

Hagar, Uncle Tom's Cabin, and why we can't agree on what the Bible says about slavery

Abstract: This article examines the history of interpretation of Hagar's story in Genesis 16 within debates over slavery through the narrative frame of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The character Mr Wilson echoes the hermeneutics of very real nineteenth-century apologists for slavery, a tradition that implicates Calvin. In contrast, George reflects the more sympathetic tradition of the abolitionists, which is traced back to Chrysostom and Philo. Drawing on modern literary genre theory, I propose that these different readings of Genesis 16 really begin as different conceptions about the *kind of thing* we are reading: its genre. The High Mimetic genre assumed by the Apologists, or the Low Mimetic mode of the abolitionists, changes what assumptions they make about characters, setting and what the gaps in characterisation mean. Apologists and Abolitionists cannot agree on what the Bible *means*, because first and fundamentally, they cannot agree on what the Bible *is*.

Key words: Genesis 16; Hagar; Slavery; Hermeneutics; Genre; History of Interpretation; Uncle Tom's Cabin; Harriet Beecher Stowe; Mimesis.

It is testament to the power of Hagar's story that both sides of the slavery debate have wanted to claim her for themselves. Apologists for slavery have taken her return at the angel's word as tacit justification for the very institution of slavery, and perhaps even a word of divine warning to slaves contemplating their escape. Abolitionists, in contrast, have read the moral of the story quite differently, dismissing the fact of slavery as simply part of the story's setting, and seeing Hagar in a much more sympathetic light. We might be tempted to interpret this kind of disagreement over what the Bible means in a cynical way: the Bible means whatever the politics of the reader needs it to mean. Yet the history of interpretation of Genesis 16 suggests another, more literary, dimension to the debate. Using the narrative frame of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, I want to show how the disagreement between Abolitionists and Apologists starts off life as a disagreement over a more fundamental hermeneutical question: what *kind of thing* is this? In other words, each side has different assumptions about the text's genre. Two modern genre theorists in particular help to draw out the critical role of genre in shaping the history of interpretation of Hagar's story: John Frow, with his description of genre as a function of reading, and Northrop Frye, with his anatomy of High and Low Mimetic modes of fiction. The differing reading genres assumed by the Apologists and Abolitionists dramatically shift how they interpret the characters in the story, and what significance they place on elements of the setting. This case study in the importance of genre will be suggestive for our own hermeneutical

reflection. Sometimes we cannot agree on what the Bible *means*, because first and fundamentally, we do not agree on what the Bible *is*.

Whatever its enduring merits as a work of literature, the historical significance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is hard to overstate. Published as a novel in 1852, Harriet Beecher Stowe's work had a significant impact on public opinion about slavery in the northern states.¹ Abraham Lincoln is reported to have said, on meeting Stowe, "so you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!"² The reception history of this work is a complex study in itself, and aspects of the book have been found problematic by twentieth century postcolonial standards.³ However, the clear theological message of the novel is that those in tune with the sympathies of Christ will have compassion on the "lowly."⁴ The novel provides a fascinating narrative frame to some all too real nineteenth century debates in the public square about the Bible and slavery. It is almost a hermeneutical parable: the characters within it are readers of Scripture, giving voice to the competing ways real nineteenth century Christians used the Bible to support their view on the moral status of slavery.

Chapter XI of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, ironically entitled "In Which Property Gets into an Improper State of Mind," is set in a Kentucky tavern. Mr Wilson, a good-natured but conservative old white manufacturer, recognises a runaway slave called George who has boldly disguised himself as a Spanish gentleman. Mr Wilson had taught George to read and write while George was on secondment in his factory, and by George's own account Mr Wilson was the first person in his life to speak a kind word to him. Mr Wilson — whose mind, we are told, is like a bale of cotton: "benevolently fuzzy and confused"⁵ — wants to help George but he is worried about his daring deception and contempt for the laws of the land:

¹ James H. Smylie, "'Uncle Tom's Cabin' Revisited: The Bible, the Romantic Imagination, and the Sympathies of Christ," *Interpretation* 27.1 (1973).

² Cindy Weinstein, *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.

³ For a sympathetic analysis of some of the strengths and weaknesses of Stowe's novel, see Curtis Evans, "'The Chief Glory of God [Is] in Self-Denying, Suffering Love!': True Religion in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*," *The Journal of Religion* 92.4 (2012).

