



The Other Stories: Biblical Resources for an Antiracist Church

L. DANIEL HAWK

Biblical literature manifests a keen awareness of the ways ethnic identity shapes perspectives, actions, and interactions between peoples.¹ Remarkable in this respect are the many texts that elevate the humanity of ethnic others while challenging the privilege associated with ethnic insiders. Narratives comprise the majority of these texts, spanning Tamar's exposure of hypocritical Judah (Gen 38:1–26) and Jesus's commendation of a Canaanite woman's faith (Matt 7:21–28). I submit that these narratives constitute a rich resource for exposing mechanisms of exclusion, challenging the sentiments that justify them, and presenting a vision of human personhood that is essential for the pursuit of racial justice.

Biblical narrators have something to say through the stories they tell, and they render them so as to signal what readers should make of them.² In the cases of Hagar (Gen 16:1–16; 21:1–21), Rahab (Josh 2:1–24; 6:22–25), and Ruth, narrators take up the stories of ethnic others—the enslaved, the indigene, and the immigrant—to challenge and transform readerly sentiments about them. Giving

¹ *Ethnicity* and *ethnic* are the preferred terms, as modern constructions of race do not reflect ancient ones.

² I use “narrator” as a way of signifying the voice that tells the story in its canonical form, as opposed to the “author,” which may signify the multiple voices that leave imprints in the course of the texts' composition.

Although biblical narrative predates the category of “race,” its repeated concern for the ethnic other can help us unmask today's patterns of exclusion and open new space for the difficult work of racial justice.

due attention to how they do so, I propose, can contribute to the urgent work of antiracism by revealing illuminating intersections with the contested narratives of race that define contemporary discourse. Each of the three narratives employs a subtle strategy that, in the course of telling, un.masks notions of ethnic privilege and separatism.

HAGAR: OPPRESSED AND BLESSED

Hagar's story is related in two parts, each of which is located at a significant juncture in the larger narrative that relates the Lord's promise of descendants to Abraham and Sarah. The first part of her story (Gen 16:1–16) sets the birth of her son Ishmael between two theophanies in which the Lord speaks to Abraham about the promise of descendants. Just prior to her appearance, the Lord declares that Abram's descendants will proceed from Abram's own body (15:1–21), and just afterward, Abraham is informed that the promised son will be born to Sarah (17:1–27). The second part of her story (Gen 21:8–21) occurs immediately after a report of Isaac's birth (21:1–7) and in close textual proximity to the Lord's command that Abraham sacrifice him (22:1–19).

The two parts of Hagar's story follow a common plot line that contrasts Hagar's treatment by Abraham and Sarah with God's response to her suffering. The narrator introduces her by evoking the aspects of ethnicity, class, and gender that define her in opposition to the wealthy Semitic male who stands at the center of the narrative: “[Sarai] had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar” (16:1b). The mention of her name gives Hagar an identity that her owners deny. To Abram and Sarai, she is less than human. Sarai speaks of Hagar only as “my slave-girl” as she gives her as a wife to Abram and when she blames Abram for siring a son through her (vv. 2, 5). Abram follows suit (v. 6). Hagar, for her part, has no voice as her body is bartered; the narrator opens a window into her suffering with an understated comment that Sarai humiliated her. Her suffering is then accentuated via repetition in the second part of her story, when conflict again arises and Sarah demands that Abraham expel her (21:10).

When Hagar leaves the family, however, she emerges as a subject in her own right. By continuing her story past the point of its connection to Abram, the narrator marks her story as worth telling, signaling that she has worth apart from Abram (16:6b–14; cf. 21:14–21). The angel of the Lord finds her in the wilderness and addresses her by name, and with a question rather than a command: “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” (v. 8). This expression of concern evokes a response from Hagar, who tells the angel that she is fleeing her mistress.³ The angel in turn bestows an astonishing blessing that evokes what the Lord said to Abram in the previous episode: “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude” (16:10; cf. 15:5).

³ Hagar's dialogue with the angel is the only instance in Genesis where the Lord speaks directly to a woman.

