

For the past two years or so, Christine and I have been watching a YouTube channel. You need to understand that this is unusual for us. We’ve effectively named the channel “The Abandoned House.” What it is, is a young (late 20’s) couple who bought an abandoned house in West Vancouver, demolished it by hand, and have been in the process of rebuilding it.

When we first began, we were enthralled by learning how a house was built, what was behind the walls, and we wondered along with the hosts, how they were going to both disassemble and then reassemble the home. They’ve done most of the labour themselves, contracting out things which were either very outside of their skill set, thinking metal construction framing, sprayfoam installation, window and glass installation, or were things that if they weren’t done just right, it would drive them mad, think drywall.

However, alongside this, we’ve come to notice just how much this couple could be called influencers. I would wager to guess that most of the income from this renovation comes either from ad revenue from YouTube or from sponsorships along the way. They regularly highlight tools, materials, and furnishings that have been given to them by companies wanting a little bit of promotion. This is in addition to the services and products that are inserted into the middle of their weekly episodes by the hosts.

With the advent of social media, the celebrity or the social media influencer has taken off, and for some people, it’s their sole source of revenue. Enabling them to live in ways that shape the attitudes, behaviour, or even culture. I won’t lie, some days I want to rebuild an abandoned house and secure all the sponsorships along the way, but then I’m quickly reminded that I don’t have that great a screen presence.

Marketing and product placements aside, influencers wield significant power in our culture; they drive trends, spark movements, and can shape collective thought. Why else explain how Taylor Swift mobilized a generation of fans to register over 65,000 new voters in a single weekend, or how just a few summers ago, everyone just *had* to have a particular Stanley brand tumbler with straw, and how Clara Hughes’ work with Bell Let’s Talk, transformed how Canadians discuss mental health from a private struggle to a national priority.

The Influencer is not just a marketing skill; they wield power and demand attention. This is why, for our summer series, the worship committee landed on talking about Women in Scripture as Influencers. These women have shaped, transformed, modified, manipulated (in a good way), and interveined in the story of God and God’s people. And we begin our series with the story of Hagar.

Hagar’s story is as painful as it is complex. Feminist theologian Phyllis Trible called it one of her “Texts of Terror.” A phrase that I think acknowledges what we’re reading here: a tale of impatience, marked by abuse, and shadowed by neglect, and it’s also a story of God noticing and responding to injustice. In Hagar, we hear a story of a woman placed into a situation which, at the time of writing, it may have been culturally acceptable. Today, we recognize it for what it was: deeply unjust. Our task is not to explain it away, but to stand and notice Hagar within it.

Hagar’s story is interwoven with Abram’s story and God’s story of covenant. Introduced as Sarai’s Egyptian slave girl, Hagar likely was part of a peace offering Pharaoh had given the

family after he had imprudently taken Sarai to be his concubine. The misunderstanding with Pharaoh was corrected, but this couple had a significant problem; God had promised to Abram that he would be blessed with land and with children if Abram would trust in God and follow God's leading to move to a different place. However, no matter how faithful Abram was, he couldn't father children on his own; that's just not how that works. Repeatedly, God had appeared to Abram and promised to give him land and offspring. But it was not happening, or at least, not happening fast enough. Sarai, convinced that God was preventing her from having children, came up with a plan.

Hagar is offered to Abram by Sarai, so that Hagar could be the surrogate for Sarai, and thus produce the promised heir. Without hesitation, Abram agrees, but Hagar? She has no voice in this. Without consent, without having a say in whether or not she wanted to spend the night with a man old enough to be her grandfather, Hagar is sent to Abram.

Hagar conceives, but then things get more complicated. The power dynamics are thrown upside down. Hagar may have resented being caught in an impossible situation, but she took pride in the fact that she was pregnant, whereas her old, barren mistress was not. Inversely, Sarai resented Hagar (even though this was all her idea). And while Sarai blamed Abram for all the problems with Hagar, Abram abdicated all responsibility to Sarai, who in biblical terms "dealt harshly" with Hagar, we know what that means today: she was met with cruelty and abuse.

If this is starting to sound like an episode of *The Handmaid's Tale*, specifically the conflict between Serena Joy and Offred, you wouldn't be wrong. Margaret Atwood drew inspiration from this very story, as well as others like it in Scripture, to craft her seminal dystopian vision.

And if this were the end of the story, Hagar would be reduced to just another statistic in the heartbreaking history of those who suffer in silence. However, it's not. In the midst of that pain, Hagar found the courage to act. She refused to be silenced. She stood up for herself and fled into the wilderness, seeking safety—and there, in the desert, she meets God, who was already waiting to see her.

