

From Hebrew 'Slave' to Arabian 'Sage': Linking the Jewish and Muslim Narratives in the Story of Hagar, the African in Pre-Islamic Arab History

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Abstract

This article examines the place of Hagar, an African woman, in pre-Islamic Arab history. It examines the story as it is presented in both the Jewish Scripture and by Judeo-Christian scholars, on one hand, and in Muslim sources on the other. The Sarah-Hagar issue in the Abrahamic family-history mainly informs the Judeo-Christian interpretation of the generational deadlocks between the believers of the biblical message and Muslims. Thus, a new approach to the understanding of the Hagar-Narrative could facilitate mutual understanding in the interreligious dialogue. Both Jewish and Muslim sources, to a large extent, trace the ancestry of the present generation of the Arabs to Hagar, the former African "slave" of the mother of "Hebrew" Israel through her son, Ismā'īl. The Judeo-Christian Hagar is presented as a sinner-slave who committed the sin of pride but who was welcome out of God's infinite Mercy for sinners. Nevertheless, in the Muslim sources, God's plan made this rejected African "slave" and her son the "sages" and pillars for a new nation and a fountain from which evolved "the greatest Prophet of humankind", Muḥammad. The Story of Hagar is a neglected topic for interreligious dialogue between the Abrahamic faiths.

Key Words: Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ismā'īl, Jewish, Muslim

Introduction

The story of Hagar, the African maidservant of Abraham's wife, Sarah, and the woman who first gave Abraham a son, hardly arouses the interest of African Muslim academic scholars. In the conventional Muslim discourse, Hagar (Hājar) is always mentioned in relation to Abraham's journey to the Ḥijāz but often not with a critical evaluation of the narrative, particularly, in relation to the Jewish sources including the Talmūd. Thus, very little scholarly work has been done towards a reinterpretation of

this strange story. This is quite surprising because there are interesting gender implications which African Muslim gender scholars could explore about an African woman being the “mother” of “the greatest Prophet of humankind.” There is, therefore, much to examine about Hagar, the African woman who sacrificed her “welfare” to begin a new epoch of human history. We shall examine this story outside the prism of patriarchy. The Jewish Scripture and, particularly, Judeo-Christian scholars, put Hagar and her innocent son, Ismā’īl, in a very bad light by portraying Ismā’īl as a person adorned with base-desires and Hagar as a sinner.¹ Thus, in many respects, the innocent woman “victimized” by her obedience is not only chastised as an insolent girl who caused her mistress (Sarah) so much pain but the mistress herself and her husband (Abraham) are also accused of the “sin of unbelief.” Davis succinctly explains this Jewish perspective in the following extract:

Over four thousand years of hostilities between Arabs and Jews began because of the sin of unbelief. Sarah and Abraham did not wait for the fulfilment of God’s prophetic promise. Here is the genesis of the world’s longest running family feud: “Then Sarah, Abram’s wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan” (Gen. 16:3). When Hagar, the Egyptian maid became pregnant she began to “despise” her mistress, Sarah.²

The story of Hagar and Ismā’īl is significant because the arrival of the two Africans in Arabia marked an important landmark in the history of the human race, a new religious establishment in the making.³ In spite of this, Hagar’s tale rarely appears in Islamic scholarly discourse. The relationship between Africans and the land known today as Arabia appeared in different ways. Africa made a marvellous contribution to Arabia.

¹ William M. Templeton, *Understanding Genesis: A Commentary of the Book of Genesis with Life Application for Modern Man* (USA: Xulon Press, 2010), 226; J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Cambridge: Win B. Eerdmans, 2010), 175

² David Davis, *The Elijah Legacy: The Life and Times of Elijah; The Prophetic Significance for Israel, Islam and the Church in the Last Days*, ed. Beverlee Chadwick (USA: Bridge-Logos, 2010), 237

³ We recognize the fact that the Near East context was patriarchal. Nonetheless, with an African mother, although, Ismā’īl was Afro-Asian in the real sense, genetically, it is not wrong to refer to him as an “African.”

Arabia hosted the Prophet, Muḥammad, but he came through the womb of an African woman, Hagar, through her son, Ismā'īl. In addition, the first *Mu'adhdhin*, personal assistant of the Prophet, Bilāl ibn Rabāḥ, was himself an African from Ethiopia (Kush).⁴ Were these sheer coincidences? The Arabs mainly trace their ancestry to the patriarch, Abraham, through his son, Ismā'īl. The motherly role of the African woman, Hagar, is commemorated at least once a year in Makkah during the event known as *Sa'y bayna Ṣafā wa Marwah* (the walk or running between mounts Ṣafā and Marwah). In a tradition quoted in one of the earliest biographies of the Holy Prophet, we read: "When you conquer Egypt treat its people well, for they can claim our protection and kinship."⁵ Thus, the story of Hagar provides an insight into the Egyptian or African dimension of the genealogy of the Prophet, which requires some scholarly reflection today. Nonetheless, the narratives are plagued with convergences and divergences. Using the Jewish and the Muslim sources, this paper reflects on the African dimension of the pre-Islamic history in the light of the narratives about Hagar. The purpose is to assess Africa's role in the building of the pre-Islamic Arab civilization with scholarly insights into the story of Hagar and her son, Ismā'īl.

Hagar and Her Place in Jewish and Muslim Discourse

Muslim scholars unanimously agree that Hagar was the mother of Ismā'īl (Ishmael), the patriarch to whom Prophet Muḥammad's ancestry is traced. However, as we shall see, not all Arabs descended from Ishmael. This is because by the time the historical spring of *Zamzam* was discovered by the distressed Hagar, that piece of arid

⁴ See: Jibrail Bin Yusuf, "Islam and Traditions in Africa: Friends or Foes?," *Abibisem: Journal of African Culture and Civilization*, 5 (2012): 92

⁵ Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah (The Life of Muhammad [A Translation with Introduction by A. Guillaume])* (Oxford: O.U.P., 2004), 4

land was not yet occupied by anyone.⁶ When Abraham took Hagar and Ismā'īl to the Hijāz, Ismā'īl was an infant. Thus, ethnically, Ismā'īl and his mother, Hagar, were not Arabs and, therefore, were not the sole progenitors of the Arab race.⁷ Hence, the general claim that Arabs are the descendants of Ismā'īl is incorrect. The sources indicate that Ismā'īl learned the Arabic language from a migrant Yamānī tribe of Banī Jurhum,⁸ a section of the descendants of Qaḥṭān who were initially occupying the valleys of Makkah. However, it is possible that Abraham spoke more than one language with a sound knowledge of Proto-Arabic and Hebrew for the following reasons:

1. Having been brought up in Ur of Chaldean, he would definitely speak the Mesopotamian language of Akkadian.
2. Since he communicated with Egyptians in Egypt, he must have had command over at least a few Egyptian words.
3. As a nomadic pastoralist, he would have had a working knowledge of Amorite or Proto-Arabic as his mother tongue.

⁶ The founding of Makkah is almost always associated with Ismā'īl and his mother, Hagar. However, other tribes later came to join in the adjoining valleys of Makkah but this took place after Hagar and her son, Ismā'īl, had already planted their settlement in the vicinities of the Well of Zamzam ((see: *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol.1, ḥadīth no. 3365; Safiur Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raḥeequl Makhtum* (Riyadh: Darssalam, 2001), 36))

⁷ The Jewish Scripture, however, reveals that the Arabs were nomads or desert-dwellers (Isaiah 13:20; Jeremiah 25:24) who had relationship with ancient Israel (1 Kings 10:15; 2 Chronicles 17:11; 2 Chronicles 21:16; 22:1; 2 Chronicles 26:7; Nehemiah 2:19; 4:7; 6:1). In the annals of the Assyrian kings from Tiglath Pileser III to Ashurbanipal (745-627 BC), Sargon II is alleged to have moved a certain nomadic Arab group to Samaria during the implementation of the Assyrian deportation policy after the conquest of the area. Thus, the Samaritan woman who met Jesus Christ at the well (in John 4) might have an Arab descent while the Samaritan leper who glorified God for being healed possibly related to Ismā'īl ((see: Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2003), 111)). The Hebrew Prophets (the *Nabiyim*) link them with the Dedanites ((Isaiah 21:13; Jeremiah 25:23-24; Ezekiel 27:20-21; for independent details, see: Chris Flint, "God's Blessing to Ishmael with Special Reference to Islam," *St Francis Magazine*, 7/4 (October 2011), 19)). It seems that the first appearance of the word "Arab" in the extra-biblical text occurs in the Assyrian records which mention a certain foe as "Gindubu" (deciphered as the Arabian Jundub) a belligerent enemy of King Shalmaneser III during a battle at Qarqar north of Hamah in late 853 BC ((see: D.D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol.1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), 611; P.K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 10th ed. (London: Macmillan, 1970), 37; Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel*, 111)).

