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Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah: Use, Misuse, and Abuse of Enslaved Reproductive Bodies in Seventeenth-Century Mediterranean Painting. From Visual Exegesis to Iconographical Absence[1]

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Abstract: This paper investigates the visual representations—or the marked absence—of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah, three enslaved women in the Book of Genesis, within seventeenth-century Mediterranean painting. Drawing on feminist biblical criticism, art historical analysis, and visual exegesis, it explores how artists in Catholic regions such as Italy and Spain engaged with the iconography of these biblical figures. The study considers how artworks either reproduce or challenge the patriarchal ideologies embedded in Scripture and reflected in early modern theology and culture. Through the analysis of selected paintings, it reveals how silence, abjection, and guilt were visually encoded into the stories of these women, shaping their reception across time. It also contrasts Catholic visual traditions with Dutch Protestant interpretations, illuminating the theological and cultural dynamics at play. The research shows how artistic strategies—such as composition, gesture, and emotion—contributed to the marginalization or subversion of these figures. Ultimately, the paper argues that early modern art participated in the ideological work of biblical interpretation, acting as both a mirror and a critique of patriarchal structures. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates at the intersection of gender, religion, and visual culture, and expands the discourse on how enslaved and silenced biblical women are negotiated through their painted image.
Keywords: Biblical Iconography; Feminist Biblical Criticism; Visual Exegesis; 17th-century Spanish and Italian Painting; Body; Forced Maternities.

ES Hagar, Bilhah y Zilpah: uso, mal uso y abuso de los cuerpos reproductivos esclavizados en la pintura mediterránea del siglo XVII. De la exégesis visual a la ausencia iconográfica

Resumen: Este artículo examina las representaciones visuales —o su notable ausencia— de Agar, Bilhá y Zilpá, tres mujeres esclavizadas del Libro del Génesis, en la pintura mediterránea del siglo XVII. A partir de la crítica bíblica feminista, el análisis historiográfico del arte y la exégesis visual, el estudio analiza cómo los artistas en contextos católicos como Italia y España abordaron la iconografía de estas figuras bíblicas. Se investiga cómo las obras de arte reproducen o cuestionan las ideologías patriarcales presentes en las Escrituras y en la teología y cultura de la época moderna temprana. El análisis de una selección de pinturas revela cómo el silencio, la abyección y la culpa fueron visualmente codificados en las historias de estas mujeres, influyendo en su recepción a lo largo del tiempo. Asimismo, se contrasta la tradición visual católica mediterránea con interpretaciones protestantes neerlandesas, poniendo de relieve los marcos teológicos y culturales que influyen en la exégesis visual. El estudio muestra cómo las estrategias artísticas —como la composición, el gesto o la expresión emocional— contribuyen a la marginación o subversión de estas figuras. Finalmente, se argumenta que el arte del periodo participó activamente en la interpretación ideológica de las Escrituras, funcionando tanto como reflejo como crítica de las estructuras patriarcales. Al hacerlo, contribuye a debates más amplios en la intersección entre género, religión y cultura visual, y amplía el discurso sobre cómo las mujeres bíblicas esclavizadas y silenciadas son construidas a través de su imagen pintada.
Palabras clave: Iconografía bíblica; Crítica bíblica feminista; Exégesis visual; Pintura española e italiana del siglo XVII; Cuerpo; Maternidades forzadas.

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1. Introduction

This study examines the visual representations—or the conspicuous absence—of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah, three enslaved women forced into motherhood in the Book of Genesis, in seventeenth-century Mediterranean painting. Drawing on feminist biblical criticism and visual exegesis, it explores how pictorial interpretations of these figures reflect or depart from the biblical narratives, particularly within Catholic contexts such as Italy and Spain. In doing so, the research highlights the ways in which artistic depictions reinforce or challenge the patriarchal structures embedded in Scripture, shaping public perceptions of these marginalized women. Through the analysis of iconographic trends and omissions, the study reveals how silence, abjection, and guilt were visually inscribed into their stories, in alignment with the theological and social ideologies of the time. Ultimately, this thesis contributes to broader discussions at the intersection of gender, religion, and art by demonstrating how visual culture both perpetuates and subverts textual marginalization.

To this end, the research adopts an interdisciplinary methodology that integrates feminist biblical hermeneutics, art historical analysis, and visual exegesis. The study is structured as follows:

First, the study offers a close reading of the biblical passages concerning Hagar, analyzing key themes of gender, power, and subjugation, as well as later exegetical interpretations, particularly those shaped by Pauline theology. Second, it examines a selection of seventeenth-century paintings from Italy and Spain, identifying recurring visual motifs and iconographic patterns, with special emphasis on compositional choices, figure placement, and emotional expression, to assess how these artworks frame the narratives of enslaved women. Third, it contrasts Catholic Mediterranean depictions with Dutch Protestant interpretations, highlighting the theological and cultural frameworks that informed their respective visual exegeses. Finally, the study applies the same approach to Bilhah and Zilpah. Given their almost complete absence in seventeenth-century visual culture, the focus is on a close reading of the biblical texts concerning them, emphasizing how their silencing in art reflects their marginalization in both text and tradition. Feminist theory is applied throughout to explore how artistic strategies reinforce or contest androcentric narratives.

By synthesizing these approaches, the study uncovers the ideological work performed by visual interpretations of Scripture, demonstrating how early modern art functions as both a mirror of and a response to patriarchal religious structures.

2. Painting the Bible's Gaps: The Representation of Old Testament Female Characters from a Feminist Perspective

The Bible has played a crucial role in inspiring art throughout the centuries. The stories told in the Holy Scriptures have been an inexhaustible source of subject matter for painters and visual artists, and painting, in turn, has greatly influenced the way certain biblical themes have been read and understood[2].

As Steiner has pointed out, "painting has what might be termed a 'hyper-semantic' quality"[3]. As any interpreter of the visual arts knows, painting is capable of evoking meanings that, in their richness and complexity, can rival those of literature. However, one should be aware that these qualities or capacities of painting function within intertextuality—that is, in the relationships a painting establishes with other works of art or literature. Only by reading paintings in the light of other paintings, literary works, or pieces of music, among others, can the semiotic power of visual art be fully apprehended[4].

