



Fractured Families and Rebel Maidservants: The Biblical Hagar in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Literature

Christine Petra Sellin

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Troublemaker. Sinner. Rebel. Pagan. Jew. Heretic. Infidel. These were among the most common terms early Christian writers used to characterize Abraham's slave and concubine Hagar. Mentioned only briefly in the Old Testament, the lowly maidservant was conventionally cast as a villainess, reflecting the patriarchal biases and prejudices of the bible and its interpreters. Paul's allegorical reading of Hagar in Galatians 4—Hagar as a kind of enemy of the Christian Church—assured her ignominy. Hagar's tale is among the more disturbing, complex accounts of a female figure in the Old Testament, a tragic tale of servitude and heir-making surrogacy, followed by expulsion and exile. Sellin looks at Dutch painting to recover Hagar's reputation. Hagar was a major preoccupation in the seventeenth-century Dutch Golden Age, as the many versions of her story in literature and art demonstrate. She is treated with an unprecedented degree of sympathy, mercy, and dignity. The Dutch transformed the outcast into a symbol of redemption and a model of maternity. Hagar's story was interpreted as a didactic domestic drama, touching on topics such as family break-ups, extramarital sex, rivalry between women over men, sibling rivalry, and struggles between husbands and wives and masters and servants. Hagar's story fired the imagination because it offered Dutch artists the equivalent of a modern soap opera. But it also revealed what mattered most to the Dutch and perhaps lay at the heart of the fledgling Republic's success and survival. This included the primacy of the family, an emphasis on domestic well being, and the maintenance of ideal civic order. The paintings reflect that the Dutch developed a tenderness, understanding, and compassion for Hagar that the world had never seen before. Exile in scripture, cast off by Paul, Hagar found refuge among the burghers of the Dutch Republic and given pride of place on the walls of their homes. >

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