⁴ Smylie, "'Uncle Tom's Cabin' Revisited: The Bible, the Romantic Imagination, and the Sympathies of Christ," 68. The subtitle *Or, Life Among the Lowly*, is a reference to Matthew 25:31-46. Smylie takes this as the hermeneutical key to the book, and interprets the book as an extended commentary on that passage.

⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or, Life among the Lowly* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 185.

‘this way of talking is wicked—unscriptural. George, you’ve got a hard master—in fact, he is—well he conducts himself reprehensibly—I can’t pretend to defend him. But you know how the angel commanded Hagar to return to her mistress, and submit herself under the hand; ...’

‘Don’t quote the Bible at me that way, Mr. Wilson,’ said George, with a flashing eye, ‘don’t! for my wife is a Christian, and I mean to be, if ever I get to where I can; but to quote Bible to a fellow in my circumstances, is enough to make him give it up altogether. I appeal to God Almighty;—I’m willing to go with the case to Him, and ask Him if I do wrong to seek my freedom.’⁶

Mr Wilson’s hermeneutic — “that way” of quoting the Bible to which George objects — takes the narrative of Genesis 16 as its text. To give God a running start on providing the promised progeny, the childless Sarai suggests that Abram take her maidservant Hagar as a second wife, so that Sarai can build her family through her maidservant. Abram agrees, and Hagar quickly falls pregnant. In a culture that prizes fertility, this upsets the domestic power dynamic, and the fertile Hagar begins to look down on her mistress (Gen 16:4). Sarai complains to Abram, and the great patriarch responds by giving Sarai free reign to put Hagar, his now pregnant new wife, back in her place. Sarai mistreats Hagar, who then flees (Gen 16:6). The angel of the Lord meets her in the wilderness, calls her by her name (Gen 16:8, previously she has been called only “my/your slave”: Gen 16:2,5,6), and tells her to “return” and “submit” under the hand of her mistress. The angel then offers her reasons to be confident in returning: a promise of many descendants, echoing that received by Abram in Genesis 15:4, and an instruction to call her child “Ishmael” because “the Lord has heard your cry of affliction” (Gen 16:11). Hagar responds by giving a name to God (אלֹהֵי רְאִי, “God of seeing”), explaining that she has seen face to face the one who sees her — and in seeing her, has taken notice of her situation in a way her husband has spectacularly failed to do (Gen 16:13).

The real interpreters

Back in that fictional Kentucky Tavern, our two characters read Hagar’s story with two different hermeneutical strategies, which I am going to call the *apologist*, and the *abolitionist*. Mr Wilson gives voice to the hermeneutics of the apologists for slavery. He takes Genesis 16 as a story about a runaway slave commanded by God to return to her mistress, finds in it a

⁶ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or, Life among the Lowly*, 183-84.

general rule that slavery is recognised by God as legitimate, and applies that rule to George. George is wrong to run from his master, no matter how harsh his treatment.

This way of understanding Scripture was indeed promoted by real nineteenth-century pro-slavery apologists, including the eighth presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church in the USA, John Henry Hopkins.⁷ For Hopkins, Abraham's ownership of slaves, and the command to the "fugitive" Hagar is "proof that slavery was sanctioned by the Deity," and, he adds:

If the philanthropists of our age, who profess to believe the Bible, had been willing to take the counsel of that angel for their guide, it would have preserved the peace and welfare of the Union.⁸

Hopkins follows a tradition of interpretation supported by John Calvin in his commentary on Genesis. While his contemporaries Cajetan and Luther are sympathetic to Hagar's piety and suffering, Calvin is more austere.⁹ The fact that the angel calls Hagar "Sarai's maid" signals to Calvin that:

she still remained a servant, though she had escaped the hands of her mistress; because liberty is not to be obtained by stealth, nor by flight, but by manumission. Moreover, by this expression, God shows that he approves of civil government, and that the violation of it is inexcusable. The condition of servitude was then hard; and thanks are to be given to the Lord, that this barbarity has been abolished; yet God has declared from heaven his pleasure, that servants should bear the yoke;¹⁰

Even Gerhard von Rad, who thinks the narrator is more sympathetic to Hagar than any of the other characters, finds in Genesis 16 a clear principle that "Yahweh will not condone the breach of legal regulations."¹¹

⁷ For a summary of arguments on each side of the debate see Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1983), 31-66.

