

Chapter 12

Hagar/Hajar, Muslim Women and Islam: Reflections on the Historical and Theological Ramifications of the Story of Ishmael's Mother

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Abstract There is a duplicitous treatment of Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, in Western sources. Ishmael is Abraham's first-born, so agreeing with the Islamic view, but is then cast out as illegitimate in favour of Isaac. Similarly, Hagar agrees to be Abraham's wife, so as to give him the child his other wife Sarah cannot give him, and stands aside while this child is adopted by his other wife, but is then subsequently cast out as though a common adulteress. Granted Ishmael and Hagar are Arabic, while Isaac and Sarah are Aramaic (read Jewish), the Western story remains as a sore point in Muslim scholarship. It has potential to serve as a negative motif for the treatment rendered to Islam by Western sources from the very beginning. In the case of Hagar, it becomes a particular motif that suggests that the ill-treatment of Muslim women within Islam has been justified by the way the 'first Muslim woman' was treated by the Jews. Recovering and re-conceiving the story from the Muslim perspective can serve to repair some of this negative history. This is the intention of this chapter.

Introduction

Hagar (known as Hajar in Arabic) is a character in the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions (the three so-called Abrahamic religions). The story outlining her treatment as Abraham's subsidiary wife has caused concern both in antiquity and in modern times. She is described as the woman used for others' advantage and then forthwith disposed of without mercy. She presents an archetypical image of the unwanted partner and the exiled single mother who fears for her child's welfare. In this context, her story also presents as a motif for the rejection of the Arabic

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interpretation of the Abrahamic legend by the Judaeo-Christian West. Granted the Arabic interpretation lies at the heart of Islam, her rejection has potential to be understood as a rejection of Islam itself.

Background

According to the traditions preserved by the three Abrahamic faiths, Hagar was an Egyptian servant-woman of Sarah, the wife of the Ancestor Abraham. Their stories, with some competing details, more or less match in general outline. That outline is as follows: when Sarah, wife of the Ancestor Abraham, proved to be infertile, she suggested that Abraham have a child by her handmaiden Hagar.¹ She has the ominous name of 'Stranger'. Hagar conceived and became the mother of a son, Ishmael. At some significantly later date, unexpectedly and by divine intervention, Sarah herself conceived and also had a son, Isaac. In a questionable aspect of the tradition, Sarah then decided to expel Hagar and Ishmael from the home and Abraham condescended. The mother and child² were given bread and water to wander into the wilderness. With the water running out, the distraught Hagar placed the child under a tree. She went off from him so as not to hear his wailing and see his death. A messenger of God appeared to her and showed her a nearby well which saved their lives. Hagar settled in a remote area. The next salient feature of the story is that Abraham was commanded by God to sacrifice his son (Isaac in the Jewish and Christian traditions, although there is ambivalence in the Islamic tradition) and he almost completed the human sacrifice, only to be countermanded at the final moment by a messenger of God.

There are major differences between the three traditions as to the identification of the son who is the token of divine promise, Abraham's role in the expulsion of Hagar, the geographical location of the wandering and the well and the identification of the son who is nearly sacrificed.

While the symbolic figures of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac became highly visible in the traditions, Hagar has also had her own prominence. The seemingly reprehensible treatment meted out to her in the storyline has raised questions. As a result, there are a number of modern interpretations of her symbolic character in this story form. For example, for many Muslims today, Hagar symbolizes true motherhood and female leadership (see 'Aishah 'Abd al-Rahman 1999, p. 200). Hagar has also become, for both some modern Arabs and even some Israelis, the embodiment of the spirit of the Palestinian Arabs, displaced by the Israelis from their homeland. Some Israeli nationals even see Hagar as the symbol of future reconciliation between the Israeli State and the Palestinians or the Arab world generally (Yiftachel 2010). In Christian circles, Hagar has been interpreted by Christian Liberation Theology

¹ Whether Hagar actually became Abraham's wife, in the full sense of the term, or had the status of a concubine, is disputed in the traditions.

² The child's age was indeterminate at this point.

adherents and some feminists as the symbol of the silent victim of patriarchy and ethnic violence (Bailey 2002).

Hagar, as depicted in the storyline, is clearly patent of many interpretations. In order to clarify her symbolic role, and the possibility of further reinterpretation of it, I intend to trace the development of the Abraham tradition insofar as it specifically deals with Hagar and to see how it progressed. There will necessarily be greater attention paid to the symbol in the Hebrew Scriptures where we have its first instance. In this way, there should be some criterion for judging how her character can be interpreted within the parameters of the three Abrahamic traditions.

The Jewish Tradition of Hagar

Hagar originated within the Jewish Torah. We have no earlier reference. If we are to re-find the original symbol, then we need to revert to that text in the first instance. She appears in the Hebrew Torah as one of the characters in a complex of Ancestor Stories featuring Abraham and Sarah (at first known as Abram and Sarai) in Genesis 11–25. She is unknown in other literature or traditions. The complex of pericopes in the Torah text is marked off by genealogies at its beginning and end. Over some time, extraneous material had been attracted into this complex and these additions distorted its original format. In particular, a long novella concerning Abraham's nephew, Lot, has been interleaved but there are other editorial additions and duplications as well.

Once the additions have been excised, a chiasmic structure appears (where the first item corresponds to the last, the second to the second last and so on – see Fig. 12.1).³ The chiasmic structure is based on verbal and thematic similarities in the Hebrew text and is reproduced below with only the original text included. Note that the names of Abram and Sarai in the first part are changed to Abraham and Sarah in the second.

There are significant verbal and thematic parallels between the items in the first half and those in the second half of the chiasm. There are two covenant sacrifices (D/D1), two endangerments of Sarah (C and C1) and two Testings of Abraham (B and B1; in the first he is required to give up his past, in the second to give up his future). The whole section is marked off by parallel genealogies.