In this sense, focusing our gaze on the relationship between the Bible and painting, much of what people know—or think they know—about the biblical text comes from their interpretation of familiar visual representations rather than from a direct reading of the ancient text. In other words, while the Bible has inspired painting for centuries, viewers' own reading of the biblical text is often informed by their recollection of biblical-themed paintings with their own richness and complexity of meaning[5].As Paolo Berdini points out biblical paintings are more than mere illustrations of biblical stories. Rather, they are active interpretations of the biblical text, and their analysis offers complex theological and philosophical ideas, much like written exegesis.[6] In this sense, Berdini has explored the concept of visual exegesis, arguing that paintings with biblical iconography provide unique theological perspectives that shape how

2 Phyllis Silverman Kramer,"The Dismissal of Hagar in Five Art Works of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", en *The Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series)*, ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 195.

3 Wendy Steiner, "Intertextuality in Painting", *The American Journal of Semiotics* 3, no. 4 (1985), 57.

4 Wendy Steiner, "Intertextuality in Painting", 57–59.

5 Cheryl J. Exum, "The Accusing Look: The Abjection of Hagar in Art", *Religion and the Arts*, 2 (2007): 143–144, https://doi.org/10.1163/156852907x199134.

6 Paolo Berdini, *The religious art of Jacopo Bassano: painting as visual exegesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

viewers understand religious concepts[7]. This challenges the notion that religious paintings merely reflect the Scriptures, showing instead the extent to which they are influenced by the time, place, and intellectual currents of the artist. Thus, while painting can be understood as a form of non-verbal exegesis, the visual characterization of a biblical scene in pictorial material is likely more subject to the artist's historical and cultural context than verbal translations and commentaries of the Bible typically are[8]. In this way, as Guadalupe Seijas has pointed out, when approaching the study of iconographic representations of biblical characters, one must move from the text to the image—focusing on the text that inspires the artist's representation—before returning from the image to the text to assess the extent to which the artist remains faithful to, or diverges from, the biblical narrative[9].

As Exum has recently proposed, it is important to consider these premises to establish a proper dialogue between the Bible and art, in which the biblical text and biblical art play equally important and critical roles in the process of interpreting each other[10]. Biblical painting can bring a critical dimension to the biblical text, pointing out aspects of the text that may be problematic, and perceiving aspects of the text that the reader is led to overlook by the biblical narrators.[11] In other words, a critical analysis of biblical paintings can enable its viewers to understand the biblical text from a more critical and therefore enriching approach, shedding light on how paintings can confront unresolved gaps within the biblical narrative[12].

The gaps in the biblical text are more evident in relation to its female characters[13]. When it comes to the Bible, women are usually minor or secondary characters in men's stories. In fact, the majority of biblical narratives employ strategies to exclude, marginalize, silence, or otherwise subjugate women. The narrators of the Bible were primarily men who presented a male-centered view of womanhood[14]. It is therefore necessary to reclaim the voices that have been denied to them for, while women play a crucial role in the biblical text, their stories and voices are fragmented and distorted by the male voice that informs about them.

However, this marginalization is not surprising. Before the advent of feminism, Western systems of thought—including philosophies and religious traditions—largely ignored, marginalized, or attacked femininity. They muted the female perspective or outright excluded women from symbolic production[15]. Thus, women have been historically sidelined in the process of meaning-making, and biblical literature and its visual reinterpretation have been no exception. Thus, as Exum argues, it is necessary to approach the Bible as a cultural artifact from a feminist perspective, because the ideology expressed in the biblical text "has been and continues to be so influential in shaping gender roles and expectations in contemporary society"[16].

In this sense, when analyzing the representations of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah through a dialogue between painting and the Bible, it is important to acknowledge that all women present in biblical literature have been constructs of androcentric narrators serving androcentric interests. Likewise, visual exegesis from deeply Catholic 17th-century countries was often conducted in service of an androcentric agenda. Thus, much of the pictorial representation of these Old Testament female figures, their episodes or stories, highlights the fragmented nature of their biblical stories[17].

Paying attention to these factors when analyzing the visual interpretation of biblical women can reveal structures that, either consciously or unconsciously, have either erased or fixed their status, role, and perception within the symbolic universe of the viewers who contemplate them, with both direct and indirect social implications. Thus, a critical feminist approach to the study of these characters' iconographic types reveals that the absence of certain figures from biblical paintings is just as informative as is their presence. Moreover, the oversight of certain common narrative aspects within their visual interpretations can prove as significant as the appreciation of what is actually depicted, offering crucial insights into how the biblical text has been shaped for particular socio-ideological purposes in specific historical and cultural contexts.

These considerations will be the starting point leading us towards the analysis of female biblical iconographic types in order to establish a feminist dialog between the female characters in the text and their image. This way, we will be able to explore the noted "hyper-semantic" quality of the image in terms of its intertextuality, bringing to light the history of the transmission and reception of the stories of Old Testament women and their pictorial translation.

Regarding the female characters in the Genesis narrative—the so-called matriarchs—the representations of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah, studied as a group due to their shared status in the text as female slaves forced into motherhood, provide us with a powerful example for understanding the importance of establishing a fluid dialogue between biblical art and biblical literature, as well as why this analysis must consider both what is present and what is absent both in the artistic production and within artworks.

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7 Paolo Berdini, "Jacopo Bassano: A Case for Painting as Visual Exegesis", en Interpreting Christian Art, ed. Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2003), 169–187.

8 Phyllis Silverman Kramer,"The Dismissal of Hagar", 195–196.

9 Guadalupe Seijas, *Women of the Bible. From Text to Image* (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 1–5.

10 Cheryl J. Exum, *Art as a Biblical Commentary. Visual Criticism from Hagar the Wife of Abraham to Mary Mother of Jesus* (London; New York: T&T Clark/Bloomsbury), 3–9.

11 Guadalupe Seijas, *Las imágenes hablan. Biblia, arte y mujer* (Pamplona: Eunsa, 2025), 40–45.

12 Cheryl J. Exum, *Art as a Biblical Commentary*, 12.

13 Carmen Yebra-Rovira, "Bible, Art and Women: Criteria for Analysis and Critical Interpretation", en *Women of the Bible. From Text to Image*, ed. Guadalupe Seijas (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 5–23.