⁸ John Henry Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery: From the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century: Addressed to the Right Rev. Alonzo Potter* (New York: W. I. Pooley, 1864), 7-8.

⁹ For a comparison see John L. Thompson, "Hagar, Victim or Villain? Three Sixteenth-Century Views," *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 59 (1997).

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King (Bellingham: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 430-31.

¹¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Revised ed. (London: SCM, 1972), 194.

In contrast, the abolitionist hermeneutic portrayed in the novel reflects real people like Albert Barnes, a nineteenth century Presbyterian theologian from New Jersey. Even if שפחה in this chapter describes something morally equivalent to the situation of American slaves (which the abolitionists strenuously deny), the record of Abraham having slaves is, Barnes says,

the record of a mere *fact*. There is no command to buy servants or to sell them, or to hold them as property — any more than there was a command to the brethren of Joseph to enter into a negotiation for the sale of their brother. Nor is there any approbation expressed of the fact that they were bought...¹²

His argument uses the obvious comparison with polygamy to show the absurdity of taking the description of slavery as its endorsement:

They practised concubinage and polygamy. Is it therefore certain that this was the highest and purest state of society, and that it was a state which God designed should be perpetuated? Abraham and Isaac were guilty of falsehood and deception... Jacob secured the birthright, by a collusive fraud between him and his mother...and Noah was drunk with wine... and these things are recorded merely *as facts*, without any decided expression of disapprobation; but is it therefore to be inferred that they had the approbation of God, and that they are to be practised still, in order to secure the highest condition of society?¹³

The patriarchs found a system in existence and “acted only in accordance with the customs of all the surrounding nations.”¹⁴ In other words, for Barnes, *narrative is not normative*.¹⁵ That is not to say that the stories are devoid of moral teaching. Instead, God’s perspective on slavery is to be discerned from “the events of his providence” — such as his delivery of Israel from slavery in Egypt — rather than the actions of the human characters.¹⁶ The abolitionists bolster this case by citing the Deuteronomic command against returning foreign slaves to their masters

¹² Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Perkins & Purves, 1846), 71.

¹³ Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 78.

¹⁴ Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 64. Pro-slavery apologist Hopkins is of course aware of the potential problem that his hermeneutic seems to justify polygamy as well as slavery, but as Drisler dryly observes, his explanation for the difference “satisfies himself ... if not his readers”: Henry Drisler, *Bible View of Slavery, by John H. Hopkins D.D., Bishop of the Diocese of Vermont, Examined*. (New York: C. S. Westcott, 1863), 10.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Andrea Abeyasekera for this phrase.

¹⁶ Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 81.

(Deut 23:15-16), and the requirement to release Hebrew slaves every seventh year with a generous allowance (Deut 15:12-13).¹⁷

This reading continues along an alternative track in Jewish, Christian and Islamic exegetical traditions, which is detailed in John L. Thompson's thorough study of the history of interpretation of this episode.¹⁸ Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman, John Chrysostom, Hilary of Poitiers, as well as book 15:9 of the Islamic *hadith*, have all been more sympathetic to Hagar, even sometimes characterising Abram and Sarai's treatment of her as sinful.¹⁹

The first century Jewish exegete Philo takes her story not as a lesson about the morality of slavery, but allegorises her journey to show the value of submitting the soul to discipline of the *logos*.²⁰ This recasts the women as pedagogical symbols: Sarai is virtue, Hagar is preliminary studies like grammar.²¹ It is not always certain how much Philo is talking about the "real" Hagar, and how much he is talking about the allegorical Hagar.²² However, it is clear that Philo considers affliction, even a "humiliating" form of affliction like slavery, as potentially a "great blessing".²³ Philo depicts the angel as "her friend and counsellor," teaching her "not to feel only shame, but to be of good courage as well."²⁴

The allegorising of Sarai and Hagar as ideas rather than women has precedent within the New Testament, in Paul's use of Hagar as an allegory for the Old and New Covenants in Galatians 4:21-31. However, C. K. Barrett suggests that here Paul may be merely responding

¹⁷ Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 142-3.

¹⁸ See John L. Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Thompson, "Hagar, Victim or Villain? Three Sixteenth-Century Views."

