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### THE HOMILETICS OF HAGAR

In a remarkable book, entitled *The Tears of Lady Meng*, the Chinese author, C. S. Song tells the story of a Chinese woman whose wedding day was shockingly and completely unexpectedly transformed from celebration to sorrow. On her wedding day, her husband is violently taken away by the political powers of the day to serve as a human sacrifice, buried in a portion of the foundation of the Great Wall of China, in order to ensure its successful completion.

Song movingly describes the bereaved woman's journey to the wall where her husband's bones are buried. There she starts to cry inconsolably. Her tears reverberate throughout the land, and then an incredible thing happens - wonder above all wonders - the Great Wall of China comes tumbling down!<sup>1</sup> To the amazement of everyone, her tears shatter the seemingly immovable setting of structure and stone, of brick and bulwark, yes, of brutal politics and manipulative power-plays. Song summarises this event in a few sentences:

She must have wept her heart out. Her wailing must have moved the firmament of heaven, shaken the foundations of the earth. Her crying must have stirred all 'living souls' . . . to rally behind her. And an incredible thing happened. The Wall, that invincible Wall, the Wall that embodied brutal power and naked authority, collapsed and yielded up her husband's bones.<sup>2</sup>

In effect, the weeping of this Chinese woman tears down the walls of death itself. Her tears tear down the tomb of totalitarian terror. Her cries inaugurate change, create resurrection, bring her husband back to life. He steps out of the tomb, into the light of a new, surprising, life...

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<sup>1</sup>C. S. Song, *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People's Political Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>Song, *The Tears of Lady Meng*, 44.

In the text that we have read this morning, we hear of another woman who cried - Hagar. Talk about vulnerability: she is a *woman* in a patriarchal world, more than that, a *slave*, taken from Egypt, a *foreigner* in all the senses of the word – as her name, Hagar, suggests - a *victim* of the power-play of messy and complex relationships, *manipulated* between the seemingly spineless attitude of Abraham and the destructive jealousy of Sarah, *used* as a womb to carry Abraham's child – without her consent being asked or taken into consideration - *not even named* once in the preceding dialogue between Abraham and Sarah about her fate - only called “this slave woman”. Neglected, chased away twice, ending up with a dying child in the desert, excommunicated, marginalised to a place of death and desolation.

She represents the ultimate collateral damage of other people's agendas; at first glance even the collateral damage of *God's* agenda to establish a covenant with Abraham, the spineless “father of the believers”; an unfortunate footnote or afterthought to the efforts of this God to act in a faithful manner...

In the desert, Hagar does what seems to be the only remaining thing to do – she lifts up her voice, and cries. But listen closer, look deeper. There are more to these tears than meet the eye...

Hagar cries. Alone. Her only company is her dying son, lying a few meters away under a bush. The silence of the desert surrounds her. The sand underneath her hears her sobs. The wind carries away her weeping. Alone, crying.

And yet, she is not alone. She is – as far as I could tell – the first human being recorded in the Bible doing what is ultimately human: crying. She might be the first, but she was, and is, and definitely will not be the last. Her tears reverberate throughout history, gathering momentum, forming part of a tsunami of tears that floods the earth: those of Israel, crying out by mouth of the psalmists: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1) Or: “How long, Lord; how long must we wait?” (Psalm 13:1) Or: “My tears have been my food, day and night...” (Psalm 42:3) She groans with creation, she sobs for salvation; she weeps with those who live in expectation of the revelation of the glory of God (Rom 8) – even if she knows nothing of this at this point in her life, sitting there on the sands of the desert, weeping into the wind...

Without her knowing it, Hagar's tears mingle with those of the mothers of all ages, weeping like Rachel, and not to be comforted (Jeremiah 31:15-17); with the tears of the mothers of the abducted daughters in Nigeria, of the abducted sons in Israel and Palestine, of the bereaved ones after the missile strikes have left their carnage. Hagar's tears are added, drop after drop,

to those of the mothers of the fallen sons in all the senseless wars of centuries; to the tears of the fathers whose daughters have become bomb-victims, offered up in the never-ending religious struggles on so many continents; to the tears of the parents of the hungry children of Sudan, because they do not even have one grain of rice to feed them with; to the tears of the families of the teenagers dying in the cross-fire of the gang-wars on the Cape Flats in South Africa; to the tears of the disempowered and displaced; of the vulnerable and marginalized. Drop after drop, giving volume to the force of the tsunami of tears that floods this earth...

