

Hagar and History

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“The Bible is itself a political battlefield.”¹ Gil Anidjar writes this apropos of the distance between the exuberance and chaos of the Bible when considered alongside the systematic and mathematical precision of ancient Greece. One suspects that Anidjar has in mind the comparison drawn by Erich Auerbach in the opening pages of *Mimesis* between Homer and the Elohist (viz., the Greek and the Hebrew). In the former, all is present, illuminated, explicit; in the latter, all is past and future, shrouded, implicit.² Auerbach infamously argues that it is from the biblical Elohist, not Homer, that the spirit of Western literature descends. (So, too, the very idea of history, but I am getting ahead of myself.) Indeed, Anidjar mentions (but does not cite) Auerbach on the very next page (27) of his short but dense *On the Sovereignty of Mothers*. The passing reference to Auerbach, and more specifically to Auerbach’s theory of “figuration,” is worth dwelling on. For when it comes to the biblical-political battlefield, much depends on what one understands by figuration, or figural interpretation—indeed figura itself—to say nothing of the figures of Sarah and Hagar, the mother and the slave.

Anidjar has written a beautiful and provocative book, and I am grateful for it. If, in what follows, I fixate on but a handful of its pages, this reflects the limits of my own reading and understanding. I want simply to say something about what Anidjar has said about the Bible and about race. Doing so obliges me to draw out some of the stakes of Anidjar’s reading of Hagar (and thus, too, his reading of Paul—and of Augustine, who too reads Paul). I have in mind the profound tension between historical and symbolic readings of the Bible, a tension that the Christian mode of figural interpretation claims to have the power to dissolve. Accordingly, I will be obliged to say a few words about Auerbach’s theory of figuration, as it is most comprehensively developed in his 1938 essay “Figura.” I’ll conclude with a thought—as yet only a thought—about the ‘history’ of ‘race.’

To put it briefly and bluntly, what I see in *On the Sovereignty of Mothers* is an attempt to think mothers and slaves in a way that resists easy reterritorialization by—what else?—Christianity. It is also an attempt to think history and race (scare quotes dropped) in a way that rhymes with justice and truth. In the end, it is my sense that Hagar both confirms and confounds these attempts, because—one must insist on this—Hagar is not ours for the taking.

Neither Historicist nor Symbolic

In note 31 to Chapter 1 (p.119), Anidjar makes an interesting methodological remark. He raises the question of the historicity—specifically, the *modernity*—of the ‘racial contract’ theorized by Charles Mills and others, as well as of the concept of race itself. After affirming the modernity of race, Anidjar remarks that the

¹ Gil Anidjar, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers: The Political as Maternal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024), 26. All references to this text will be cited hereafter in the body of the essay.

² See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. William R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3-23.

argument of his book is “neither historical nor historicist.” He instead proposes to read the “dialectic of mother and slave as implicating, figuring, or prefiguring, the problem of race.” That Anidjar takes this dialectic seriously becomes clear a few pages later in the body of the text (32ff.), where he offers an ingenious reading of Hagar and Sarah through Hegel’s infamous master-slave dialectic. Spoiler alert: the slave Hagar turns out to be the truth of the mother Sarah (37). What interests me most, however, is the claim that this dialectic figures or prefigures the problem of race. The implications of this claim for thinking about the Bible, history, and race are illuminating.

First, one should remark on the temporal torsion (which is not to say distortion) effected by the invocation of figuration. One could ask: Is the dialectic of mother and slave an ancient or a modern dialectic? A Biblical Hebrew or a German Idealist dialectic? We are told that it is neither historical nor historicist; thus, it is perhaps both ancient and modern. What matters is that this ancient-Biblical-Hebrew-modern-German-Idealist dialectic *figures or prefigures something modern*, namely, “the problem of race” (p.119, n.31). Second, Anidjar goes on to make clear that what is at stake in the figural dimension of his argument, and of the political battlefield in which it is entrenched, has nothing to do with a hermeneutical reduction of the figures of Hagar and Sarah to *mere symbols*. That is to say, Hagar does not ‘symbolize’ slavery any more than Sarah ‘symbolizes’ motherhood. The specifically *figural* relation of Hagar to slavery is not symbolic. It is, rather, a genuinely historical relation, though its historicity is, in an important but paradoxical sense, downstream from its figurality. (This will bring us, in just a moment, to Auerbach.)

