

## Women & Angels of the Bible: Hagar and the Angels in the Desert

*Forward Movement Managing Editor Richelle Thompson recently chatted with Lindsay Hardin Freeman, author of the popular book [Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter](#), and Kate Moorehead, author of the newly released [Angels of the Bible: Finding Grace, Beauty, and Meaning](#).*

*You can also listen to this conversation in a special episode of the [Forward Day by Day podcast](#), released on March 24, 2020.*

**Richelle:** Welcome, everyone, to this conversation with two of our favorite Forward Movement authors. Today we have Lindsay Hardin Freeman, author of the best-selling book *Bible Women: All Their Words and Why They Matter*. And Kate Moorehead, author of *Angels of the Bible: Finding Grace, Beauty and Meaning*. Welcome, Lindsay, Kate. Thanks for being here today to talk about the role of women and the role of angels in the Bible.

**Kate:** Thank you.

**Lindsay:** Good to be here.

**Richelle:** So we've had some great conversations already exploring Mary's encounter with the Angel Gabriel and the angel who visits Eve at the gate of the Garden of Eden. Today, we're going to talk about perhaps a lesser known story of Hagar and her encounter with an angel of the Lord. So first, let's put the story in the context. For those who want to read the story in their Bible, you can find it in Genesis, Chapter 16 and then Chapter 21. But, Lindsay, give us the short story. Put Hagar's story in context. Who is she? What's happening in the biblical narrative here as we're introduced to Hagar.

**Lindsay:** This is a really pivotal point in the Bible. And it happens in Genesis. Basically, Hagar's story is found in Chapter 16 and 21. And it's an amazing story. You have to peel back the layers of it. Hagar will inexorably be linked to Sarah and Abraham. Bible chronology would put this story at about 1900 BCE. As you remember, Abraham and Sarah are wandering in the wilderness because God has told them to go out in the wilderness. And there they will have as many children, as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. At that point, it was all about having descendants, all about leaving a legacy through your children—and through your property to a lesser extent. So there's this concept of

having children and descendants is very important. Abraham and Sarah, by all accounts, are a happily married couple. They leave home. They're what is considered old at this point. I believe that Abraham is about 75 and Sarah is 60.

**Lindsay:** They are very old, and they start wondering and wondering. And they don't get pregnant. Sarah does not get pregnant. And here's this big covenant, by God, who said "Go. I will show you the promised land. Go. You will have descendants." But nothing is happening. So they have trials and tribulations throughout the wilderness. Sarah is captured and kidnapped by some point by the local king. What happens is that they lose faith in the covenant that God has promised, at least that's the way the Bible presents it. They lose faith, and they believe that it's time to find another way to have a child. So Sarah takes her maid, her Egyptian servant named Hagar. And it's pretty well understood that Hagar will also be considered a concubine, and Sarah sends her into Abraham's tent and she becomes pregnant with Ishmael. Ishmael is born, about 12-15 years earlier than Isaac, who will eventually be the heir to Abraham and Sarah. And the sparks fly because Hagar is accused, at least in the Bible, of becoming haughty. She's pregnant with a child of the man of the leader of the tribe. Some would consider it rape. Other would not. Throughout the ages, this has been hotly debated. Nevertheless, Hagar's pregnant. She becomes haughty. She goes out into the wilderness because she's so unhappy. And there she runs into an angel of the Lord who tells her to return and submit to her mistress. That's the first half of the story. And we'll leave it there.

**Richelle:** All right. Great. Well, let's go back for just a second. Before we get to Hagar's encounter with the angel, I want to talk for a minute about the importance of having a procreation, of having children, and of why that is so important and what role that has in this pretty shocking story of this married couple turning to another woman, of Sarah inviting another woman into her husband's bed to have a child. That's pretty shocking. Kate, tell me about what's going on here. What led Sarah to this moment?