⁸ Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raḥeequl Makhtum*, 38

4. Further, since he lived for some time in Haran, he would also have been knowledgeable in Aramaic.
5. Finally, since he moved to Canaan where he stayed for at least ten years before the birth of Ismā'īl, he would also have been proficient in Hebrew, the religious language of the Canaanites.⁹

Since Hagar also stayed with this couple in Canaan for at least ten years, she would also speak at least two languages, namely: her Egyptian native tongue, and Hebrew, the native language of the Canaanites.¹⁰ Abraham's hometown is traced to Ur (Ār), a town near Kūfah around River Euphrates in today's Iraq. The Muslim sources indicate that Abraham first migrated from Ār to a place known as Haran ten miles north of the Syrian border.¹¹ At this time, the Jewish sources indicate that he bore the name Abram.¹² Abraham stayed in Haran with his father, Terah, identified by the Jewish Scripture to be a Haranian and a polytheist. The Muslim literature also identifies Terah as a polytheist (*Mushrik*).¹³ This explains why Abraham migrated from his father's town of abode, Haran, to Palestine. A ḥadīth in *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* makes reference to a statement by the Prophet to the effect that Abraham lied only three times; this tradition refers to the destruction of certain deities in a shrine which was placed under his care one day.¹⁴

⁹ Rick Brown, "Language matters like Bright Sunlight: The Benefit of Communicating in Heart Language," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 26/2 (2009): 86. The name Ibrāhīm (Abraham) is argued in Arabic to be derived from the root words, 'Ib and Raḥīm where the former is believed to connote a corruption of 'Ab, an Arabic word for "father" while Raḥīm means "Merciful." By this conjecture, Ibrāhīm would mean "Merciful father." However, the current Arabic spelling of the name calls this derivation into question and thus leads it to the problem of accuracy.

¹⁰See: Genesis 6:3; Phyllis Tribble, "Ominous Beginnings for a Promise of Blessing," in *Hagar, Sarah, and their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, ed. Phyllis Tribble and Letty M. Russell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 38

¹¹Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raḥeequl Makhtum*, 34.

¹²David J. Zucker, "What Sarah saw: Envisioning Genesis 21:9-10", *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 36/1 (2008):56.

¹³ See, Ibn Kathīr, *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbyā'* (Damascus: Dar al Fayha, 2001)

¹⁴ For more details on this story, see: Ibn Kathīr, *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*. Bukhārī's ḥadīth has, however, been contested ((see: Israr Ahmad Khan, *Authentication of Hadith: Redefining the Criteria* (London, Washington: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010), 51-2; see also: Jibrail Bin Yusuf, "review of *Authentication of Hadith: Redefining the Criteria*, by Israr Ahmad Khan, London, Washington: International Institute of Islamic

Both the Jewish and Muslim sources indicate that Abraham did not stay at one place and moved to different places.¹⁵ In his memoir entitled, *Tārīkh Ibn Khaldūn*, Ibn Khaldūn, possibly informed by the Jewish sources, argues that Abraham wandered over several places, inviting people to the truth of monotheism.¹⁶

According to the narrative, in one of his travels, Abraham went to Egypt, a place to the north-east of the Sahara Desert in Africa. The specific reason behind his journey to this land is subject to speculation. The Jewish scholars opine that Abraham's journey to Egypt was not by any divine order but probably due to the discomfort caused by the acute famine in Canaan where he was settling with his wife.¹⁷ Following an acute famine in the land of Canaan, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, set sail for Egypt. In his *Fath al-Bārī bi Sharḥi Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Imām Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī points out that, the king of Egypt at that time was accustomed to desiring the beautiful wives of people. In ancient Egypt and the Near East, divorce was virtually impossible and was mainly facilitated through death. Therefore, a man who desired another man's wife could only separate the couple by killing the man. Abraham's suspicion thus serves him right when he advises his wife to lie about their marital status as they get to Egypt.

Upon Abraham's arrival, true to his suspicion, the king casts a wanton look at Sarah's beauty and attempts to gratify his brutal desire. The story surrounding this is reported by the Judeo-Christian and Muslim literature although with some degree of differences.¹⁸ The king attempts to touch Sarah but goes through an unusual experience

Thought, 2010, xxiv+188 pages. Notes to p. 204. Bibliography, to p. 207. Index to p.215," *Ilorin Journal of Religious Studies*, 2/1 (2012): 101-2

¹⁵ Deut 26:5; Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raḥeequl Makhtum*, 34

¹⁶ In the Jewish Scriptures, Abraham is mentioned as "a wandering Aramean" (see: Deut 26:5). However, Qur'ān 29:26 hints about his migration to Canaan (see: *Tafsīr ibn Kathīr*).

¹⁷ Genesis 12:10

¹⁸ For more details, refer to: Ibn Kathīr: *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*; S.A. Maududi, *Four Basic Quranic Terms* (New Delhi: Markazi Maktaba, 1980)

that eventually convinces him that Sarah is a righteous woman. The situation overwhelms the king to such an extent that he gives his own daughter, Hagar, the woman who is perhaps the most noted African woman in scripture, to the service of Sarah. Hagar is noted by many as a slave-girl of the Egyptian king but many sources also indicate that she was the daughter (Princess) of the king.¹⁹ Hagar, the humble African woman, is fated to be the mother of a progeny that would produce “the greatest Prophet” for humanity. Interestingly, due to religious prejudice, in her own land of birth, Egypt, Hagar faces some degree of discrimination due to the politics of religious identity. Among the Copts in Egypt, there is an identity crisis when it comes to the legacy of Hagar because although, as Egyptians, and for that matter, Africans, they are related racially to Hagar. Yet, for them, as Christians, this *Hagarist* sense of identity conflicts with their religious sense of being because they believe they are more related to Sarah who is believed to be “a great grandmother of Christ [the Christians]” in contrast to Hagar who is “the great grandmother of [Muhammad, the] Muslims.”²⁰

From Egypt, Abraham and his wife, Sarah, return to Palestine in company with Hagar. Apparently, the Jewish Scripture gives a narrative about a certain prophecy in which the couple were looking forward to be blessed with a son.²¹ In Palestine, the couple, still being unable to reconcile with childlessness almost a decade after the said covenant, now decides to find a practical solution to the menace. Since ancient times, male sterility has been a serious problem and for women, it was a catastrophe and a

¹⁹Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum*, 35; Bruce S. Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of three Faiths* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 77; see also: Ibn Khaldūn, *Tā'rikh Ibn Khaldūn* vol. 2 (Beirut, Dar Ibn Hazm, 2011), 77-8

²⁰Wagdy Elisha, “Can Egyptian Christian Women Identify with Hagar?”, *Claremont Journal of Religion*, 1/1 (2012): 69

²¹Genesis. 12:3; cf. 15:4; 17:16, 19, 21; 18:10, 14, and also: David C. Stancil, “Genesis 16:1-16; 21:8-21-The Uncherished Child: A “Modern” Wilderness of the Heart.” *Review & Expositor*, 91/3 (1994): 394

sign of failure.²² Multiple-wife marriage became an ultimate solution to this age-old menace which was and still is often blamed on women. However, among the Orient, from Babylon to Egypt, surrogate motherhood of a slave was preferred to polygamy because it afforded the women maximum control over their own husbands in marriage. In the midst of this context, the distressed Sarah, who traditionally blames herself for the problem,²³ devises a plan to have a child through a surrogate mother.²⁴ Therefore, she offers her beautiful African Princess, the ‘maid of honour’, Hagar, in marriage to her husband, Abraham; an arrangement which, from the perspective of some Jewish scholars, proved to be a mistake.²⁵ As we quoted earlier from Davis, “Over four thousand years of hostilities between Arabs and Jews began because of the sin of unbelief.... Here is the genesis of the world’s longest running family feud:....”²⁶ However, it is appropriate that we take the words “sin” and “unbelief” above metaphorically and symbolically rather than literally. The implication from the above extract is that Abraham’s family has fallen victim to the human vulnerability of impatience towards the divine decree.²⁷

²²Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis 16-50”, in *The Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 2., ed. B.M. Metzger, D.A. Hubbard and G.W. Barker (Texas, USA: Word Books, 1994), 7

²³ Genesis 16:3; G. Henton Davies, “Genesis”, in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol.1., ed. Clifton J. Allen (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 180

²⁴E.A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1964), 117

²⁵ There is a slight difference of opinion about the sort of relationship that Sarah offered Abraham and her princess. While some opine that Sarah offered Hagar as a concubine thus striking out the possibility of plural marriage, others maintain that Hagar was offered as a wife (refs: *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol.1, 474; Muhammad Sulayman S. al-Mansurpuri, *Rahmatul-lil-‘ālamīn*, vol.2 (Delhi: Hanif Book Depot, 1930), 34; & cited also by: Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raḥeequl Makhtum*, 35; see also: Ibn Kathīr, *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*). However, it seems the debate is among Judeo-Christian scholars; however, the orthodox Muslim view favours the latter although that is fraught with a few challenges as it makes it a bit difficult to explain what then gave Sarah the authority to want to demand higher attention than Hagar and further demanding the removal of Hagar from her “matrimonial” home when, after all, they were all co-wives (see: Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raḥeequl Makhtum*, 35). Possibly, Sarah considered her seniority not just as the elder wife but her status as the former mistress gave her a leverage over Hagar. This is in consideration of the fact that, as the mistress, her second status as the senior wife is inviolable. And this further buttresses our earlier argument as to why the mistresses preferred surrogate wombs of slaves to fresh marriages.