Anidjar’s avoidance of the conceptual pitfalls of symbolism is well warranted, especially given that he draws from an archive penned by Black women such as Jennifer Nash, who are concerned with “a form of relationality, a set of practices, a form of labor, an embodied experience,” rather than with the reduction of Black motherhood to a “political category that is synonymous with pain.”³ Anidjar is instead interested in what Nash calls the “*longue durée* of slavery,” which goes back—all the way back—to antiquity, to the writings of Saints Paul and Augustine.

In the Bible, and at least since Paul, Hagar—that ‘shadow,’ as the famously mother-loving Augustine described her, ‘the foreshadowing symbol [that] was itself foreshadowed’—is undoubtedly considered a slave, a servant and a slave. Since Paul, the dialectic of mother and slave—a tale of two cities—imprinted itself, at times with extreme violence, at times in extreme silence, on a number of traditions, on a number of constitutions. (27)

Here, Anidjar refers to Auerbach, who “would have spoken of *figuration*,” who would have spoken “of Hagar as a prefiguration of ancient and modern slavery” (27-28). But what does it mean to say that Hagar is a prefiguration—a *figura*—of something or someone, perhaps some *people*, yet to come?

³ Jennifer Nash, qtd. in Anidjar, *On the Sovereignty of Mothers*, 119, n.34. See Jennifer C. Nash, *Birthing Black Mothers* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021). See, too, the other pivotal Black authors cited by Anidjar in this passage: Dolores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Ossining, NY: Orbis, 2013); Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Amaryah Armstrong, “Of Flesh and Spirit: Race, Reproduction, and Sexual Difference in the Turn to Paul,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2017).

This is a question worth pressing, because Anidjar rightly seeks to avoid the traps of both historicism and symbolism. And yet it is precisely the figural hermeneutics of the Christian tradition that presents us with a reading of scripture in which Hagar the slave is irreducible both to historicist criticism (because she is a prophetic figure of a truth yet to come) and to symbolist or allegorical reduction (because she is a historically real person). In this sense, the reference to Auerbach is warranted. But the book is perhaps not yet finished with Auerbach, to say nothing of figural interpretation itself, which, as I've argued elsewhere, was the hermeneutical mechanism by which the logic of supersession was crystallized in the Christian tradition.⁴ There were certainly precursors and forerunners (Justin Martyr comes to mind), but the chief alchemists of this logic were the Latin theologians Tertullian of Carthage and Saint Augustine of Hippo. This, in any case, is what Auerbach demonstrates in his pathbreaking and painstaking *criticism* of figural interpretation.⁵

Figura

Auerbach offers a dense and illuminating account of *figura's* antiquity. The term was exceptionally versatile: it referred not only to a 'sensible three-dimensional shape,' but also to 'form' in the sense of poetic form; to 'figures of speech' or 'allegories;' to the 'figure' of a man or a woman, as in English usage; and to 'copy' or 'image,' as in Lucretius. Indeed, Lucretius is one of Auerbach's privileged examples, because it is in *De Rerum Natura* that the "playful association between original and copy" is most strikingly captured by *figura*.⁶ By far the most significant development in the semantic life of *figura*, however, lies in the way it was deployed by Tertullian of Carthage in his polemics against his theological enemies: on the one hand, the arch-heretic Marcion of Sinope; on the other hand, the Jews. In Tertullian—and in Augustine after him—*figura* is meant to safeguard nothing less than the historical truth of the Christian faith.