At the centre of the chiasm, in the unattached E, we find the story of Hagar, rejected by the Ancestors, giving birth to Ishmael ('God hears'). This outcome in the narration is quite unexpected: why should the firstborn and his mother be rejected, to be replaced by the later born son and the wife? This question posed to the storyline actually raises another: what would have been the historical context that could explain the formation of a chiasmic structure with this peculiar core? What is being sought is not an historical residue that might explain the narrative but the historical period in which this narrative (perhaps factually historical, perhaps not), with its specific characters and their interactions, might have been meaningfully created and read?

³For further justification of this structure see Crotty (2005).

- A Genealogy 11:10-32
- B Migration of Abram and Sarai from Haran 12:1-9
- C Danger to Ancestor, Sarai, in Egypt 12:10-13:4
- D Covenant Sacrifice 15:1-11, 17-21
- E Hagar, rejected by the Ancestors, gives birth to Ishmael¹⁶
- D1 Covenant Sacrifice 17:1-10, 15-22
- C1 Danger to Ancestor, Sarah, in Gerar 20
- B1 Birth of Isaac 21:1-7 and the Testing of his Near Sacrifice⁴ 22:1-14
- A1 Genealogy 25:1-18

Fig. 12.1 The literary structure of the Genesis story

It should be noted that the rejection of Hagar and Ishmael at the centre of the chiasm is repeated with more detail in Genesis 21:8–21. These are alternatives, with Hagar pregnant in the first instance and the mother of a grown child in the second. We have one written version of the tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures. The second, more extensive version of the rejection would have been also in circulation (and inserted later in the narrative).

The most obvious contender for an historical context would be the Persian period,⁵ prior to the schism between Judaism and the Samaritans about 300 BCE, i.e., during the period of 500–300 BCE, since the Torah does not exclude the Samaritans and was accepted by them. It would thus seem that this Abraham/Sarah tradition with its key reference to Hagar must have taken form before 300 BCE at the latest. What of a *terminus a quo*? There are reasons to situate its creation not much prior to that time.

During the period after 500 BCE, there had been transfers of population from Mesopotamia to the Persian satrapy of Yehud. This was originally a Babylonian province, comprising Jerusalem and the area adjacent to it, which had been militarily taken over by the Persians. The Persians, according to accepted colonial practice, had transplanted a new population with a mandate to build a Temple and rebuild the city. These immigrants might or might not have had genealogical descent from earlier exiled groups taken from the same area by the Babylonians. However it may have been, the newly settled immigrants were required to make the new land their own. This undoubtedly set up conflict between the urban immigrants and the native,

⁴The Testing of Abraham is known in Jewish tradition as the Aqedah (also Akedah) or the Binding (of Isaac). This refers to the reference in the text to Isaac being bound for sacrifice. In Christian tradition the same event is more commonly known as the Sacrifice of Isaac (even though he was not actually sacrificed).

⁵In what follows I am indebted to Davies (1992).

more rural population that had never left the area. The immigrants would have had instructions to establish themselves as an enclave comprising groups such as temple authorities, local aristocrats and entrepreneurs (see Weinberg 1992). Importantly, the immigrant group would necessarily have been literate.

Within the city of Jerusalem, the newcomers must have established the cult of a new High God,⁶ YHWH. This High God may or may not have borne the characteristics of the YHWH worshipped earlier in Iron Age Palestine at such sites as Kuntillet 'Ajrud (see Davies 1991, pp. 78–82). Whereas in Iron Age Palestine, YHWH would have been a local fertility god with his own consort (Asherah), or perhaps consorts in the plural, the YHWH of these immigrants would have been a single, male god, without consort, creator of all things, the equivalent of a Babylonian Sin or Marduk.⁷ This explains why the key symbolic statement, within E, contains the rejection of the Indigenous population, Hagar and Ishmael. The next question is why is this statement of rejection contained within two episodes of covenant-making?

A covenant, in Near Eastern religious society, implied that between the High God as a patron deity and the community there was a contract that regulated mainly land possession and the treatment of those outside the community. This narrative's structure declares that the contract is with Abraham and his progeny via Isaac, son of Sarah, not with Abraham's progeny via Ishmael, son of Hagar. The latter are rejected.

Looking at greater depth into the history of the post-Exilic experience, the Persian overlords wanted to ensure an increase in their revenue in the conquered areas to the west and to ensure political stability. Agricultural production needed to be increased in the Palestinian area and new sites were therefore established (see Høglund in Davies 1991, pp. 54–72). The immigrants acted at the behest of these Persian masters. They needed to establish themselves as being *in situ* by right. Those who had 'returned' to Yehud are therefore presented in the relevant biblical texts, for which they themselves by means of their scribes were responsible, as being of pure ethnic descent from still earlier inhabitants who had arrived prior to the present population that had an original claim to the land. Cyrus provided the initiative, based on economic and political grounds, and the immigrants rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and its Temple and forged an identity for themselves.

⁶Niehr (1990) has written about the discernment of a high god by a religious society. It was in particular in the Persian/Hellenistic period that we have significant Near Eastern evidence of the emergence of cults of a single high god. For example, at this time, Nabonidus was regarded as eccentric for his singular worship of the high god Sin (Pritchard 1969, pp. 560–562). Likewise, around this time the Achaemenids turned to the exclusive worship of the high god, Ahura Mazda (Boyce 1975).

⁷Philip Davies has written of this period:

...the exile is the central myth of the biblical account of the past. The immigrants, like the Pilgrim Fathers, had their minority experience come to determine the identity of the majority whose real history was different. However, this central paradox, by which the immigrants displaced the indigenous, manifested itself in other narratives too, celebrating an original 'Israel' that was brought into the 'promised land' from outside, and distinguished itself radically and polemically from the indigenous population. There are in the biblical literature several such stories of origin, including the stories of Abraham, the Exodus and the conquest. (1992, p. 84)

Even the new Temple of Jerusalem can be explained by Persian economics, since temples were storehouses not only for religious taxes but also for imperial taxes. Our modern division between church and state is not relevant here. Under Persian rule, if the local temple raised taxes, then no separate imperial system was required (Schaper 1995). Hence, the momentum for the building of the Second Temple came from Cyrus and his bureaucracy, not from the immigrants or the extant population.⁸ Its purpose was not primarily the worship of a High God but as a centre for the cultural and economic revitalisation of the satrapy.