²⁶Davis, *The Elijah Legacy*, 236

²⁷See also: Genesis 15: 2; Stancil, “Genesis 16:1-16,” 394

The understanding here is that, the period of time that has elapsed is enough to throw the “Jewish Sarah” into the agony of “disbelief” or “distrust” in the reality of this divine promise. Indeed, under normal circumstance, her age would repel any resolve to wait for the fulfilment of the promise. The age of Hagar at this time is unclear but she must have been either in her late teens or early twenties.²⁸

Sarah’s arrangement has been a subject of debate among Judeo-Christian scholars. While some find the event inconceivable,²⁹ others like Westermann vindicate Sarah on ethical ground.³⁰ “Sarah’s action was justified”³¹ because, in the ancient traditions of the Near East, when a woman’s slave girl gave birth to a baby, that baby automatically belonged to the slave’s mistress,³² who could treat the child as her own to enjoy every status of her biological offspring.³³ Wenham reveals that:

Surrogate motherhood is attested throughout the ancient Orient from the third to the first millennium B.C., from Babylon to Egypt. ... Given the social mores of the ancient Near East, Sarai’s suggestion was a perfectly proper and respectable course of action.³⁴

In the Jewish Scripture, it appears this perception forced Sarah to develop a deep jealousy for Hagar and her innocent son, Ismā’īl, the new signatory to the inheritance of Abraham: “the child of that slave-woman will not inherit along with my son Isaac.”³⁵ We are a bit cautious with the use of the word “slave” for Hagar. This is because of the

²⁸ Stancil, “Genesis 16:1-16,” 394

²⁹ Stancil, “Genesis 16:1-16,” 394

³⁰ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (London: SPCK, 1986), 250,

³¹ Westermann, *Genesis*, 250

³² Genesis 16:2; see also: Stancil, “Genesis 16:1-16,” 395; Moshe Reiss, “Ishmael, Son of Abraham,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 30/4 (2002): 253. For more details, see: Wenham, “Genesis 16-50,” 7; Kristin Kleber, “Neither Slave nor truly Free: The Status of the Dependents of Babylonian Temple Households,” in *Slaves and Households in the Near East [Oriental Institute Seminars, no.7]*, ed. Laura Culbertson (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011), 103 & passim

³³ See: Genesis 16:2; Reiss, “Ishmael,” 253; Victor H. Matthews, “*Marriage and Family in the Ancient Near East*,” in *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, ed. Ken M. Campbell (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 26. However, the latter applied to children born through surrogacy.

³⁴ Wenham, “Genesis 16-50,” 7

³⁵ Genesis 21:10; see also: Zucker, “What Sarah saw,” 54

circumstances that influenced the Pharaoh to deliver Hagar to Sarah and Abraham.³⁶ It convinces us that the Pharaoh, possibly, offered this Princess to be cultured in the righteous ways of the couple, and, probably, not as a “slave” in its actual sense. In return, however, she would render household services as a house-help.

In Sarah’s surrogate motherhood arrangement above, one realizes that tradition and personal desire combined to produce a divine effect, the fulfilment of a divine promise which the couple had decidedly given up.³⁷ One observes the Islamic principle of *‘Urf* (custom) or even *‘Ijtihād* that applies sound personal reasoning in accomplishing a divine purpose through confirmed and accepted socio-cultural conventions. Perhaps, Sarah’s inability to conceive a son for Abraham is a divine longing for this son to be born through another womb, Hagar’s. Sarah imagines this possibility without circumventing the divine purpose. Hence, she eventually accepts her childlessness as her fate and facilitates the fulfilment of the divine promise through “human initiative” using Hagar since she herself has been prevented by Him who issued the promise.³⁸ Sarah’s arrangement, which is traditionally found to be fulfilling and promising to the husband, Abraham, is that the young African girl, with her fertile womb, will conceive a child with Abraham which will be counted as Sarah’s.

Hagar’s status as a servant now renders her a vulnerable partner to her mistress’ authority backed by the dominant cultural norm which ultimately empowers the latter to push her agenda of influencing the girl into the bosom of marital life. Hagar, the victim of a decision which will affect her future life, but for which she remains quite

³⁶ The Qur’ānic narratives often refer to the Egyptian kings as *Mālik* (Qur’ān 12:43; 12:72). The name “Pharaoh” (Fir’aun) is used in the Qur’ān only in reference to the Egyptian king at the time of Moses (Qur’ān 7:104; 10:75). However, for personal convenience, I will use Pharaoh as a title for the Egyptian king.

³⁷ Walter Brueggemann, “Genesis,” in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James L. Mays (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 151; see also: Stancil, “Genesis 16:1-16,” 394

³⁸ Phyllis Tribble, “The Other Woman: A Literary and Theological Study of the Hagar Story,” in *Understanding the Word: Essays in Honour of Bernard W. Anderson*, ed. James T. Butler, Edgar W. Conrad and Ben C. Ollenburger (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 222-23

vulnerable, will be empowered to assert herself when she gets pregnant. This state of affairs will greatly wound the relationship between her and her mistress. According to the Jewish accounts, on justifying her womanhood with pregnancy after Abraham “touched” her, Hagar now began to despise her mistress,³⁹ who blamed Abraham for that sudden reversal of their fortunes.⁴⁰ Jewish scholars argue from the perspective that Sarah was forced into a situation where, in addition to her deep emotion of not having a child, she also had to endure the impertinence of her own maid whom she was now “sharing” her husband with.

Nonetheless, something is overlooked in the above setting. It appears that Sarah, who had not been pregnant before, did not seem to have come to terms with the emotional stress of Hagar’s first pregnancy. Instead, Sarah felt suffocated by Hagar’s eccentric behaviour which was seemingly misunderstood as her despising her mistress. The above is significant because throughout Hagar’s stay with her hosts, one reads no report of insolence on her part and that humble quality possibly convinced her mistress that she could be a good alternative to a second wife (polygamy). Yet, the real challenge in Abraham’s family life would surface after the birth of Ismā’īl. From the Jewish Scripture, the birth of this child marked a major turning point in the life of Hagar, Sarah, Abraham himself, and undoubtedly, the entire course of human history.⁴¹ Husband and wife now changed their attitude towards Hagar who, in one breath, was to be the fountain through which a future generation would be drawn. Yet, in another, she was victimized for the impatience with regards to the divine promise, a certainty that possibly made Hagar feel “powerless and punished for her obedience.”⁴² Sarah’s hope of

³⁹Reiss, “Ishmael,” 253; Davis, *The Elijah Legacy*, 236

⁴⁰ Gen. 16:4; Stancil, “Genesis 16:1-16,” 394

⁴¹ Zucker, “What Sarah saw,” 54

⁴² Stancil, “Genesis 16:1-16,” 394

being a mother through the surrogate mother, Hagar, has been divorced from reality because “Hagar is repeatedly declared the mother [of the new baby]” and Sarah’s parental status is absent from the picture primarily due to a strained relationship.⁴³ This outcome depicts the failure of the entire arrangement which added insult to injury and thus fuelled discontent in Abraham’s household.⁴⁴

As we indicated earlier, the Jewish sources suggest that the said promised son was to be conceived by Sarah and born as Isaac (Ishāq in Arabic). The Muslim sources also talk about the birth of Isaac. However, from the Muslim sources, the news about Isaac’s birth was delivered after the Hagar *hijrah* (migration), which we shall examine soon, and it is tied-in with the destruction of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (the people of Lūt).⁴⁵ In the Jewish Scripture, however, Sarah delivered Isaac before Hagar was expelled. This primarily made Hagar and her son irrelevant to the psychology of Abraham’s wife, a situation which brought a sort of triangular relationship for Abraham, as the leader of the family, with Sarah at one extreme and Hagar and her son at the other.

According to both the Jewish and the Islamic sources, the mounting animosity between Hagar and Ismā’īl (together) and their mistress, Sarah, and the latter’s demand for the removal of Hagar from her matrimonial home eventually gains a divine sanction which facilitates the migration of Ismā’īl and his mother, Hagar, to Arabia.

