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# Rereading the Biblical Story of Sarah and Hagar: A Note for Interfaith Activists

**Fachrizal Halim**[1]

**Abstract:** This article examines the complex relationship between Sarah and Hagar in the book of Genesis chapters 16 and 21, with a focus on informing Muslim readers and interfaith activists. Drawing on the documentary hypothesis approach and insights from biblical scholars, the article aims to clarify the historical and cultural context of the story and challenge narrow interpretations that can lead to assumptions of theological or political supremacy. The article argues that a deeper understanding of the relationship between Sarah and Hagar in their social and political context can promote theological openness and facilitate the contemporary struggle for justice and interfaith relations.

**Keywords:** Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, Isaac, documentary hypothesis

## Introduction

The story of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis chapters 16 and 21 continues to animate theological debates to this day. The narrative highlights the contest between two women who have distinct social status in the household of Abraham; Sarah, who was barren, and her maidservant Hagar, whom Sarah wished to become a surrogate to give Abraham a child. Although Hagar bears a son named Ishmael, Sarah eventually bears her own son Isaac. The passages also reveal that God promised to multiply the descendants of both Ishmael and Isaac and that they would become the fathers of many nations.

Despite both heirs of Abraham being promised to become the fathers of many nations, the story takes a problematic turn, as authors, redactors, and early readers of the texts emphasize the family line of Abraham and Sarah and the covenant that goes exclusively through Isaac, rather than through both Isaac and his older brother Ishmael. As a result, the story of Hagar and Ishmael has been ignored in much of the history of Jewish, and to a certain extent, Christian theology. On the contrary, the narratives of Sarah and Isaac received positive interpretations and represent an enduring theological foundation for Jewish identity. In today's context where family lineage and religious identity continue to shape communal relationships, the story of Sarah and Hagar could be

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used to define the boundaries of the faith, reaffirm a sense of theological supremacy, or consolidate one's struggle against real or perceived oppression (Klein, 2008).

The problem of narrow interpretation in the story of Sarah and Hagar can be traced back to the early Jewish commentaries and Christian apostles, and even contemporary Jewish authors. For example, the commentary *Midrash Esther Rabbah* notes that of ten portions of stupidity in the world, nine were given to the Ishmaelites (descendants of Ishmael), and only one was given to the rest of the world. Additionally, the commentary notes that nine portions of robustness were allotted to the descendants of Ishmael, and the remaining one was allotted to the rest of the world. The characterisation of Ishmael and his descendants as 'stupidity' and as 'robustness' may not necessarily carry any theological implications. However, Jewish writers added that Ishmael is the progenitor of twelve Arab tribes who once occupied the region spanning from the Euphrates to the Red Sea (Feiler, 2002, pp. 75-76). This designation serves to create a clear distinction between "us" (Jews) and "others" (Arab descendants of Ishmael), and could potentially be used to reinforce theological and political boundaries. For example, in the contemporary Arab-Israeli conflict, the way the narrative is understood could manifest in the perpetuation of conflict between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims, making it seem impossible for them to achieve peace and harmony.

In a similar vein, the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the people of Galatia in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey) highlights the distinction between the children of Sarah and the children of Hagar, suggesting that those who are born of the flesh (i.e. through Hagar) are not children of the "promise" (Galatians 4:22-31). In this letter, Paul defines Hagar, the slave woman, as "of the flesh" and inferior to Sarah, the free woman, who is of superior stature for having received the "promise." Again, this division creates a hierarchical structure within Abraham's household, with Abraham as the father and two distinct groups of descendants: those of the free woman (i.e. Sarah and Isaac) and those of the slave woman (i.e. Hagar and Ishmael). This hierarchy reinforces the notion of a privileged group (i.e. "us," the descendants of Sarah and Isaac) and an excluded group (i.e. "the others," the descendants of Hagar and Ishmael), perpetuating a problematic division that potentially creates disharmony among different religious communities. The irony is that an interpretation that ignores the plight of the outcasts, slaves, and the poor may contradict the teachings of Jesus, who always stood with the marginalised.