¹⁹ Elaine James, "Sarah, Hagar, and Their Interpreters," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, and J. E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012).

²⁰ Philo, *Questions on Genesis*, trans. Ralph Marcus, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 218.

²¹ Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 25.

²² Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation*, 24-27.

²³ Philo, *On Mating with the Preliminary Studies*, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 451-551.

²⁴ Philo, *On Flight and Finding*, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 13.

to his opponents' use of Hagar as an allegory for those inside and those outside the covenant²⁵ — indeed the story of an Egyptian being sent away from the covenant family would seem to most obviously serve his opponents' side of the Jew/Gentile debate. Whatever its origin, the dual allegorical traditions of Paul and Philo are echoed to various degrees in Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Didymus the Blind, Gregory of Nyssa, and Ambrose of Milan.²⁶

The allegorical tradition can tend to skim over the actual suffering of the woman Hagar. Allegorical readings are not automatically bad for Hagar, or for slaves: as Thompson observes, in Philo's allegory Hagar is inferior to Sarai/virtue, but within the allegory the preliminary studies are essential to attaining the higher goals, and this may have positively influenced how the historical Hagar was received by later interpreters.²⁷ By the time we reach Origen, Hagar is reborn as a Christian.²⁸

John Chrysostom is also somewhat sympathetic to Hagar's mistreatment, even as he regards it as potentially leading to greater wisdom: "Let us learn from this incident how great an advantage stems from adversities."²⁹ In Chrysostom's reading, the angel's encouragement to return becomes glossed not as a reprimand for escaping from slavery, but as a clear though sympathetic rebuke for Hagar's ingratitude and resentment earlier in the story.³⁰ Even then, Hagar's suffering is suffering, though it may also be an opportunity for growth. Like Philo, Chrysostom finds nothing in the text that justifies her mistreatment, or endorses the system of slavery as a whole.

Continuing this line of thought, more recent studies by interpreters like Phyllis Tribble and David Cotter have helped draw focus away from the angel's command, to the incredible dignity conferred on Hagar in the interaction, which earlier commentators often missed: she is the first person in the Bible to receive such a messenger, she is the only woman in the Bible to receive

²⁵ Barrett, "The Allegory of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in the Argument of Galatians", *Kasemann FS*, 1-16, in Bruce, *Galatians*, 218.

²⁶ See Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 29-36

²⁷ Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 25-27.

²⁸ Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs*, 31.

²⁹ John Chrysostom, "Homily 38," in *Homilies on Genesis* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1986-1992), 370.

³⁰ Chrysostom, "Homily 38," 369.

a promise of innumerable descendants, and she is the only person who ever names God.³¹ Like Moses, Cotter observes, Hagar sees God — because “God is justice” and as an Egyptian, cut off from her family, abandoned by her husband, Hagar “stands for those whom God has special concern, the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow.”³² Hagar returns to her affliction, but that is not the point: the point is that God has affirmed her, restored her dignity, because as the God of justice he has special concern for the foreigner, the slave, the oppressed.

“And yet,” Tribble notes, “the messenger has ordered her to return to affliction. Rather than dispelling suffering, divine hearing affirms it.”³³ The dignity accorded to Hagar in her affliction thus becomes a central theme in this strand of interpretation, anticipating the adoption of Hagar as a representative of suffering and exclusion by African American writers.³⁴ Indeed, despite the history of appropriation of her story by slavery apologists, Hagar’s story has often been reinterpreted using a survival and quality-of-life hermeneutic by Christians within the African diaspora in the West.³⁵

Frow and Frye’s Genre theory

George and Mr Wilson; Apologist and Abolitionist. How can we explain these two very different stands in the tradition of interpreting Hagar’s story? Cynically, we might side with Augustine St Clare, the character in Stowe’s novel who puts all these different hermeneutical manoeuvres down to simple economic self-interest. Speaking to his northern cousin he postulates:

‘suppose that something should bring down the price of cotton once and forever, and make the whole slave property a drug in the market, don’t you think we should soon have another version of the Scripture doctrine? What a flood of light

³¹ See Thompson, *Writing the Wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among Biblical Commentators from Philo through the Reformation*, 18; Phyllis Tribble, “Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing,” in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Tribble and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); David W. Cotter, *Genesis*, Berit Olam (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003).