Hagar cries, but she does not cry alone. She cries in the desert, but she cries *coram deo*, before and with God. I said earlier that she is the first human being recorded in the Bible, crying. *But she is not the first One crying.* The first recording of crying in the Bible is not that of Hagar and her tears in the desert, or of the weeping of any other human being, for that matter – it is, wonder above all wonders, of the tears of God, crying out because of the sin of humanity. In a remarkable revelation of the innermost being of God, we hear:

*The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain* (Genesis 6:6).

Even before Hagar cries, God cries. Hagar – the nameless, neglected slave woman from Egypt gives volume, not only to the weeping of the world, but also to the groans of God, to those of the Spirit, without words (cf. Rom. 8:26-27). She is taken by the hand, and she takes the hand of the One who stands in front of the grave of his dead friend, Lazarus, and of whom we hear in the shortest text in the Bible: *Jesus wept* (John 11:35).

*Hagar wept.* God weeps. For a better future. Just imagine this: Hagar and God weeping for resurrection, for life. Refusing to accept the unacceptable, to give in to hopelessness, to give up on the promise of the alternative. Weeping for a better world, where weeping will no longer be a way of life...

Hagar cries, yes, but she does not cry alone, and she does not cry in vain. Her tears do not evaporate into the warm air of the desert. On the contrary: her tears move realities; express more than a thousand tongues. Her sobs say more than a series of serious sermons; her weeping weighs more than a myriad of words. She sees her son, lying dying under the bush; and she sighs, and her sigh becomes a sign of protesting hope, and of hopeful protest.

Why? Because Hagar believes that God does in fact hear, as already suggested in the name of her son, *Ishmael* (cf. Gen 16:15). It is because she believes that Hagar calls upon God to hear, to grant the grace of a new beginning. It is out of faith in the hearing God, that she weeps against all odds; protests against so-called “reality”; against so-called “destiny”. Her tears, in

fact, bring heaven into motion, for we hear: *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. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him."* (17, 18)

Truly, the power of tears must not be underestimated. The Great Wall of China cannot choke or chain it, and the desolation of the desert cannot dampen or deter it. Someone like Jean Paul Sartre even suggested that tears represent the "magical transformation" of this world. Why? Because it changes the relation of those who shed these tears to the world, but also, consciously or unconsciously, it changes the attitude of those to whom the tears are addressed.<sup>3</sup>

This is what happens in our text. Hagar refuses to accept her circumstances, and she calls upon God as the only One who can effect this "magical transformation" of her situation. And God hears, and does precisely that. In a few, short sentences, the Biblical text give an account of this magical transformation: Hagar's eyes are opened, the boy is taken out from under the bush, Lazarus rises from the grave. Water springs forth from a well.

To be sure, this "magical transformation", brought about by tears, does not equate a quick-fix. God is not a Magician, pulling a rabbit from a hat. We read that Hagar still dwells in the desert – place of death and desolation - with her son, but we now also hear that Ishmael becomes skilful in the use of the bow and arrow, an unmistakable symbol for food and future survival (20). This "Egyptian slave woman" is no longer neglected, but nurtured; no longer nameless, but named - what Abraham and Sarah did not do, God does: calling Hagar by name (17, 18). More than that: Hagar is the first one in the Bible, not only to cry, but also in daring to name God, as *the One who sees* (Gen 16:13). She becomes the mother of a nation, does what no other mother is ever recorded as doing in the Old Testament – choosing a wife for her son, even so from Egypt – where Israel would soon end up as slaves themselves (Exodus)!

Off course, many tears are still flowing on this earth; on all the continents represented here. The tsunami has not abated. On the contrary. Many walls are still dividing us, moving us to tears – in China, in India, in South Africa, in Europe, in the Americas, between East and

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<sup>3</sup>Tom Lutz, *Crying: The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999), 225, 226, 240.

West, between North and South, between rich and poor, between the powerful and the powerless, between ideology and ideology, between religion and religion. But somehow, Hagar gives us hope: she teaches us that our tears have the power to move the firmament of heaven, to shake the foundations of the earth, to stir all living souls, to create future, to bring the walls come tumbling down.

Yes, God is the first one to cry in the Bible. But She is also the last one to wipe away all the tears from our eyes (Revelation 21:4).