des keilschriftlichen Sklavenrechts. Ein Beitrag zur Tradition, Überlieferung und Redaktion der alttestamentlichen Rechtstexte* (BBB 55. Bonn: Hanstein, 1981); Muhammed A. Dandamayev, "Slavery, Ancient Near East" in *ABD VI*, 58-65.

²⁶ Among the wide variety of scholarly works about the history of slavery is Junius P. Rodriguez ed., *The Historical encyclopedia of world slavery* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1997).

²⁷ A detailed synchronic analysis of power relations is given by Jacobs, *Gender*, 129-155.

raised self-respect and lowered respect towards Sarah? Did Sarah have a right to violate and punish Hagar?

Physical violence against slaves was not forbidden in biblical law. For example, the Covenant Code²⁸ does not penalise the use of the rod on slaves but does not allow killing a slave. The use of physical violence is thus at least partly accepted, but causing injuries created a need for compensation, even from the owner to the slave.

When a slave owner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property. [...] When a slaveowner strikes the eye of a male or female slave, destroying it, the owner shall let the slave go, a free person, to compensate for the eye. (Exod. 21:20-21, 26 NRSV)²⁹

The legislation of the Covenant Code thus authorises to use violence but clearly adheres to the value of the slave as a person. The slave is part of the property, but the value of a human being is recognised because a slave may become a free person as compensation for severe injury. Using mild violence against slaves was mainly understood as part of property management, which helped maintain the *status quo* and suppression of a slave's too strong or rising self-confidence.

Whatever the concrete form of the violence used by Sarah and whatever the cultural and legal standards, the act of affliction caused Hagar to become a runaway in chap. 16. Although Sarah's behaviour seems to be culturally acceptable, it needed to be legitimised by Abraham and God. This is a clear indicator that Sarah acted in an area where the legal or moral codes were not clear. Whatever the legal or moral status of the punishment, it was such wrongdoing against Hagar that she fled.

Hagar's situation is supported in the divine message. The message confirms that Yahweh has heard of the wrongdoing (Kyn(l) hwhy (m# yk). The affliction in itself was an oppressive act against a vulnerable human being, a foreigner without full rights compared to Israelites. The

²⁸ Conventionally seen as pre-exilic and earliest legislative document in Ancient Israel. Late-dating of the CC is, however, argued for by John van Seters, "Law of the Hebrew Slave: A Continuing Debate", *ZAW* 119 (2007), 169-183.

²⁹ Cf. Code of Hammurabi: "If he put out the eye of a man's slave, or break the bone of a man's slave, he shall pay one-half of its value" (CH 199).

slave was dominated by the owner and the pregnant young woman became an object in a power game. “Read in the light of contemporary issues and images, the story depicts oppression in three familiar forms: nationality, class and sex.”³⁰

The other version of the use of power is told in chap. 21. In the earlier story in chap. 16 the reason for the conflict was the emancipation of Hagar and here the process is triggered by the play (qxcM) of Hagar’s son. The expression qxc pi. does not have negative implications in itself, although it is often translated as “mocking.”³¹ Actually, the plain play and existence of Ishmael seem to threaten Sarah because Ishmael, as Abraham’s older offspring, challenges the inheritance order (21:11). Although, in an earlier passage, Ishmael is mentioned as a child of Abraham and his second wife (16:3), Ishmael is now only a son of *Abraham’s female slave* (21:10, 12).

From Hagar’s point of view chapter 21 repeats the same themes as chap. 16:

- the new existence of the foreigner (Hagar’s raised self-esteem/Ishmael growing up)
- the result is violent behaviour or expulsion;
- Sarah is the real actor;
- Hagar is in the wilderness;
- Hagar meets an angel of Yahweh;
- Yahweh is the one who hears the affliction or the cry;
- Ultimately help for Hagar comes from Yahweh.

Both chapters explore a story in which Abraham had an Egyptian slave as a wife/concubine who reached a remarkable position in the family but was finally expelled. Through the whole story one perspective focuses on the survival of Hagar. It is finally Yahweh who helps the Egyptian runaway/castaway to resist the use of power and violence. Hagar and Ishmael are expelled but not annihilated, oppressed but not abandoned, and finally guided to settle down.

³⁰ Tribble, *Texts*, 27.