14 Cheryl J. Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)-versions of biblical narratives* (Valley Forge (PA): Trinity Press International, 1993), 9–12; Guadalupe Seijas, Las *imágenes hablan. Biblia, arte y mujer*, 40–45.

15 Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 231–233.

16 Cheryl J. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 11.

17 Cheryl J. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 96–97.

3. Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah: From the Biblical Text to Biblical Painting

Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah stand as powerful examples in the Book of Genesis of the objectification, mistreatment, and exploitation to which women's bodies are typically submitted as representatives of the female gender within the biblical text. Their stories unfold alongside the lives of the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, where they are depicted either as maids or as slaves to their primary wives—Sarah, Rachel, and Leah—and as coerced mothers of their children. Thus, before proceeding to the study of the female characters who center this work and their visual representation, it should be emphasized that the ignominy to which female bodies and characters are submitted in Genesis is a general trend.

All the matriarchs in Genesis are often absent from key events, and their voices, emotions, and perspectives are largely ignored. Their stories in turn reflect male-centered ideals, portraying them as subordinate to their husbands despite them having occasional influence over lower-status women. A central theme is the paradox of the "sterile matriarch"—wives valued for motherhood yet depicted as barren, thus reinforcing patriarchal control. Infertility is seen as a woman's issue, never a men's one, and serves to diminish their power. This leads to a competition being established among women, as barren wives offer their enslaved maids as surrogates, creating unequal co-wife relationships that sustain the patriarchal order[18]. Therefore, the matriarchs and her servants in Genesis are depicted as mirror images of each other, each seeking the qualities the other lacks. Their relationships as co-wives are shaped by both patriarchy and class hierarchy, which prevent them from forming alliances[19]. The biblical text justifies the exploitation of lower-status women, as primary wives use their enslaved maids' bodies for their own maternal benefit. This practice is not simply imposed on them but rather a strategy to elevate their social status and fulfill the patriarchal ideal of motherhood[20].

Opposing the "sterile mother" to the "fertile Other", Genesis narrative brings up the idea that women are necessary albeit dangerous for the overall patriarchal system. As Weems notes, the relation between matriarchs and their surrogates in Genesis "is a story of ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and sexual exploitation" that inevitably conveys upon the reader the image of women betraying women, and mothers competing and conspiring against mothers[21]. Thus, women's nature and experience within the biblical text is completely displaced and distorted, itself a direct result of a male-centered discourse that uncritically assumes the patriarchal system[22].

Furthermore, as Scholz has pointed out, from a contemporary feminist perspective, the stories of Hagar, Bilhah and Zilpah must be identified as episodes of sexual coercion, although they are rarely labeled as rape in biblical scholarship[23]: Hagar is mistreated by Sarah and forced into relations with Abraham, while Rachel and Leah compel their maids, Bilhah and Zilpah, to bear children for Jacob[24]. Therefore, these narratives also reflect the intersection of gender and class oppression, as privileged wives and patriarchs exploit disempowered women to uphold the androcentric social order.[25]

Thus, the maidservants of Genesis, briefly mentioned in the narrative and devoid of voice or agency, are objectified, undermined, and subjugated by male and female characters alike. The use and abuse of their bodies, along with the absence of their personal perspectives, reflect the Bible's patriarchal biases and, as we will argue, of their exegesis too—both verbal and visual.

3.1. Hagar

First, we analyze the description, status, role and implications of Hagar's figure within the biblical text. Her story is told in two Genesis's chapters: Genesis 16 and Genesis 21. "Hagar the Egyptian" is how the biblical narrator introduces her in both chapters, emphasizing her foreignness. In Genesis 16, she is presented as a desirable surrogate mother because, as noted above, Sarah is sterile. It is precisely at the suggestion of her barren mistress that she becomes Abraham's concubine and the mother of his firstborn, Ishmael. Thus, as a foreigner and an enforced mother, Hagar's story of ignominy, abjection, and solitude begins to unfold in the biblical narrative, which ends in Genesis 21 when she and Ishmael are dismissed by Abraham at Sarah's command after the birth of Isaac and left to fend for themselves until the intervention of Yahweh's angel[26].

An especially interesting and relevant aspect of Hagar's story is that the biblical text— in both chapters 16 and 21—invites the reader to view the events first through Sarah's eyes and perspective and then through Abraham's, yet it never considers the handmaid's own perspective within the narrative. By calling her "the Egyptian" or "the slave," mentioning her only briefly by her own name, the biblical narrator deliberately disengages the reader from this character, attempting to uproot Hagar from their emotional and symbolic universe. In other words, the Genesis narrator is preparing them for the story's tragic conclusion. As Exum points out, in Gen 16: 1–6, "the biblical narrator depersonalizes Hagar by objectifying

18 Cheryl J. Exum, *Fragmented Women,* 120–121.
19 Cheryl J. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 122.
20 Athalya Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite woman: social role and literary type in biblical narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985), 92.
21 Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: a Womanist Vision of Women's Relationship in the Bible* (San Diego (CA): LucraMedia, 1988), 2.
22 Cheryl J. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 141.
23 We acknowledge that applying the term 'rape' to certain sexual practices in the book of Genesis may be anachronistic. However, as Exum explains, while the experiences of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah would not have been considered rape within the social framework of ancient Israel, this should not prevent contemporary scholars from examining the issue through a feminist critical. In Cheryl J. Exum, *Art as a Biblical Commentary*, 73–74.
24 Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 55.
25 Two fundamental works regarding rape within the Old Testament are the book by Susanne Scholz, *Sacred witness: rape in the Hebrew Bible* (2010), and the chapter by J. Cheryl Exum, "The Rape of Hagar" (2019, 72–88).
26 Christine Petra Sellin, *Fracture Families and Rebel Maidservants. The Biblical Hagar in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Literature* (New York; London: Continuum, 2006), 1.

her"[27]. In addition to being referred to as a foreigner and a slave, she does neither speak to Abraham or Sarah, nor they do speak to her. Instead, the barren matriarch *takes* her and *gives* ger to her husband; then, the elderly patriarch *goes in to* her and she becomes pregnant –an event over which she has no control. Therefore, Hagar is presented and unfolded as a character who is only spoken about and acted upon[28].