God does not ignore her. God comes to her and cares for her. An angel is sent, and calls her by name, unlike Abram and Sarai. The angel instructs Hagar to return. The wilderness in Scripture is not a safe place; then again, neither is the camp with Abram and Sarai. But in that moment, it may have been the only realistic path to keep Hagar and her unborn child alive. Before she returns, God gives to her and her son, Ishmael, a divine promise: "Hagar would have many offspring. That her child, to be named 'Ishamel', meaning 'God hears', would have a conflicted life, but both he and Hagar would have a future." This is something remarkable. This promise echoes the promise made to Abram.

In response, Hagar gives God a name, the only person in scripture to do so. God is named by Hagar, El-roi, or "the God of seeing," Because she has been seen by God. And this detail is notable. God is usually the one doing the naming. In scripture, the one who names has power over the named. In this case, Hagar claims the power of naming.

More than a decade later, the pattern of neglect and ostracism repeats, while Ishmael is older, Sarai now conceives, and gives birth to Isaac. And just as Isaac, the promised child, is weaned, Sarai feels threatened by Ishmael playing with Isaac. And again, Hagar and Ishmael are sent out, sent away from the tribe, abandoned, presumably to die. And there again, in the desert, in the wilderness, is God. And again, God, "the God of seeing," meets them, cares for them, and protects them.

Often, these passages from Genesis are read as Abram and Sarai as the main characters. And that, I would suggest, is a very privileged reading of this passage; it repeats the harm done to Hagar by 'othering' her. By focusing this story on Abram and Sarai, and in a way elevating their actions as the 'correct' actions, we re-victimize Hagar. We choose to overlook her in favour of the matriarch and patriarch of the Genesis story. But Hagar is not unnoticed; she is, instead, seen by God.

While in many senses of the word, Hagar is the 'other' in this story. Her name literally means, "the foreigner, the alien, the sojourner." She is by no means a minor part. Hagar is just as important and influential in God's story and the story of God's people.

Hagar and Ishmael were not treated well in this story. They faced poverty, oppression, violence, and the threat of homelessness. "Hagar had a difficult life, but in the end God provided the resources she needed to survive and to make a way out of no way."¹ Hagar receives multiple signs of divine grace, even though she is a poor, enslaved woman who is not one of the chosen people.

And this is not just ancient history. Hagar's story is the story of many women today, with her experience of poverty, oppression, violence and homelessness. CBC recently reported on the need for more shelter space for victims of domestic violence in the Niagara region, specifically St. Catharines.² Shelters are reporting that they're seeing domestic violence cases continuing to rise year over year, and that they're struggling to have enough beds for all the women fleeing abuse. Like Hagar, so many women today are cast out into the wilderness, forced to find safety where there is none. Hagar's story is not a one-off event; it is a mirror held up to our present reality.

Hagar's story, though, can still be a story of good news. "Hagar escapes her slaveholders and abusers and receives her inheritance from God, and God fulfills all of God's promises to her."³ In Hagar, we hear a story of a compassionate God noticing her in a way that Sarai and Abram, and others, could or would not. The Good News here is not that she returned to safety in a human sense, but that she was claimed by the Divine when no one else would claim her. In a culture that dictated she was disposable, God declared she was precious. In a lineage obsessed with bloodlines, God promised her son a future.

And this is why Hagar is an influencer: sharing in God's covenant, she sparked a movement by also birthing a nation that stretches across history. She claimed the power to name God 'The One Who Sees,' changing how we understand God's attention to the broken. She intervened in the story of God's people, through her relationship with God, 'the One Who Sees,' she showed that God's promise was bigger than the chosen people, and also was bigger than human scheming. "Hagar acts on her own behalf. She is the only woman in the Hebrew Bible to select a wife for her son, and the woman she chooses is from Egypt, the land of her own

¹ Japinga, Lynn. 2017. *Preaching the Women of the Old Testament : Who They Were and Why They Matter*. First edition. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press. pg 17.

² Forsyth, Paul. 2026. "Domestic Violence Investigations by Police See Sharp Spike in Niagara." CBC. June 9, 2026. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/domestic-violence-niagara-police-shelters-full-9.7227236>.

³ Wilda C. Gafney. 2017. *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. Westminster/John Knox Press. pg. 44.

people.”⁴ This story is a story for people of this world who feel that they have been abandoned. Reminding us that God sees and notices.

Hagar and her story is not a footnote in the story of God. She is the first of many women in Scripture who will reshape our understanding of God. She is one of the original influencers in the story of Scripture.

Amen

⁴ Williams, Michael E., Sharon Pace, Martha Whitmore Hickman, and Betty Lehrman. 1993. Old Testament Women. Nashville: Abingdon. pg 28.