‘Outcast’ to the Arabian Desert of Paran

After sometime, the growing tension between Sarah and Hagar and Ismā’īl, reaches irreconcilable stages. Abraham, the leader of the troubled family becomes

⁴³Ray Porter, “If only Ishmael might live under your Blessing?,” *Faith to Faith Newsletter*, Summer 2009, 2; Flint, “God’s Blessing,” 11

⁴⁴ See: Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel*, 50; Flint, “God’s Blessing,” 11, footnote no. 66

⁴⁵ Qur’ān 11:69-73; 29:31; Ibn Kathīr, *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*

deeply perplexed. Abraham had voluntarily chosen to cooperate with his wife in facilitating Hagar's surrogacy. Yet, afterwards, he became incapable of protecting the final fruit of this plan, baby Ismā'īl. In this state of affairs, they needed divine intervention. Did the Pharaoh give his Princess, Hagar, to Abraham's family as a gift? A couple of years earlier, Hagar's personality had impressed Sarah who humbly offered her hand in marriage to her own husband to bring forth a son for the sake of the continuity of her family. Yet, just when providence blessed her surrogate womb with this child, Sarah does not want to even set her eyes on the same Hagar and the baby she had clamoured for. At this point, fate would determine the future of those divine-sanctioned vicissitudes of life. Following this growing tension, Abraham took Hagar and her baby to the uninhabited barren-land of Paran (Farān in Arabic).

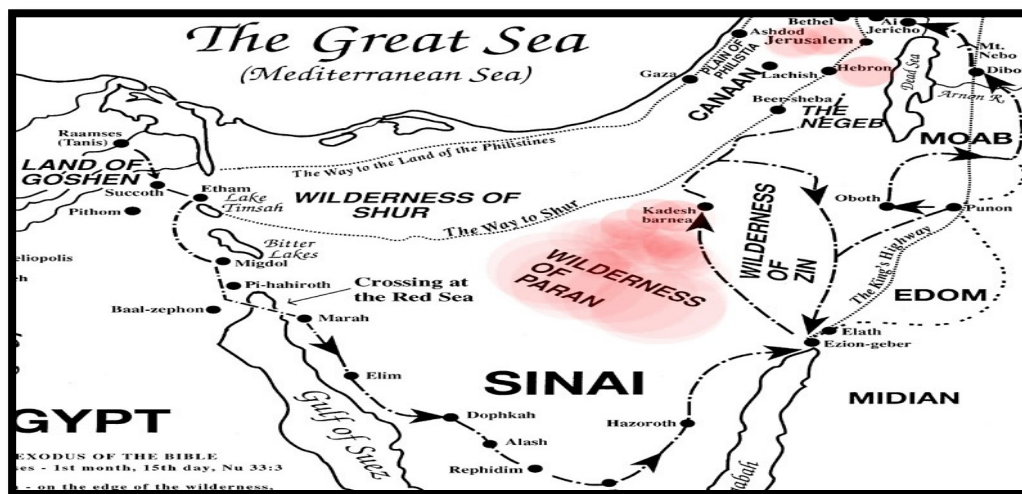


Figure 1: A Map showing the Location of the Desert of Paran (source: <https://rastafarirenaissance.files.wordpress.com/2014/06/behaalotecha-parsha-wilderness-of-paran.jpg>, 19th December 2015)

The Desert of Paran is also mentioned in both the Muslim and the Jewish records. In the Jewish Scripture, it was the destination of Hagar's *hijrah* from Beersheba (the Arabic *Bi'r al-Saba'*), the abode of Ismā'īl's father, Abraham, in Palestine.⁴⁶ Also, the

⁴⁶ Genesis 21:19-21. Palestine is sometimes referred to as Canaan in the Jewish Scripture which the Israelites used as the justification to occupy Canaan around the 2nd Millennium B.C. having identified Palestine or Canaan

Israelites under Moses sojourned there during the exodus from Egypt. It was on this same desert that the *Manna* was sent down.⁴⁷ Further, it was on the Desert of Paran that Prophet Dāwūd (David) sought refuge from his pursuers from King Saul's army.⁴⁸ In the Islamic literature, Paran is mapped within "a mountain range in Makka" in today's Saudi Arabia which corresponds to the site of Abraham's young family mentioned in Qur'ān 14:35-7.⁴⁹ It is found in the area of the Ḥijāz region of today's Saudi Arabia. According to the Arab geographer, Muqaddasī, the Red Sea splits into two tributaries at the edge of the Ḥijāz at Paran (Arabic: Farān from the Hebrew Fa'ran).⁵⁰ In his *Ṣifatu Jazīrah al-'Arab*, the 10th century Abbassid Arabist of al-Yaman, Ḥasan al-Hamdānī, indicates that Paran is said to be the name of a son of Amalek (Arabic: 'Imlīq), a descendant of Esau (Īsaw or Īs in Arabic) and the founder of the Amalekite tribe who is mentioned several times in the Jewish Scripture. Yet, another "Pharan [Farān]" is identified as the son of Auf.⁵¹ However, the authenticity of the latter is doubtful.⁵² The 13th century Graeco-Arab cartographer, Yāqūt Al-Ḥamawī (1179-1229), also argued that "Farān [Paran] ...[is] One of the names of Mecca in the Torah."⁵³ However, in his *Kitāb al-Tijān*, Wahb b. Munabbih explains *Tāl Farān* (Mountain of Farān) as the outer reaches of Makkah.⁵⁴ The Paran

with the Promised Land God is said to have assured Abraham and his descendants, the Israelites of (see: Genesis 12:7).

⁴⁷ Numbers 10:12; Olive M. Winchester, *A Brief Survey of the Old Testament: Moses and the Prophets* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1953); Asher Elkayam, *The Qur'an and Biblical Origins: Hebrew, Christian and Aramaic Influences in Striking Similarities* (Bloomington: Xlibris, 2009), 66

⁴⁸ Sol Liptzin, "Nabal and Abigail," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 8/2 (1979/1980): 78

⁴⁹ See: M. Fethullah Gulen, *The Messenger of God-Muhammad: An Analysis of the Prophet's Life*, rev. ed. (New Jersey: The Light Inc., 2005), 10

⁵⁰ See: Muḥammad Ibn Aḥmad Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm fī Ma'rifat al-Aqālīm*, ed. M.J. De Goeje (Leiden, Brill, 1906); see also, English Trans. by: Basil Anthony Collins, *The Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions* (United Kingdom: Garnet, 1994), 11

⁵¹ Syed Ahmed Khan, *Khuṭbāt al-Ḥamdiya 'alā a-'Arab wal Sīrah al-Muḥammadiyya al-fuhā* (*A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*) (London: Trubner & Co, 1870), 34&35

⁵² Khan, *Khuṭbāt*, 35

⁵³ Yāqūt ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Kitāb Mu'jam al-Buldān*, vol.3, ed. Ferdinand Wuestenfeld (Leipzig: NP., 1868): 65 &834; Reuven Firestone, *The Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, N.Y: State Univ. of New York, 1990), 65 &205, footnote no.18

⁵⁴ See: F. Krenkow, "The Two Oldest Books on Arabic Folklore," *Islamic Culture: An English Quarterly*, 2/2 (1928): 207

Desert, however, seems to cover an area beyond the Ḥijāz and includes the northern half of the coastal plain of the Red Sea stretching from the Gulf of Al-'Aqabah to the Strait of Bāb al-Mandeb (what is popularly known as Tihāmah). However, the place of Hagar's arrival is navigated in today's Makkah, which is located within the mountain range of this Desert.⁵⁵ A 19th century Arabic rendition of the Samaritan manuscript of the *Pentateuch* by R. Kuenen (published in 1851 at Lugduni Batavorum) says that Farān and Ḥijāz "are one and the same place" while Ahmad Khan argues that Farān and Ḥijāz are "identical."⁵⁶ The point of significance is that the above desert would once again be a site for the divine manifestation, for the last time, of God's central message for humanity, *Tawhīd*, through the matriarchal lineage of a humble daughter of Africa, Hagar.

This new place initially named Bakkah became what is Makkah today, a city which has remained important to Muslims all over the world due to the Sacred Mosque (*Masjid al-Ḥarām*). At the time Hagar and Ismā'īl arrived in Makkah in the Ḥijāz or the Desert of Paran, nobody had settled there due to the absence of drinkable water in the area. This then implies that the city of Makkah was founded by people of African origin, a point which justifies the link Africa has established with Arabia, the Arabic language, and Islam. It is recorded that Abraham left Hagar and her son under a lofty tree beyond the present location of the Sacred Mosque⁵⁷ and returned to Palestine to re-unite with his "official wife",⁵⁸ Sarah.⁵⁹ Two issues are left for speculation here. First, what prevented Hagar from returning to her parents in Egypt as she initially attempted to do

⁵⁵See: Alexander Marx and B. Halper, "Halper's 'Post-Biblical Hebrew Literature' Review of Post-Biblical Hebrew Literature. An Anthology," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 14 (1924): 341-348; Alexander Marx, *Halper's 'Post-Biblical Hebrew literature'* (Philadelphia: NP, 1924), 53