Furthermore, in the recent book that explores the legacies of influential female figures in Jewish history, *The Passion of the Matriarchs* (Tuchman & Rapoport, 2004), Tuchman and Rapoport do not include a full story of Hagar even though she was an integral part of Abraham's household. The authors mention Hagar in passing as a surrogate womb who demeaned Sarah after becoming pregnant and was later demoted to a servant again. By contrast, the life story of Sarah was mentioned in great detail. She was described as a priestess who accompanied Abraham in bringing God to the Canaan world and the first matriarch blessed to witness God's promise to Abraham fulfilled through her lineage before her passing. This decision to elevate Sarah and mention Hagar only in passing may suggest there is no theological insight or moral lesson that Jewish readers can gain from Hagar's narrative.

From an ecumenical perspective, the theological construct that gives preference to Sarah and Isaac over Hagar and Ishmael can create a basis for exclusion and hinder the possibility of accepting that God has blessed Sarah's son and Hagar's son in His own way. It could also lead to the marginalisation of others who, on the basis of the same biblical narrative, are thought to have traced their lineage to Abraham through Hagar and Ishmael. To avoid this privileged narrative and

potential exacerbation of conflict, one scholar attempted to bring back the "lost" story of Hagar in a monograph for contemporary readers who are not familiar with the narrative (Teubal, 1990). Equally concerned with the narrow interpretation that potentially exacerbates communal conflict, others reinterpret the story of Sarah and Hagar with the goal of promoting ecumenical partnership and peacebuilding (Feiler, 2002; Frymer-Kensky, 1996).

For academics or interfaith activists, reinterpreting the biblical story of Sarah and Hagar through the lens of ecumenical partnership and peacebuilding appears promising in the fractured world today, especially after the war broke out between Hamas and the state of Israel on October 7, 2023. However, the same approach poses a challenge to "insiders" either Jews or Christians who view the story as foundational to their belief system. Rereading the story with a humanist and ecumenical vision above undermines a particular theological position that many Jews find significant for their identity, e.g., covenant. While groups or individuals who are traditionally oppressed, excluded from the covenant and identified with Hagar (non-white Christians or Muslims) find attempts to reread the biblical story liberating, the same cannot be said for Jews who may feel that such attempts undermine their traditional beliefs. This effort may suggest that an attempt to build ecumenical partnerships without taking into consideration insiders' perspectives may actually exacerbate the existing divide between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and push them even further apart.

This article aims to examine the story of Sarah and Hagar and explore how it has been interpreted in an exclusive way within Jewish and Christian theological boundaries. I will then assess current efforts to re-read the same story and theological construct above in light of the ecumenical partnerships, but one that can equally reinforce a similar exclusive theological construct that distances Jewish and Christian theologians from their interfaith partners. I shall show that the complex narrative of Sarah and Hagar can serve multiple theological interests. As such, scholars, interfaith activists, and general readers may find it helpful to acknowledge that the biblical narrative can be interpreted in various ways by different readers.

In my experience as an interfaith activist, I have observed that although Abraham is a central figure in Islam, many Muslims are not familiar with the detailed story of Sarah and Hagar as described in Genesis, particularly on how Hagar and Ishmael were banished and how Abraham's covenant with God goes exclusively through his son Isaac. While many Muslims are familiar with the story of Ishmael and Isaac from literature such as *Qisas al-Anbiya* (Stories of the Prophet) by authors such as Ibn Kathir, neither the Qur'an nor the collection of hadith sufficiently narrated the story of the two women in great detail as in Genesis. The implication of not knowing this story is that it could lead to silence and a lack of appreciation for the moral messages conveyed in the biblical narrative. Therefore, another key goal of this article is to introduce the story of Sarah and Hagar to Muslim audiences, to enable them to recognise and appreciate the theological debates within Judaism and Christianity.

The concept of 'recognition' that I refer to here resonates with Charles Taylor's understanding of it as a constitutive element of a multicultural society. According to Taylor, "due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need" (Taylor, 1994, p. 26). Cultivating recognition and appreciation of theological debates within Judaism and Christianity for Muslim audiences and wider interfaith activists could be the missing piece that helps us to rehabilitate the fractured world today and achieve greater understanding and respect between different faith communities.