The story of the return to Yehud describes, in reality, a colonial, immigrant action, of a new population supplanting a local population. This immigrant group would have been made up of a ruling class with Persian power behind them. This ruling class would have included a priestly caste and a group of relatively rich traders, investors and landowners who were dispatched specifically to take advantage of the economic situation (see Weinberg 1992 and Kippenberg 1982). Those not included would have been the *'am haaretz* ("the people of the land"), those inhabitants who had been left in the local area, worshippers of the local YHWH and other deities. These people would not have been connected with the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its new Temple. They were not part of the elite worshipping group with its own distinctive, if unhistorical story. Between the immigrant group and the extant population there would have been many causes for conflict.

The immigrant group had the power to govern as granted to them by the Persians, but they were not accepted by the larger population. To enhance their acceptance, they required a mandate from the past for their right to rule and their claim to the land. The biblical literature came about, under their direction, by scribal activity as they endeavoured to insert themselves artificially within the traditions of the Indigenous population and to create a religious culture that seemingly had links with the local past and which advantaged them. They undertook a literary program that made use of existing records and traditions (some doubtless of a historical basis in our terms) which inserted the immigrant group cleverly into its discourse. The literary program would have been overseen by this very same ruling caste by means of its own scribal school.

After these reflections on the literary analysis of the text and its socio-historical setting, we return to the Genesis narrative concerning Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac. What is the synchronic meaning of the biblical story that centres on the rejection of the son of Abraham born to Hagar, and the acceptance of the son of Abraham by Sarah? The central focus in the story of the Ancestors is not Abraham but Sarah. Abraham, through Hagar, became the father of Ishmael, the 'Inauthentic Israel'. Sarah is the Ancestor who, against all expectations, as is made clear in the endangerment of the Ancestor stories, gives birth to the 'True Israel' – Isaac. She is

⁸ At this point the term 'Second Temple' needs to be reconsidered. We know very little about the First Temple of Solomon apart from the extensive descriptions in the scriptural record. If this record is largely the result of purposive writing whose redaction took place in the Persian period then it becomes questionable as history. The newcomers based the newly built Temple on a previous Temple which they themselves described. Perhaps there had been a previous Temple but its size, importance and even its focus of worship are not at all certain.

not the mother of Ishmael, the Inauthentic Israel, the forebear of the *'am haaretz*. The birth of Ishmael by Hagar might have seemed to have been the fulfilment of divine promise, but it was not. The fulfilment of the promise, sealed by the covenant ritual, was Isaac born through Sarah.

According to this reading of the narrative, the Ancestors, Abraham and Sarah have been brought from Mesopotamia to the Land that was promised to them. There, Sarah has eventually produced the True Israel, the heir of the divine promises. The *'am haaretz*, the inhabitants of the Land, should consequently surrender any claim to territory or power. This narrative in Genesis 11–25 is a formal claim to both land and power, an account of how a new population from Mesopotamia could establish itself as the later descendant of putative Ancestors and could lay claim to possession of land and the right to rule.

Hence, the story in Genesis 11–25 should be read as follows. Abram and Sarai are living outside the *'eret*, the Land of Israel. They are called by the High God YHWH to enter the land and to take possession of it. This is a first Testing, since Abram must give up his land and ethnicity. Their journey represents a formal act of taking possession of the new Land.⁹ Sarai is threatened in Egypt; she may be restrained from entering the Land.¹⁰ She is delivered. A first covenant ceremony is performed in the land, and it is followed by the rejection of Hagar and her son, Ishmael, who would seem to be the obvious means of fulfilling the promises of the covenant. Ishmael is not to be the successor. This is the central point of the story.

The names of Abram and Sarai are then changed and another covenant ceremony is performed, this time with Hagar and Ishmael absent. This is followed by another threat, more proximately on the borders of the land, to Sarah's entry into the land. Again, she is delivered. Finally, all of YHWH's purposes are revealed with the birth of Isaac by Sarah and the passing of the second Testing, the near sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham at YHWH's bidding.

In short, the Abraham tradition in Genesis 12–25 is a complex foundational story justifying the acquisition of the land by 'Abraham's family', an immigrant group that had arrived in the land and inserted itself into its sacred narrative. During the same Persian period in which the Abraham story circulated, it would have been conjoined with another similar tradition, the Mosaic Exodus-story, which had a separate literary history but followed the same pattern of foundational story.¹¹ Hence, Isaac entered Jewish religious consciousness as the symbol of the group that

⁹Note the initial parallels with the Exodus journey in this account.

¹⁰Note further the continuing parallels with the Exodus story in this part of the narrative: the role of the Egyptian Pharaoh, plagues and the eventual decision to let the Ancestors depart.

¹¹There were a number of other tribal traditions (which may or may not have contained kernels of historical fact) circulating: supplementary Isaac and Sarah stories, the Lot novella, Jacob-Israel stories, the Joseph novella, the Mosaic Exodus story mentioned above. The whole complex of stories would have been formed into the flowing text of the Torah. At some point within this phase of scribal redaction, the Abraham complex would have first been expanded by the additions mentioned earlier and then the cumbersome text would have been relegated to a preparatory phase to the Mosaic Exodus story with the central point being Moses meeting YHWH on Sinai. This latter became the main foundational story rather than Abraham meeting YHWH on Mount Moriah, the Mountain of Vision.

claimed inheritance of the land. Sarah was the ‘True Mother Ancestor’ and her son, Isaac, was the ‘True Israel’. Hagar was the symbol of the ‘Inauthentic Ancestor’ and her son Ishmael was the ‘Inauthentic Israel’. The Jews, predominantly the immigrants during the Persian period, saw themselves as ‘Isaac’ and the local inhabitants as ‘Ishmael’. This meant that the story of Isaac underwent ever more careful scrutiny as time went on.