³¹ Among many others the translation “mocking” is favoured by Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50. Vol. 2. WBC* (Dallas: Word Books 1994), 82.

Hagar's story can be read also as an oppression story.³² From this point of view Hagar is a victim, a foreigner and a female slave. This means that she belongs to the margins of the support system and safety net provided by an extended family. This becomes obvious in the story plot which explores her status as vulnerable and without rights. Hagar is used as a child making machine, oppressed and expelled, as motivated by power relations and inheritance questions.

Through the whole story Hagar is described as a person who lives in a marginal area. She is from Egypt but her background is not explained. She is treated as a slave who is not appreciated and forced to go into exile. Through her escape and expulsion she is emancipated due to her personal will and divine help. She overcomes the violence and power over her, which gives her the possibility to be free. In the end, she stays in the border area between Egypt and Palestine, in the margins but no longer marginalised. Based on the help and promise given by God, Hagar becomes a person of success.

Option for the insiders and concern for the others, or: reading with the interpreter I

The Hagar stories in Gen. 16 and 21 describe the family of Abraham in two episodes. The chapters do not have similar views on how to deal with a poor and foreign slave. The writer of chap. 16, the Yahwist (J), treated Hagar with a much more positive attitude compared to the later writer in chap. 21. The Yahwist let Hagar stay in Abraham's family, and described her as a woman met and helped by God. Hagar's credo is short: God sees me (y) r l). The reality of the poor (Hagar) was seen by God and the poor (Hagar) herself was aware of this – a major issue in awareness building.³³

The later insertion in 16:10 interpreted the event against a wider horizon. Hagar's credo was connected to the promise of multiple offspring. Beside these positive attitudes J also told about the punishment Sarah gave to Hagar. J even allowed Sarah to treat Hagar harshly without any critical comments. These observations do not give us permission to go further and presume that J

³² Tribble, *Texts*; Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness. The Challenge of Womanist God-talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis 1993), 1-4.

³³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New Revised 20th Anniversary Edition. New York: Continuum 1993), 68-105; Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990).

had a negative attitude toward Hagar even if certain verbal connections with the Fall story exist, and it is certainly beyond the limits of the story to see Hagar as an error (von Rad; cf. Levin).

The writer of 21:8-21 (probably also the writer of 16:9) represented harsh opinions toward the poor Egyptian slave, married to Abraham. The passage was built on earlier information given in chap. 16 but the views are sharpened. As noted in the exegetical analysis, chap. 21 is a literary creation based on earlier texts, especially on chap. 16. Chap. 21 is a piece of narrative theology, a *midrash*, explaining the division between those who belong to the family and those who are outsiders. According to the writer it was not sufficient that Hagar was kept under strict control including harsh treatment. Hagar also had to be excluded from the family in order *not* to give her son the chance to share the inheritance (21:12).

The way the expulsion is articulated emphasizes that Hagar and Ishmael did not receive even a small part of the inheritance. In 21:14 Abraham gave Hagar nothing but bread and a skin full of water (Mym t m x w M x l), which is in sharp contrast with other biblical texts. For example, compared to the laws of Deuteronomy the contrast is clear: Deut. 15:12-18 gave an order to release a Hebrew slave and give the slave plenty of gifts. By mentioning bread and water the writer implies that Hagar and Ishmael did not take any of the material resources belonging to Abraham but left with “empty hands” (cf. Deut. 15:13).³⁴

When Hagar and Ishmael are driven from the midst of Abraham’s family the writer is free to return to the divine help and promise to Hagar. At the moment of death God intervenes and repeats the earlier promise about Ishmael’s offspring – which means not only survival but the growth of a large nation. The last theme already requires the existence of 16:10, which is later than J but earlier than chap. 21.

The latter Hagar story represents ambiguous attitudes toward the foreign slave and concubine. This can be noticed also in the changed terminology: Hagar is not articulated as a

³⁴ The contrast between rich Abraham and poor Hagar is emphasised by Fewell, “Changing the Subject”, 189-192.

servant (hxp#) of Sarah and wife (h#Ø) of Abraham but rather the slave of Abraham (Ktm) , and a concubine. The use of power against Hagar is accepted by the divine authority. The best explanation for the strict views in chap. 21 is the altered social setting. In the exegetical analysis chap. 21 was dated to the post-exilic period. That period forced Israelites to protect their identity against colonial powers and also against other ethnic groups. At such a time the formulations about circumcision (P), Sabbath legislation (still later in P) and the idea of annihilation of the other nations (Dtr) as part of the nation's earlier history were developed. These aimed to protect identity and support the struggle of survival against outer pressure. The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael can be seen as an expression of a similar bias – a tendency toward hostility against other ethnic groups and to protect one's own group.

