

Behind the scenes of *The Woman Who Named God* by Charlotte Gordon

I first met Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar when I was a child in church. We drew pictures of them in Sunday School. I made Abraham have a long white beard. I gave Sarah a bun of white hair like a grandmother. Our teacher told us Abraham stood for obedience and faith. So did Sarah. Hagar's name was harder to remember and I didn't bother to draw her at all. She was the one who had to be sent away to make the path clear for Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac. I preferred stories about Jesus. Everyone in my class did. He hung on His cross behind the altar in our church, and with his long hair he looked like Peter Frampton, or any of the rock stars my parents disapproved of, but whom I secretly admired.

I could not know that my fascination with Jesus represented a victory of the church over the Hebrew Scriptures, the Jews, and Abraham. I knew nothing of Abraham's dilemma, Sarah's beauty, or Hagar's exile. Church was the center of my family's life and so was the beautiful drama of Easter, the tragedy of the crucifixion, the joy of Pentecost. I never questioned this until I was twelve, when my older sister told me she knew something I did not know about our father. After a few days of begging on my part, she pulled me into the hallway off the kitchen and whispered so no one else could hear.

"Dad is Jewish."

"But he goes to church," I said. "He's Christian."

"Yeah, but he was born Jewish," she said.

I thought of the Jewish children I knew. They had always seemed very different from us. In St. Louis, where I grew up, they even had their own country club. Sometimes their parents would not let them participate in our school's Christmas pageants. I always felt sorry for them.

Of course, I should have recognized the Jewish children as my brothers and sisters in faith. After all, Abraham is traditionally known as the father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But this is not how I was taught.

When I asked my father if he was Jewish, he said no and that his parents weren't Jewish, either. His father was an artist and his mother was an intellectual. Our discussions devolved into sessions where it sounded like my father was conjugating the verb to be. I am not/you are not/he, she, or it is not Jewish. No one here is Jewish. When my grandmother, our father's mother, came to visit and made borscht and told me not to

kibbitz during a vicious game of casino, these were regarded as charming “Russian” characteristics. As a result, I used to say I was half Russian, not half Jewish. In some important way my father had succeeded. He had managed to alienate me from his heritage as successfully as he had distanced himself.

But when I left home for college, everyone thought I was Jewish. It turned out that Gordon was a Jewish last name. I had curly brown hair. A big nose. All the clichés. The free Jewish newspaper got sent to my mailbox in college. Jewish boys wanted to date me, until they found out my mom was not Jewish. Then they hurt my feelings by losing interest in the daughter of a man who denied his Jewish identity.

I tried to go to church, but did not feel entirely at home there even though I knew the words by heart. Each time I sank into the familiar silence of a pew, the same question nagged at me: Did I really believe Jesus Christ was my Savior? Not really. But Easter was beautiful and so was midnight mass and so were the words of the Nicene Creed. Who was I? Why did I feel so divided? After my father’s pronouncements, I felt it was a lie to say I was half Jewish. All that he had passed on to me was shame about being Jewish. I hadn’t yet realized that there is actually a Jewish tradition in this country of hiding one’s Jewishness. Part of my heritage was pretending not to have this heritage.

And so, without really meaning to, I went on a journey to discover more about the legacy my father was ashamed of. I read, studied, learned Hebrew, and pored over the Bible and the teachings of Jewish and Christian theologians. I wanted to convert, but did not want to abandon my Christian upbringing, even though I could not feel at home in the churches I visited. I didn’t really know what I was looking for until one day in my thirties I met Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar again in bible study. We were reading Genesis 21 and it was my turn to read the Hebrew aloud. When Abraham’s wife Sarah told him she could no longer tolerate sharing him with his second wife, Hagar, and that he must send Hagar and her son Ishmael away, Abraham was *vayayrah*. Our teacher paused and asked us what this Hebrew word meant. No one was sure.

“Bad?” I guessed.

“Yes,” said the teacher, “but in this context it probably has more of a connotation of being distressed. Abraham is unhappy, even shattered. He does not know what to do.”

Suddenly I saw myself and my father in this man. Lost, divided, confused. The patriarch, the first one, the father of us all did not know where to turn. I had never imagined I might have inherited my divisions and bewilderment from him. He was supposed to be the pious grandfather, the man who always obeyed God and therefore never felt any ambivalence about anything. I thought of my picture of the boring old man in Sunday School. Now I had found this famous father had passed his divisions onto me and to my father. If he could follow God, then so could I.

I converted, but my conversion did not end my obsession with this story. I read Jewish commentators, the early church fathers, Christian commentators, the Koran, and Muslim commentary on the story. I discovered that some of the early Jewish commentators argued that Sarah was more of a prophet than her husband. One recent scholar has even claimed that Sarah was a high priestess in Mesopotamia and directed the actions of her husband. As for Hagar, there are many different versions of her story. In both Judaism and Christianity, she is usually depicted as a victim, the tragic exile, and Sarah is the cruel agent of God's plan. Accordingly, many Jews and Christians tend to feel uncomfortable with the story since neither Sarah, nor Abraham behaved in a particularly admirable fashion.

In Islam, however, Hagar is a heroine. She volunteers to leave home because she wants to be a missionary and spread the word about the one true God. Abraham takes her by the hand, leads her to Mecca, and leaves her there. At first, she is sad to be alone, but after she realizes that this is the will of Allah, she accepts her fate. As time passes, she and her baby Ishmael grow weak from thirst. She races up the nearest hill to search for water, but can't find any, so she runs down and climbs a second hill. She repeats this seven times, until an angel appears and shows her a small stream of water. After she and Ishmael drink, she digs a well that is now known as the Zam Zam, the holiest water in Islam. In fact, Mohammed says that she is the most blessed of all women for digging this well as it preserves the water for future generations. Hagar's actions are commemorated by Muslims when they make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca called the *haj*, one of the five pillars of the faithful Muslim's life. They retrace Hagar's path between the two hills and drink from the waters of the Zam Zam. Hagar, this brave heroine, is also known as the founding mother of Islam. It will be one of her descendants who gives birth to Mohammed.

I was astonished to make these discoveries. Hagar, a heroine! She is the only person in the Bible to name God. She is also the first person to weep in the Bible and thereby establishes a personal relationship with the divine that is in stark contrast to the more legalistic relationships He has with the patriarchs in the Bible. To me, the Muslim version of this story is redemptive. It taught me that if we look at familiar characters from different angles, we will see things we never suspected were there. It also suggested that women were far more important to the creation of the three monotheistic religions than I had realized. *The Woman Who Named God* is the result of my journey of faith, but it is also only a way station. From writing this book, I have learned how much more there is to learn. I have spent five years writing about one story from the Bible. Five years on 14 chapters. There is much more to learn, much more to study.