

A Conversation with Charlotte Gordon about *The Woman Who Named God*

Why did you write *The Woman Who Named God*?

I wrote this book to help me understand the complexities of my family heritage and to help us all understand our divided family legacies. My father was born Jewish and converted to Christianity. My mother is a devout Christian. I am a convert to Judaism and so is my sister. My three other siblings are Christians. We cannot whitewash our differences. But perhaps, if we understand where our faiths come from, we might understand each other better and have a chance to resolve the hatred that terrorizes the modern world. The story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar stands at the crossroads of faith and as such is important for nonbelievers as well as believers. This saga has shaped many of our ideas about cultural and religious identities, who our friends are, who we hate. What we like about ourselves. What we want to change.

What is your religious background?

I didn't know my father was Jewish until I was twelve. My older sister told me the secret. This information and my father's attempt to cover it up started me on my Jewish path. Why did my father pretend not to be Jewish? What was so bad about this religion? I loved the Episcopal Church of my childhood, but when I began to learn about Judaism I felt I had found my home. I loved the debate, the emphasis on study and ritual. Along the way, I had some great teachers. Elie Wiesel took me on as a student. He told me I was on a journey of *teshuva* ("return"). He was right.

Why did you choose to write a book about Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar?

Long before I converted, I studied Hebrew as well as Jewish culture, history, literature, and religion. I was miserable during this time in my life. I wanted to convert but didn't want to hurt my family. Also, I loved the Christian traditions of my childhood. How could I give up the rituals of the church? But one day in Torah class we came to a Hebrew word I didn't know. Abraham was *vayera*. "What does *vayera* mean?" I asked. "Ah," the rabbi said, "it means depressed, divided." Abraham, the great patriarch, divided, depressed? How could this be? Suddenly, I realized that if this man could follow God, so could I. I made the decision to convert and within a few months I was Jewish. My conversion did not end my obsession with Abraham and his story. I immersed myself in the story of Abraham's life and discovered that he is torn apart by the two women in his life, his wife Sarah and his concubine Hagar. I was fascinated by these characters. Sarah is brave, beautiful, and smart. She is the traditional matriarch of the Jews. Hagar is resourceful, courageous, and faithful. She is the founding matriarch of Islam.

Who is "the woman who named God"?

Hagar.

Abraham's second wife, or concubine, is the only person in the Bible to give God a name. She is also the first person to weep in the Bible. This is important because Hagar invents the idea of a personal relationship with God. She names God *El-Roi*, "He who sees me," because God has seen her pain and promises to help her. Before this, the pagan gods were viewed as scary, impersonal forces who took little interest in individuals. Even Abraham has a relationship with God that is based largely on contractual agreements. Hagar and God have a different kind of relationship, a new one that is based on emotional exchange and intimate knowledge of each other's character.

You argue that it is highly possible that God actually chose Abraham because of his wife Sarah.

Yes, there is nothing special about Abraham in the first part of the story. He is not virtuous like Noah or strong like Samson. Instead, the narrator spotlights Sarah. We learn that she is barren. And, the narrator emphasizes this fact by repeating it. My theory is that God wanted this famous couple to need Him and rely on Him. If Sarah could not have children, then Abraham and Sarah would have to depend on God to grant them a miracle. Therefore, they would have "to walk in God's ways"—whether or not they wanted to. Sarah tries to escape her dependence on God by telling Abraham to have a baby with Hagar. He complies and Ishmael is born. But God is not content with this. He makes the great miracle happen and Sarah has a baby thirteen years after Ishmael is born. His name is Isaac.

Why do you think this story is so important for promoting interfaith cooperation and understanding?

Most Jews and Christians view this story with uneasiness. Sarah and Hagar quarrel in the Bible. Hagar teases Sarah about her inability to get pregnant. Later, Sarah insists that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. Many readers are appalled that Abraham obeys Sarah and exiles Hagar. I often hear people say how much they dislike Sarah or how they feel sorry for Hagar. But what these readers fail to understand is that Hagar's exile is the beginning of her liberation. I figured this out when I read the Muslim version of the story. In Islam, I discovered that Hagar is actually viewed as a brave heroine rather than a tragic victim. Instead of being exiled from Abraham and Sarah's home, she volunteers to leave the campsite in order to spread the word about the one true god. Abraham leads her to Mecca, where she digs the famous well, the Zam Zam, with her own hands. When marauding tribes try to steal the well from her, she protests and safeguards the land for her son, Ishmael. When he grows up, she finds him a wife (a job that is traditionally a father's responsibility) and Ishmael becomes the founder of the Arabs and the great-great-grandfather of Mohammed. This story, then, is not a story of conflict. It is a story about the formation of two peoples, Jews and Muslims. Hagar had to leave Sarah behind in order to carve out her own destiny. In many ways, this is the original "two-state solution" for the Middle East. The Arabs and the Israelites have different destinies, but this does not mean that they need to be enemies. Just the opposite, in fact.

You also say that Isaac and Ishmael are important symbols of hope and reconciliation.

After Abraham dies, Isaac and Ishmael come together to bury their father. Their ability to cooperate and live in peace gave me my initial dream of hope, since they never have conflict over land or their father's legacy. Again, this made it clear to me that this is truly a foundational story about the formation of two peoples: the Jews and the Muslims, rather than a story of ineradicable conflict. Hatred is actually not at its center.

Cooperation and distinct identities are what matter the most. That is what makes it so tragic that this is the story that virulent opponents cite when staking their claims to Israel. Both Israelis and Palestinians view this story as holy evidence that gives them the right to the Promised Land. In actuality, this story provides a blueprint of how to live in harmony. Both sons receive their father's blessing. Both are entitled to Abraham's legacy. Their descendants will intermarry, trade, and cooperate. But they will still be distinct peoples, separate, and entitled to their own share of Abraham's legacy—the original two-state solution, as I said in the last question.

Some people say that any writing about the Bible is purely conjectural. They want to know what *really* happened.

The insistence on hard, scientific evidence for Scriptural events represents a modern trivialization of the importance of the Bible and, for that matter, all symbolic constructions of meaning. Biblical commentary, including the Talmud, the hadith, and Christian writings, are inherently "conjectural," as they are based on questions, speculations, and ideas about a text and about stories. Today's secular reader can easily forget that there is another kind of truth besides that of material reality. But stories embody their own set of truths. The point is not to prove if these people really existed. What is important is that these biblical characters have camped out in the imagination of believers for thousand of years. Bible stories shape who we are and how we think about ourselves. Even if we aren't religious, we have still inherited many biblical ideas about morality, friendship, sexuality, and warfare. Everyone, believers and nonbelievers, should become aware of this important story, as I think it is a story that can help promote better understanding among Muslims, Jews, and Christians.