In the pre-exilic period endogamy, marriage within one's own people, was not a rule, as a variety of examples show (Deut. 21:10-14; 2 Sam. 11; 2 Kings 11:1).³⁵ The open criticism against exogamic marriages was reasonable only in the exilic/post-exilic period. Despite all the problematic tones, the episodes in chaps. 16 and 21 have also a clear and at least partly positive message for the foreign poor: they are accepted among the Israelites and blessed, but not unconditionally. Chap. 21 in particular makes this obvious. The poor are taken care of by Yahweh but they are socially excluded from the inner circle of Israelite society. How can this obvious tension be explained?

Actually there seem to be two lines to follow, and the tension is between these basic lines. The main storyline appeals to the exclusive promise concerning offspring made to Abraham and Sarah. This major theme of the story is an explanation about the promise and blessing given exclusively to the chosen insiders. The patriarchal mainstream view of the story describes how Yahweh keeps his promise to Abraham and makes him a large nation. Beside the main stream there is a side-story which pays attention to Hagar, the poor in the margin. The core of this story is based on oppression of the poor and Yahweh's reaction to it. The importance of the relation between

³⁵ For further examples see Athalya Brenner, *The Israelite Woman. Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 115-118; Victor P. Hamilton, "Marriage (OT and ANE)" in *ABD IV*, 559-569.

Yahweh and Hagar is described in chap. 16 with several verbs. Yahweh heard ((m#) the oppression and spoke (rbd) to Hagar. Finally, the last aspect described is Hagar's experience of having been seen by God: "You are the God who sees me" (y r l) ht)). The concern for the poor, "the other" who do not live in the inner circle of society and family institutions, is evident especially in chap. 16. In the later layer of the texts (16:9 and 21:8-21) the scene has been modified. The promise made to Hagar is not cancelled but the expulsion guarantees that the offspring of Isaac – the insiders – will not have to compete for the land with Ishmael's offspring. According to the writers of Gen. 16 and 21, it was God who helped the poor in their survival struggle. Hagar is expelled but also empowered and enabled to have her own growing family. Hagar is blessed but left outside, according to the Israelite point of view.

The values of the Hagar stories, or: the ethical comments of the contemporary reader (interpreter 2)

What is the researcher's role in the inter-contextual analysis? On the one hand the researcher may be an outsider having no direct contact with either poverty in the Ancient world or current poverty. Conventionally, exegesis has tried to be as neutral as possible, nearly invisible – as if the researcher (with his/her own social location) would not exist at all. On the other hand, this entire study would not have its shape without my questions, analysis and conclusions. Thus the neutrality or invisibility is an illusion. Without being poor, immigrated or a woman (I am white, middle class and male) I still have an obligation to aim to recognise, hear and analyse all the variety of dimensions related to poverty.

For the current researcher (interpreter 2) one of the most difficult questions is: how to evaluate the views of the writers of the Bible. Their attitudes were exclusive and hostile to poor people. This was articulated clearly in the affliction and expulsion of Hagar. And still, the writers also represented the positive understanding that Yahweh is the one who helps those who are in trouble, who are in need of divine help because of oppression.

If these ideas are brought together they create an obvious tension between excluding social actions and an inclusive theological understanding of God. How is it possible that the same God contains such a strong circle of contradiction: God is the one who takes care of those who are excluded by the people guided by the same God? In the story “the Deity is on the side of the oppressors.”³⁶

This particularistic behaviour makes God schizophrenic or a double-faced *Janus* figure that allows affliction but also heals the wounds of the oppressed. To accept the story as a divine guidance leads to an illusory world where wrong acts are too easily accepted and made divine.³⁷ The implications of this can be severe and lead to the reality where the poor, “the other”, are not really empowered but only helped and doomed to remain the targets of charity. To avoid this, it is important to see that the real promise of the future blessing includes a social dimension too, for a blessing without justice hides original **wrong acts**.