Hagar's point of view, her feelings, and her emotions regarding her forced sexual intercourse with Abraham are completely withheld from the reader by the Genesis narrator. Her consent is irrelevant. Moreover, the text gives minimal attention to the sexual encounter itself. In fact, Hagar only responds to Sarah after she becomes pregnant. Thus, the reader is informed that, only after having become pregnant, does Hagar begin to despise her mistress—a reaction linked to the elevated social status inherent in motherhood. This act of defiance against an upper-class woman leads to, and seemingly justifies, Hagar's mistreatment by Sarah—though the text remains vague about the nature of this abuse—ultimately forcing the servant to flee the patriarch's household[29].

It should be noted, in this regard, that this is not solely due to the difference in status between "wife" and "slave." The distinctions between the two also encompass age, origin, and narrative function, factors that shape their respective roles within the biblical text. Sarah, an elderly Hebrew matriarch, embodies authority, the covenantal promise, and divine favor, with her advanced age underscoring the miraculous nature of her fertility (Gen. 17:17). In contrast, Hagar, a young Egyptian slave, occupies a position of marginality and vulnerability; her youth and foreign origin emphasize her subordinate status, although her pregnancy temporarily disrupts household hierarchies and brings her into direct encounter with God (Gen. 16:7–14). These differences illuminate these dynamics of power and subjugation, demonstrating how women's bodies function as sites of social negotiation and divine intervention. While Sarah represents the idealized mother of the covenant, Hagar exemplifies resilience and liminality, highlighting alternative modes of spiritual and narrative significance. Understanding these distinctions is crucial not only for biblical interpretation but also for tracing their reception in later artistic and literary traditions, which often emphasize the tension between authority, marginality, and survival[30].

Therefore, Hagar is enslaved, abused, and mistreated, yet she is seen by God. In Genesis 16:7–16, she experiences a theophany—an encounter with God—in which she becomes a narrative subject in her own right. This encounter serves as a reminder of her duty to bear Abraham's son, and God having promised her numerous descendants, she returns—following the divine messenger's instruction—to the patriarch's household. There, she continues to endure mistreatment and subjugation by Sarah yet nonetheless submits herself on the grounds of what is presented as a greater purpose: to be the mother of Ishmael[31].

However, the birth of Isaac—the divinely promised son of Sarah and Abraham—triggers a new crisis for Hagar, one that ultimately leads to her and Ishmael's expulsion (Gen 21:8–14). According to the biblical narrator, this event is instigated by Sarah's demand: "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave shall not be heir with my son Isaac" (Gen 21:10). While Sarah's words portray her as cruel and jealous toward Hagar, the text appears to justify her request by implying that Ishmael had somehow mistreated Isaac, who is the chosen one. Following divine instruction, Abraham reluctantly complies, sending Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness with only some bread and a skin of water (Gen 21:11–14).

The biblical narrator recounts the exile with striking brevity. Although Ishmael's actions are cited as the reason for their banishment, he is mentioned only in passing, allowing the text to avoid direct focus on his character. As Exum notes, the narrative skillfully shifts the emphasis onto Hagar, framing her as the object of Abraham's action while omitting any explicit statement that he is, in fact, casting out his own son[32].

Immediately afterwards, Hagar experiences her second encounter with the divine, marking the final moment in which she takes center stage in the narrative. When they run out of water and food, she places her son under a bush and lies down, resigned to death. Hearing Ishmael's cries, the angel of God opens Hagar's eyes and reveals a well of water to her, saving both mother and son from a tragic fate (Gen 21:15–21). In contrast to Genesis 16, in this second theophany, the divine messenger does not appear directly to Hagar but speaks to her from heaven[33].

Thus, the accounts in Genesis 16 and 21—which together comprise Hagar's entire story—offer the perspectives of Sarah, Abraham, and God, yet remain entirely silent on the emotions, thoughts, and inner experiences of those most affected by these events: Hagar and Ishmael.

However, we argue, Hagar's story has taken on a profoundly different interpretation in certain visual exegeses, where artistic representations have imbued it with a much stronger emotional impact. In this regard, the story of Hagar has been visually represented through a wide range of iconographic types. At certain times and in specific places, particular biblical episodes have been more visually prolific than others, leading to the codification of these representations—that is, the establishment of stable and recurring visual patterns.

Sellin, in her work *Fractured Families and Rebel Maidservants* (2006), has examined 17th century visual exegesis within Dutch paintings and engravings depicting the story of Hagar. Besides intertextuality in biblical painting, Sellin has also explored the socio-cultural factors that had contributed to the

27 Cheryl J. Exum, *Art as a Biblical Commentary*, 73.
28 Cheryl J. Exum, *Art as a Biblical Commentary*, 73–75.
29 Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 58–59.
30 Guadalupe Seijas, "Introducción al estudio de la Biblia" en G: Seijas (dir.), *Historia de la literatura hebrea y judía* (Madrid: Trotta, 2014), 39-43.
31 Cheryl J. Exum, *Art as a Biblical Commentary*, 91.
32 Cheryl J. Exum, "Toward a Genuine Dialogue between the Bible and Art", en *Congress Volume Helsinki 2010*, *Vetus Testamentum Supplements*, vol.148, ed. Martti Nissinen (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 477.
33 Cheryl J. Exum, *Art as a Biblical Commentary*, 89.

prevalence of certain visual interpretations over others, and which ultimately helped establish Hagar's figure as a significant symbol in both painting and Dutch collective imagination. However, an in-depth analysis of these issues remains lacking in the pictorial production of other regions during the same period. This is particularly true for the two Mediterranean European countries at the center of this study: Italy and Spain. The approach taken by painters and visual interpreters from these deeply Catholic countries in depicting this female figure has been markedly different from that typically adopted in their Northern European counterparts— a distinction that is not merely a matter of artistic preference or just a coincidence.