The attention of the Jewish people centred not so much on the rejection of Hagar and Ishmael, but on the near sacrifice of Isaac at the hands of his father which follows later in the storyline. This ensured that a typology of Abraham as the epitome of obedience to YHWH was highlighted in the tradition in such texts as Sirach 44:19–21:

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations,
and no one has been found like him in glory.
He kept the law of the Most High,
and entered into a covenant with him;
he certified the covenant in his flesh,
and when he was tested he proved faithful.
Therefore the Lord assured him with an oath
that the nations would be blessed through his offspring;
that he would make him as numerous as the dust of the earth,
and exalt his offspring like the stars,
and give them an inheritance from sea to sea
and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth.

Texts like this¹² give no details about the testing other than the fact that Abraham persevered in obedience, although they presumably are referring implicitly to the test recorded in Genesis 22 regarding the near sacrifice of Isaac.

To a lesser extent there was still interest, as time passed, in Hagar and Ishmael. Ishmael became more and more the son of the Stranger. Jubilees 15:28–32, for example, justifies the election of Israel (and the rejection of the Gentiles) because Ishmael’s descendants did not join in the covenant on Sinai. The Targum of Pseudo-Jonathan (which gives an expanded version of the text of Genesis) takes up the argument again as to the relative superiority of Isaac and Ishmael:

Ishmael said: “It is right for me to be the heir of my father, since I am his first-born son.”
But Isaac said: “It is right for me to be the heir of my father, since I am the son of Sarah his wife, but you are the son of Hagar, the servant of my mother.” Ishmael answered: “I am more righteous than you because I was circumcised when thirteen years old.”¹³

Ishmael would be claiming that he was circumcised by choice, whereas Isaac was circumcised by the decision of his parents. Regardless, what is made abundantly clear is that the true heir is Isaac, son of Sarah, not Ishmael, son of Hagar.

Hagar’s role becomes clearer in all of this. She remains substantially Sarah’s maidservant. She had been elevated to the status of Abraham’s wife only by the decision of Sarah. Having achieved motherhood, she abused her position by refusing

¹² See also Judith 8:26 and 1 Maccabees 2:52.

¹³ Maher (1992), ch. 16.

to acknowledge herself as a Sarah-substitute and Sarah removed her privilege. This led to Hagar's rejection, her life in the wilderness and her eventual settlement there. The purpose behind the narrative is to make clear that, despite Abraham being the common father, Hagar was not an Ancestor and therefore Ishmael was not the child of promise, but instead Sarah was the true Ancestor and Isaac was the child of promise.

The Abraham story, with its links to other Ancestor stories and the Exodus and Conquest stories, gave rise to a new religious movement, Judaism, which claimed its origins in a remote past. This religious community first of all defined itself by means of the Ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, who had, by divine promise, conceived a son, Isaac. The High God YHWH had commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and he went very close to carrying out the order; he was only stopped by divine intervention. The faith-adherence of Abraham in obeying a command that would have, in human eyes, brought the enterprise to nothingness was upheld as the ideal faith of the Jew. Jews identified themselves as this Isaac, son of Sarah; they were not Ishmael, son of Hagar. Hagar was regarded as the Mother of Inauthentic Israel.

The Christian Tradition of Hagar

Christianity inherited the Abraham story with its focus on the obedience of Abraham in being willing to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. The act of a father, Abraham, offering his only son in blood sacrifice (even if it was not carried out) became a convenient Christian symbol for the Father-God offering his only son Jesus as a blood sacrifice (which was carried out) for the sake of humanity.

Within this symbolic universe, Hagar and Ishmael went largely unnoticed. They were not direct players in the near-sacrifice event. Only in one Christian text does their involvement with the Abraham tradition come again to the fore and demonstrate where they stood in the Christian view. Paul wrote a letter to the Galatians in which his key point was that converts to the Jesus movement did not have to become Jews first.

It is important to determine who Paul's Galatian audience might have been. They would have been primarily Jews who had converted to the Jesus movement. There would also have been a number of God-fearers, however; these were adults who had been attracted to Judaism but, while showing great sympathy towards its beliefs and practices, had not made the final step to join the Jewish community.¹⁴ In particular, the males would not have been circumcised. These God-fearers would also have turned their allegiance to the Jesus movement. Both constituencies would have been persuaded by Jesus movement missionaries like Paul and others.

¹⁴ See Crossan and Reed (2004), p. 227.

Reading the subtext of the letter, it seems clear that the people in Galatia had related to Paul what they had heard from some of the other missionaries of the Jesus movement in favour of continuing the Jewish ritual of circumcision. The missionaries' argument ran thus: God had made a covenant with Abraham as related in Genesis (in the Abraham tradition) and this text provided a seemingly irrefutable argument in favour of the accompanying ritual of circumcision. God had promised a line of descendants plus possession of the Land, but he had also required from his male followers circumcision as a sacred sign of adherence. Not only Isaac and his descendants were to be circumcised, but also Ishmael and his descendants. This Abrahamic covenant was then completed and fulfilled in the later covenant (when the traditions were combined) made with Moses on Sinai.

Paul turned the Galatians' argument on its head. He countered that the blessings promised to Abraham were now available to non-Jews, the Gentiles, through Jesus who was the offspring of Abraham; Jesus was the 'New Isaac'. In turn, Paul was confronted with an argument from his opponents, namely, that it was the Jews who were descended from Sarah's son Isaac, not from the slave child Ishmael, son of Hagar, who gave rise to the Gentiles. It was Jews alone, symbolized by Isaac, who had met YHWH on Sinai.