⁵⁶For more details on Farān: see: Khan, *Khuṭbāt*, 75-6

⁵⁷Qur'ān 14:37

⁵⁸Reiss, "Ishmael," 254

⁵⁹Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raḥeequl Makhtum*, 35

according to Jewish scholars?⁶⁰ Secondly, why did Abraham not send her back to her parents when he did not want to live with her anymore? However, what is intriguing is that, according to the Muslim sources, Abraham reportedly began journeying back to Palestine without even informing them about his decision. Moreover, they were only left with a leather case containing date fruits and a vessel of water.⁶¹ Consequently, Hagar protested, but Abraham, who might have acted on divine orders, never looked back. Hagar is heard saying: “Has God asked you to do this? [*lahu-l-Lāh ‘amruk bi hādhā?*]”⁶² This humble question, the message and tone of which seemingly struck the deeply religious Abraham to a degree which exceeds any imaginable conjecture, forced him to immediately turn back and respond: “yes [*na‘m.*]” There upon, Hagar’s heart is laid to rest (but with some unease). The conversation continues as follows:

Hagar: “Oh Abraham, to whom are you leaving us? [*yā Ibrāhīm ‘ilā man tatrunkā*]”

Abraham: “I am leaving you to God’s care” [*‘Ilā-l-Lāh*]

Hagar: “I am satisfied to be with God!” [*Raḍītu bi-l-Lāh*]

She then returns to her baby saying: “God will let no harm to come onto us [my baby and I]”⁶³

The above discourse clearly shows that the humble African woman, whose offspring would be the most influential in Arabia, also had a firm belief in God. She perhaps took consolation in this to prepare for the new fate awaiting them in the not too far future. Abraham has left, and sooner or later, the water is finished; the nursing-mother, Hagar, now faces the consequence of her migration.⁶⁴ The real toil in life is just about to begin.

⁶⁰According to Judeo-Christian scholars, following the treatment of her hosts, Hagar attempted to escape back to Egypt and had travelled as far as the “Oasis of the Desert of Shur” to the north-east of her homeland Egypt while in the state of pregnancy (see: Gerhard von Rad, “Genesis,” in *The Old Testament Library*, rev. edition., ed. G. Ernest Wright, John Bright, James Barr and Peter Ackroyd (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 192; Stancil, “Genesis 16:1-16,” 394-5)

⁶¹ Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum*, 35

⁶²*Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 4. ḥadīth no. 372

⁶³For details, see: *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 4. ḥadīth no. 372-76 ;Ibn Kathīr, *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyā*; Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī, *Fath al-Bārī Sharḥ Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Cairo: Dar al-Hadīth, n.d.)

⁶⁴ See: Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*

Where was she to get water from a land with harsh conditions which had detracted even nomads from its beautiful topography?⁶⁵ The small-boy Ismā'īl started crying of thirst. This might re-raise our earlier question as to why Hagar did not continue back to Egypt after Abraham had left. But we now find the answer in the above discourse in which she affirmed her faith in God that He was with them (i.e. "I am satisfied to be with God! ... God will let no harm to come onto us").⁶⁶ By this time, Hagar had become more conscious of the need to take her own "destiny" into her hands, and with her son, face the harshness of life with all the confidence it deserved.

In his oft-cited commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, entitled, *Fatḥ al-Bārī*, Imām Ibn Ḥajar, confirming the Jewish narrative,⁶⁷ indicates that when the water ran-out, Hagar, whose breast could not produce milk anymore, could not endure looking at Ismā'īl's agonizing cry. Therefore, she left him and hovered between the hills of Ṣafā and Marwah with the hope of finding a passerby who could help; but all to no avail. On Mount Marwah, an Angel appeared to her who later dug the historical Well of Zamzam for them.⁶⁸ The story surrounding this Well is well known among scholars and in the Muslim traditions.⁶⁹

Ismā'īl in the Making of Arabia

There is no conflict of opinion about the fact that Ismail's offspring settled in Arabia, the land where Makkah is situated today. Furthermore, there is no disagreement

⁶⁵ See: Ibn Ḥajar, *Fatḥ al-Bārī*

⁶⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol. 4. ḥadīth no. 372-3; Ibn Kathīr, *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyā*; Ibn Ḥajar, *Fatḥ al-Bārī*

⁶⁷ See: Genesis 21:15

⁶⁸ For more details, see: Muhammad Taqī-ud-Din Al-Hilālī & Muhammad Muhsin Khān, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'ān in the English Language: A Summarized Version of At-Tabarī, Al-Qurtubī, and Ibn Kathīr with Comments from Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī Summarized in One Volume*, 15th ed. (Riyath: Darussalam, 1996), 463-7

⁶⁹ See: *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, vol.1, ḥadīth nos. 3364, 3365; Al-Hilālī & Khān, *Interpretation*, 464-5. For other theories on the Well of Zamzam, see: Robert Dankoff, *An Ottoman Mentality: The World of Evliya Çelebi* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 182-3

about the fact that a chunk of the Arabian Peninsula was inhabited by the progeny of Hagar's son,⁷⁰ Ismā'īl to whom many Arabs trace their ancestry today.⁷¹ And, both Jews and Arabs consider him to be an ancestor of the Arabs.⁷² Both the Jewish and Muslim sources also agree that Ismā'īl gave birth to twelve children.⁷³ The two sources, however, disagree about the tribal origins of his wives. The Jewish Scripture indicates that Ismā'īl's mother, Hagar, chose for him a woman from Egypt to marry.⁷⁴ The wild Desert of Paran which is situated south of the land of Canaan and northeast of Mount Sinai (Arabic: Ṭūr Sīnīn) could, indeed, facilitate easy access to women or people from Egypt; possibly those en route across the Gulf through the Paran Desert to Canaan for trade. Research indicates that Canaan became an extension of Egypt which enjoyed trade and cultural monopoly in the East.⁷⁵ This phenomenon had some impact on the progeny of Ismā'īl who still traded with Egyptians in company with the Midianites.⁷⁶ This economic way of life (trade or *Tijārah* in Arabic) eventually became an outstanding characteristic of his descendants, the Arabs mentioned in the Tanakh Scripture.⁷⁷ The word "Arab" is even argued to derive from a Semitic or Hebrew word which could be

⁷⁰Khan, *Khuṭbāt*, 61

⁷¹Thomas Clarke, *History of Intolerance: With Observations on the Unreasonableness and Injustice of Persecution, and on the Equality and Wisdom of Unrestricted Religious Liberty*, vol.2 (London: B.J. Holdsworth, 1823), 69; Diana R. Rice and Brian Mullen, "Isaac, Ishmael, and Janus: Past and Future Lessons regarding the Ethnic Categorization of Faces," *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 17/9 (2003): 1129-1147; Asha Bedar and Joumanah El Matrah, *Media Guide: Islam and Muslims in Australia* (Australia: Islamic Women's Welfare Council of Victoria, 2005), 8; Davis, *The Elijah Legacy*, 237

⁷²Reiss, "Ishmael," 256

⁷³Cf. Genesis 25:13; Khan, *Khuṭbāt*, 61; and Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum*, 39

⁷⁴Genesis 21:20; Clarke, *History*, 68; Cyrus H. Cordon, "Egypt: The Nurturing Land," in *Genesis: World of Myths and Patriarchs*, ed. Ada Feyerick, Cyrus Herzl Gordon, and Nahum M. Sarna (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 189; Reiss, "Ishmael," 255

⁷⁵See: Cordon, "Egypt," 189

⁷⁶Clarke, *History*, 68-9; see also: Genesis 37

⁷⁷Lia D, *Achad-Ankh-Quest: The One-Life-Quest for the Unnamed Pharaohs of Scripture* (USA: Xulon Press, 2012), 51

used for merchandise.⁷⁸ Thus, the traders, believed to be the descendants of Ismā'īl, who saved Joseph (Yūsuf) by buying him, were en route to Egypt.⁷⁹

According to the Jewish accounts, Ismā'īl fathered twelve children with this Egyptian woman and together, they raised their children in Paran (today's Ḥijāz in Arabia).⁸⁰ These twelve children, all of whom were males, were known as “princes” or “tribal chiefs.”⁸¹ This then implies that the twelve tribes of Ismā'īl's progeny (i.e. the later or Arabized Arabs) were of African origin. Their territory would extend from Havilah in Arabia to Shūr in the northwest towards Egypt.⁸² It is known that Ismā'īl married more than once, yet the number of children he had with these women remains uncertain. The Jewish sources indicate that he had at least a daughter, Mahalath⁸³ or Basemath,⁸⁴ with the Egyptian wife, whom Esau, the son of his brother, Isaac (Arabic: Ishāq), married.⁸⁵ It reports that Isaac had objected to Esau (Īs) marrying a Canaanite woman, an objection that possibly influenced him to marry Basemath or Mahalath.⁸⁶ It appears Esau's marriage to Mahalath was to “appease” his father, Isaac, over the marriage of Hittites.⁸⁷ However, some scholars argue that Ismā'īl had two daughters, who were both from the Egyptian woman.⁸⁸ Still others claim he had only one daughter.⁸⁹ According to the Jewish sources, Basemath was the original name of Mahalath and is alleged to have been named “*Mahal*”, which means, “forgiven”, in

