

Genesis 21:15-19 and Theophanic Experience of Distressed Women

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Abstract

This study examines the theophanic encounter in Genesis 21:15–19 as a transformative narrative of divine intervention for marginalized women. Through literary and critical analysis of the Masoretic Text, the study investigates how Hagar, a traumatized and displaced Egyptian slave experiences a theophany that subverts patriarchal and socio-ethnic hierarchies. The research method employed in this study is narrative method of biblical exegesis. The research reveals Yahweh's character as attentive to female distress despite Hagar's cultic outsider status; and establishes a paradigm for God's solidarity with oppressed women. The study aims to interpret Genesis 21:15-19 in its original context, and use its exegetical findings to address the fate of distressed and marginalized women in the contemporary society. The study examines a comprehensive elucidation on theophany and theophanic experience. It is observed that in the contemporary society, especially in the patriarchal society, some women are marginalized and victimized through various means. This victimization has caused further effects such as escalated conflict, explosion of anger, loss of property and lives and so on. The study concludes that this theophany redefines divine election, prioritizing vulnerable women's survival over established power structures. The researcher opines that if the exegetical findings of Genesis 21:15-19 are properly applied, marginalization of peasant women would reduce.

Key words: Genesis 21:15-19, Theophany, Experience, Distressed, Women.

Introduction

Genesis 21:15–19 is one of the Old Testament texts which can be used to address the prevalent problem of distressed women in the contemporary dispensation. It occurs at the convergence of Abrahamic covenant tensions and Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) social stratifications. Hagar initially introduced as Pharaoh's enslaved gift embodies intersecting marginalities which include ethnic foreigner (Egyptian), gender subordinate (concubine/slave), and displaced mother. Her expulsion into the Beersheba wilderness reflects ANE practices of abandoning enslaved women during crises (Stager, 1985). Theologically, this episode marks the only direct divine speech to a woman in Genesis apart from Eve (Trible, 1984), occurring after Abraham, the covenant bearer abandons her. The narrative's sparse dialogue and physical desolation (Hagar's refusal to watch Ishmael die) evoke ancient motherhood traumas, contrasting with Isaac's protected lineage. Significantly, God's intervention to restore the oppressed occurs without patriarchal mediation (Williams, 1993).

Traditional exegesis often subordinates Hagar's theophany to Abrahamic covenant theology, reducing it to a literary foil. This obscures the text's radical claim that God directly intervenes for an enslaved, idolatry-associated woman outside Israel's cultic community. Such readings perpetuate interpretive violence against marginalized voices (Scholz, 2021). The narrative challenges systematic theologies that prioritize divine sovereignty over compassion. God's response to Ishmael's cries (*wayyišma' ēlōhîm*, "God heard," v.17), not Hagar's weeping appears textually jarring. Does God attend to the boy through his mother's trauma? How does this shape theology of lament? This study attempts to explain how this ancient narrative reframes pastoral and ethical responses to modern women in displacement, single parenthood, or trafficking. This framework positions Hagar's theophany as a critical

lens for reimagining divine justice, gender, and marginality challenging readers to confront the text's subversion of power hierarchies and its implications for contemporary praxis.

In the contemporary time, distressed women experience physical/sexual violence (WHO, 2021). In some cultural settings, peasant women lack equal economic rights; 18 countries restrict women's property ownership (World Bank, 2023). Women in conflict areas face gender-based violence (UN Women, 2022). All these form part of the recent challenges distressed face in the recent time. Therefore, the major aim of this paper is to do thorough exegesis of Genesis 21:15-19 and apply its exegetical findings in the context of distressed and marginalized women in the contemporary society. The research method used in this research work is narrative method of biblical exegesis. Narrative method is used to give the chronological order of event and give exploration of the world of the characters in that narrative. According to Obiorah (2015), the need of this method is to investigate how the narrator engages and draws the readers into his narrative world. The method is apt for this study because the text of study (Genesis 21:15-19) is a narrative.