³² Cotter, *Genesis*, 106.

³³ Tribble, “Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing,” 41.

³⁴ James, “Sarah, Hagar, and Their Interpreters.”

³⁵ Delores S. Williams, “Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation”, in Delores S. Williams, “Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation,” in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Tribble and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 183.

would pour into the church, all at once, and how immediately it would be discovered that everything in the Bible and reason went the other way!”³⁶

Economics may indeed influence exegesis more than we like to admit. However, I want to suggest that one helpful, maybe less cynical way to understand the different understandings of the Bible held by the apologists and abolitionists is as matter of *genre*. Apologists and Abolitionists cannot agree on what the Bible *means*, because first and fundamentally, they cannot agree on what the Bible *is*.

To help show why this is the case, I will be drawing on the frameworks offered by two modern genre theorists. John Frow sees genres not as immutably Aristotelian classes but as relatively stable systems of relationships between texts. A text does not belong to a genre; genres are resources used by writers and readers; shared conventions with a social force. For Frow genre is as much a function of *reading* as of texts themselves, as readers impute to texts “the-kind-of-thing-this-is.”³⁷ This raises the possibility that a reader might employ a different economy of relationships and therefore produce different meanings. In this discussion I am especially interested in how *readers* of Scripture have made use of very different genre resources in their interpretation of Hagar.

One crucial way of differentiating the competing genres is *mode*. In Northrop Frye’s analysis the modes of fiction are distinguished by the varying moral relationship between the characters and ordinary humans.³⁸ In Myth the characters are superior in *kind* to ordinary humans: they are gods and not humans, like Zeus. In Romance and High Mimetic fiction the heroes are superior by *degree*: they are superhumans, like Batman. In Low Mimetic modes the characters are no better than you and me, like King Lear or Don Quixote.

When the apologists open their Bibles to the patriarchal narratives they find a series of stories about godly men and women presented for our moral instruction. The Harmony Presbytery of South Carolina, for example, was anxious to defend the reputation of the “good old slaveholders and patriarchs”³⁹ against any suggestion of wrongdoing; others remind us that

³⁶ Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin, or, Life among the Lowly*, 281.

³⁷ John Frow, *Genre*, Second ed., New Critical Idiom (New York: Routledge, 2015), 111. Frow is adapting Hirsch’s notion that genre is a guess at “the-kind-of-thing-this-is”.

³⁸ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 33.

³⁹ Harmony Presbytery, South Carolina, quoted in Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 30.

Abraham was a “friend of God,” and “holy.”⁴⁰ This consistent bias against Hagar in favour of Abraham has a long history. It is striking how hard Philo,⁴¹ Josephus,⁴² Augustine,⁴³ Chrysostom,⁴⁴ Luther,⁴⁵ and Calvin⁴⁶ work to defend Abram’s (and sometimes Sarah’s) reputation in this story. In fact, this is true even of commentators who are not explicitly pro-slavery. Augustine delights in showing that Abram was not motivated by lust: “What a man was this, using women in a true manly fashion, his wife soberly, the handmaiden obediently, no woman immoderately!”⁴⁷ Philo describes Abram as “the virtuous man” and Sarai the “wise wife.”⁴⁸ Josephus provides an extensive apology for Abram’s apparent callousness towards Ishmael.⁴⁹ Even the more sympathetic Chrysostom praises the “great richness in the just man’s virtue,” and “unspeakable faith and obedience” as opposed to Hagar’s “ingratitude” which reflects both the “frailty of woman’s nature” and servants’ general propensity to “forget their place.”⁵⁰ On Chrysostom’s reading, Abram’s passivity becomes exemplary commonsense:

Let husbands take heed and imitate the just man’s restraint in according their wives such great respect and regard and making allowances for them as the frailer vessel so that the bonds of harmony may be tightened.⁵¹

Within Frye’s system, the expectation that when we open Genesis we will find superhumanly moral characters for us to emulate suggests the reader is taking the story as Romance or High Mimetic. Within this mode, Abraham becomes Superman — Chrysostom’s actually calls him

⁴⁰ Presbytery of Tombebee, quoted in Barnes, *Inquiry*, 58; Dr Fuller, quoted in Barnes, *Inquiry*, 59

⁴¹ Philo, *Questions on Genesis*, 207.