⁷⁸See: Clarke, *History*, 69

⁷⁹Elkayam, *The Qur'an*, 65

⁸⁰Cordon, “Egypt,” 189; Elkayam, *The Qur'an*, 65

⁸¹Clarke, *History*, 68; Cordon, “Egypt,” 189; see also: Genesis 25

⁸²Cordon, “Egypt,” 189

⁸³Genesis 28:9

⁸⁴Genesis 36:2-3

⁸⁵See also: Reuven Chaim Klein, “The Wives of Esau,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 42/4 (2014): 211

⁸⁶See: Genesis 28:6-9

⁸⁷Carol Bakhos, *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab* (Albany: State University of New York, 2006), 28

⁸⁸Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Desilver, 1836), 429

⁸⁹Richard R. Losch, *All the People in the Bible: An A-Z Guide to the Saints, Scoundrels, and other Characters in Scripture* (Cambridge: Win. B Eerdmans, 2008), 175

confirmation of the Jewish theory of having one's sins forgiven on getting married as promulgated in the ancient commentary of the *Pentateuch* called *Midrash*.⁹⁰ In the Jewish accounts, the Egyptian woman, who did not know Abraham, sent him (Abraham) away when he visited at a time Ismā'īl was not at home. This caused Ismā'īl to divorce her and remarried a new woman from Canaan. He then sent an apology to Abraham, and requested another visit.⁹¹

The Muslim sources, however, differ from the above Jewish account. In the first place, they reject the Egyptian origin of Ismā'īl's first wife. This account also has it that Ismā'īl married a woman from among the immigrant Arab tribe of al-Yaman, Banī Jurhum, who closely associated with Isma'il⁹² and are said to have taught him the Arabic language.⁹³ The Muslim sources agree with the Jewish narratives on many issues, yet, they equally diverge in many ways. Although the Muslim sources disagree with the Egyptian lineage of Ismā'īl's family, namely: the Jewish narrative on his Egyptian wife, both sources agree that Ismā'īl had twelve sons with no disagreement in the names of those sons.⁹⁴ Further, the Muslim sources also indicate that his first wife was divorced on account of his father's visit. However, contrary to the Jewish account, the "Islamic Abraham" ordered his son to divorce his wife following her uncouth complaint of abject poverty to her husband's "unfamiliar visitor", Abraham.⁹⁵ The implication is that she had washed her dirty linen in public, a behaviour that, perhaps, from the point of view of the concerned father-in-law, was uncharacteristic of a good wife.

⁹⁰ For more details, see: Jed H. Abraham, "A Literary Solution to the Name Variations of Esau's Wives," *The Torah U-Mudda Journal*, 7(1997): 3, see also footnote no.13 on 15.

⁹¹ Louis Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975), 123-125; Reiss, "Ishmael," 255

⁹² Dankoff, *An Ottoman Mentality*, 182

⁹³ Ibn Kathīr, *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyā*, Al-Hilālī & Khān, *Interpretation*, 465; Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raḥeequl Makhtum*, 38

⁹⁴ Cf. Genesis 25: 13-14 & Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, 3; see also: *Sīrat Ibn Hishām* abridged by Abdus-Salām M. Hārūn, trans. Īnās A. Farīd (Cairo: A-F.F.T.P.D, 2000), 4

⁹⁵ Al-Hilālī & Khān, *Interpretation*, 465

Moreover, contrary to the Jewish accounts, the second woman Ismā'īl married was not a Canaanite but also a Jurhumite who is popularly claimed to be the daughter of Mudād b. 'Amr, the head of the Jurhumites.⁹⁶ Her name is given as Ra'lah and she was the mother of Ismā'īl's twelve children.⁹⁷ The Muslim sources are, however, silent about the narratives on the daughter(s). The implication is that the first wife possibly had no child with Ismā'īl.

The above narratives about the first Ismā'īli Arabs, which are fraught with convergences and divergences, are not only intriguing, but also mind-boggling. Who are the Jurhumites who have created this historical stand-off? Historians report of two tribes who bore the name, Jurhum. One was the ancient tribe of Jurhum who existed simultaneously with Banu 'Ād, an extinct generation of desert Arabs classified alongside the tribe of Thamūd, the 'Imlāqīs (the Amelikites), the Ṭasm and the Jadīs.⁹⁸ This Jurhumite tribe came from Kush.⁹⁹ The Kushite civilization was headquartered at Napata, a city-state in ancient Nubia located on the west bank of the River Nile in Northern Sudan. Kush was an ancient colony of Egypt. However, later, Egypt fell for this

⁹⁶Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, 3; Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum*, 38; Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam: A History of the Evolution and Ideals of Islam* (New York: Cosimo, 2010, originally published in 1891), lxiv. The Jurhumite king appears as Meghass ibn Amr and Mudad ibn Amr respectively in the two sources.

⁹⁷ Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, 3; Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum*, 38-9

⁹⁸ See: Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum*, 31. They are now known as the “perishing Arabs” or “Desert Arabs” (*Arab al-Bā'idah*). The 'Ād, who “were the first settlers” in the Arabian Peninsula, were Hamitic in origin or they came from Africa. There were also two groups with this name 'Ād. Apart from the Kushite 'Ād which has been mentioned, another group with the same name is traced to the family of Shem (Sām) and are the fourth generation from Noah ((Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, 4; for more details, see: Khan, *Khubāt*, 14-23)). They controlled a territory in Central Arabia adjoining Al-Yaman, Hadramaut and Oman, which the Arab geographers originally referred to as *Ahsāf al-Ramal*. The 'Ād built a lofty civilization in Asia until a huge number of them were exterminated by draught. A few survivors migrated to Yemen to build another civilization “which attained considerable prosperity” until they were also overpowered by the Qahtanite (Joktanite of the Jewish scripture) branch of the pure Arabs. The 'Imlaqīs were scattered in the Hijāz, Yemen, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt where they ruled as Pharaohs. Those in the Hijāz were overpowered by the Yemenite Jurhumites, a branch of the Qahtanites. The Thamudis were also Kushite in origin. They also dominated the area between the Hijāz and Syria east of Arabia Petraea, known as Hijr and the borders of Edom. They became middlemen in the fruitful trade between the Hijāz and Syria and lived in lofty rocky buildings which made them feel they were invincible to divine destruction. Their stories are allegorically presented in the Qur'ān ((for more details, see: Ibn Kathīr, *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyā'*; Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, lix-xi)).

⁹⁹ Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, lxi.

colony during the mid-eighth century (around 727 BCE) when king Piye captured Thebes and the Nile Delta and ruled them as the 25th Dynasty, a fleet which began with King Kashta. It was under the control of the Kushites that Egypt had the largest number of Pyramids constructed. Thus, in many respects; Kush was Egypt at the height of her power.¹⁰⁰

The second Jurhum tribe is classified among the Qaḥṭānian Arabs, the pure Arabs. These were a Yemeni Arab tribe (itself argued to have been linked with the offshoot of the Kushite civilization in Ethiopia in East Africa). The Jurhumites came to subdue the 'Imlāqis in the Ḥijāz and took over their territorial possessions.¹⁰¹ Therefore, it could be argued that the land referred to today as Arabia was heavily populated by the people of Hamitic or Afro-Asian blood.¹⁰² These might be Kushite, Egyptian, or

¹⁰⁰ See: David Silverman, *Ancient Egypt* (New York: O.U.P., 1997), 36-37; Laszlo Torok, *The Kingdom of Kush: Handbook of the Napatan-Meroitic Civilization* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 132; Robert Morkot, *The Black Pharaohs: Egypt's Nubian Rulers* (London: Rubicon, 2000); Roger G. Morkot, "On the Priestly Origin of the Napatan Kings: The Adaptation, Demise and Resurrection of Ideas in Writing Nubian History," in *Ancient Egypt in Africa (Encounters with Ancient Egypt)*, ed. David O'Connor and Andrew Reid (London: University College London Press, 2003), 151; Charles Bonnet, *The Nubian Pharaohs* (New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 142-154; David N. Edwards, "The Archaeology of Sudan and Nubia," *Annual Review Anthropology*, 36 (2007):219; Geoff Emberling, *Nubia: Ancient Kingdoms of Africa* (New York: ISAW, 2011), 9-11

¹⁰¹ Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, lxi

¹⁰² 'Hamitic' is often used in the literature to contrast the blessed tribe of Israel (Shem) read in Genesis 5. The Jewish sources, the Torah and the Talmūd, mention Prophet Noah (Nuḥ)'s three children, namely: Shem, Ham, and Japheth among whom Ham's son, Canaan, was cursed (see: Genesis 9:25). This was informed by an episode which eventually set the stage to generalize the curse for all descendants of Ham ((see: Alida C. Metcalf, *Go-betweens and the Colonization of Brazil: 1500-1600* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 163-4)). The Talmūd, a compendium of Jewish oral traditions before the 6th century of the common era, indicates that the descendants of Ham were cursed to become black people and thus regarded the Hamites as a morally debased race (see: T. F. Gossett, *Race-the History of an Idea in America* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), 5; Edith R. Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis; Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective," *The Journal of African History*, 10/4 (1969): 522)). In their *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (published in New York by Doubleday in 1964), Robert Graves and Raphael Patai connect the descendants of Ham with black Africans in solid terms: "And since you have disabled me... doing ugly things in blackness of night, Canaan's children [your descendants] shall be borne ugly and black! Moreover, because you twisted your head around to see my nakedness, your grandchildren's hair shall be twisted into kinks, and their eyes red; again because your lips jested at my misfortune, theirs shall swell; and because you neglected my nakedness, they shall go naked, and their male members shall be shamefully elongated! Men of this race are called Negroes, their forefather Canaan commanded them to love theft and fornication, to be banded together in hatred of their masters and never to tell the truth" (see: page 121). In fact, the genealogical table believed to be the generation of Noah popularly called "Table of Nations" in Genesis 10:6 mentions the biblical Egypt (Mizrim), along Kush and Canaan, as the son of Ham (see also: Khan, *Khutbāt*, 14; Nahum M. Sarna, "The Anticipatory Use of Information as a Literary Feature of the Genesis Narratives," in *The Creation of Sacred Literature: Composition*

Thamūdī and, therefore, it was not impossible for Hagar, to marry Ismā'īl to an Egyptian woman.