In Tertullian's usage, *figura* means "historically real prophecy." In the practice of figural interpretation, one reads "the people and events of the Old Testament as 'figures' or historically real prophecies of New Testament eschatology."⁷ What makes Tertullian's procedure so important and novel is the insistence that "both the figure itself and what it prophesies are historically real in equal measure."⁸ What is essential, then, is that for Tertullian a figure is a real, literal, and historical person or event that nonetheless signifies something beyond itself. *Figura*, one might say, points up its own negativity. What is decisive is that this negativity (and what it indexes) is itself historically real. But this means that we have to guard against the confusion endemic to the semantic range of *figura*, especially the way that its English usage almost always

⁴ Timothy Snediker, "Figural Interpretation and the Logic of Supersession," PhD Dissertation, UC Santa Barbara, 2024, esp. Chs. 1 and 2.

⁵ I specify that Auerbach's "Figura" is a criticism of figural interpretation to signal my profound agreement with the arguments of James I. Porter, who, to my knowledge, is the only reader of Auerbach to have fully digested Auerbach's deeply ambivalent view of figural interpretation. See James I. Porter, "Erich Auerbach and the Judaizing of Philology," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Autumn 2008): 115-147; James I. Porter, "Disfigurations: Erich Auerbach's Theory of Figura," *Critical Inquiry* 44 (Autumn 2017): 80-113; James I. Porter, "Old Testament Realism in the Writings of Erich Auerbach," in Shai Ginsburg, Martin Land, and Jonathan Boyarin (eds.), *Jews and the Ends of Theory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 187-224. By contrast, the lion's share of scholarship on Auerbach has dubiously assumed that *figura* is not only the 'skeleton key' to his thought, but that Auerbach himself subscribed to the Christian-figural-interpretative view of history!

⁶ Erich Auerbach, "Figura," in *Selected Essays: Time, History, and Literature*, trans. Jane O. Newman, ed. James I. Porter (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 69.

⁷ Auerbach, "Figura," 80.

⁸ Ibid.

signifies something non-literal, that is, something figurative or allegorical. Instead, we should understand that Tertullian explicitly opposes his *figural* reading of scripture to a merely *figurative* reading of the same.

To take one well-known example: in *Adversus Marcionem* III.16, Tertullian claims that the Old Testament figure Hoshea son of Nun, receives his new name (i.e., Joshua; see Num. 13:16) from Moses in order to prefigure, or prophesy, a Joshua yet to come —namely, Joshua, or Jesus, of Nazareth (the two share the Hebrew name *Yehoshua*). Joshua thus becomes a figure of the Christian concept of grace. Unlike the Law, here figured by Moses, Joshua can, and does, lead the people of Israel into the promised land. As a figure of grace, Joshua son of Nun is also, and already, a figure of Joshua the Christ, who is the fulfillment of Joshua son of Nun. Here we can see how *figura* internalizes the original-copy distinction under the rubric of prophecy and fulfillment. For this reason, *figura* is able to point to a ‘future original.’ In the example above, Joshua the Christ is the true origin (because he is the fulfillment) of the figure Joshua son of Nun; yet Joshua son of Nun already pertains to Joshua the Christ, because *figura* is ultimately nothing other than this literally and historically real pointing-away-from-itself towards its own—its *proper*—fulfillment, which is itself literally and historically real. Within the historical schema of figural interpretation, a figure like Joshua son of Nun is, paradoxically, a copy that temporally precedes its original.

When, some two hundred years after Tertullian, Augustine takes up the program of figural interpretation, he preserves this emphasis on literality. What Augustine adds to the mix is the ambition to formulate a full-blown theology of history (as one glimpses in *Civitas Dei*). The entire Old Testament is, as it were, up for grabs in the game of figural interpretation.⁹ And Hagar is swept up in the game as well. It’s worth noting, too, that Anidjar’s musings about what Auerbach *would have* said about Hagar are not idle. In fact, Auerbach does mention Hagar, albeit briefly and in passing, amidst a litany of examples drawn from Augustine’s figural interpretation of scripture. Auerbach specifies that, for Augustine, “Hagar the slave is a *figura* of the Old Testament, [and of] the *terrena Jerusalem*.”¹⁰ Anidjar adds: *and of the (modern) problem of race*.