The encounter concludes when Hagar gives a name to “the LORD who spoke to her” (v. 13). The narrator subsequently confirms the divine blessing when Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the desert. Once again, the divine messenger appears to her with a question that conveys caring and declares that God will make of Ishmael a great nation (21:18b; cf. 17:20).

The narrator nuances the two parts of Hagar’s story with details that equate Hagar’s divine encounter with two key episodes of Abram’s story. As Abram did in response to the Lord’s calling, Hagar leaves her family with no particular destination in sight. As with Abram, the Lord issues a command, followed by a blessing of descendants (cf. 12:1–3). The narrator associates the promise with a specific location, as was the case with Abram (16:14; cf. 12:8). Similarly, the second part of Hagar’s story alludes to the climactic episode of Abraham’s story, that is, the binding of Isaac.⁴ Hagar, like Abraham, departs because of a divine command (21:12; cf. 22:2). Abraham “rises early” to gather items for Hagar’s and Ishmael’s journey, just as he does for himself and Isaac (21:14; cf. 22:3), and the narrator injects a note of pathos into both stories (21:11–12; 22:6–8). Like Abraham, Hagar must face the death of the son who embodies the divine promise but experiences the Lord’s intervention at the last moment, when she “sees” the means of deliverance (a well, 21:19; a ram in a thicket, 22:13). The narrator then concludes Hagar’s story with a reference to settling (21:20–21; cf. 22:19). These allusions to the beginning and climactic moment of Abraham’s story, as a whole, equate the Egyptian slave with Israel’s ancestral father as a recipient of divine blessing.

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By these devices, the narrator takes up the story of Hagar to depict the dehumanizing ways that those with power treat those at the margins and to portray a God who dignifies those who are so demeaned. Hagar’s ethnicity stands at the center of the contrast, as she assumes multiple feminine identities within the story.⁵ Situated at strategic junctures in Abraham’s story, Hagar’s story undercuts any association of privilege with blessing and conveys that God’s blessing extends to all. The Egyptian slave is accorded a personhood that Abraham and Sarah deny her, challenging readers to examine their sentiments and practices in light of Hagar’s story.

⁴ See David W. Cotter, *Genesis*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew & Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2003), 146–151.

⁵ Tammi J. Schneider, *Mothers of Promise: Women in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 108.

RAHAB: HOSPITALITY AND SURVIVAL

Rahab's story (Josh 2:1–24; 6:22–24) opens the account of Israel's conquests in Canaan. It is situated immediately after a series of exhortations that present wholehearted obedience to the law of Moses as necessary for fulfillment of the land promise (Josh 1:7–9; cf. Deut 28:61; 30:10; 31:26). Of particular importance in this respect is Moses's decree that the peoples of the land are to be slaughtered without mercy and that no agreements are to be made with them (Deut 7:1–6).

The narrator begins the story of Rahab, in the Hebrew text, on a discordant note:

Joshua son of Nun dispatched two men from Shittim, who were to reconnoiter covertly, saying, "Go! Look over the land, especially Jericho." They left and entered the house of a woman, a prostitute, whose name was Rahab. Then they lay there. (Josh 2:1)⁶

The report raises eyebrows for a number of reasons. First, "lying" evokes an idiom for sexual intercourse. The narrator's language is both suggestive and ironic; instead of walking around the city, the spies "lie" in the house of a prostitute. Second, the manner of Rahab's introduction pointedly renders her in opposition to the elite Israelite males who carry the story forward. And echoing Hagar's introduction, the narrator gives the Canaanite woman a name, whereas the two Israelite spies remain nameless and indistinct.

While the story begins with the spies, Rahab soon takes center stage. When the king's men appear at Rahab's house and command that she hand over the spies, she tells them instead that the spies have left and persuades the men to pursue them. She then presses the spies to swear that the Israelites will not harm her and her family when they take Jericho. Her plea includes a striking declaration:

I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. As soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. (Josh 2:9–11)

The recital of the Lord's mighty acts of salvation, followed by an acclamation of the Lord's supremacy, constitutes the core of Israel's confession of faith. Here, however, that confession issues from the lips of a Canaanite prostitute!