**Kate:** It's hard for us to imagine nowadays how pivotal procreation was in this time. In fact, if you look carefully at the scripture, there are many genealogies, genealogies in Genesis or genealogies in the gospels. These genealogies were an example of showing how very important it was that people continued, that the human race continued, because that was up for question. I mean, they were living very precarious lives. So having children literally

meant the continuation of life itself. And it was the biggest question in your life: Do you create children? Do you bear children? And the purpose of a woman was to bear children. She was owned. She was property. She was basically a womb for the purpose of having children. That was what they saw as the purpose of her body because it wasn't as strong as a man's, it couldn't hunt and gather as quickly as a man's. So that was her purpose. So if a woman did not bear a child, it was almost as if she was considered an empty shell or an empty vessel, not worth anything because she hadn't fulfilled the purpose of her life. So for Sarah, as she aged, I cannot imagine the anxiety that must have been produced in the depression and the despair when she is married to this faithful man who has a good entourage. I mean, he's got everything; she's supposed to provide him with a son and she's not doing it. Her body is not producing. So it was not uncommon back then for a married couple to take a slave girl because again, she was property. Here is another womb. Let's use this womb instead of that womb. There wasn't any thought about consent or no consent, you know. It's interesting because it's Sarah who suggests that Abraham take this slave girl. It wasn't the man. It was the woman actually who was the proponent of this horrible abuse and objectification and rape. And it was the woman who suggests it because she needs to feel validated and to feel a sense of worth. And the only way she thinks she can accomplish that is by abusing and terrorizing another woman. Then, not only does Hagar get pregnant, but Sarah mistreats her. Hagar flees into the desert because Sarah practices this sort of harassment, abuse. She was, from what you can tell, terrible to this other woman. So it's such a sad situation back then when the entire value of women came from their ability to have children. They had no worth as human beings.

**Richelle:** I want to take an aside here. I want to continue with the story in just a moment. But I think modern listeners would say, "It's hard to relate to that. I'm not going to invite another woman into my husband's bed. I'm not going to be the other woman who comes in and bears another man's child." That type of thing. But I think that as modern listeners, there is also a lesson here of how women treat each other. I wonder what thoughts you all have about that, about how can women sometimes tear each other down. And what are the other lessons here about how the importance of building one another up and being supporters and nurturers instead of seeing each other as competitors?

**Lindsay:** I'm not sure that I see the black and white in this story, because there are several stories in the Old Testament about this situation. For instance, Jacob with Rachel and Leah

and with his wives' slaves and how they all had children together. I'm not sure I see this in such harsh terms because Hagar very well could have been raped. And when there's a power imbalance, it usually is rape. But at the same time, Hagar wouldn't have had children either, if it weren't for this intervention by Sarah and Abraham. So I'd like to think that the story of Sarah and Abraham has some love in common affection to it. They were together a long time. We see their personalities emerge. So I'm not sure it was as terrorizing. We won't know because we're not there. But in terms of competitors, we're going to talk about in a minute how the whole Jewish Islamic Christian story is wrapped up in these three individuals and especially Sarah and Hagar. I always find myself thinking if they could have found a way to be less competitive, work a little better, perhaps we wouldn't have all these conflict that we have today. Now, that's way back in our legend, and our sacred treasure, the Bible, and the myth. And all of that comes together in these stories. But I often find myself thinking that jeez, I wish they had done a better job of working it out there. And maybe we'd have more harmony today.

**Kate:** Yeah. Yeah. I mean, we don't know. Hagar may have been honored to be with Abraham. There wasn't really a word for concubine yet, so it would have been a wife, because if you had intercourse, that was your wife. So but certainly afterwards, when Hagar has the child, there's no dispute that the Hebrew word is mean. Sarah was mean and Hagar didn't leave just because she wasn't having a good time. She left because she was desperate and running out into the desert. I think it was the Negev that Hagar was heading toward Egypt where she may have been from, that she was running home. She's probably a young girl. And it is a bit sad that Sarah didn't take care of her. And, you know, being a young mother is kind of emotional anyway. Usually you're kind of all over the place. Your moods are swinging, and you're crying a lot. And here you have this older woman giving you a hard time. It's a sort of a sad scenario for women's relationships.