As Sellin points out, the figure of Hagar might have been passed over the church fathers and ulterior biblical exegetes altogether if it had not been for Saint Paul. His reading of Hagar's story in Galatians 4, where the apostle depicts her as an enemy of the Christian church, assured her ignominy. However, while this character was rejected from modern commentators, as noted above, Hagar's story fired up the imagination of Dutch artists, both literary and visual, due to the enormous storytelling possibilities offered by such a tragic and morbid family story[34]. About one hundred and forty paintings of Hagar's narrative survive to date within Northen Netherlandish pictorial production, most of them revolving around four among the most compelling incidents from the biblical text: Sarah leading Hagar to Abraham's bed (Gen 16: 2–4); the Angel commanding Hagar to return with her abusive mistress (Gen 16: 7–12); the dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen 21:14) and the miraculous rescue of mother and son in the wilderness (Gen 21:17). In particular, the popularity of the iconographic type of the expulsion simply has no match else in Europe at this time, not even in Flemish painting, with seventy-five paintings on this matter[35]. Besides their large number, one of the most striking characteristics of the Dutch paintings that Sellin collects and describes in her work is the emotional intensity they convey. The Dutch artists ignore the traditional stereotype marking both the biblical text and its Pauline interpretation: Hagar and Ishmael are not villains[36]. Instead, in the Dutch visual exegesis of the 17th century, mother and son are represented as remarkably sympathetic characters for the public, by giving the viewer access to Hagar and Ishmael's point of view, which, as we have seen, is denied within the biblical narration itself[37].

However, Hagar's pictorial representations in Italy and Spain during the same period starkly differ. In general, in the artistic production of both regions, the scenes related to the biblical narrative of Genesis 21 and its interpretation in Pauline exegesis (Galatians 4:29) will predominate[38]. The iconographic types derived from the narrative of Genesis 16 will be largely omitted in the visual exegesis of countries influenced by Catholic ideology.

Only few examples can be found regarding this chapter within the Italian production. While, despite being the least prolific episode of all those represented, we can see several examples of the moment when Sarah offers Hagar's reproductive body to Abraham in Dutch pictorial production, that scene is virtually absent from Italian Baroque pictorial production. Only a few isolated examples relating to the Genesis 16 narrative from the moment Hagar flees after being abused by her mistress can be found. Specifically, we can find two iconographic types: Hagar and the Angel and The Return of Hagar.

The Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon houses an example by the painter Francesco Monteleci, known as Cecco Bravo, dated 1650 and titled *Hagar and the Angel* (Fig.1). In this painting, which depicts Hagar's first theophany, Cecco Bravo, by means of a technique practiced by the Mannerists of the 16th century, arranges his characters in such a way they appear frozen in space. As a result, we see the figures of the enslaved woman and the angel in very close-up, with the angel appearing to indicate her she must return to Abraham's household, creating an expressive face-to-face encounter between the two characters. We perceive the shock of Hagar as she listens to the angel, who, with a gesture and a sinuous movement of his body, orders her to return[39].

Fig. 1. Francesco Monteleci, known as Cecco Bravo, *Hagar and the Angel*, 1650. Dijon (France), Musée des Beaux-Arts. Fuente: Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon/François Jay

Meanwhile, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna owns a painting representing the moment immediately after the one painted by Cecco Bravo by Pietro da Cortona (1596-1669), born Pietro Berrettini in Cortona (Italy): *The Return of Hagar* (1637). In this

34 Sellin, *Fracture Families and Rebel Maidservants*, 2.

35 Sellin also counts 15 paintings regarding Hagar's command by the angel to return to Abraham's household, 40 on the matter of the rescue in the wilderness, and, thus, leaving around 10 on the type of Sarah leading Hagar to her sexual encounter with the patriarch. In Sellin, *Fracture Families and Rebel Maidservants*, 3.

36 Cheryl J. Exum, "The Accusing Look: The Abjection of Hagar in Art", *Religion and the Arts*, no. 2 (2007):143–171, https://doi.org/10.1163/156852907x199134.

37 Sellin, *Fracture Families and Rebel Maidservants*, 2–9 and 69–150.

38 Rafael García Mahíques, "Abraham Bids Farewell to Hagar and Ishmael: Continuity and Variation of the Iconographic Type, *Religions*, 12 (2021): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121107.

39 Rafael García Mahíques, *Los tipos iconográficos de la tradición cristiana, VII. Antigua Alianza, I. Los patriarcas* (Madrid: Ediciones Encuentro, 2022), 427.

painting, the Italian artist depicts Hagar returning to Abraham's household after having spoken to God, symbolized by the angel who is still indicating to the woman to fulfill her duty as Ishamel's mother. Sarah, the abusive mistress, is waiting for her, observing her from the house. Cortona depicts the patriarch with open arms, welcoming the return of the pregnant slave, but still somehow attracting her toward Sarah. On the floor, next to Hagar, the artist depicts a staff and a garment bundle on the ground, symbolizing the Egyptian slave's journey to and from her master's house.

Regarding Spanish 17th century painting, no example of any of these iconographic types could be found. The first chapter of the story of use, misuse and abuse of Hagar remains completely silenced in Spanish visual exegesis.

As noted above, the majority of Italian and Spanish depictions are going to refer to Genesis 21. First of all, the most popular iconographic type will not be the one depicting the moment when Abraham, at Sarah's request, expels Hagar and Ishmael from his home with bread and a waterskin. Although there are indeed examples of the dismissal, it will not be the central type around which the story and character of Hagar had been fixed in the collective imagination. Rather, by a significant margin, the most popular iconographic type— which follows a fixed pattern throughout the century— will be the one representing God's rescue of the mother and child in the desert or wilderness.

In the Christian tradition, Isaac is a foreshadow of Christ, and his growth is a symbol of the growth of hope and faith in the Messiah. Thus, Sarah's request to Abraham was a troublesome problem. As the mother of Isaac, Sarah's cruelty throughout history was difficult to justify, since herself was a foreshadow of the Virgin, gifted by God with motherhood. Therefore, following Saint Paul, the dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael was read allegorically: Sarah, the virtue, was offended by attempts of Ishmael, the flesh, to contaminate Isaac, the Spirit[40]. In this sense, while the northern countries, influenced by Reformist ideology, softened their exegesis of this story during the 17th century—allowing their visual interpretation to focus more on the familial and emotional aspects of the episode—Catholic exegesis, however, continued to uphold the Pauline interpretation, which is essential to understanding the development of the dominant iconographic types. Accordingly, in the countries dominated by the Catholic church during the 17th century, as a result of Galatians 4: 29 and probably as an opposition against Reformation values, the iconographic types regarding the Genesis 21 chapter must be appraised as a whole, resulting from the very specific moment where Ishmael contaminates or mistreats Isaac[41].