Paul argues against this:

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia¹⁵ and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. (4:22–26)

Paul then inserts a quote from Isaiah 54:1 before returning to his conclusion:

Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? "Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman." So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (4:28–5:1)

Paul, in what must have been regarded as the most shocking of *volte-faces*, has identified Hagar and Ishmael not with Arab Gentiles but with Sinai and Judaism. He identified Sinai as the home of Hagar, Ishmael and their descendants and identified them further with slavery. They were the 'present Jerusalem' as against the 'Jerusalem above'.

Paul's point was that, after Christian baptism, there are no further distinctions such as had been created by circumcision. Circumcision had distinguished between the Jew and the Gentile, between the male and the female (who is not circumcised) and, ultimately, between the free and the slave. In the new dispensation of the Jesus

¹⁵More likely: She is Hagar, since Sinai is a mountain in Arabia. See Gager (2000), p. 94.

movement, however, all members of the Jesus movement have found equality in being linked with the mystical Jesus. There is no need for circumcision.

So Paul adapts the symbols. Abraham (a favourite character for Paul's pedagogy) had two wives, Sarah and Hagar, and they had two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. Before the time of Jesus, the Gentiles of Arabia and elsewhere were the children of Ishmael. Now, the same Gentiles who had converted to the Jesus movement were able to have a new status since they had been adopted as free sons of Abraham and Sarah. They became part of 'Isaac'.

What then does Hagar stand for in the Pauline tradition and presumably in the early Christian tradition generally? Before Jesus, she had been the mother of all non-Jews and these were accounted for as the siblings of Ishmael. After Jesus, however, Sarah becomes the mother of both Jews and non-Jews who believe in Jesus. They become the siblings of Isaac. Hagar for the Christian is the Stranger, the Mother of the outsiders, whether they are Gentiles or Jews who continue to opt for Jewish ways and reject Jesus.

Thus, to move forward in time, John of Damascus in the late seventh century in his *Heresies*, one of the first Christian polemics against Islam, could write using this entrenched Christian symbol of Hagar and Ishmael:

There is also the superstition of the Ishmaelites which to this day prevails and keeps people in error, being a forerunner of the Antichrist. They are descended from Ishmael, who was born to Abraham of Hagar, and for this reason they are called both Hagarenes and Ishmaelites. They are also called Saracens, which is derived from *sarras kenoi*, or destitute of Sarah, because of what Hagar said to the angel: 'Sarah hath sent me away destitute.' (Genesis 16:8) (John of Damascus 1958).

Later Jewish and Christian Adaptations of the Hagar Story

Turning from the Jewish literature of this period to later post-biblical Christian literature, there is certainly a growing emphasis in that writing on the parallel between the sacrifice of Jesus and the near-sacrifice of Isaac. To measure the meaning of Hagar, we need to see her within this changing context of the whole Abraham story.

It must be remembered that the gospels were written at least decades after Paul and, by that stage, interest in blood sacrifice would have intensified. In particular, interest in sacrifice would seem to be concentrated in the literature that devolved from the Roman forms of Christianity. This would have included human sacrifice. Admittedly, while in the Roman world human blood sacrifice was officially banned, it had taken the form of the sacrifice of condemned criminals and gladiators (sometimes the same category) in the amphitheatre games.¹⁶

¹⁶In about the same time slot, Carthage shows evidence of widespread child sacrifice with 20,000 urns containing child remains dating from the period 400–200 BCE. The Carthaginian practice is confirmed by Plutarch in Babbitt (1962), p. 493.

Up to the middle of the first century CE, the Jewish tradition would have used the Abraham story to extol the typology of Abraham as the Ancestor who demonstrated faithful obedience by agreeing to sacrifice his only son. The more Jewish form of Christianity assimilated this type of Abraham and continued to apply it to the situation of their Christian communities. Thus, the Letter of James has this exhortation:

Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the Friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (James 2:22–24)

The Jewish tradition would change under the burden of historical events. The Roman colonial presence around the Mediterranean and the constraints on Jewish political freedom made Jewish authors reinterpret the Abraham and Isaac story from the viewpoint of Isaac. Previously, they had interpreted themselves as an Isaac, the only legitimate child of the father, Abraham, father of the people. They now saw their community as Isaac who was on the point of being martyred, but martyred as a willing sacrifice for others. In a desperate situation, they saw themselves in their suffering as being the salvation of the world.

Roman Christianity,¹⁷ as against the more Jewish forms, came upon this developing form of the story, with a Jewish 'Isaac' offering himself in a sacrificial act of self-martyrdom. The Roman mentality of these Christians was open to ideas about blood sacrifice and even human sacrifice. The Roman church applied this symbol of Isaac, as he was depicted in the developing Jewish tradition, not to the Jewish people, as Jews did, but to Jesus. The near sacrifice as narrated in the story of Isaac, the Christians would have said, had already been offered in its complete form and Jesus was the sacrificed son of the Father. It was a once and for all sacrifice and any other sacrificial act (such as Christian death by martyrdom) was explained as a prolongation of the sacrifice of Jesus.

Soon, the Jewish Isaac and the Christian Jesus (as the New Isaac) were firmly in opposition and this very opposition promoted further development of the typology in both the Jewish and Christian camps. As against the Jewish assertion that the near-sacrifice of Isaac was an atoning Jewish sacrifice for all peoples, the Christians asserted that the Isaac story merely prefigured the final once-and-for-all atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Aspects of this typology penetrated the canonical gospel tradition of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all of which came under Roman aegis, with Jesus as Isaac sacrificed by his Father being written into the gospel narratives. Eventually, the full account of the death of Jesus fulfilling the type of Isaac as a propitiatory blood sacrifice was more clearly elaborated by later Roman Christian writers, particularly by the third century.

¹⁷ On the distinction of Roman Christianity and the more original forms of the Jesus Movement see Crotty (2001).