Doubtless, there is more than one way to read *figura*, more than one way to practice figural interpretation, and more than one way to speak of, and to understand, what is meant by ‘figuration’ in the sense given it by Auerbach and his inheritors. But it is also clear that Hagar *belongs*, if I may be permitted to use this term, to the practice of figural interpretation in a way that is indubitably Christian. As James I. Porter has very keenly pointed out, the ‘figures’ of the Old Testament never get to just *be themselves*.¹¹ Perhaps this is

⁹ It should be noted that another development in Augustine is the way that the New Testament, too, is increasingly subject to the protocols of figural interpretation. This should come as no surprise, since Tertullian’s aims were more polemical and thus much narrower. Tertullian was an apologist in a way that Augustine need not have been, which allowed Augustine to consider promises and prophecies within the Gospels themselves as prefiguring heavenly, especially eschatological, realities rather than ‘merely’ historical ones. See Auerbach’s commentary on this development in Auerbach, “Figura,” 100-101.

¹⁰ Auerbach, “Figura,” 85. See Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 16.11. Augustine is glossing Paul’s letter to the Galatians; see Galatians 4:21-31.

¹¹ “When,” inquires Porter (“Disfigurations,” 91), “are Saul—or Moses, or Aaron, or Hagar, and so on—ever *themselves*?” The answer is obvious: never, not even in their concrete historical existence, which is always already a sign-symptom of salvation history. Compare Porter’s gloss on Auerbach’s reading of the same ‘figures,’ which “affirms the real, concrete, and individual reality of each of the actors whose lives it, narrates in all their psychological complexity and depth, each of them deeply etched with time, from Adam and Noah to Sarah and Hagar, to Abraham and Isaac, David, Joab, Absalom, and the rest, none of whom is a stand-in for something else because all of them just are *themselves*” (ibid., 101).

everyone's fate, since (enter historicism!) no one can ever simply be themselves, if by 'being ourselves' we mean a straightforward extraction or abstraction from our social and historical context. But the point of revisiting Auerbach's analysis of *figura*, however, is to be mindful of the fact that what he ultimately uncovers is nothing less than the uniquely Christian character of the figural enterprise—and, one should add, the indelibly supersessionist logic of the Christian tradition.

What, then, does it mean to say, as Anidjar does, that Hagar *prefigures* the problem of race, given that this implies that the modern problem of race is the *fulfillment* of Hagar's rather ambiguous victory in the mother-slave dialectic? What, then, is the modern slave? Or, rather, *who*—for it cannot be Hagar—is the modern slave?

A Thought

In an important essay, "Natural Slavery, Real Abstraction, and the Virtuality of Anti-Blackness," Sara-Maria Sorentino argues that the concept of slavery is an "emergent abstraction of anti-blackness," such that the canonical theorization of natural slavery (viz. Book I of Aristotle's *Politics*) can only be retrieved in an anti-Black manner.¹² The ramifications of Sorentino's argument far exceed the parameters of the present essay, but I refer to her here because her analysis has something to teach us, and perhaps to unteach us, about Hagar.

The natural slave, as it appears in Aristotle, is distinguished from the legal slave. Legal slavery refers to "the contingent (and not natural) condition of becoming adrift from the whole."¹³ In other words, historic defenses of slavery, which frequently map onto regimes of indebtedness or captivity in war, are not defenses of slavery *as such*. Only Aristotle, it seems, was willing to offer a defense of slavery construed as natural. One key passage runs, roughly, as follows: natural slavery is justified "where it is advantageous as well as just for the one to be enslaved and the other to be master."¹⁴ Here, the slave is something like a hand of the master's body. It is good for the (slavish) hand to serve the (master's) body, especially because the master's body needs to be able to leave the household (the *oikos*) to appear in the *polis*, where his potentiality can be most fully actualized. The slave, bless her heart, makes him, the master, so able.