A striking example that illustrates this concept almost to perfection, while being connected to both Italian and Spanish pictorial traditions, is the canvas *Fight between Isaac and Ishmael* (1696) by the Neapolitan painter Luca Giordano. Executed during Giordano's Spanish period, this painting (Fig. 2) presents the entire episode in a single composition, condensing three key moments into one. In the foreground, we see Ishma el and Isaac, the latter in tears after receiving a blow from Hagar's son. Sarah, watching attentively, observes the fight between the two brothers from an intermediate position. In the distant background, Abraham is depicted dismissing Hagar and Ishmael—who wears the same outfit as in the foreground—after Sarah, justifiably, requests their departure to protect her son's well-being. Giordano effectively places all the blame for the expulsion on Ishmael. The viewer can easily understand Sarah's reaction, as a loving mother compelled to intervene against the potential physical harm and moral corruption of her long-awaited son.

Fig. 2. Luca Giordano, *Fight between Isaac and Ishmael*, 1696. Madrid (Spain), Museo Nacional del Prado. Fuente: Museo Nacional del Prado.

Other notable Italian pictorial exemplar of the dismissal is the famous painting *Abraham Casting out Hagar and Ishmael* (1657) by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, so-called Guercino (1591–1666), kept at

[40] Rafael García Mahíques, *Los tipos iconográficos de la tradición cristiana, VII. Antigua Alianza, I. Los patriarcas* (Madrid: Ediciones Encuentro, 2022), 634–635.

[41] John L. Thompson, *Writing the wrongs: Women of the Old Testament among biblical commentators from Philo to Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 200), 238.

the Pinacoteca di Brera (Fig. 3). In terms of style and iconography, the representations by Guercino and Giordano are entirely different; however, in their visual exegesis of this biblical scene, they stand in the same direction. This painting was commissioned from Guercino by the Cento Community in 1657, his hometown, as a gift for Lorenzo Imperiali, the cardinal legate of Ferrara. He depicts four of the main characters of the story, leaving Isaac aside, on a stage. The representation conjures up the world of melodrama, which is also inspired by their gestures, creating a scene of great *pathos*. In keeping with Northern European representations of this theme from the same period, Guercino elicits a deep sense of compassion for Hagar and Ishmael. There is no justification for Sarah's behavior; she is depicted in profile on one side of the canvas, glancing sideways at the expulsion and looking pleased. Meanwhile, Hagar, her eyes red from weeping, comforts a young Ishmael, who, still inconsolable in his tears, rests his hands on his eyes. Thus, in this example, Hagar and Ishmael are given the voice denied to them by the biblical narrator; Guercino, as a visual interpreter of the scene, focuses on telling something that is silent in the text.

Other examples of paintings in this vein include Mattia Preti's work (*Palazzo Pretorio di Prato*, 1640), Giovanni Bonatti's piece (*Musei Capolini*, 1660–1666), and a painting by the Cesena-born artist Cristoforo Savolini (*Pushkin*, c. 1670), which, despite not reaching the degree of emotional transmission achieved by the painter of Cento, nonetheless allow the viewer to empathize with the suffering of Hagar and Ishmael.

Fig. 3. Giovanni Francesco Barbieri, known as Guercino, *Abraham Casting out Hagar and Ishmael*, 1657. Milan (Italy), Pinacoteca di Brera. Fuente: Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan – MiC.

This is much more complex in the very few existing Spanish representations. We have identified two examples of this scene of rejection in 17th-century Spanish painting: the various versions of the subject by Pedro Orrente – or his workshop (Fig. 4)– of *The Dismissal of Hagar* (Lisboa, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, 1625–1630) and a drawing by Antonio Lanchares, *Abraham Bids Farewell to Hagar and Ishmael* (1600), preserved in the National Library of Spain (Fig. 5). In Lanchares drawing, Abraham is dismissing Hagar and Ishmael next to the truly affected characters of Sarah and Isaac. Meanwhile, in Orrente's work, which is part of a series of canvases depicting the lives of the patriarchs, we find the same compositional device previously used in Giordano's painting. Multiple events that had occurred sequentially in time are presented together within a single plane. Thus, in the foreground, placing the scene outside Abraham's household, Orrente depicts Abraham dismissing both mother and son, while Sarah is taking care of Isaac, who is crying in turn because of Ishmael's misconduct; while, in the background, the Spanish painter shows the moment that occurred immediately after, when Hagar and Ishmael are rescued by God's Angel.[42] Both works, by depicting a desolate Isaac comforted by his mother, seem to justify Sarah's request and Abraham's decision, discouraging the viewer from feeling too much sympathy for Hagar and Ishmael.

Fig. 4. Pedro Orrente, *The Dismissal of Hagar*, ca. 1625–30. Lisboa (Portugal), Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga. Fuente: Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, Lisboa.

Fig. 5. Antonio Lanchares, *Abraham Bids Farewell to Hagar and Ishmael*, 1600. Madrid (Spain), Biblioteca Nacional. Fuente: Bliblioteca Nacional de España.

Despite these examples, as noted above, the iconographic theme relative to Hagar's story that had

[42] Recent studies identified the background scene as Hagar's first theophany (Genesis 16). However, given the painting's inscription referencing Genesis 21 and the likely presence of Ishmael beneath the bushes, we interpret Orrente's depiction as the handmaid's second theophany. In Jorge Oliaga Vázquez, "Repudio de Agar", en *Identidades compartidas. Pintura española en Portugal*, cat. exp. Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga, November 2023–March 2024, coord. Benito Navarrete Prieto y Joaquim Oliveira Caetano (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional, 2024), 166–167.

the greatest impact and success in Catholic countries was, undoubtedly, the depiction of her second theophany: *Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert* or *Hagar and Ishmael in the Wilderness*.