Throughout the story, Rahab demonstrates the opportunism, shrewdness, and determination that mark Israelite identity. She sends the king's men on a wild goose chase, hides the spies, acclaims Israel's God, and succeeds in wrangling an

⁶ Author's translation.

agreement that will allow her and her family to survive. She facilitates the spies' escape by lowering them through a window in her house, directs them to hide out in the hills until the king's men have returned, and sends them on their way (vv. 15, 22).

The narrator portrays the spies, on the other hand, in consistently passive and reactive terms. They lie down (v. 1). They are hidden (v. 6). They are preparing to sleep (v. 8). When Rahab presses them for an agreement to spare her family's life, they readily accept, replying, "Our lives for yours!" Perhaps realizing that the agreement directly violates the command of Moses, they later declare that the agreement will be nullified unless Rahab ties a crimson cord in her window and keeps her family inside the house when the Israelites commence the slaughter (vv. 17–21). Furthermore, the spies deny culpability by claiming they made the agreement under duress. Twice they refer to "the oath that you made us swear" (vv. 17, 20). In contrast to Rahab, they mention the Lord only in passing (v. 14). When they return to Joshua, their report consists of reiterating Rahab's declaration that the hearts of those in Jericho have melted (v. 24).

The crimson cord in the window recalls the blood on Israelite doors that protected Israelite families during the Passover in Egypt, further blurring the line between Israelites and Canaanites. Because of the sign, Rahab and her family are spared when others are being killed and so share with Israel an experience of deliverance. Joshua's decision to honor the spies' agreement breaks the Deuteronomic commandment and precipitates a final reversal (Josh 6:22–23, 25). Moses declares emphatically that Israel's success is contingent on the nation's wholehearted obedience to the Lord and on meticulous observance of the commandments (Deut 11:22–28; cf. Josh 1:7–8). Yet at Jericho, the Lord fights for Israel despite the transgression and collapses the city wall. There is no report of divine displeasure, nor even a single word of recrimination directed toward Joshua or the nation. Instead, we are told that Rahab and her family are placed outside the Israelite camp and that their descendants have "lived in Israel ever since" (6:25). Rahab's story thus ends by noting a continuing indigenous presence in the land alongside of Israel and, implicitly, the failure of the program of indigenous erasure envisioned by the commands of Moses.

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RUTH: WELCOMING THE IMMIGRANT

The Bible has little good to say about Moabites outside the book of Ruth. References to Moabites attest to a high degree of ethnic antagonism. Biblical texts depict Moabites as arrogant (Isa 16:6; Jer 48:29), aggressive (Num 21:1–24:25), and

inhospitable (Deut 23:4). Their women are associated with predatory sexuality (Gen 19:30–38; Num 25:1–5). Moabites are also the objects of degrading imagery, as in the grotesque account of Eglon’s death at the hands of Ehud (Judg 3:22).

The most strident expression of antagonism, however, occurs in the form of a Mosaic commandment: “No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD” (Deut 23:3). The commandment is noteworthy for being one of the few commandments that biblical literature reports being implemented. The book of Nehemiah concludes with an account of reforms that Nehemiah instituted in Jerusalem (13:1–31). The account begins with a reference to the commandment being read publicly and with a report that, in compliance, the people “separated from Israel all those of foreign descent” (v. 4b). It concludes with another, more detailed account, in which Nehemiah publicly humiliates Jews who have married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab and proscribes intermarriage between Israelites and non-Israelites (vv. 23–27). The account is capped by Nehemiah’s own commentary on this and other reforming actions, which he characterizes as cleansing the community “from everything foreign” (v. 30).

The book of Ruth was likely written in response to programs of this sort, the exclusivist sentiments that fueled them, and the strict application of the commandments that supported them. As in the stories of Hagar and Rahab, the writer takes up the artifice of narrative to overturn deeply rooted ethnic stereotypes. The book begins with an Israelite family finding refuge for ten years in Moab, among the people that Israel castigates for their unwelcoming disposition. The two sons subsequently find Moabite wives for themselves.

