

Flight – Beginning of the Listening Process

A study of the encounter between Hagar and Sarah

Rev. Dr. Emily Awino Onyango

Listening to God is the foundation and starting point of all listening processes. As we listen to God, we have an opportunity for self-reflection and evaluation, and also listen to others. In Genesis 16, we reflect on the story between Sarah and Hagar. Hagar is fleeing from a conflict situation, and in the process she encounters the angel of the Lord¹. In this encounter between God and Hagar, God listens to Hagar. Hagar also listens to what God has to say about her situation as she reflects on the way forward. This story is very useful in reflecting on the situation within the Anglican Communion. Several issues are raised within the text which is similar.

First, the text presents Hagar fleeing from the conflict situation. Maybe, she thinks that by fleeing the problem will be solved. In the Anglican Church, the different groups seem to be in flight. There is a great worry over imminent division within the Church. Flight in this case is seen as trying to escape the problem. However, in the text Hagar's flight leads her into a situation of listening to God and also reflecting on the issues at stake. This is quiet similar to the experience of the Luo people of Kenya. Flight



Rev. Dr. Emily Awino Onyango
Senior Lecturer, Historical Studies
Saint Paul's University
Limuru
Kenya

plays a very important role in conflict resolution and is always the spring board of self-reflection and also listening to others. In the genealogy stories, Ramogi, the great ancestor of the Luo people had two sons. They had a major conflict which forced them to part ways. But parting ways gave them opportunity to reflect and reconcile and also realize that their destiny is bound together. In Luo marriages, when a marriage is at the point of breaking,

¹ The angel of the Lord always refers to God himself appearing in human form

there is always flight from one of the parties, which gives an opportunity to each of them to reflect and then, in the presence of a few people listen to each other and reconcile.

Second it is evident that pregnancy and contempt is not the only issue but it can be described as the final straw on the horse's back. There are several historical issues between the two and even between their societies. There are historical issues in their personal relationships, for example the issue of slavery. The history of their countries is also characterized by cultural and religious conflict. Hence, historical issues of gender, ethnicity and race are also in play. Focusing on the pregnancy and contempt might not capture the whole issue. In the Anglican Communion there are also historical factors in play.

Third major issue in the conflict between the two women is power relationship. Sarah, is in a position of power, she is a matriarch in Israel, which gives her a very special position in the chosen nation, and also a privileged position in the sight of God. Sarah is also married and in Israel, position of a married woman is tied to property ownership (Lacocque, 1990:11) and also gives social security. Sarah is also a free-born. However, despite Sarah's position, there are aspects which also make her powerless. Sarah is barren and has no child and in Israel motherhood is greatly respected, and reproduction is key to the survival of the society. In this particular context having a child was very critical as a child was key to the fulfilment of the covenant.

Hagar on the other hand is powerless; she is an Egyptian and therefore a gentile with no rights in this context. Hagar is also single and is a slave, which implies both poverty and low social status. However, Hagar has a point of strength because she is young and fertile. In this particular context, this really mattered. Both Hagar and Sarah share one point of powerlessness; they are both disadvantaged due to their gender. In the Anglican Communion power relations is a major issue. But as we learn from this passage no one person is completely powerful or powerless.

Fourth, another issue to reflect on is the role of culture in the conflict. God had made a covenant with Abraham and promised to bless him with an heir and greatly multiply his descendants. This was a divine promise, but Sarah and Abraham resort to culture to fulfil the divine promise. There were acceptable ways in the culture to deal

with the issue of childlessness. First, this was through adoption, and it is believed that Abraham had already adopted Eliezer as an heir. Secondly, according to the laws of Hammurapi, a wife could present one of her slave girls to her husband to bear a son (Baldwin, 1986:58). Sarah followed this route which was culturally acceptable. Sarah, takes initiative to deal with her humiliation, and fulfil her promise, she is not straight forward but resorts to culture (Wallace, 1981:53). Sarah herself had already confessed that it is God who gives a Child.

Sarah and Abraham, in resorting to go the cultural way use a very exploitative method. Hagar is being used as an object to build up a family for Sarah. Sarah has the agenda but Hagar is just an object being used. This results in several tensions and conflicts. Employing the use of culture led to contradiction in two major divine principles. First, was the fulfilment of the covenant between God and Israel which had to come through the ancestors. Israelites had to be faithful to the covenant and to the ancestors who were to fulfil it. Secondly, God is a just God who sees the plight of the oppressed. In this case an oppressive way was being used by Sarah and Abraham to fulfil God's promises. In the Anglican Church, this plays out when it seems that there is a contradiction between issues that are biblical and issues which deal with justice in the Church.

Hagar becomes pregnant with Abraham's child and holds Sarah in contempt. Hagar now felt that she was above her mistress. The pregnancy gave Hagar new status and also hope in life. She boasts at the prospect of bringing up a son for Abraham, an heir to the master. It is interesting that even the legislation within the culture did not crush her spirit. According to culture, the official wife and not the mother of the child had jurisdiction over the Child and the right of inheritance is only assured when the son had been legally adopted (Baldwin, 1986:58). In conceiving Hagar has the opportunity to contribute to Sarah's recovery of well being by giving them a child. The result would be that she would also enjoy enhanced status. Instead Hagar sees this as an opportunity to gain personal and social victory over the mistress (Janzen,1993:43). The question posed is that do we use the opportunity we get to bless others as we also progress or we prefer personal victory?

Sarah responds by holding Abraham accountable for Hagar's behaviour. Abraham on his part refuses to take responsibility but permits Sarah to do whatever she wants. Each one is passing the buck. Sarah is determined to put Hagar in her place, and therefore decides to mistreat Hagar, which is not justifiable. It is interesting that in this passage, the people in conflict are actually not facing each other. Abraham also decides to sit in the fence, and let events take their course, but encourage Sarah to do whatever she wants. None of the parties can claim innocence in this situation.

Hagar felt afflicted and decides to flee, in the process God appears to her and listens to her. God calls Hagar both by her name, and also refers to her as maid of Sarah. God therefore acknowledges her individuality and personal identity. God affirms her as a person, but by also referring to her in relation with Sarah, God also underlines her identity with Sarah. God asks Hagar where she is coming from and where she is going. She is therefore forced to reflect both on her past and her destiny. Hagar responds that she is fleeing from her mistress. However, God forces Hagar to reflect on the root of the problem and think more seriously on the future and her destiny. Hagar seems to be evading the only way into a tolerable future. In her flight, she might not have seriously weighed her options. Culturally, the child she was carrying could only be an heir to Abraham he was born in the knees of Sarah, and legally adopted. Hagar is therefore ordered to go back to her mistress. She is also not innocent and has wronged Sarah, both had wronged each other, and the flight was not helping but alienating them. However, after encountering and listening to God Hagar returned to her mistress.

Flight, therefore becomes an opportunity to meet God, listen to God and to obey the instructions of God. Listening to God becomes a spring board for self reflection and also to return. God corrects Hagar but also affirms her and gives her hope.