Hebrew Text of Genesis 21:15-19

15 וַיָּקֹלֶת הַמָּיִם מִזְהַמָּת וַתַּלֵּךְ אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִתְּחִת אַמְּדָה שְׁיחִים:
 16 וַתָּלֶךְ וַתַּשְׁבַּב לְהָמְדָה בְּמִתְחַנֵּן קֶשֶׁת כִּי אִמְרָה אֱלֹהָה אֶל-אֶרְאָה בְּמִתְּהַלֵּל מִנְגָּד וַתַּשְׁבַּב מִנְגָּד וַתָּשַׁא אֶת-קְלָלָה וַתְּבַךְ:
 17 וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת-קְול הַגָּבָר יְהָרָא מֶלֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶל-הָגָר מִזְהַמָּתִים וַיֹּאמֶר לְהָגָר מִה-זֶּה הָגָר אֶל-תִּירְאִי קַיְשָׁמָע
 אֱלֹהִים אֶל-קְול הַגָּבָר בְּאָשָׁר הוּא שָׁם:
 18 קָומֵי שָׁאֵי אֶת-יְהָנָעָר וַיְחִזֵּק אֶת-יְהָנָעָר בָּזְקִילָּגָן גָּדוֹל אֲשִׁימָה:
 19 וַיִּפְקַח אֱלֹהִים אֶת-עֵילָה וַתָּרָא בָּאָרֶץ וַתָּלֶךְ וַתָּמָלֵא אֶת-הַמָּמָת מִים וַתַּשְׁק אֶת-יְהָנָעָר:

English Translation of Genesis 21:15-19

15 When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes.
 16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.
 17 And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.
 18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.
 19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

Context of Genesis 21:15-19

The socio-cultural context of Genesis 21:15-19 considers Hagar's status as an Egyptian slave which places her at the bottom of the household hierarchy. Ancient Near Eastern legal texts, particularly *Code of Hammurabi* §§146, 170–171 permitted masters to exploit enslaved women as concubines for progeny, yet deny them inheritance rights. Her expulsion (v.14) reflects legal norms allowing disposal of "unproductive" enslaved persons during famine (Schipper, 2021). Sarah's authority to expel her (v.10) affirms elite women's managerial roles within patriarchy (Stager, 1985).

Hagar's act of placing Ishmael "under the bushes" (*tahat haśšîhim*, v.15) echoes ANE infant exposure practices. Mesopotamian texts (e.g., *Myth of Sargon*) describe abandonment as a last resort for destitute mothers. Her distance ("a bowshot away," v.16) signifies ritual separation from death while fulfilling mourning duties (Gruber, 2016). The narrative's focus on her weeping (*wattešā' et-qōlāh watteb̄k*, v.16) highlights cultural expectations of maternal lamentation. The Beersheba wilderness represents a socio-geographic margin where societal protections vanish. Nomadic cultures viewed deserts as domains of chaos and divine encounters (Num 20:1–13; 1 Kgs 19:4–8). God's intervention here subverts the trope: wilderness becomes a site of revelation for the marginalized (Niditch, 2012).

Historically, the narrative reflects early 2nd millennium BCE practices which correlates to expulsion of secondary wives/sons to secure inheritance (cf. Nuzi tablets, *Hurrian Family Laws*), and Egyptian presence in Canaan (Hagar's ethnicity) during the Middle Kingdom (Kitchen, 2003). The story addresses Babylonian exile anxieties: Divine care for displaced people (Hagar/Ishmael as analogs to exiled Judah) and Reassurance that God hears cries (*wayyišma' 'ělōhîm*, v.17) of the scattered (Blenkinsopp, 2011). Ishmael's survival legitimizes Arabian tribes (Nabateans, Qedarites) as Abrahamic descendants (Knauf, 1989). The "great nation" promise (Genesis 21:18) engages 8th–7th c. BCE interactions between Israel and North Arabian tribes. Assyrian records (e.g., Tiglath-Pileser III) mention *Qedar* as Ishmaelite allies/counterparts, suggesting the text negotiates neighbour relations (Brettler, 2007). This dual-context analysis reveals Genesis 21:15–19 as a textured narrative negotiating household power dynamics, survival ethics, and divine providence within specific ANE socio-historical frameworks.

Close Reading of Genesis 21:15-19

Mother's care for her child vv 15-17

Hagar demonstrated her motherhood in the wilderness. The Hebrew word נָשַׁלְקָה translated "she cast" indicated Hagar's attempt to preserve and protect her son, Ishmael, but despair was her challenge. According to Jamieson, Fausset and Brown (1997), Ishmael sank exhausted from fatigue and thirst, his mother laid his head under one of the bushes to smell the damp while she herself, unable to witness his distress, sat down at a little distance in hopeless sorrow.