Let us now investigate the issue further beyond the ethnic or tribal dimensions. Jewish Rabbis and scholars have not painted a good picture of Hagar and her son, Ismā'īl. Through their scriptural exegesis, they have successfully portrayed Ismā'īl and his descendants as rejected partners to the Israelite covenant. Hagar is portrayed as a sinner who enjoyed grace out of God's infinite mercy for sinners.¹⁰³ Her son, Ismail, is also depicted as "a wild donkey" or "wild ass" who reigns in terror and wickedness, a set of attributes which, in the context of the narrative, cannot be interpreted to mean anything good.¹⁰⁴ He is an unwanted partner whom all Israel is against and who is against all Israel.¹⁰⁵

Further, Canaan, just like Egypt, does not appear in the good books of Israel. The "mother of Israel", Sarah, and the "father of Israel", Abraham, did not have a positive experience in these lands. Sarah was manhandled by the King of Egypt; the gift this king

and Redaction of the Biblical Text [Near Eastern Studies, vol.22], ed. Richard Elliott Friedman (London: University of California Press, 1981), 76). This "curse of Ham" and its ideological matrix of "black race" became the motivation for the slavery and racist treatment against blacks for over 1000 years (see: David M. Goldenberg, "The Curse of Ham: A Case of Rabbinic Racism?," in *Struggles in the Promised Land*, ed. Jack Salzman and Cornel West (Oxford: O.U.P, 1997); David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 1: see introduction & 170; David Goldenberg, "Early Jewish and Christian Views of Blacks" (*Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Gilder Lehrman Center International Conference*, Yale University, Connecticut, November 7-8, 2003), 1-21; Metcalf, *Go-betweens and the Colonization of Brazil*, 163)). Thus, although this curse has been repudiated by scholars like Goldenberg, the term 'Hamitic' or 'Hamite' has been used for the black race which is traced to Ham and this gained acceptance in the 17th century ((see also: p.522; R. Hess, "Travels of Benjamin of Tudela: A Twelfth Century Description of North-East Africa," *Journal of African History*, 6/1 (1965): 17)). The 15th century Afro-Arab traveller of Fez, Al-Ḥassan Al-Fasī, popularly known as Leo Africanus, described black Africans as the descendants of Ham (see: Al-Ḥassan Ibn Muhammad Al-Wezaz Al-Fasi, *The History and Description of Africa and of the Notable Things Therein Contained*, trans. John Pory (London: Hakluyt Society, 1896; Sanders, "The Hamitic Hypothesis," 522-3). Many scholars also trace the 'Ādites and the Thamudis to Shem through 'Aram and 'Awṣ in the case of the former and 'Aram and Kather in the case of the latter (see: Khan, *Khuṭbāt*, 25). The implication is that those who established the Kushite civilization could be 'Ādites who possibly migrated to this place from the East. But even if that is the case, in their return they would not come in their full Semitic blood.

¹⁰³ Antonios Fakry, *Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Cairo: St. Mary the Virgin, 1997), 153-5

¹⁰⁴ Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel*, 70-1

¹⁰⁵ See: Genesis 16:12; H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* (London: Evangelical Press, 1972), 504; Flint, "God's Blessing," 6-8

offered her also became a ‘problem’ for her in the land of Canaan where she (Sarah) also remained childless for some time. These experiences invariably make Canaan and Egypt partners to the “wild ass.” Why did the biblical Isaac, the “promised son” of Israel, discourage his son, Esau, from marrying a Canaanite? Canaan and his descendants are cursed to be permanent slaves to Shem. Canaan is a land of polytheists; and in order to purge it of this filth, the whole land is offered as a “gift” (divine promise) to Israel in order to perpetuate the servanthood of Ham and the “divine-sanctioned Mastershood” of Shem. The above background gives the impression that the Jewish (biblical) Ishmael’s marriage to Egyptian and Canaanite women, the “cursed Hamites”, proves his “lowly” origin before “superior” Israel. On the contrary, the Islamic Ismā’īl’s marriage to two Jurhumite women of pure Arab descent, refutes this and reaffirms his family’s Semitic connection. The above phenomena create a certain impasse in the Jewish-Muslim understanding of the Hagar narrative.

The only descendants of Ismā’īl’s sons that can be traced are those of Nabet and Qidar. The Madinan tribes of Khazraj and the Aws are traced to Nabet.¹⁰⁶ Imām Bukhārī and Imām Ibn Ḥajar connect Qaḥṭān, whose offspring are classified as pure Arabs (*‘Arab al-‘Āribah*¹⁰⁷), to the descendants of Nabet.¹⁰⁸ In his *Ar-Raḥeequl-Makhtum*, one of the well-known books on the biography of the Prophet by a 20th century author,¹⁰⁹ Safiur-Rahman Al-Mubarakpuri argues that from the descendants of Qidar, who dwelt in Makkah, came Adnān,¹¹⁰ who is believed to be the 21st grandfather of Prophet

¹⁰⁶Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raḥeequl Makhtum*, 39-40

¹⁰⁷ See: Hitti, *History*, 32; Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raḥeequl Makhtum* (see: the Arabic version)

¹⁰⁸*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ḥadīth no.3507; Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, vol.6, 621-23; Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raḥeequl Makhtum*, 40

¹⁰⁹ This book was given the first prize in a worldwide competition on the *Sirah* (the biography of the Prophet) in Makkah in 1979 by the Muslim World League.

¹¹⁰ However, according to one of the oldest manuscripts of the *Sirah al-Rasulullah* which authorship is contested between Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Hishām, Adnān came through the lineage of Nabet (see: *Sirat Ibn Hishām* by Hārūn, page 4)

Muḥammad.¹¹¹ However, some scholars disagree with the short link between Adnān and Abraham and argue that forty grandfathers existed between Adnān and Abraham.¹¹² However, in his *Sīrah al-Rasūlu Allah*, one of the oldest surviving collections of a detailed biography of the Prophet in an edited form, Ibn Ishāq and his celebrated editor, Ibn Hishām, trace Adnān from the lineage of Nabet.¹¹³ The editor, Ibn Hishām, traces the genealogy of the Prophet through the following:

Muhammad was the son of ‘Abdullah, b. ‘Abdu’l-Muṭṭalib (whose name was Shayba), b. Hāshim (whose name was ‘Amr), b. ‘Abdu Manāf (whose name was Mughīra), b. Quṣayy (whose name was Zayd), b. Kilāb, b. Murra, b. Ka’b, b. Lu’ayy, b. Ghālib, b. Fihir, b. Mālīk, b. Al-Naḍr, b. Kināna, b. Khuzayma, b. Mudrika (whose name was ‘Āmir), b. Ilyās, b. Muḍar, b. Nizār, b. Ma’add, b. Adnān, b. Udd (or Udad), b. Muqawwam, b. Nāhūr, b. Tayrah, b. Ya’rub, b. Yashjub, b. Nābit, b. Ismā’īl, b. Ibrāhīm [Abraham]....¹¹⁴

The genealogy between the Prophet and Ismā’īl has not caused any debate among Muslim scholars apparently because the Prophet himself mentioned it in his traditions.¹¹⁵ According to Al-Ṭabarī, the Prophet often mentioned Adnān as one of his grandfathers.¹¹⁶ From the descendants of Adnān, after several grandfathers, came Quraysh whose descendant, ‘Abdu Manāf, is mentioned in the above extract. From this line came Hāshim, then ‘Abdul Muṭṭalib (Shayba), then ‘Abdullah, the father of the Prophet.¹¹⁷