In 17th-century Italian painting, this theme became ingrained in the collective imagination, some variations notwithstanding, through the iconic codification of a recurring pattern: Hagar, seated or lying in a wild landscape, is saved by an angel who points to a well, while Ishmael—depicted as a baby or young child—lies nearly lifeless, either on the ground besides them, or in the background. Depending on the styles of various pictorial schools or trends, the scene takes on different appearances, although they all follow a similar pattern, featuring Hagar as the central protagonist. Given what was noted above regarding the ideological context in which these images were created, the popularity of this type may call attention to itself. However, the explanation is quite simple.

On the one hand, as Sellin points out, "when the banished Hagar and Ishmael encounter the angel in the wilderness, [these scenes] were also devised to touch on themes of sin and redemption"[43]. These representations thus conveyed the sense of a merciful, omnipotent divine force capable of saving human beings by alleviating their suffering and sorrow. They likely served as a symbol of comfort for viewers, offering a tangible expression of the assurance of salvation even in the most uncertain times. Thus, while this theme lay at the heart of the Protestant Reformation, it was equally—if not more—embraced by the Catholic Church. In an ideology rooted in the power of redemption, the depiction of Hagar as a "sinner" rescued by an angelic being, akin to an Old Testament Mary Magdalene, must have reinforced in viewers the necessity of contrition, obedience, and repentance—essential virtues for a devout Catholic, especially for women[44].

On the other hand, the melodramatic nature of the scene—depicting a desperate young mother resigned to die with her son after having been used, abandoned by her husband and father, and subjected to the cruelty of an abusive mistress—must have been a powerful image that aligned with the expressive and stylistic interests of Italian Baroque painters. However, this was likely not the message that viewers ultimately took from this visual exegesis, especially when the entire story of both characters had been codified and iconized primarily through this iconographic type.

Among the vast number of examples we could mention regarding this type, we highlight two due to their peculiarities in relation to the iconic pattern. The first of these is the example by Giovanni Lanfranco entitled *Hagar and the Angel* (1600-1647), which is preserved in the Louvre Museum. Some recent studies have identified this painting as depicting Hagar's first theophany (Genesis 16)[45]. However, in our view, and in agreement with the Louvre's own identification of the scene, Lanfranco's painting aligns with Pietro da Cortona's *Hagar and the Angel* (1643), housed in the Ringling Museum of Sarasota (Fig. 6), which notably portrays Ishmael as a lively infant. In the shadows between Hagar and the angel, Lanfranco depicts the young child holding his mother's arm, mirroring Cortona's painting. This detail—portraying Ishmael as healthy and Hagar as more at ease—reduces the dramatic intensity of the scene and diminishes the emphasis on repentance and redemption.

Fig. 6. Pietro Berrettini, known as Pietro da Cortona, *Hagar and the Angel*, ca. 1637–38. Sarasota (Florida, US), Ringling Museum. Fuente: Ringling Museum, Sarasota.

Fig. 7. Francisco Collantes, *Hagar and Ishmael*, 1640. Providence (Rhode Island, US), Rhode Island School of Design Museum. Fuente: Rhode Island School of Design.

Meanwhile, the 17th-century Spanish representations of this scene—rare, as has generally been the case regarding depictions of some strong women from the Old Testament[46]—encode this iconographic type in a manner distinct from the Italian examples. They fit within a specific category of representation: Old Testament landscapes. Following the approach of 17th-century French painters such as Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin, these works depict Hagar, Ishmael, and the angel as miniature figures,

43 Sellin, *Fracture Families and Rebel Maidservants*, 153.
44 Sellin, *Fracture Families and Rebel Maidservants*, 153–155.
45 García Mahíques, *Los tipos iconográficos de la tradición cristiana,* 426–427.
46 Álvarez Seijo, Begoña, *Deseando a la mujer fuerte. Presencias y ausencias de las mujeres fuertes del Antiguo Testamento en la pintura española del seiscientos*. PhD diss (Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, 2023), 155–171.

almost insignificant in scale, set within vast, wild, and verdant landscapes. This visual exegesis of the episode could be considered to be more into line with the biblical text, insofar as it completely silences any emotions Hagar and Ishmael might feel—or any emotional connection to the characters in general—placing far greater emphasis instead on the landscape than on the figures themselves. Spanish examples of these Old Testament landscapes with Hagar and Ishmael can be found in the painting of Francisco Collantes, *Hagar and Ishmael* (1640), kept at the Rhode Island School of Design (Fig. 7) and in the canvas by Antonio del Castillo Saavedra of the Museum of Fine Arts of Córdoba (Andalusia, Spain), *Hagar and Ishmael in the desert (*1655–1660).

3.2. Bilhah and Zilpah

Having examined Hagar's story and its visual exegesis during the 17th century, we now turn to the stories of Bilhah and Zilpah—much briefer, more silenced, yet equally tragic.

In the particular case of Bilhah and Zilpah, we aim to develop an analysis in the opposite direction to that of Hagar's story: namely, from the image to the text. The reason is simple. Throughout the 17th century, European pictorial production did not produce any paintings that depicted or interpreted the story of these two female characters from Genesis. While the biblical narrator, as we shall argue, gave them a name and the "gift" of motherhood—since they bore four of Jacob's sons—there is no image that illustrates or describes what happened to Bilhah and Zilpah within the biblical text, nor one that clearly depicts how they might have looked.

However, 17th-century Italian painting produced a vast number of depictions of Jacob's primary wife, Rachel—some as part of visual narrative cycles on the life of the patriarch, some others as individual works. Among these, we also find representations of her sister, Leah. Nevertheless, since Leah was not the mother of the chosen son, she never takes center stage in the visual exegesis. Although very limited in number, similar examples can also be found in Spanish painting from the same period. Regarding these representations of Rachel and Leah—which include the iconographic types of *Jacob and Rachel at the Well*, *Jacob Asks Laban for Permission to Marry Rachel*, *The Encounter of Jacob and Laban*, *Laban Searching for the Idols*, *The Death of Rachel* and so forth—some depictions of female secondary characters can be found, which might correspond to Bilhah and Zilpah. Their identification, however, remains uncertain.