The verb *shalak* conveys violent abandonment, evoking Ancient Near Eastern infant exposure practices (Gruber, 2016). Hagar's act subverts maternal instinct, reflecting absolute despair. The bush (שְׁיחָה) symbolizes fragile refuge. Its sparse shade mirrors Hagar's dwindling hope. Her positioning, a bowshot away (כַּעֲמָתָה קָצָב) creates physical and emotional distance. *Mineghed* ("opposite") frames her as a witness to death, not an active mourner (Sarna, 1989). The bowshot measurement (approx. 100–200m) signifies relational rupture while remaining within sight (Hamilton, 1995). This vocal lament contrasts with silent grief (Gen 23:2). Her weeping is a public performance of anguish, asserting humanity amid dehumanization (Trible, 1984). Hagar's trauma becomes the locus of revelation, challenging patriarchal norms (Trible, 1984). Divine response asymmetry gives hope in the midst of despair. God "hears the boy's voice" (וַיַּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־קְול הַבָּעֵר), v.17), ignoring Hagar's cries, highlighting maternal invisibility (Scholz, 2021).

Divine Visitation vv 18-19

Divine imperatives counter Abraham's expulsion (*leki!*, "Go!", 21:14). *Še'ā* ("lift") reverses *vattashlekh* ("cast down"), reframing abandonment as divine commissioning (Lapsley, 2005). Hagar's unnamed status is apparent in the narrative. God addresses her directly yet omits her name, centering Ishmael's destiny (Williams, 1993). *Goy* ("nation") affirms Ishmael's independent ethnic identity (Knauf, 1989). נְקֻדָּה denotes spiritual awakening, not physical sight. The well (בָּאָר) was present but unseen, hence a metaphor for divine revelation in despair (Ressegueie, 2005). Water as theophany: The well manifests God's mercy, subverting desert-as-death symbolism (Fretheim, 2005).

Divine Favour vv 20-21

The formula *'ělōhîm 'et-* signifies divine election (cf. Joseph, Gen 39:2). Ishmael—exiled and half-Egyptian receives patriarchal status (Brettler, 2007). Ethnic rehabilitation is observed in the critical analysis of the narrative. God was with an outcast validates his place in the Abrahamic legacy (Sternberg, 1985). Mastery of the bow (*qesheth*) symbolizes adaptation to wilderness life. This skill foreshadows Ishmaelite resilience (Gen 25:18) but also implies violence (cf. Gen 27:3) (Hamilton, 1995).

Hagar reclaims agency as matchmaker. An Egyptian wife restores maternal heritage, rejecting Abraham's household (Scholz, 2021). Moreover, divine favour was eventually fulfilled. Ishmael's lineage thrives outside the covenant, embodying God's expansive providence (Brueggemann, 1982). Ishmael's Egyptian marriage (v.21) fulfills God's promise outside the Abrahamic line, expanding divine favour beyond ethnic boundaries (Knauf, 1989).

Understanding the Concept of Theophany in the Old Testament

The word “theophany” is a compound word from Greek, *theos* meaning “God” and *phainein* meaning “to appear”. This denotes a temporary, sensory manifestation of God within the created order. In the Old Testament, it transcends mere divine communication, embodying God’s personal presence while preserving divine transcendence. Key characteristics include:

Temporality: God enters time/space without permanent containment (e.g., burning bush, Ex 3:2).

Mediated Embodiment: God appears through created forms (fire, cloud, human likeness) to accommodate human perception (Fretheim, 2005).

Transformative Purpose: Theophanies convey revelation, commission individuals, or enact judgment (von Rad, 1962).

Primary Modes of Theophanic Manifestation

The basic modes of divine manifestation include the following:

Anthropomorphic Appearances

Genesis 18: Yahweh appears as one of “three men” to Abraham (v.2), eating and conversing. It is an embodiment without compromising divine holiness (Barr, 1993).

Natural Elements as Divine Vehicles

Burning bush (Ex 3:2–6): Fire symbolizes God’s purifying presence without consuming creation. Sinai theophany (Ex 19:18) which is “Mount Sinai was covered with smoke because Yahweh descended on it in fire”. Pillar of cloud (Ex 13:21–22) which guides Israel while veiling divine glory (*kavod*) is another example of natural element of divine manifestation. Shekhinah in the Tabernacle (Ex 40:34–38), a cloud that signifies God’s localized presence.

Auditory Revelations: Thunder/Voice at Sinai (Ex 19:19) reveals God’s voice as a “trumpet blast” reconfigures cosmic order (Moberly, 1983). The Still, Small Voice (1 Kgs 19:12): Yahweh’s whisper to Elijah subverts expectations of stormy theophanies.

Functions and Purposes of Theophany

Covenant Ratification: Sinai Theophany (Ex 19–24) indicates God’s descent onto the mountain confirms the Mosaic covenant, with theophany as its “signature” (Ex 24:9–11: elders “saw the God of Israel”).