## Research Methodology

In this paper, I will conduct a critical analysis of the story of Sarah and Hagar using the Documentary Hypothesis approach. This approach is known to have been used by biblical historians to explain the origins of the five books of Moses, also known as the Torah or Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The theory assumes what constitutes the five books of Moses are four literary sources identified as Jehovist (J), also called the Yahwist, the Elohist (E), Deuteronomist (D), and the Priestly (P). Chronologically, J is considered the oldest source, which includes significant portions of Genesis, Exodus and Numbers, and a few segments of Deuteronomy. E and D sources came much later but are assumed to have been redacted before the exile period around 500 BCE. The latest source P also contains the same portions of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but are redacted during the post-exilic period, which formalised the Torah or Pentateuch at around 450 BCE (King, 2001). Based on the content redaction processes being formalised for approximately four hundred years, this theory suggests that the Torah or Pentateuch was not written by a single author (Moses), but rather by multiple authors. Therefore, what came down to us as the Torah was written by different authorships, which were edited over time and compiled into its final version.

Using the documentary hypothesis in biblical analysis allows us to examine the social and political context in which the story of Sarah and Hagar was written by different authors that make up Genesis chapters 16 and 21. By examining the historical and cultural context, I aim to gain an insight into the story and its historical context, and how it served to construct and solidify Jewish and Christian identities. Taking into consideration how the story is understood by insider Jews or Christians who do not accept the documentary hypothesis approach, I wish to contribute to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of the story of Sarah and Hagar, without necessarily antagonising the communities.

To ensure consistency throughout the paper, I shall use the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) released by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States. I anticipate that the outcome of this analysis will enable general readers, especially Muslims and interfaith activists, to recognise the theological debates that arise from the story, and how biblical scholars analyse it, and to provide a clear path for them to apply their understanding in practical ways.

## Summary of the Story

The story of Sarah and Hagar in the Book of Genesis appears to have been written in two different periods of time by several redactors. The first story appears in Chapter 16:1-16, and the second continues in Chapter 21:8-21. In the first part of the story, it is told that Sarai, Abram's wife, had not given birth since they married (see also Genesis 11:30). This situation saddened Sarai as the wife in Abram's household, and she finally decided to offer her maidservant Hagar as her surrogate to Abram. By offering Hagar to her husband, Sarai wished that through Hagar's womb, she would provide Abram with an heir and save herself from carrying the shame of barrenness in her community. However, her decision to share the status as the only wife in Abram's tent came to a

bitter fruit as Hagar looked with contempt at her after conceiving. Sarai then complained to Abram and put the matter before God: "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me" (Genesis 16:5).

In response to Sarah's complaint, Abram was ambiguous. Instead of offering an immediate solution, he stood between abdicating his responsibility as the would-be father and recognising Sarai's claim over Hagar. Not knowing whether the matter was serious to Hagar or simply being insensitive, Abram said to Sarah: "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please"(Genesis 16:6). As one might expect, this rather indifferent statement led to a tragedy in Abram's tent as Sarai "dealt harshly" against Hagar and caused her to flee from Abram's tent.

The next verses tell us that the angel of the Lord found Hagar in the wilderness of Shur and asked her to return to Sarai with a promise that God would multiply her offspring that "cannot be counted for multitude" (Genesis 16:10). The angel of the Lord also informed Hagar to name her son Ishmael, "for the Lord has given heed to your affliction" (Genesis 16:11). It is said that Hagar submitted to the request and eventually gave birth to a son in Abram's household who was called Ishmael, at a time when Abram was eighty-six years old.

The second part of the story continued thirteen years later after Abram was ninety-nine years old. Although the conflict between Sarah and Hagar is found in Chapter 21, its introduction begins in Chapter 17. It is said that God appeared to Abram and made a covenant with him: "I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (Genesis 17:7). This covenant has a precondition that "every male among you shall be circumcised" (Genesis 17:11). Then, God continues with the promise that He will bless Sarai and from her, Abram would have another son who shall be called Isaac.