Other contextual voices or reading with the poor 2

“As a symbol of the oppressed, Hagar becomes many things to many people. Most specifically, all sorts of rejected women such as black women and *dalit* women find their stories in her.”³⁸ When the Hagar stories are read with the current voices of the poor several observations and questions arise, showing both similarities and also differences between these two contexts, i.e. social locations. The reality of women in Finland is largely very different compared to the life setting of women in Ancient Israel but the poverty theme opens views that are worth noting.

Just to offer an example of international marriages in Finland. Mostly immigrants are fine and are happily married. However, the report by the Ministry of the Interior in May 2009 reminded about the reality of violence and oppression in which hundreds of Thai women live.

³⁶ Jacobs, “Gender”, 154.

³⁷ Which was conventional in pre-critical interpretation during the Reformation (Cajetan, Luther, Calvin). Thompson, “Hagar”, 213-233. Reis, “Hagar Requitted”, 106-109 explains the oppressive action only as human failures which were later required to the Israelites during their stay in Egypt. In the concept of God nothing seems to be problematic for Reis. In a similar way Williams, Sisters, 20-22 wondered if God did “not know about Sarais’s brutal treatment” when Hagar asked to return (16:9). In her analysis Williams (following Tamez) tried to find such a point of view which would make God’s acts justified and right.

³⁸ Jebakani, “Hagar”, 41.

One Thai female, “Naan” age 33, told her story in Finland:

“I met my husband in a restaurant in Thailand. He guaranteed my visa. We never married. When I came here it appeared that my husband already had a wife. I was sad. They lived in the same house but like friends in separate rooms. I had to do all the work and serve the man but he treated me like a slave. He was violent and did not give money. I ate potato peels.
I escaped and met another man. Also he hit me. Now I am sick and broke. The social workers give me 100 euros in a week. Children are with the man and because of them I do not want to move away but I cannot live here either. Who will help me?”³⁹

In many cases poverty is caused by external reasons and not by one’s own choices, which seems to be obvious in Hagar’s case. A poor person is not often able to make decisions about him/herself. Problems are linked to the different layers of economics, society and culture far beyond the choices of an individual. As with Hagar, also the contemporary poor have only a limited number of possibilities for decisions about their lives.

A fairly central question related to poverty in the modern world is that of mentality: how are the poor seen and how do they see themselves? In contemporary descriptions of poverty one of the main themes is shame and lack of self-esteem. Poverty gives a label which saps energy and excludes from social arenas. To avoid exclusion and deprivation special support is often needed as well as personal strength. Using contemporary terms, the Hagar stories can be seen as an empowerment story where the foreign female slave, an object of other peoples decisions, finds self-esteem, survives and is able to create her own social world with her son.

The present reality of immigrant women in Finland, briefly described earlier in this article, contains aspects of a difficult reality. Major difficulties are connected with the new role in the new society, questions of living and also questions of violence. According to the existing definition of violence, we have good reasons to say that the story of Hagar fulfils the criteria. Hagar was forced to face physical/mental violence, expelled and then pushed almost to the point of death. According to the modern knowledge of law we notice that her rights as a member of an extended family, as a

³⁹ *Helsingin Sanomat* 17.5.2009 (translation by Latvus).

human being and as a wife were not respected – and not even according to the ancient criteria.

Another example of a socially oriented contextual interpretation is offered by Nicole M. Simopoulos, who collected different readings of Gen. 16 in socially and geographically varying female groups.⁴⁰ One such group of South African black women had lived in the middle of a “dehumanizing system of Apartheid [and] were [the] poorest of South Africa’s poor”. For them Hagar was an Egyptian slave girl, perhaps a case of child abuse. For them the central themes of the story were abuse, misuse of power, corruption, sexual and economic exploitation, and slavery. The women reacted especially strongly to 16:9. The oppressive image of God was linked in their attitudes to the rich and powerful. The women concluded that, “The author of the Gen. 16 story is clearly mistaken in his or her understanding of God”.⁴¹

According to an inter-contextual interpretation, these readings have special value as authentic and genuine current interpretations. These women represent the current poor (poor 2) as described above (context 4). With good grounds the group of South African women can identify themselves as poor. The current voices cannot be understood as equal to or the same as the voices in the biblical story but, rather, are new interpretations and versions of ancient voices.