Prophetic Commissioning: Isaiah’s Vision (Isa 6:1–8): The throne-room theophany overwhelms Isaiah with holiness (*qadosh*), cleansing and sending him (Brueggemann, 1998).

Divine Judgment and Salvation: Theophanic Warfare, God “marches” in storm imagery to defeat chaos (Hab 3:3–15; Ps 18:7–15). Burning of Sodom (Gen 19:24): Fire from Yahweh embodies judicial action.

Revelation of Divine Nature: Exodus 34:6–7: God proclaims His name (“Yahweh”) and character (“merciful and gracious”) to Moses in a cloud.

Old Testament theophanies affirm a God who engages creation intimately yet remains wholly other. They are not mere literary devices but theological events revealing Yahweh’s character: holy yet immanent, transcendent yet present. As Terence Fretheim notes, “Theophany is less about God’s location than God’s availability” (2005, p. 48). This paradox – embodied presence without domestication – anchors Israel’s worship and invites contemporary reflection on divine encounter.

The Concept of Distressed Woman/Women

A distressed woman is a woman who is showing or suffering from distress; worried, upset, or troubled. This can manifest as extreme anxiety or sadness. It can also describe a woman experiencing severe physical strain (Enero, 2023). This is a narrative device where a woman is placed in a dangerous situation and requires rescue by a male character. The “damsel” is often portrayed as beautiful, of high social status, and in need of protection. The male protagonist is motivated by kinship, love, or lust to rescue her, potentially becoming a hero.

Signs/Characteristics of a Distressed Woman:

1. Changes in behaviour, such as becoming withdrawn, anxious, or fearful: One of the first signs that may indicate that a woman is being abused is a significant change in her behaviour. You may become more withdrawn, anxious, depressed, or fearful. The woman may avoid eye contact, appear nervous in the presence of her partner, or act submissively to avoid conflict. These changes may be signs that you are living in an environment of violence and control.
2. Social isolation, often enforced by an abusive partner: Women who suffer abuse are often isolated by their partners, limiting their contact with family and friends. The woman may stop participating in social activities, stop seeing certain people, or her partner may monitor and control her communications. Social isolation is a strategy used by abusers to keep the woman under their control and prevent her from seeking help.
3. Unexplained physical injuries: Another obvious sign of abuse in a woman is unexplained physical injuries. If a woman has bruises, cuts, fractures or other injuries that she cannot explain or attributes to domestic accidents, she may be a victim of violence. It is important to pay attention to these signs and seek professional help if abuse is suspected.
4. Changes in mental and emotional health, including anxiety, depression, and difficulty concentrating: Abuse can have serious consequences on a woman's mental and emotional health. It can manifest as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, insomnia, or other mental health problems. The battered woman may experience sudden changes in her mood, have difficulty concentrating, or experience suicidal thoughts. It is essential to pay attention to these changes and offer professional support.
5. Difficulty trusting others: Abuse can undermine a woman's trust in others, making her feel like she can't count on anyone for support or protection. The battered woman may feel distrustful, paranoid, or afraid to ask her loved ones for help, fearing retaliation or believing that they will not believe her. This lack of trust can make it difficult to seek help to get out of the violent situation. (Enero, 2023).

Distressed woman in Biblical (Old Testament) Context

The concept of the "distressed woman" ('aniyah, *dakah*, or *lahats* in Hebrew) in the Hebrew Bible represents a recurring theological and social motif where women experience extreme vulnerability due to systemic injustice, violence, or cultural marginalization (Westbrook, 1991). The terms used to designate "distressed" in the Old Testament include the following:

עֲנֵיה ('aniyah) – "afflicted" (Ex 22:22; Isa 10:30)

דָּקָה (dakah) – "crushed" (Ps 34:18; Isa 57:15)

לֹהֲט (lahats) – "oppressed" (Ex 22:21; Deut 24:15) (Exum, 1993) and (Brueggemann, 1990).

Characteristics of Distressed Women in the Old Testament

Legal Powerlessness: No inheritance rights (Num 27:1–11), dependent on male kin.

Economic Vulnerability: Widows deprived of property (1 Kgs 17:8–16), foreign women without clan protection (Ruth 1:5).

Sexual Exploitation: Victims of rape (Dinah, Gen 34), forced marriage (Tamar, 2 Sam 13), or trafficking (Judg 19–21) (Laffey, 1996).