⁴² *Antiquities*, Book 1, Chapter 12, 215-219.

⁴³ Augustine, *City of God, Volume V: Books 16-18.35*, trans. Eva M. Sanford and William M. Green, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 123.

⁴⁴ Chrysostom, “Homily 38,” 355, 57, 64.

⁴⁵ Luther, *Commentary on Genesis*, 49

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 424.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, 123.

⁴⁸ Philo, *Questions on Genesis*, 207.

⁴⁹ *Antiquities*, Book 1, Chapter 12, 215-219.

⁵⁰ Chrysostom, “Homily 38,” 355, 57, 64.

⁵¹ Chrysostom, “Homily 38,” 367.

“man of steel, God’s noble athlete”!⁵² — and the story becomes a kind of morality tale. Here is what Abram did, so you should too.⁵³

In contrast, on the abolitionist reading, the characters in Genesis 16 are read within the Low Mimetic or Ironic mode. Barnes sensibly asks:

Who would undertake to vindicate all the conduct of the patriarchs, or to maintain that all which they practised was in accordance with the will of God?⁵⁴

Writing fifty years later, Josephine E. Butler has a firm rebuke for those High Mimetic readers who would indeed try to vindicate Abram:

shall we, therefore, speak softly of the conduct of Sarai and Abraham in this matter? I prefer to express frankly my disgust. To abstain from condemnation of their action would be to seem to charge God with approval of heartlessness and cruelty. The sacred writers never excuse, or call upon us to condone, what is wrong, immoral, or unjust in the life and conduct of the chosen servants of God, whose sins and errors he punishes and chastens, while he forgives. I am perplexed, in reading certain commentators, in noting a degree of – shall I call it complacency? – in their judgment of this story of Hagar, as if God himself had ordained each step in it, and Sarai had done well.⁵⁵

Likewise, Tribble sums up Abram’s character as seen from the Low Mimetic perspective:

No mighty patriarch is he but rather the silent and acquiescent figure in this drama between two women ... He ducks responsibility.⁵⁶

⁵² Chrysostom, “Homily 38,” 366.

⁵³ The dominance of allegorical readings could be seen as supporting the High Mimetic history of interpretation. Reading Genesis 16 as allegory helps to erase the historical Hagar, Sarai and Abram from the text, replacing the complex and imperfect characters of the Low Mimetic with the kind of flattened stereotypes that support the higher meaning. At the same time, allegory sidelines the actual slavery in the story as an embarrassing quirk of history — quickly passed over to get to the true spiritual significance, which has nothing to do with propping up the institution of slavery. The legacy of the allegorical tradition is hard to describe as either positive or negative. Ultimately, it is both.

⁵⁴ Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*, 78.

⁵⁵ Josephine E. Butler, *The Lady of Shunem* (London: Horace Marshall, 1894), 73-4.

⁵⁶ Tribble, “Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing,” 39-40. Contra Dianne Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013), 64.

This deflation of our expectations of characters within the moral universe of the Low Mimetic mode affects two other related features of the text.

First, the mode changes what *kind* of characterisation readers expect to find. Can the narrator's silence about Abraham's actions really be taken as tacit approval? It depends on the genre. Robert Neff argues that a fitting category for the narratives in Genesis 12:1 to 25:18 is the saga cycle. Drawing on Einarsson's description of Icelandic literature, he notes that one of the features of saga is its detached point of view and economical description of characters from their external actions with little direct evaluation: "one of the main charms of the sagas is precisely how much one can and must read there between the lines."⁵⁷

This echoes Robert Alter, Shimon Bar-Efrat and Yairah Amit in their general observations about characterisation in Hebrew narrative.⁵⁸ When more direct characterisation techniques are employed in Hebrew narrative it is often to deliver an explicit and less ambiguous moral summary of a secondary character: Pharaoh, another Egyptian, admits his sin out loud (Exod 9:27, 10:16), as does Balaam (Num 22:34) and Achan (Joshua 7:20). It is significant, then, that neither the angel nor Hagar give voice to the idea that she should return because leaving was a sin. Moral ambiguity is a feature throughout the passage, as the abolitionist readers expect. We cannot, therefore, interpret the silence on Abraham's actions as an endorsement.