As we might expect, Aristotle's defense of slavery is deeply ambivalent. Sorentino notes that "natural slavery not only exposes the enslavability of the Greeks" (because anyone, in principle, could be 'suited' for slavery), but "also turns mastership into a form of slavery, creating 'in the master a kind of desire that turns

¹² Sara-Maria Sorentino, "Natural Slavery, Real Abstraction, and the Virtuality of Anti-Blackness," *Theory and Event*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2019), pp. 632. "To encircle the terms of the historiographical dilemma: if, on the one hand, blackness was operable among the ancient Greeks, then blackness (as philosophical indeterminacy) and slaveness (as its ontological infusion) risks being of such universal provenance that its categories could offer nothing substantial to the comprehension or critique of the trans-Atlantic trade. On the other hand, if blackness is a purely historical invention, consequent *from* early modern ruptures of slavery and codified through race, then it is one divisive construct among others on a spectrum of claims of belonging and its relationship to slavery is incidental. By arguing for a third option, slavery as an emergent abstraction of anti-blackness, I hope to clarify how natural slavery comes to invade and occupy the position of the transcendental, such that we can't go back without its freight, such that our exposure of the ancients will always be anti-black."

¹³ Sorentino, "Natural Slavery," 634.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1255b7–8, 10.

him away from his obligations as citizen.”¹⁵ There are other deep ambiguities, and much more ambivalence, in Aristotle’s theory of slavery, but what is most striking to the modern eye is that the slave, the *natural* slave, theorized by Aristotle is just that: a theory. The slaves that Aristotle knew were contingently enslaved. The natural slave did not exist for him as such. Or, rather, we should say that the natural slave existed for Aristotle only virtually, potentially, in theory.¹⁶

Sorentino’s work, conducted in the complementary registers of afro-pessimism and Black feminism, is concerned with the fact that the concept of natural slavery was taken up *in its actuality* in the sixteenth-century theological debates over the political-ontological status of Native Americans in the so-called New World.¹⁷ The Spanish Dominican Francisco de Vitoria set the terms of the emergent theological consensus: Native Americans did *not* fall into the category of natural slaves. Of this decisive moment, Sorentino remarks that “it was the *application* of natural slavery that had become open for debate, not its relative truth, which suddenly was assumed.”¹⁸ Given the spectacular reappearance of the ancient (hypothetical) category of natural slavery in the context of the very real dispute over the very real slavishness of very real (human?) beings, Sorentino trains her attention, and ours, on the curious “connection between the reappearance of natural slavery as fact and the reification of blackness as unquestioned slaveness.”¹⁹ For it turns out that, for the men of conscience in the sixteenth century, to be Black is to be slavish, to be enslaved, indeed, *to be a slave*. Naturally.

What was merely virtual in antiquity is actualized in modernity. But this means that the virtual slave is colored, so to speak, by the Blackness of the actual, natural slave. Should we say that Aristotle’s virtual slave *prefigures* the actual, natural, Black slave of the trans-Atlantic world-system? Or should we say, rather, that the actual, natural, Black slave is the truth (the future original!) of the virtual slave, who, for her part, is ever and always “the foreshadowing symbol [that] was itself foreshadowed?”²⁰

And what, after all, shall we make of Hagar, who will have been the truth (the future original? or the mother?) of Sarah?

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¹⁵ Sorentino, “Natural Slavery,” 638.

¹⁶ Sorentino dwells at length on the hermeneutical problem of whether Aristotle’s description of the natural slave should be read as defense or denunciation. See Sorentino, “Natural Slavery,” 636-639.

¹⁷ Sorentino, “Natural Slavery,” 643.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 637 (Book 15, Chapter 3).

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