**Lindsay:** And it doesn't say a lot about Abraham either.

**Kate:** Yeah, where is the guy? Right.

**Richelle:** Yeah. Definitely can't let him off the hook here either. So we're in the desert, in the wilderness. And Hagar meets an angel. Kate, what happens there?

**Kate:** Well, it looks from the scripture that Hagar is upset. She is thirsty, which is completely understandable in that kind of climate. She is near a spring of water, which she finds, which is great. So she's not about to die, but probably death is possibility, especially if she was nursing a baby. And this messenger appears, you know, the Hebrew is the most broad of all, and it's just a messenger—it could have been a human being, could have been a celestial figure. We don't have any idea. And this messenger basically is the first one that says her name, first of all. Sarah and Abraham have not called her by her name. So the angel, says "Hagar." But then says, "slave girl. Where are you going?" And she's honest, and she says, "I'm running away from my mistress." And then the angel tells her to go back, which is so interesting and almost disturbing because she was being mistreated. So the angel says, go to your mistress and you're going to suffer at her hand. But I have more of a plan. Basically, you're going to you're going to bear this son. So she goes back. She goes back.

**Lindsay:** And you think of you think of that being pregnant and thirsty and scared, like really pregnant. So God may have suggested that she go back for her own protection so she would have the baby. And supposedly Sarah, as the elder woman of the tribe, would have been the healer, would have attended most of the birth. And there's some indication that in cultural times, if the servant was to have a baby for a woman, that the woman had to sit behind the slave and the slave would have to give birth basically on the woman's lap. We don't know if any of that happened in the Bible or not. But it is a scary thing to have to go back and submit and know you're going to suffer. But it reminds me, of course, that all of the stories in Genesis are about breaking out and suffering. You look at the story of Eve. She was told she was going to suffer, too, by having children. And yet that's part of the human journey and human processes is suffering. And God appears to endorse it here, not for the sake of suffering itself, but for growth. It's nice to know that God has a plan, isn't it, that it's not just go back and suffer forever?

**Richelle:** I was just thinking of course of Mary being very pregnant and on this journey. We hear of women on the cusp of new life and a significant thing is happening, but it is also a very vulnerable time in their life and a time where things could go very wrong. But God wraps God's arms around through angels and says, "I am here, I am. I'm with you." So Hagar goes back. But my sense, my understanding, is that she doesn't go back the same woman. How do you think she has changed from this encounter with the angel?

**Kate:** Well, she goes back and she has this boy and the angel has named the boy, Ishmael. So she has this sense of confidence, which happens to women in the scripture when they bear a son. If they had seven of them, they were considered a virtual male. Every time a son was born, the validity of the woman increased. So she's feeling that validation. And she just raises this boy and we don't really hear much from her. It's quiet until the second son is born to Sarah.

**Richelle:** And Lindsay, the second son, is, of course, Isaac.

**Lindsay:** Isaac, right. And apparently in our Bible, he is the child of the covenant. There is some ongoing conflict between Sarah and Hagar. It's quiet for a while, but then Ishmael gets to be about fifteen and Isaac is weaned from Sarah at about oh, age 3 probably. And then Sarah sees Ishmael taunting Isaac. And she goes to Abraham and says, "I've had enough. This is it. You must send her away." And Abraham says, "Well, it's up to you." And so Ishmael and Hagar find themselves once again out in the desert. And this time it looks like all it is going to end. They're really thirsty, and they're really hungry. And I'm going to switch it over to Kate because we have a big encounter with an angel here.