Indeed the narrator's few moral suggestions are studiously even handed: Hagar *belittled* Sarai (הַעֲרִיבָה ... וְהָקֵל, 16:4); Sarai *mistreated* Hagar (עָנָה, 16:6). Both word choices are heavy with negative connotations. Here קָלַל in the *qal* stem has the basic meaning of the root: her mistress was "insignificant" in her eyes, "count[ed] as nothing".⁵⁹ With Sarai as the subject the full connotations of the root are carefully soft-pedalled. If we were to make Hagar the agent of the sentence, the verb would be either a *hiphil* (meaning to "treat with contempt", as in 2 Sam 19:43) or a *piel* (meaning to "curse", as the capital crime of cursing one's parents in Exodus

⁵⁷ Robert W. Neff, "Saga," in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable*, ed. George W Coats (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 25.

⁵⁸ Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives*, trans. Yael Lotan (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 82; Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 90. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 126.

⁵⁹ HALOT, 1103.

21:17). On the other hand, the root ענה in the *piel* stem as here has connotations of oppression (Gen 31:50, Exod 1:11), humiliation (Num 24:24) and even sexual violence (Gen 34:2).⁶⁰ The reader is especially reminded of verse 13 in the previous chapter, where God prophesies the “oppression” (ענה) of his descendants in Egypt.⁶¹ The unhappy parallel between the two women’s behaviour is further highlighted by the repetition of “eyes”: Sarai is little in Hagar’s eyes (verse 4), so Sarai is invited to do to her what is good in her eyes (verse 6).

As Speiser summarises, “All three principals in the case have some things in their favor.”⁶² Tsevat can find no indication in the text as to how we are meant to respond to the angel’s command to return.⁶³ Hagar’s obligations to her mistress are certainly assumed: even on the run Hagar admits to fleeing from “my mistress” (verse 8), and the angel “catches” her word and says to return to “your mistress.”⁶⁴ The verb for return (16:9, imperative שובי) can have the connotation of “repent,” as in Isaiah 51:20. So Hagar returns, but does she repent? And if she does, is it repentance from her belittling of her mistress, or for her escape from her lawful mistress, or perhaps even for abducting Abram’s seed? Here in Genesis 16, the dialogue never addresses Hagar’s faults directly: the angel speaks of the promise of offspring and the Lord’s hearing her affliction, Hagar speaks of the Lord having “seen” her (verses 10-11, 13). Calvin’s reconstruction of the angel’s implicit accusation and Hagar’s internal self-reproach fits uneasily with the way we expect the narrator of a saga cycle to construct characters.⁶⁵

This studied ambiguity in characterisation reflects what genre theorists describe as the genre’s “fix” on the world — its worldview.⁶⁶ Genesis 16 inhabits the anthropological worldview of Genesis 1–3: humanity are fallen, and Abraham’s call does not exempt him from fallibility. As Alter puts it, “there is often a tension, sometimes perhaps even an absolute contradiction,

⁶⁰ HALOT, 853.

⁶¹ On the significance of these “charged” words see Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 33.

⁶² E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 120.

⁶³ Matitiah Tsevat, “Hagar and the Birth of Ishmael,” in *The Meaning of the Book of Job and Other Biblical Studies: Essays on the Literature and Religion of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1980), 56.

⁶⁴ Tsevat, “Hagar and the Birth of Ishmael,” 57.

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, 438.

⁶⁶ See Frow, *Genre*, 19.

between election and moral character.”⁶⁷ So it is not necessary to protect Abram’s reputation. Like an Icelandic saga cycle, characters in Genesis develop slowly sometimes in opposing dimensions: Abram can, in Genesis 12 be a model of faith, and in Genesis 16 be an oppressor. He is human, complex.

Second, the mode affects the way the setting is read. The apologist High Mimetic hermeneutic finds a text disembedded from the particularities of distant time and space. The story becomes almost a parable, its horizons simultaneously more abstract and thus more immanent. As a fairytale, set nowhere, and therefore anywhere, it can be made to speak directly into nineteenth-century North America: Abram the plantation owner, Hagar the insolent black slave, the laws of Mesopotamia the laws of Mississippi.