Ruth, one of the Moabite wives, displays the unwavering devotion to others that exemplifies the heart of the Torah’s social ethic. Because of her dedication to Naomi, she confesses her devotion to Israel’s God, declaring, “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16c). She gleanes for food to provide for herself and her despondent mother-in-law (2:2–3). The narrator later evokes the trope of the Moabite predator by relating Ruth’s calculated approach to Boaz in the middle of the night, while he is sleeping off the effects of a harvest celebration (3:6–13; cf. Gen 19:30–38). In a striking reversal, however, Boaz commends the Moabite for her faithfulness and proclaims her an admirable woman.

The writer artfully uses the motif of marriage as a device for dismantling negative sentiments toward foreigners. Naomi introduces the motif when she bids her Moabite daughters-in-law to return to their mothers’ houses and find security in the home of a husband (1:8–9a). The instructions implicitly endorse endogamy and, by implication, the notion that one is better off among one’s own people and that an ethnic group must maintain strong internal boundaries. The story ends, however, with the entire village of Bethlehem acclaiming the marriage of an upstanding member of the community to a Moabite woman and elevating Ruth to a status equal to that of Rachel, Leah, and Tamar, the group’s ancestral matriarchs (3:11–12). With the community women’s declaration that Ruth is worth more to Naomi than seven (Israelite) sons, the book ends with an enthusiastic endorsement

of exogamy and, with it, the sentiment that welcoming immigrant others into the covenant community brings blessing. The marriage of Ruth the Moabite to Boaz the Jew completes a transformation in perspective toward ethnic others and a shift in community identity, from an identity marked by strong internal boundaries to a people defined by the permeability of those boundaries.

The narrator initiates the transformation through an encounter that opposes the destitute foreigner, “Ruth the Moabite,” over against Boaz, who is introduced as “a prominent rich man” (2:1–23). Ruth enters a plot belonging to Boaz, uninvited and perhaps unwanted, while Boaz’s workers are harvesting barley. When Boaz asks the supervisor of his workers about Ruth, the supervisor identifies her only as “the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab” (v. 6). Boaz, however, addresses Ruth as “my daughter,” employing familial language that communicates welcome.

As the drama unfolds, the narrator relates a process by which Boaz, who stands at the center of the community, draws Ruth from its periphery to its core. He begins by telling her that she belongs:

Then Boaz said to Ruth, “Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.” (Ruth 2:8–9)

In this brief speech, Boaz tells Ruth that she belongs with the community and that she will be provided for. While readers might expect the Judahite leader to ask indignantly what this Moabite woman is doing in his field, Boaz instead asks Ruth a question that conveys hospitality. He tells her that she belongs in the community’s space and invites her to join the young women who work for him. He follows these words of belonging with a declaration that assures her that she will be protected from harassment from community members. Finally, Boaz invites Ruth to drink from the water that the men in the community have drawn, thereby making the community’s resources available to her.

When the workers break for a meal, Boaz invites Ruth to join them, thereby using his position to bring Ruth fully into the community’s life (vv. 14–16). He personally offers her roasted grain, and she eats until she is completely satisfied. When the field hands go back to work, Boaz goes even beyond these measures and commands the young men of the community to give her special treatment, that is, to pull out handfuls of harvested grain so that she can easily gather what she needs. Then he commands the workers not to humiliate her. The Hebrew term that Boaz employs in the command is often associated with violent abuse, reinforcing the vulnerability that the young Moabite woman faces as she seeks to make a new life among the people of Bethlehem (cf. 2:22).

Ruth responds to these initiatives with astonishment and gratitude. She responds to Boaz in the field by asking why he has noticed her, since she is a

foreigner. The Hebrew text here raises the central issue of the book through an exquisite word play on “notice” and “foreigner,” which derive from the same Hebrew root. Boaz answers by commending Ruth for her devotion and diligence and then blesses her by Israel’s God. Ruth in turn expresses gratitude for Boaz’s empathy and, again, astonishment that he has done so since she is not a member of the community.