The tension between Sarah and Hagar began when Ishmael and Isaac had grown together. Genesis 21:9 portrays that when Sarai, who is now called Sarah, sees that Ishmael teases Isaac, she urges Abram, who is now called Abraham, to cast out Hagar and Ishmael from his tent. Abraham, who had the experience of casting Hagar away from his tent, was reluctant to grant Sarah's request. In a situation where Abraham could not find a solution to calm Sarah down, God once again came to intervene. "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you" (Genesis 21:12). This statement marked the end of the story of the two women.

After the event, Hagar and Ishmael, under Abraham's grievance to please Sarah, had no other choice but to go into the wilderness. However, even as Hagar was no longer in Abraham's tent, she once again found her spiritual momentum to receive the angel of God who calmed her when she and Ishmael desperately needed water. Hagar, who could not bear to see her son crying for water, begged the Lord: "Do not let me look on the death of the child" (Genesis 21:16). It was at this moment that the Lord sent an angel to her: "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him" (Genesis 21:17-18). In the end, Hagar and Ishmael decided to stay in the wilderness of Paran.

After their expulsion from Abraham's tent, the Bible does not provide any more information about the relationship between Hagar and Sarah. However, Ishmael and Isaac are

reported to have maintained contact, and when Abraham died, the two brothers met to bury their father in Machpelah (Genesis 25:9).

## Strands and Contexts of the Narrative

Scholars in Biblical studies have argued that the story of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis has different sources that can be traced in the various ways in which the narratives are preserved and presented to us. In the case of the narrative story of Sarah and Hagar in chapters 16 and 21, Biblical scholars have traced a combination of three identifiable sources: the Jehovist (J), also called the Yahwist, the Elohist (E), and the Priestly (P). A German scholar, Karl-Josef Kuschel, identifies that the two sequences of the story in chapters 16 and 21 are, in fact, a combination of J and E sources. However, the P editors have edited the story to make it in line with the purpose of the narrative in chapter 17. Hence, following Kuschel, the story of Sarah and Hagar that we have today is the product of the Priestly writings (P) (Kuschel, 1995).

The evidence of P can be traced from the emphasis on the context to legitimise Sarah's son Isaac as the heir of Abraham. What we read in chapter 16 is an introduction to God's decision to bless Isaac as the progeny of Abraham (Genesis 17:19-21, 21:12). The authors or editors of P have had their own theological agenda to promote and preserve the story, that is, to inform readers that although Abraham had an older son Ishmael, the family line and privileges attached to it, i.e., covenant, went through his younger brother Isaac (Kuschel, 1995).

Robert Davidson, another biblical historian, argues that the narratives in chapter 16 are the product of the Jehovist (J) tradition. However, verses 3, 15, and 16 come from the Priestly (P) authors, with their formal style and fondness for precise chronological detail. The notion of "ten years" in verse 3 and the reference to Abraham being "eighty-six years old" in verse 16, according to Davidson, are clear examples of the P materials (Davidson, 1979, p. 49). Similarly, Savina Teubal, another biblical scholar, argues that the two episodes of the story of Sarah and Hagar consist of two distinct sources: Genesis 16 by the J sources, and Genesis 21 by the E sources. However, although they are different, the two narratives constitute one theme. Hence, according to Teubal, while the rest of chapter 16 is the product of the J materials, verses 1, 3, 15, and 16 are distinctly the product of Priestly writings (Teubal, 1990).

Teubal also argues that chapter 21 is a combination of the J, E, and P source materials. The first verse of chapter 21, "The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised," according to Teubal, is written by the J authors. Then, in the second, third, fourth, and fifth verses, the P editors inserted: "Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him" (Genesis 21:2-5). The next verse, when Sarah says; "God (Elohim) has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me," is exclusively the product of the E editors (Teubal, 1990, pp. 38-39).

The arguments presented by Kuscher, Davidson, and Teubal are in line with the earlier analysis proposed by historian Martin Noth, in that he argues that if the P source materials were removed, "the remainder of the Pentateuch would be neither unified nor homogenous" (Noth, 1972,

p. 20). Following this theory, it is highly probable that the J and E sources were written independently during the early periods of the Israeli monarchy. On the other hand, the P narratives were added during the period when the Israelites were living in exile. Based on this theory, it can be inferred that the various sources of the Torah or Pentateuch were written by different authors at different times. One may argue that the story of Sarah and Hagar, in particular, was significant to the Jewish community during their exile in the sixth century BCE. This story helped to establish the community's identity and had special meanings for them. In other words, the story of Sarah and Hagar is a part of the ancient Israelites' story and holds significance for the people at a particular time.