The following lines written by Phyllis Trible sum up well the reason why Hagar has become a symbol for many other oppressed persons:

She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.⁴²

5. Final remarks

⁴⁰ Nicole M. Simopoulos, “Who Was Hagar? Mistress, Divorce, Exile, or Exploited Workers: An Analysis of Contemporary Grassroots Readings of Genesis 16 by Caucasian, Latina, and Black South African Women” in Gerald O. West (ed.), *Reading Other-wise. Socially Engaged Biblical Scholars Reading with Their Local Communities* (Semeia Studies 62. SBL: Atlanta 2007), 63-72.

⁴¹ Simopoulos, “Who Was”, 69-71.

⁴² Phyllis Trible, *Texts*, 28.

The method used in this article illustrates how a *four-context model* works. Due to this method it is possible to combine contextual and exegetical working processes and avoid a possible one-sidedness of approaches. Conventional exegesis has all too often ignored contextual viewpoints and tried to act as if the biblical *text* were the only dimension of analysis even if, in such cases too, scholars and their studies are not free from their social reality. If contextual reality is ignored the perspective for understanding the essential dimensions of the story becomes all too narrow. Similarly, if the results of conventional exegesis are not studied carefully, the contextual approaches are in danger of being one-sided and of assimilating the ancient to the contemporary readings. Thus the *four-context model* aims to introduce a more balanced reading of biblical texts.

The position of Poor 1 behind the text is mostly a way of looking at the text, an optional view on the same text analysed normally. But even as such it seems to be a valuable point of view. The position of Poor 2 evokes the hard reality that still exists, but which remains a methodological challenge. The *four-context model* is a helpful way of formulating questions but it can and must still be developed in the future.

What are the central findings? The writers of the Bible do not describe Hagar's feelings and words in detail. Often Hagar is a plain bystander with regard to the decisions related to her. Mostly the text describes acts done and words said *to her*. In the story, Hagar is taken from her homeland and sold as a slave, abused, made an object of mental and physical violence but most of all she is the person who has no opportunity to make decisions about her own life. As a slave Hagar was not in an equal position but had to fight for herself and even for her survival. The culmination is in the expulsion story because it contains the possibility of total destruction but leads to an experience of empowerment. At the end Hagar is able to also make her own decisions: to find her own place and to take a wife for her son. This means that she has, at least partially, a power position similar to that of Sarah's earlier in the story. No further details about the rest of her life are given but the story contains the possibility of her finding a future acknowledged position and social

protection in Ishmael's growing family. Is the God who heard and saw Hagar, the poor slave, and who spoke to Hagar and saved her from "suffering premature and unjust death" the God who also has a preferential option for the poor?⁴³

The first interpreter(s) of the Hagar story, the writer(s) of the Bible, did not agree that Hagar is the one to be first and foremost protected.⁴⁴ For them the existence of the Israelite nation, embodied in Abraham and Sarah, was the priority concern which represented the main target of God's protection and blessing. Within these national limits they wanted, however, also to call to mind that God paid special attention to the foreigner and the poor.

The current social location of many poor immigrant females reminds one that Hagar's story has not yet been closed. The voices in the margin still cry for refuge and protection and are still in danger of being expelled. The question of the ancient writers' moral is actually a current one and requires both ethical and practical actions.

The methodology introduced in this article aims to offer a broader and more adequate contextual reading of the Hagar stories. One of the confirmed results is that both exegetical and contextual approaches are needed, in order to complement each other. Limited interest in either of these will increase the danger of one-sided views: either pretending that present reality does not affect exegesis or, all too fast, assimilating biblical texts to current issues.

An inter-contextual analysis creates an ongoing discussion between texts, contexts and different voices. None of those positions has priority in the end; however, all dimensions are invited to be critically heard and evaluated. A singular final view of Hagar is an illusion that does not exist. Nevertheless, Hagar's story offers inspiration and challenges in new contexts – as long as her contemporary companions are still in danger of being (ab)used, dealt with harshly, and expelled.

⁴³ Gustavo Gutierrez, "The Task and content of liberation theology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19-38.

⁴⁴ The treatment of Hagar was probably the major reason for the later explanations in the post-biblical Jewish tradition as well as in the Christian writings. About later Jewish, Christian and Muslim tradition see articles in *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2006).