The issue was certainly paramount for the anonymous author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*,¹⁸ in which there was reference to the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem, which would seem to indicate the Roman replacement of some temple structure on the destroyed site of the Herodian Temple. This would have occurred about 130 CE and helps date the letter. Its exegetical style and the form of text point to Alexandria for its provenance and there are references that indicate Gentiles as its intended audience (e.g., 3:6; 17:7).

The author was virulently anti-Jewish and claimed the Hebrew Scriptures as a Christian writing, on the basis that Christians alone are the heirs of the covenant promises formerly made to the Ancestors of Israel. As part of this argument, Isaac is described as a type of the perfect sacrifice (even though he was not actually killed) when he was offered on the altar by his father Abraham and the author uses the typology to point forward to Jesus' sacrifice (see Hebrew, 7:3). The author goes on to link Jesus' sacrificial death to the Hebrew Scriptures and concludes that God has no longer any need for sacrifices since the blood sacrifice of Jesus satisfied once and for all.

Melito, Bishop of Sardis, in his *Peri ton Pascha*,¹⁹ a homily for some festive occasion written in about 167 CE, also describes Isaac as a type of the coming, suffering Jesus who was bound so as to unbind humanity, although it was Jesus who was put to death like the ram. He argues that the divine Jesus had pre-arranged his own sufferings in the history of the Ancestors (especially in the events concerning Isaac) and in the prophets and in the actual history of Israel.

By the time of Tertullian²⁰(circa 155–230 CE), the full prefiguration of Jesus mooted in these previous texts is in place. Like Isaac, Jesus carried the wood to the hill where he was to be sacrificed; the ram hung by its horns in Genesis 22 was the prefiguration of Jesus hung on the 'horns' of the cross and crowned with thorns (*Adversus Judaeos* 13). Certainly, by the third century, there are clear signs that Jesus' death is generally interpreted in a sacrificial way and that the Eucharistic meal too is interpreted as a blood sacrifice.²¹

The conclusion to this survey is that, when Christians interpreted Jesus' death as a blood sacrifice, they used the typology of Isaac to explain that God as Father allowed that blood sacrifice to eventuate.²²

Thus, Judaism and Christianity each had its own reading of the story of Isaac. Neither reading can be understood without reference to the other; they are

¹⁸ In Ehrman (2003), pp. 1–84.

¹⁹ In Hall (1926–1965).

²⁰ In Dunn (2004).

²¹ See Bévenot (1979), pp. 413–429. Cyprian (c. 200–258 CE) had been a pagan orator and firmly established the language of priesthood, temple, altar and sacrifice within Christian dialogue. He applied the priestly imagery of Hebrews to the Christian bishop.

²² This raises a controversial issue: at what time could the Jewish tradition of an expanded account of the near-sacrifice of Isaac, clearly delineating that it had a vicarious effect, have been formulated? And did this expanded Jewish version affect this Christian thinking? Or was the Christian account of a vicarious sacrifice of Jesus as the New Isaac the cause for the expanded version of a willing and adult Isaac participating in his near-sacrifice? On this question see: Levi (1912), Spiegel (1950), Vermes (1961, 1996).

complementary. They are also at odds with each other. It is agreed that Sarah and Hagar are the consorts of Abraham. Their sons are both the children of Abraham. Each son has his own separate constituency. How should that constituency be identified, however, in historical terms? That is the vital question. Who in the historical context is the real child of the covenant, born of the Authentic Ancestor? While Judaism and Christianity differed over the question of the Authentic Israel and the right to be Isaac, there was no dispute over Ishmael and Hagar. Ishmael and his mother Hagar were relegated in both traditions to the symbol of Inauthenticity.

This was taken as a given in Christian thought. Augustine of Hippo made use of Hagar to describe the sinful condition of humanity, the 'earthly city' as against the heavenly city (*City of God* 15:2). Aquinas and John Wycliffe both saw Sarah as standing for the redeemed while Hagar stood for those who were 'carnal by nature, mere exiles'.

Now we need to look at the reading of the story that was to become current in the Islamic Qur'an.

The Muslim Tradition of Hajar

Although not mentioned by name in the Qur'an, Hajar (in Arabic) has played a prominent role in Islamic ritual. Her son Ishmael (Ishmail in Arabic), however, is explicitly mentioned in the text²³:

Then you shall tell of Ishmail; he, too, was an apostle, a seer and a man of his word. He enjoined prayer and almsgiving on his people, and his Lord was pleased with him. (*Sura Miriam* 19:54)

The advent of Islam coincided, as we have seen above, with the dissemination of an Abraham story that contained competing symbolisms of Isaac as the True Israel in Judaism and Isaac as Jesus in Christianity. Islam shows some awareness of this theological debate. The Qur'anic Ibrahim is first presented as a destroyer of idols, a militant monotheist, who is threatened by his own people with death. This threat is thwarted by Allah. The text continues with the promise of a child:

He said: 'I will take refuge with my Lord; He will guide me. Grant me a son, Lord, and let him be a righteous man.'

We gave him news of a gentle son. (*Sura Al Suffat* 37:99)

The Qur'an, however, does not identify either Isaac or Ishmail as the particular 'righteous man' born to Ibrahim. In fact, both Isaac and Ishmail are noted as 'righteous' in Islamic tradition. To a great extent the gentle son's identity is less important and the text could refer to whichever son of Ibrahim without the meaning being affected.

²³ Ishmail is mentioned twelve times in the text as against seventeen mentions of Isaac. In *Sura* 2:78-79 there is a list of messengers with Ishmail preceding Isaac: Abraham and Ishmail, Isaac and Jacob...