In contrast, the Low Mimetic tale of the abolitionists is grounded in the gritty vicissitudes of time and space (or chronotope, to use Bakhtin’s formulation). For most twentieth-century commentators, the institution of slavery forms part of the historical setting of the drama, and is largely irrelevant to the moral thrust of the story. They draw comparisons with ancient Mesopotamian texts dating from 2200–1400 BC including Sumerian Laws of Ur-Nammu, Old Assyrian story of Laqipum and Hatala, the Old Babylonian Laws of Ammurapi and a document from Nuzi, which provide parallels for the arrangement whereby a slave becomes a second wife to provide her mistress with a child, only to be reduced to slave for her insolence.⁶⁸ Such social institutions are part of the setting of the story, not the moral of the story. Dianne Bergant notes that the angelic encounter causes Hagar to acknowledge her social status, and obligations within the patriarchal customs of the day, yet there is no suggestion of divine approval for these social customs.⁶⁹ Hagar must return, not because fleeing slavery is wrong, but because her son needs to be named and legitimated by Abram according to the customs of the day.⁷⁰ Tsevat concludes that we should not make too much of either the fact of slavery or the fact of Hagar’s flight:

⁶⁷ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 117

⁶⁸ Tsevat, “Hagar and the Birth of Ishmael,” 54, 60, 70-71; Speiser, *Genesis*, 120.

⁶⁹ Bergant, *Genesis: In the Beginning*, 65.

⁷⁰ Cotter, *Genesis*, 105; Tsevat, “Hagar and the Birth of Ishmael,” 58-59.

It is a period piece, and it is not for us to introduce anachronistic notions about social change. Hagar's flight for freedom is not sanctioned, nor should we expect otherwise ... the social order is considered well nigh immutable.⁷¹

Conclusion

As in that fictional Kentucky tavern, the interpretive tussle over Hagar's story involves two groups of readers, reading the same text, but with very different ideas as to its genre: one reads the story according to the High Mimetic mode of the casuistic folk tale, the other reads it as a Low Mimetic saga cycle. They cannot agree on what the Bible means because, first and fundamentally, they cannot agree on what the Bible *is*: its genre and mode. This case study should perhaps prompt us to reflect on our own disagreements over the theological and practical implications of Scripture – to what extent are our different readings based on unexamined prior assumptions about genre?

Yet as well as the general reminder to reflect hermeneutically on our assumptions about genre, is there also a more specific warning here? Can we go beyond describing the reasons for the disagreement, and say that the Apologists were *wrong* to read the Bible in the High Mimetic mode?

I would love to use genre theory now to show why one reading is more valid than the other, but unlike E. D. Hirsch I don't think that genre can be baked in as a criteria for validity in interpretation.⁷² However, I do think it is possible to argue coherently that the *literary* and *theological* payoffs for reading the Bible as Low Mimetic saga are more satisfying. Reading Genesis as High Mimetic ignores much of the artfulness of the narrator: the subtle narration, the studied ambiguities, the complex characters. The apologist genre is not invalid, but it does make for a worse story.

The High Mimetic genre has poor *theological* payoffs too. The High Mimetic mode is conservatively biased towards affirming human culture, resisting the way God's unfolding acts of salvation often expose social sins and even the failings of patriarchs and matriarchs. It has a more naïve fix on the world than Genesis 3 allows us. It trains us to look for the heroes and

⁷¹ Tsevat, "Hagar and the Birth of Ishmael," 60.

⁷² E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale, 1967), 113.

villains of fairytales, whereas our biblical anthropology should tell us that in real life there are no such things.

It is no overstatement then to say that one of the most urgent pastoral and apologetic needs for the church is to recover the ability to read the Old Testament according to a Low Mimetic narrative genre. Readers are often startled by what they find in the Old Testament. Narratives like Genesis 16, which depicts the abuse of a vulnerable slave woman by two apparent heroes of the faith, can profoundly wound us, and shake our confidence in the goodness of the Good Book – unless we understand that what is being described is not a spiritual utopia populated by two dimensional exemplars, but the all too gritty reality of a world which is, to borrow Cornelius Plantinga’s phrase, “not the way it’s supposed to be.” It is only through the Low Mimetic lens that the good news of Genesis 16 starts to take focus. There is a God who sees us, who sees what is really going on here on earth. His campaign to bless the whole world will not be frustrated for want of a superhuman hero. This is good news: if God can work out his purposes in the dark world of Genesis 16, through the hopelessly mixed characters of Abram and Sarai, then he can do so in our world, through our lives, too.