Thus, with regard to the translation of the biblical text into images in relation to the characters of Bilhah and Zilpah, no single example develops their story. In short, they are directly absent from the visual realm during the 17th century. There is no conflict revolving around the moment of representation of their abusive stories, nor around who is to blame for it, in order to manage the pathos of their images (as we have seen in the case of Hagar), because they are simply not there.

Therefore, to find out what happened to these two female slaves in the book of Genesis, we must turn to the biblical text.

These two women, Bilhah and Zilpah, are going to appear in situation analogous to that of Hagar within the story of the two sisters –daughters of Laban and wives of Jacob– Rachel and Leah[47]. The story of these two matriarchs of Padam-Aram starts in Genesis 29 with the encounter of Jacob and Rachel at the well (Gen 29: 9–12). Jacob, who was escaping Canaan after his betrayal of Esau, goes there to meet his uncle Laban –Rebekah's brother. The patriarch immediately falls in love with Rachel, but Laban tricks him to have sexual relations at the wedding night with Leah instead, thus becoming Jacob's first wife (Gen 29: 21–27). This action unfolds a terrible competition between the sisters in the end of this chapter and in the next, Genesis 30, since, after marrying Leah, Jacob also gets to marry Rachel (Gen 29: 28–29). They compete for the love of the patriarch and for gaining social status through motherhood. Thus, while Jacob was in Laban's house, his wives, Rachel and Leah, and his maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah, bore the patriarch a total of twelve sons and one daughter (Gen 29:30-35; Gen 30:1-24).

Not only do Bilhah and Zilpah never have a voice in the text, but they neither engage in conversation with anyone. They are merely characters who are acted upon and named by the narrator. Thus, their dramatic story is composed entirely of abusive encounters (Gen 29:31; Gen 30:24). In their competition for children and their husband's love, Rachel and Leah use the bodies of their slaves—given to them by their father, Laban—forcing them to have sex with Jacob and bear children on their behalf[48]. As a result, Bilhah and Zilpah function as mere extensions of the matriarchs, entirely controlled by them[49].

As Scholz argues, their story is one of two free women, two sisters, competing with each other by using their own bodies while simultaneously abusing the bodies of two enslaved women. Precisely because of the violence inflicted upon them, their story does not occupy a central place within Christian imagination and imagery[50].

These episodes from Genesis 29 and 30 have received very little exegetical attention, either in literature or, even less so, in the visual arts. Even when interpreters mention or depict Rachel and Leah, they rarely focus on Bilhah and Zilpah.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the biblical text and its visual interpretations in the seventeenth century, with particular attention to female figures from Genesis, allows for both general and specific conclusions. Patriarchal violence against women in Genesis is rooted in their socially prescribed role as bearers of life, regarded as their primary societal function. This logic extends to all women, including Sarah, Rachel, and Leah, who are likewise subjected to its constraints. Moreover, conflicts between mistresses and servants exemplify the projection of a male-centered worldview onto interpersonal relationships—tensions that may appear to occur

47 Silverman Kramer,"The Dismissal of Hagar", 223.
48 Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 56.
49 Silverman Kramer,"The Dismissal of Hagar", 223.
50 Scholz, *Sacred Witness*, 63–75.

between women but ultimately reveal the aggressive and ruthless violence of the patriarchal system in which they were embedded. In the case of enslaved women and their reproductive capacities, this principle is taken to its extreme.

Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah function in Genesis as powerful examples of the objectification, mistreatment, and exploitation of women's bodies—conditions intrinsically linked to female identity within the biblical text. Their narratives unfold alongside those of the patriarchs Abraham and Jacob, where they are portrayed as maids or slaves to the primary wives—Sarah, Rachel, and Leah—and as coerced bearers of children.

Hagar's story, marked by rape, her status as an Egyptian (that is, foreign) secondary wife of Abraham, her abusive servitude under Sarah's authority as the patriarch's primary wife, and her eventual expulsion and humiliation alongside her son, is narrated almost entirely from the perspective of other characters in the biblical account. In the pictorial realm, however, her narrative is translated into a rich and varied range of iconographic types, some of which elevate her to the role of protagonist in her own right. By contrast, Bilhah and Zilpah—mentioned in the Bible only as Jacob's wives, the mothers of Dan and Naphtali, and of Gad and Asher respectively, and as instruments in Rachel's and Leah's reproductive rivalry—are virtually absent from visual exegesis, whether as primary or secondary figures.

As observed, the pictorial representation of Hagar in the artistic production of two deeply Catholic countries during the seventeenth century—Italy and Spain—differs markedly from that of northern Europe. In northern European art, particularly Dutch painting, Hagar attains notable prominence, granting visibility to both her character and the emotional and experiential dimensions of her suffering within the biblical narrative. By contrast, Italian and Spanish treatments of Hagar reflect a fundamentally different approach. Shaped by the values and ideals of a rigorously Catholic moral framework, these visual traditions omit or silence key moments of her story: Genesis 16 is largely absent. Instead, following Pauline interpretation, visual representations tend to preserve the reputations of both Sarah and the patriarch. Consequently, in iconographic types derived from Genesis 21, blame is directed—explicitly or implicitly—toward Ishmael.

Overall, seventeenth-century Catholic visual exegesis conveys an imperative to protect the integrity of Isaac as a prefiguration of Christ, which in turn requires safeguarding Sarah's image and reputation, as she herself functions as a Marian prefiguration. Because the matriarchs and their slaves operate as opposing mirror figures, Hagar is frequently cast as the antagonist of the narrative. As a result, the most common depiction of the slave presents her as a penitent figure—a vision of redemption that simultaneously exalts Salvation. This framing reinforces the notion that God abandons no one, not even a foreign enslaved woman whose son, born of a questionable union, is portrayed as having mistreated the heir of the chosen people.

In conclusion, the visual translations—or notable absences—of the stories of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah in seventeenth-century Catholic contexts reflect ideas closely aligned with those articulated by the biblical narrators and later interpreters: silence, abjection, invisibility, and the attribution of guilt to female bodies. Ultimately, from text to image, the use, misuse, and abuse of these women's reproductive bodies are presented as necessary, yet preferably enacted out of sight, with viewers encouraged to avert their gaze.

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