Ishmail is credited with assisting in building the Ka'aba, which was to become the navel of Islamic worship:

Ibrahim and Ishmail built the House and dedicated it saying, 'Accept this from us, Lord'.
(Sura 2:127)

The Qur'an also contains a story about Ibrahim's order to sacrifice a son (who is also unnamed) parallel to the Testing in the Genesis text. It reflects both that biblical story and other traditional material:

When the son grew to work with him, he said, "My son, indeed I see in vision that I sacrifice you. Look, what do you see?"

He said, "My father, do what you are commanded! You will find me, if Allah wills, among the steadfast."

And when they had both submitted their wills and he pushed him forehead down,

We called out to him "Ibrahim!

You have already fulfilled the vision!" So indeed we reward

Those who do right.

This was an obvious trial –

And we redeemed him with an immense sacrifice.

And we left for him among generations in later times:

"Peace upon Ibrahim!"

So we reward those who do right.

Indeed he was one of our believing servants. (*Sura Al Saffat* 37:84–111)

This version would seem to incorporate not only the outline of the story in the Torah but also some of the later developments. For example, in the Qur'anic text, the son is of adult age, being old enough to work with his father; the son acquiesces in the divine command to sacrifice; the command to sacrifice his son is defined as a 'trial' for Ibrahim; Ibrahim undertakes the trial and passes, thereby handing on peace to future generations. While the last two items are in the biblical text, the first two are only found in later Jewish elaborations.

By the Middle Ages, Islamic opinion over identifying this son was divided fairly evenly. Al Tabari (d. 923 CE) preferred Isaac but gave a substantial list of commentators who opted for Ishmail. Modern Muslim opinion is, however, overwhelmingly in favour of Ishmail. Why the change and the certainty in more modern interpretation that the son was Ishmail? Islam, more and more, wanted to distinguish itself from both Judaism and Christianity. If Judaism saw itself in Isaac, son of Sarah, Christianity in Jesus, the New Isaac, then Islam saw itself in Ishmail, the son of Hajar.

As to the dismissal of the child and mother, this account is found in *Sura Ibrahim* (14:37):

Lord, I have settled some of my offspring in a barren valley near Your Sacred House, so that they may observe true worship. Put in the hearts of men kindness towards them, and provide them with the earth's fruits, so that they may give thanks.

The sacred house would refer to the Ka'aba at Mecca which Ibrahim and Ishmail would later construct. We will return later to the idea of 'resettlement' in the text. In its re-evaluation of the Jewish and Christian traditions, the Qur'an has made Ibrahim central to its statement. As the one who repudiates the idols, adopts Allah as the One God and is obedient to Allah "with his whole heart" (*Sura Al Saffat* 37:85–98), he

becomes the model of the *Muslim*, the submitted one. This obedience was encapsulated in the story of the near sacrifice of his son.

What the Qur'an provided was a lens by which the readers of Islam could explore the human tendency to give of self. The text about the Testing above contains the idea of submission or *Islam* ("And when they had both submitted their wills and he pushed his forehead down") even to death. Ibrahim is the model *Muslim*, a submitted one, who makes a profound response to Allah and thus reshapes his relationship to others, including his son.

Outside the Qur'an there is further mention of the Abraham story in the Hadith literature and an even more detailed account occurs in *Qisas al-Anbiya* (Tales of the Prophets). In this collection of traditions, the Ibrahim story is taken up in several sections. One story tells of the dismissal of Hajar and Ishmail from the *haram* in Mecca and the finding of the well of Zamzam. In the account of Ibn Abbas, Ibrahim personally accompanied Hajar and Ishmail to Paran (Faran, in Arabic), the area around Mecca, and there the messenger of Allah showed them the Ka'aba. Abraham, in this account, left Hajar and his son under a tree with water at the command of Allah. Hajar was compliant because she knew that this was done at the behest of Allah. This was to test Ibrahim's obedience. The whole journey undertaken by Hajar was not, in this interpretation, an expulsion but a resettlement (Fatani 2006, pp. 234–236).

Because the water ran out, Hajar in her distress climbed two mountain tops, Safa and Marwah, to look for more. After seven mountain ascents, the angel who had guided them dug a well. This is the Zamzam Well adjacent to the Ka'aba (see Firestone 1992). This Muslim tradition was incorporated into a ritual (the *sa'i*) associated with the pilgrimages to Mecca, the Hajj and the Umra. Devout pilgrims walk between the two hills seven times to recall the journey of Hajar and then they drink water from the well. Water from the Zamzam well is regarded as sacred.

Just as the biblical story was enhanced over time, so the *surah* on Ibrahim received further commentary.²⁴ Satan was introduced and Ibrahim can be seen to be pulled in two directions by Allah and Satan. Satan questions whether the trial over the near-sacrifice was truly initiated by Allah. When, however, Satan questioned Sarah over the authenticity of the revelation, he receives the reply:

"If his Lord ordered him to do that, it is best that he obey."

Satan subsequently tries his tactic with Isaac (specifically identified as the son in this version) and then with Ibrahim, only to receive a similar response.

Summary of Traditions

At this point, we can look back over what has been uncovered. The trajectory of this Abraham/Ibrahim sacred story is most interesting. It began as a foundation story used for a specific purpose among a diaspora group in Yehud. Any earlier history of

²⁴ See Kessler (2007).

the story remains unknown. The story told of two Ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, who came from Mesopotamia to the Land. En route, they met the High God on a mountain. This initial meeting is consummated by a covenant ritual which designates the Land as belonging to Abraham and his offspring. It is made clear that the Land does not belong to the Indigenous inhabitants. The covenant ritual is followed by the birth of the son of the promise and a Testing that validates the Ancestor. The generations of offspring – Isaac, Jacob and the children of Jacob (also known as Israel) – are tabulated.

The original usage of this story was to establish the claim of a migrant population to land and its antecedent history. One aspect of the story, the Testing, would become central. Instead of the tradition focussing on the rejection of Hagar and Ishmael as the original story had done, the key point became the Testing. Abraham was the paradigm of faith as proved by that Testing, because he believed in YHWH despite the apparent consequences for the future fulfilment of the promises. Even this new focus was to change, however, in that Isaac became the key figure. He was acknowledged as the True Israel who had cooperated in the Testing and, as it were, allowed himself to be (almost) sacrificed for the sake of others.