**Kate:** Yeah, she does believe she's going to die and she doesn't want to die in front of her child. So she flings the child under the bush and goes and sits down at a distance and says, "I don't want to see my kid die, and I don't want to die first." This time it's really interesting. In the Hebrew, God is speaking through the messenger. Lots of scholars debate whether the angel spoke on behalf of God or the angel was God. It's not really clear, but it's basically a similar message that many angels give: Don't be afraid. Get up. Pick the boy back up and hold him by the hand. And we're going to make a great nation out of you. They don't go back to Abraham, but they just live, which is a much more liberating concept. The boy grows up and dwells in the wilderness, it says. And he becomes a seasoned Bowman. I think they do well.

**Lindsay:** Hagar finds a way for him, which is very exceptional.

**Kate:** Yeah. She acts like a father.

**Lindsay:** She acts like a father. She finds a way for him. And there are 12 tribes that come from Ishmael, children, which parallel the twelve tribes of Israel coming from Isaac. And then we have it, don't we? The sort of source of a lot of turmoil and a lot of negative energy. But I also find it very interesting the part about where the angel says to Hagar, "Do not be afraid." That is such a common thing with angels all the way through the Bible. Do not be afraid. We just went through that at Christmas time with Mary and Gabriel and Gabriel talking to Joseph. And do not be afraid with the shepherds. And now suddenly we hear Hagar and Ishmael being told the same thing.

**Kate:** It has a resurrection message in a way, because the angel says, "Rise up. Rise up." And she's made a different person. And again, another kind of person.

**Richelle:** It's interesting, this idea of fear being the great stumbling block for us. There are a lot of sinful things that we do, but it sounds like God is challenging us, encouraging us, nurturing us to overcome that fear, to be bold in what God is calling us to.

**Kate:** Yeah, in a way, it makes you wonder if angels are always saying basically the same thing to us: to not be afraid. God sees our possibilities. We see our limitations. We see all the things that could go wrong, and God sees all the things could go right. So in a way, it's a liberation, it's a freeing of Hagar because she's so bound up in her slavery and her womanhood. She's convinced she's just going to become part of the dust and not exist anymore, which is really what fear is about. We think we're going to just somehow go away, that we don't matter. And the angels saying, "You do matter. You're going to be the mother of all this." I don't think Abraham or Hagar or Sarah could have conceived of the descendants that have come from them. It's mind boggling to think how significant they were.

**Richelle:** So they do indeed number more than the stars in the skies. On the one hand, we have Isaac and Isaac's descendants, the Jewish people. And on the other hand, we have Ishmael and his descendants with the Muslim people. So talk to us about that. Here we have the same father, two sons, two peoples, and thousands of years of conflict.

**Lindsay:** There's a certain sense of sadness, I think, when we're talking about these women today, and I know that I feel it because we live into their stories as real people—just live

into their stories and forget any preconceptions that we have. The question that always goes through my mind when I look at this is, "Where was God in all of this? And what's God got in mind here?" God is saying, at least in the Jewish Hebrew tradition, that the covenant is with Isaac. And those are going to be God's primary descendants, the descendants of more value. But then you have the whole Islamic side of things coming from Ishmael. And so I'm asking the question, "Why does that division get set up so early?" And it seems to me God is a pretty active participant in all of this. That troubles me. So I'm assuming like Hagar, like God told Hagar, "Hey, I've got a plan." I'd like to think that God has a plan for all of us. Maybe within that's part of our job as human beings is to bring things back together. But it is a troubling story. I ask my evangelical friends on the far right: "Well, what are you thinking about this story? How does this make sense to you?" They will jump in and say things, like, "Well, Abraham and Sarah were disobedient. If they would have waited and not gone ahead, then the whole Islamic branch of the Abrahamic religion would not be there." And to me, that's not a good solution. I believe that God approaches us and holds us in love from many, many different traditions, including Islamic and Christian and Jewish. But it is a troubling story for sure. I think it's in some ways a sad story. Kate, when you were talking about Hager of finding life and Ishmael, finding life and going on, it makes me happy to hear that. But it's still a troubling story.