¹¹¹ Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-Umam wa-l-Mulūk*, vol.2 (Egypt: Husainiyah Press, nd), 191-4; Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum*, 40; Khairuddin al-Zarkli, *Al-A’lām: Qāmūs Tarājim li-’Athihar al-Rijāl wa-l-Nisā’ min al-’Arab*, vol.5 (Beirut: Dar al-’Ilm li-l-Malayin, 2002)

¹¹² Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol.2, 191; see also: Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, vol. 6, 622; Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum*, 41

¹¹³ See: Ibn Hisham in Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat al-Rasul Allah*, 3

¹¹⁴ See: Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat al-Rasul Allah*, 3

¹¹⁵ See for example: Muhammad ibn ‘Eisā At-Tirmidhi, *Jami’ At-Tirmidhi*, vol. 2, trans. Abu Khaliyl (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007); al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum*, 42

¹¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol.2, 191-4; see also: Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum*, 40; Al-Zarkli, *Al-A’lām*, vol. 5, 6

¹¹⁷ For more details, see: Hitti, *History*, 189; Al-Mubarakpuri, *Ar-Raheequl Makhtum*, 41-2

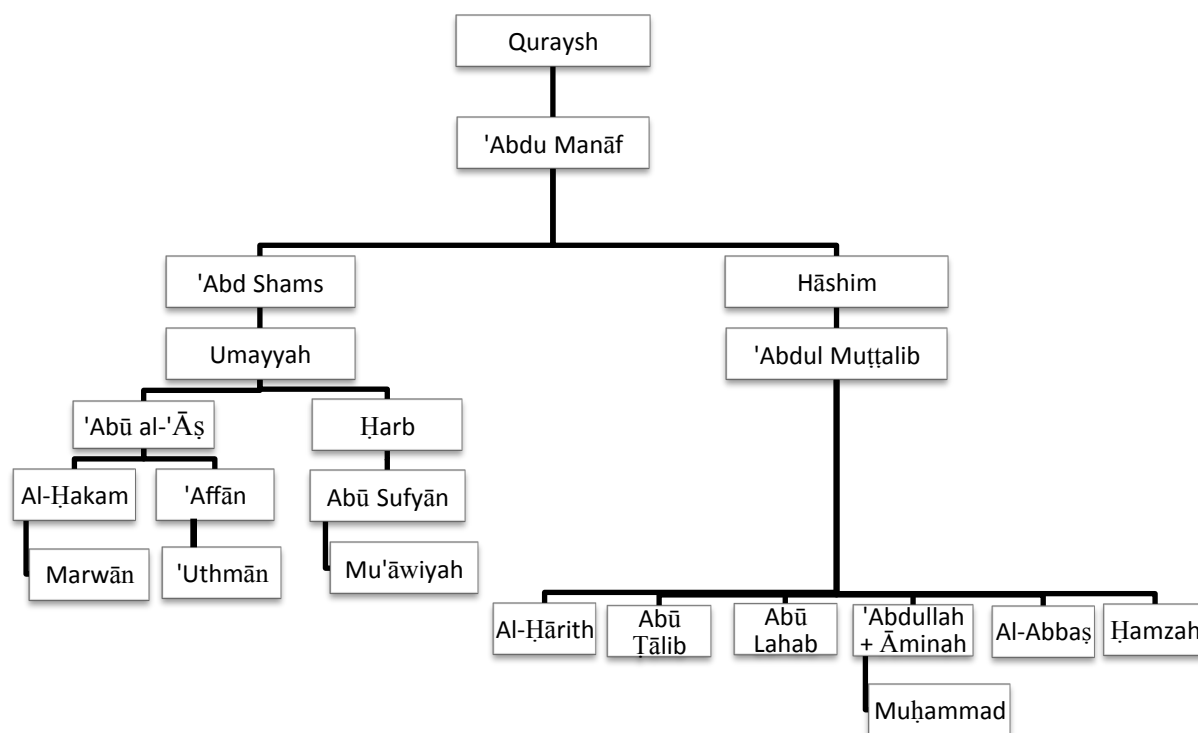


Figure 2: Genealogy of the Prophet from Quraysh (source: Hitti, *History*, 189)

After Abraham built al-Ka‘bah, Ismā‘īl administered the city of Makkah till his death at the age of 130 years (some say 137).¹¹⁸ The Jurhumites overpowered the descendants of Ismā‘īl and took control of Makkah and the Ka‘bah until the former fell out of power, possibly before Nebuchadnezzar’s (Arabic: Bukhtanasar’s) invasions. The Jurhumites were later expelled from Makkah and, sometime afterwards, the full control of al-Ka‘bah and the city of Makkah was ceded back to the descendants of Ismā‘īl.¹¹⁹ This occurred during the days of Quṣay (roughly 440 CE),¹²⁰ since whose time the control of Makkah and the Ka‘bah remained in the family of Ismā‘īl. Quṣay was inherited in the control of Makkah and the Ka‘bah by Quraysh. The Quraysh of Makkah, were able to

¹¹⁸ Cf. Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat al-Rasul Allah*, 3 & Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, vol.1, 314. The Jewish Scripture, however, supports the latter (Genesis 25:17).

¹¹⁹ Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat al-Rasul Allah*.

¹²⁰ See: Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, vol.6, 633

maintain some relics in the Ka‘bah that connected Ismā‘īl and his father to the Prophet’s family Banū Hāshim, and for that matter, the Quraysh.¹²¹

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to assess Africa’s role in the building of the pre-Islamic Arab civilization with insights into the story of Hagar and her son, Ismā‘īl. From the discussion, one issue that constantly emerged was that Africans played a major role in constructing the pre-Islamic Arab lineage and the building of Arabia. The implication is that the Arabs of today have major ethnic affinities with Africa. The Ḥajj rituals of *Sa’y* must remind Muslims all over the world about the role of Hagar and Africa in general in constructing Arabic, and for that matter, the Abrahamic identity. Women’s role in the Arab society into which the Prophet was born was essentially eclipsed by the shadow of patriarchy in which women’s roles operated behind the scenes, no matter how heroic. Nonetheless, Hagar, and for that matter Africa, still serves as the precursor of the current Arab civilization which deserves some scholarly reflection. There is a huge ethnic connection between, at least, the Prophet’s family and the earliest African or Afro-Asian settlers of the Desert of Paran, namely: Hagar and her son, Ismā‘īl.

Indeed, Prophet Muḥammad himself recognized his African origin when he admonished the Muslim conquerors: “When you conquer Egypt treat its people well, for they can claim our protection and kinship.”¹²² Further, Ibn Kathīr makes reference to a statement in which Abū Hurayrah, a known companion of the Prophet, referred to Hagar as the mother of his listeners (a cross-section of Arabs).¹²³ Yet, the Jewish

¹²¹The Ka‘bah built by Abraham and his son, Ismā‘īl, remained sacred for his progeny. 360 deities and a chief deity named Hubal, together with carved images of Abraham and Ismā‘īl were stored in it ((Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, lxiv)).

¹²² Ibn Ishaq, *Sirat Rasul Allah*, 4

¹²³ Ibn Kathīr, *Qaṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’*

Scripture (e.g. Genesis 16) portrays Ismā'īl as God's tool for exonerating Abraham while pronouncing a verdict on Sarah in comforting Hagar. Hagar is portrayed as an evil woman, a sinner who came to compound the pain of her mistress and is, therefore, ordered by God to be expelled; but due to this God's mercy for sinners, she and her child still survived. This forces Hagar into a complex and discouraging role where one might see her as an oppressed victim or a scapegoat of the prophecy which portrays this "God" as "unjust." The implication of the Jewish narrative is that Hagar was "used and dumped" as Ismā'īl, meant initially to stem the tide of sadness in Sarah's marital life and make Abraham a father, was rather placed outside the "Abrahamic covenant" and exposed to suffering in the land of penury. Nevertheless, God's own plan was to make the rejected mother and son (the African "slaves" of Israel) the "sages" and pivot for not just a new nation but a fountainhead for "the greatest Prophet of humankind." Even so, Hagar's descendant, Ismā'īl, continues to be vilified in his struggle to survive the harsh conditions of the desert: "a wild fighter who used his sword to beat, conquer, and rob his enemies, as his descendents are doing against their enemies."¹²⁴ In the above comment, the Coptic Christian Father, Fakry is in apparent opposition to the Arab conquest of Egypt and the perennial excesses of the extremists against the Copts in the past.¹²⁵ This makes Hagar's personhood enigmatic to Egyptian Copts who see Sarah as their mother vis-a-vis their own ethnic heroine, Hagar, who is despised as the mother of their antagonist other, the Muslims.¹²⁶ For African Muslims, however, the story of Hagar creates a certain ethnic consciousness and portrays the historical role of the African continent in the making of Islamic history which scholars must re-examine. For Hagar is

¹²⁴Fakry, *Bible Commentary*, 157

¹²⁵ Elisha, "Can Egyptian," 72

¹²⁶ Elisha, "Can Egyptian," 73

a woman every African could be proud of. She has been a major inspirational figure among black Americans both Muslims and non-Muslims.¹²⁷

¹²⁷Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 2-5

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