As part of this developing story, Hagar was first identified as the partner of Abraham but not a wife and certainly not an Ancestor. As time went on, the Jewish tradition ostracized Hagar further. True Israel descended from Abraham by Sarah; True Israel was Isaac. Hagar stood for the origin of all that was inauthentic; Ishmael was Inauthentic Israel.

Christian tradition then inherited the form of the story that highlighted the faith of Abraham in the Testing. It seized the opportunity to use a Jewish tradition to consolidate a Christian teaching. This had been done in many other instances, with fulfilment texts being taken, sometimes clumsily, from the prophets (for example, Isaiah's "The voice of one crying in the wilderness" to explain the role of John the Baptist); a conglomerate of allusions from the Hebrew Scriptures used to embroider the Transfiguration story; items taken from Psalm 22 (prayer of a Righteous One), to give requisite detail to the crucifixion story, and so forth. In the case of the Testing, the now entrenched image of Abraham (almost) sacrificing his only son provided an excellent basis for explaining the Father-God's sacrifice of his only son, Jesus. As the human sacrificial mode of redemption became more and more part of Christian teaching, and differentiated it from Judaism, the use of the story centring on Isaac/Jesus intensified.

In polemical dialogue, Judaism took up the image and presented the near sacrifice as the accomplishment of Isaac who was True Israel. As a willing adult, Isaac had been the agent of the sacrifice. Jewish Isaac and Christian Jesus became opposing symbols. Yet both symbolic universes agreed in the rejection of Hagar and Ishmael.

This was precisely the admixture of agreed and contested tradition that Islam inherited. Whatever the identification of the son in the Qur'an, the key point was that Islam excluded both the Jewish and the Christian lines of interpretation and returned to Ibrahim as the Father of faith who had passed the Testing. As the story developed within the Islamic canonical tradition, however, it was Hajar, not Sarah, who became the Ancestor alongside the founding *Muslim*, Ibrahim, and her son

was Ishmail, the true Islam. Hajar had been resettled by Ibrahim, but it seemed that she was lost. She was lost but she found her way.

The Islamic pilgrimage ritual encapsulates this view: the pilgrim follows in the steps of Hajar, who was lost and then found. The pilgrims affirm in the ritual that Hajar is their *Muslim* Ancestor, submitted to Allah, who eventually triumphs over the vicissitudes of life. They, as the Islamic community, have been resettled by Ibrahim, the first monotheist and founder of the Ka'aba. Hajar's son, Ishmail, becomes the archetype of the Islamic adherent, son of Ibrahim and Hajar. Islam has rehabilitated Hajar from the margins of the earlier tradition.

Conclusion

The Abraham/Ibrahim story is central to the three Faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The story has been proposed by many as the seed of a possible reconciliation between the three faiths, just as it has often been a point of contention. What this chapter has shown, however, is that the original story no longer exists in any of the three traditions. It has been buried in the past together with the issue that it encapsulated, namely, the right and claim to land of an immigrant group in Persian Yehud. That issue may still have historical and even political implications but the story itself has been developed beyond its original parameters. In its expanded forms it became a central tradition in both Judaism and Christianity, but in diametrically opposed editions. The story was then retold in Islam in yet another version.

If anything, the Abraham/Ibrahim story reflects both the similarity and difference within the three Abrahamic traditions. How and why can one story tradition take on three radically different formats? How and why can Hagar/Hajar gravitate between Inauthenticity and Authenticity? That is simply the way with stories and symbols. They do change and develop. They follow the vital movement of the communities to which they adhere. They are re-read within those communities and are revitalized in their symbolic meanings.

What then is the correct symbolism attending Hagar/Hajar? There is none. Hagar/Hajar stands for what a community wants her to stand for. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have all manipulated Hagar/Hajar to express religious teachings at the very core of their systems. She continues to be manipulated in the modern, secular versions of Hagar/Hajar: the heroine of the displaced, the symbol of Palestinian oppression, the woman in need of liberation. This manipulation is a valid procedure.

The three traditions stand today at a crossroads. Globalization and terrorism have brought them to the bargaining table. The need for toleration has become a felt need. The Abrahamic religions should not feel that they are bound by the past. The examples provided by any of the malleable versions of the Abraham/Ibrahim storyline show that the past is not an impassable barrier. The representatives of the traditions need to sit down together and to ask: can we once more reinterpret Hagar/Hajar? Just as she has been reinterpreted severally by the traditions in the past, could she now be reinterpreted by them in unison in the present?

The precondition for this interpretation is that the story is just that: a sacred story that may or may not have historical roots. Certainly, it has been read in a variety of historical contexts but it does not necessarily reflect any one historical reality. The story is a manipulation of significant symbols and, over time, these symbols have been pulled in one direction and then another. All readings have been meaningful; none has been definitive. Perhaps it is full time for a new reading of Hagar/Hajar. She could remain the Ancestor of the *am haaretz* and the mother of Ishmael/Ishmail but she could be redeemed by Judaism and Christianity as she has been in Islam. She could become the equal of Sarah and the true wife of Abraham/Ibrahim. Isaac and Ishmail could become truly brothers or perhaps be seen as alternative expressions of the same son and heir. It is not a matter of denying difference. It is a matter of reconciling and rejoicing in what is held in common.

If the above were to happen, not only Hagar/Hajar would require reinterpretation but the entire cohort of Abraham/Ibrahim, Sarah, Isaac, Ishmael/Ishmail with her. A new story would need to be told. It would be a matter of reconstructing a sacred story to suit the present *status quo* of the Abrahamic Faiths. If the will and understanding are there, this can be done. It could re-constitute the Abrahamic tradition and its earlier reputation for *convivencia*.

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