**Kate:** In a way, in my mind, this is understanding the fault lines. You know, we have in this broken world, we have some lines of severe division within our world. If we're ever going to rectify them, we need to know the source or the beginning of the division. So this story, in my mind, is an important source of healing. How that will happen, I don't know. But I do think we need to pray on the story and think about it and understand it. It's explaining what we see before us, which is I mean, just looking at the city of Jerusalem, with the Temple Mount and the division and the fighting and the walls and horror and terror and the centuries of bloodshed. It's a little bit like the Cain and Abel story. It reminds me of a pebble hitting the water and the ripples go out now. Here's the first conflict that then ripples out and out and out and out, and it's still rippling out and affecting our world. I wish we could picture Hagar and Sarah getting along or some kind of reconciliation in heaven, maybe looking down and saying, "Oh, we messed up kids. Get back together now." But there's also a sense a sibling rivalry, which is interesting to me, because Islam and Judaism and Christianity all do have the same Abrahamic roots. We do all have the Hebrew scriptures and some kind of other scriptures. And we are related. We are so much like



siblings and our hatred is partially so deep because we're sort of alike. It's very complicated, the animosity that runs between these faiths. It's also about who is loved, who's the chosen one, who does God love more. It really reminds me of two-year olds. "No, it's me. It's my turn. My turn. God loves me more." I mean, it's a very basic, primal fight that humanity has been having with itself since the beginning.

**Lindsay:** But it would seem that here God took a really active role in preventing that from happening. Maybe he was just protecting both women.

**Kate:** Well, I mean, God did not place the idea of Hagar in Sarah's mind. That was Sarah's doing. And God, if you look at it, sends these angels to comfort, to send them back, try to get them back together, try to keep them alive. So there's a lot of good work that God is doing. Now, God did make a promise and Sarah didn't have the patience to wait.

**Lindsay:** This raises an interesting point. We can say that she didn't have the patience to wait. But in my mind—and Sarah gets a bum rap these days— Sarah was doing all she could to make that covenant stand on its own two feet. If Sarah doesn't think she's going to get pregnant...she's 90 years old...if she doesn't think she's going to get pregnant, she's going to find a way to help God's plan work.

**Kate:** Right. But isn't that what we sometimes do? It's almost like the enabler. Let God be God. You know, God says you're going to have a kid. You don't have to fix it. You don't to do it.

**Lindsay:** I'm assuming that God wanted Ishmael to be born, wanted Isaac to be born.

**Kate:** Maybe. God certainly loved Ishmael and edified him. And so it wasn't a bad thing that he was born.

**Lindsay:** I always do think that Sarah was, in her own benighted way, was kind of helping this story, helping the covenant blossom. I do think the story of Abraham and Sarah is a love story. Not in the same way perhaps that we would see love these days, but there is loving and caring and affection and of course, all the other negative emotions that go with a jealousy and anger. It is a great story.

**Richelle:** One of the things I love about scripture and I love about spending time with you Kate, and with you, Lindsay, is that there are lots of ways to really explore and grapple with God's word. And every time we read it and we talk about it, there are new learnings that we can get from the Word itself and from each other. So I am encouraged by our discussion and by the hope that even though we have had these centuries of conflict that God is still with us and will be with us during Lent and always as we are trying to follow a path of redemption and to return to God. So I'm really grateful for your time today. Is there anything that either of you would want to add about the story?

**Kate:** I hope that this is not a story of just sadness. There certainly is conflict in the world from these two peoples. But there is also great diversity, great richness, great culture. There is so much wealth that came from Hagar and Sarah. They are the mothers of huge, vast, rich cultures now. So all we have to do is figure out how to get along.

**Lindsay:** And I would add to that the whole sense of God always meeting and encouraging and challenging women to find freedom and independence, to be their own people, to lead them out of very difficult situations, but also call on them to be great harbingers of all this wonderful faith, of humanity. And I'm grateful that we can recognize that they're not just minor players: They are major players and God affirms that.

Amen. Amen.

Kate Lindsey, thank you so much for your time today. I look forward to our next conversation as we explore Mary Magdalene and her encounters with angels. Have a great day. Thank you for your time.