One could argue that during their exile in Babylonia, the Israelites found it necessary to cling to a hierarchical text that emphasised the distinction between slave and master, promised and non-promised progeny. They required more than just moral guidance or archival material; they needed what John Barton (2019, p. 58) referred to as a 'national history' that would provide them with a sense of communal solidarity and hope during difficult times. This hope and communal solidarity may have also been what inspired the Apostle Paul to offer a promise of salvation to the Gentiles in the first century, as seen in his letter to the Galatians. By extending the promise of salvation beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community, Paul may have been seeking to offer hope to those who were struggling, just as the story of Sarah and Hagar had provided hope for the Israelites during their own difficult times.

## An Ecumenical Approach to the Story

The story of Sarah and Hagar is a tale of two women who share the responsibility of motherhood in their household with Abraham. Despite coming from different social backgrounds, both women acted in accordance with the norms and traditions of their society. Sarah's decision to offer Hagar to Abraham was a common practice in ancient Near Eastern societies. Similarly, Hagar's decision to flee from Sarah's oppression was a legitimate action in any social relationship throughout human history. The Hebrew people would do the same after their oppression in Egypt a few hundred years later.

The problem with the interpretation of the story of Sarah and Hagar is that theologians often focus solely on the interests of Sarah and her lineage, without considering the other story in the same household of Abraham. Reading the story narrowly to preserve family lineage solely for the promised or the one who received covenant, while excluding non-promised or non-covenantal others can lead Jewish and Christian theologians to overlook the possibility that God may have blessed Hagar and her lineage, albeit for a different reason. In our contemporary context, this model of interpretation could provide a basis for self-fulfilled theological pride and political supremacy in a multicultural society. To avoid the interpretive pitfalls, biblical scholars advocate for rereading the story of Sarah and Hagar in a new light.

J. Gerald Janzen raises this concern, arguing that by limiting the interpretation of the story to a simple slave-master narrative, the possibility of a more nuanced theological understanding, which acknowledges the blessings that Hagar and Ishmael may have received from God, is eliminated. Addressing this tragic memory of exclusion, Janzen continues that “the very community of promise and hope, of redemption and liberation, the community of Abraham and Sarah, is itself

capable of becoming a community of oppression" (Janzen, 1993, p. 46). In other words, the Israelites who were once oppressed and enslaved could potentially oppress others based on the same theological narrative. In place of this mode of interpretation, engaging in a broader interpretation of the story is imperative to fully appreciate its theological implications for communal life.

In a series of dialogues about stories from Genesis, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, has also expressed similar concerns, stating that "The issues raised by the Sarah-Hagar story play themselves out in our contemporary consciousness as we realise that a history of oppression does not guarantee that we cannot become oppressors" (Frymer-Kensky, 1996, p. 97). For her, the story serves as a reminder that even those who have experienced oppression can become oppressors if they do not critically read their traditions. Karen Armstrong who participated in the dialogue adds her thoughts on the issue, stating that "Poor Hagar is caught up in some divine drama and then jettisoned when she has played her part—chucked out into the wilderness with woefully inadequate provisions" (Armstrong, 1996). Like Janzen, both scholars stress the need to critically examine the societal and cultural contexts in which this story was written to fully appreciate its theological implications.

One would be mistaken to assume that the approach above is a product of the modern ecumenical movement. In fact, critically evaluating and examining Biblical stories has been common practice since the 19th century. A prime example is Abraham Geiger, a leading rabbi of the Jewish Reform movement in Germany, who wrote in 1836: "The Talmud and the Bible too, that collection of books, most of them so splendid and uplifting, perhaps the most exalting of all literature of human authorship, can no longer be viewed as of divine origin." He continued:

> For the love of heaven, how much longer can we continue this deceit to expound the stories of the Bible from the pulpit over and over again as actual historical happenings, to accept as supernatural events of world import stories which we ourselves have relegated to the realm of legend and to derive teaching from them or at least to use them as the basis for sermons and texts? How much longer will we continue to pervert the spirit of the child with these tales that distort the natural good sense of tender youth? (Meyer, 1999, p. 195)

This reflection suggests that the critical examination of religious texts is a longstanding tradition. Based on the above ecumenical reflection, contemporary readers, especially those who engage in interfaith dialogue may no longer benefit from approaching the story solely through the lens of the crisis experienced by the Jewish people in the sixth century BCE.