The scene in the field thus presents an exemplary portrait of faithfulness toward ethnic and immigrant others and depicts the immigrant in admirable terms (cf. 3:11). Boaz utilizes his privilege to meet the needs of the foreigner who appears in his space: a sense of belonging, access to community resources, protection from abuse and humiliation, and the extra measures required to see to her well-being. Later, at the city gate, he facilitates community acceptance by exercising a flexible interpretation of Mosaic commandments to support his marriage to her, in direct contrast to the strict interpretation by which Nehemiah justifies his reforms.⁷ The genealogy that closes the book punctuates the value of a diverse community by drawing a direct connection between Boaz, Ruth’s son Obed, and the birth of David (4:18–22).

ENGAGING THE STORIES

Written narratives work by drawing readers into a story world, engaging their imagination, and inviting them to consider the truth the story speaks about the world of their experience. Readers emerge from good narratives with a new way of thinking about themselves and the world in which they live and, by extension, rethinking their own narratives. Because readers enter narratives with different experiences and identify with different characters and events, narratives open spaces for countless intersecting stories to be told and interpreted. In this sense, biblical narratives have the capacity to illumine contested contemporary and historical narratives and so to configure the vision and practices of the communities that embrace them.

I conclude with examples of this work by way of questions. How is Hagar’s experience reflected in the dehumanizing residue of the subjugation of millions to chattel slavery? Or in the centuries-long suffering, degradation, and maltreatment voiced today in the stories of their descendants? How might faithful readers align their vision and actions with the Lord’s kindness, empathy, and blessing for the oppressed? Or with the narrator’s challenge to recognize the personhood, worth, and stories of all human beings? In what ways does Hagar’s story, when read alongside Abraham’s, expose racist beliefs and practices of privilege?⁸

⁷ See L. Daniel Hawk, *Ruth*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 122–133.

⁸ For an illuminating intertextual reading, see Delores S. Williams, “Hagar in African American Biblical Appropriation,” in *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 171–184.

In what ways might the story of Rahab challenge the way the United States narrates its history? Why does the telling of that history honor indigenous women, like Rahab, who help the invaders at points of beginning (e.g., Pocahontas and Sacagawea)? How does the narrator's subtle reversal of attributes confront white America's long-standing propensity to view indigenous people as savages and to deny its own savagery? How does the narrator's comment that Rahab and her family have lived among the Israelites "ever since" (Josh 6:25) work against mechanisms of erasure that would consign her people to the past? And how might it expose an inveterate impulse in settler America to do the same? How many indigenous people in the United States, like Rahab, carry stories that tell of massacres and unspeakable violence?⁹

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How does Ruth reflect the stories of immigrants, particularly those from vilified ethnic groups, who enter host nations bringing with them little more than hope? Can imaginative identification with Naomi and Ruth sensitize faithful readers to the vulnerability that immigrants experience and the difficult decisions they often must make? Are Christian readers willing, like Boaz, to advocate for the welcome and inclusion of immigrants? To see that they feel safe and that they have access to communal resources? How might the book of Ruth as a whole unmask the racist sentiments that are manifested in the building of walls and the separation of families?¹⁰

How might these stories—of the enslaved, the indigene, and the immigrant—initiate conversations and transformations that promote the antiracist work that must be done in these fraught times? ⊕

L. DANIEL HAWK is Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew at Ashland Theological Seminary, Ashland, Ohio, and an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. His most recent book is *The Violence of the Biblical God* (Eerdmans, 2019).

⁹ For an example of reading American national narratives through a biblical lens, see L. Daniel Hawk, "Indigenous Helpers and Renegade Invaders: Ambivalent Characters in Biblical and Cinematic Conquest Narratives," *Journal of Religion & Film* 20 no. 3, Article 24 (October 2016), <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss3/24>

¹⁰ See Hawk, *Ruth*.