Reading Genesis 21:15-19 in the Context of Distressed Women

From the findings of the exegesis, water depletion symbolizes loss of basic survival means. As an enslaved Egyptian woman, Hagar lacks resources or kinship support (Stager, 1985). Abandonment ritual, "Cast" as used in the narrative reflects ANE exposure practices for enslaved women during famine (Schipper, 2021). The psychological trauma which manifests in spatial rupture including sitting "a bowshot away" (v. 16) signifies dissociation from her dying child, a trauma response (O'Connor, 2017). Unheard lament of Hagar contrasts with God hearing *only* Ishmael's cries (v. 17), mirroring societal silencing of women's pain (Scholz, 2021). Yahweh "hears" (v. 17) Ishmael (*Yishma-El* = "God hears"), but the revelation is granted to Hagar. Divine solidarity centers her trauma (Trible, 1984). Hagar's marginalization is a replica of slavery and dispossession in Africa. However, the promise of giving Hagar's son, a great nation offers African women the hope of future and preservation of fruitful generation.

The divine imperatives “Arise! Lift up!” counters Abraham’s expulsion “Cast out!”. God commissions Hagar, not Abraham as covenant-bearer for Ishmael (Lapsley, 2005). The theological inversion contends that a foreign slave receives promises reserved for patriarchs (Williams, 1993). Abraham receives divine promises in security (Gen 12:1–3); Hagar receives them in existential crisis. In the contemporary society, especially in African setting, God’s command “Arise!” echoes African women’s resilience. For Kenyan widows, it is a hope for reclaiming stolen land (Wanjiku, 2020). In Nigerian It refreshes hope for “BringBackOurGirls” of Nigerian mothers confronting Boko Haram (Oduyoye, 2001)

The well’s sudden visibility symbolizes divine revelation in spaces of abandonment (Resseguei, 2005). Hagar, previously Sarai’s property (Gen 16:3) becomes God’s prophetic agent (“Arise!”). This subverts patriarchal hierarchies (Scholz, 2021). In desert cosmology, water signifies life’s reclaiming by the oppressed (Dube, 2000). Patriarchal violence made 40% of displaced African women experience sexual assault (Amnesty). Moreover, Neocolonial Water Theft gave European corporations control over about 75% of Africa’s water sources (Bakker, 2012). These echo Hagar’s denial of Abraham asset and initial water denial in the wilderness.

This contextual reading transforms Hagar from a passive victim to *Mama Africa*, a prophetess whose theophany fuels resistance against neocolonial and patriarchal oppression. Genesis 21:15–19 speaks to Africa’s distressed women. God sees the woman carrying water past armed militias. God hears the Congolese miner’s widow weeping over her child. God opens eyes to reveal solutions within African women’s communal resilience. Eye-opening (of Hagar) can be contextualized as grassroots liberation theologies, which has become a recognized movement in Africa for decades. It offers women the opportunity and liberation to device workable of achieving freedom from every form of male subjugation and cultural dispossession of human rights.

Recommendations

1. Trained clergy/counselors should use Hagar’s dissociation (v.16) as a paradigm for ministering to women experiencing abandonment.
2. Individual Christians and Christian leaders should integrate Hagar’s theophany into prayers for single mothers, refugees, and victims of trafficking.
3. The Christian denominations should make serious efforts to thwart any effort towards silencing distressed women.
4. Individual members of the society, especially women should practically make ethical action to establish systemic injustice.
5. Despite vicissitude of life, people should not lose hope and live in pessimisms; rather they should revive their hope and on divine intervention as human are limited to exhaustively attend to all their needs in life.
6. Women should not allow tradition to deny them their human rights of possession and belonging.
7. Government should enact rules that would prevent marginalization of women at any level of human society.

Conclusion

In Genesis 21:15-19, the story of Hagar poignantly illustrates the theme of distress among women, particularly in the context of divine intervention. Hagar, cast out into the wilderness with her son Ishmael, experiences profound suffering and abandonment. Her despair is met with a theophanic experience when God hears her cries and provides both comfort and sustenance. God’s response to Hagar’s plight emphasizes that He is attuned to the struggles of marginalized individuals. The theophanic encounter reassures distressed women that their pain does not go unnoticed.

The narrative underscores that God’s compassion extends beyond the covenant community, reaching out to those often deemed insignificant. It reflects an inclusive divine love that addresses the needs of all, regardless of their social status. Hagar’s story can be seen as a broader symbol for women facing distress, offering a message of hope and assurance that they are valued and can find strength through faith.

Genesis 21:15-19 not only portrays a specific narrative of distress but also serves as a profound reminder of the divine presence in moments of suffering. It encourages us to acknowledge and support those in distress, affirming that healing and hope are possible through divine intervention.

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