Instead, readers should embrace a broader perspective that takes into account the diversity of human experience and the complexity of God's relationship with humanity. Taking into consideration the earlier documentary hypothesis, if we re-read Genesis 16 and 21 with an ecumenical perspective, we may get the insight that both Ishmael and Isaac were blessed in different ways, with Isaac being blessed in the watered land and Ishmael in the desert. Nowhere in the book of Genesis does God show favouritism towards either Sarah or Hagar. When Sarah banished Hagar from Abraham's tent after she had conceived, God did not intervene or blame Sarah for any wrongdoing. Sarah, in this case, was expressing what a privileged woman had to do in the past. On the other hand, Hagar had a right, according to her society, to feel more worthy than Sarah because

it was from her womb that Abraham would have heirs. Hagar did not need permission to feel superior, just as Abraham and Sarah did not need to ask Hagar's consent, whether she felt oppressed or not when they decided to use her womb to give Abraham heirs.

One could argue that centuries of reading the story of Sarah and Hagar in the context of the exile, not the mention centuries of persecution under the Romans, may cause Jewish commentaries to have forgotten or neglected the biblical narrative of their ancestors' enslavement in Egypt. This neglect has led to a particular interpretation of history that denies God's justice towards both women. In particular, it led to downplaying the moral message of God's command to Hagar to go back to Sarah and submit to her. This is a unique story that is worth a theological reflection on its own. The same narrative that might be understood as subduing Hagar portrays her being the first woman in the Bible to receive God's messenger. When God, through the angel, asks Hagar to return to Sarah, He does not let her go back empty-handed. On the contrary, she returns with God's promise: "I will so greatly multiply your offspring." This shows that Hagar was an important part of God's plan and was given a special status. As Bruce Feiler quotes, "Hagar, who earlier occupied the same place as Sarah, now occupies the same place as Abraham" (Feiler, 2002, p. 66). This demonstrates that God's plan is not limited to a particular group of people and that He cares for all of His creations, regardless of their social status, whether they received covenantal status or not.

Further indication can be seen when Sarah, once again, banished Hagar and Ishmael after Isaac's birth. God did not intervene or blame Sarah for any wrongdoing. Abraham, who had already banished Hagar in chapter 16, hesitated to expel her and their son again. However, God tells him to listen to Sarah and sends them away with some food and water. In Genesis 21, God commands Abraham: "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring" (Genesis 21: 12-13). Hagar, and now with Ishmael, once again received the angel of the Lord when they were desperate without water in the desert. "Fear not," an angel reached out to her. "Lift up the boy and hold him by the hand". With divine intervention, Hagar and Ishmael survived and even thrived in the harsh desert environment. In addition, God promised to make Ishmael into a great nation, just as He promised to make his younger brother and his descendants into a great nation.

Learning from biblical scholars and historians, all the divine drama surrounding Sarah and Hagar should no longer be read as a reason for theological pride and degrade others in a multicultural society. We learn from the story that both Ishmael and Isaac were sons of Abraham and were blessed by God. If in the past this story had been used for the development of Jewish identity or Christian identity, perhaps modern readers could use the same story to embrace others who are neither Jews nor Christians. The biblical narratives that came down to us indeed state that God's covenant came down through Sarah's son, Isaac. However, it is important to recognize that this does not mean that God only cares for Isaac and his descendants. While it is important to respect the foundational story of the Israelites as the recipients of God's covenant with Abraham, it does not diminish the other message that God takes care of all His creations, regardless of their background or status. This recognition is a necessary step to promoting inclusivity and compassion towards all people and achieving harmony and mutual understanding in a multicultural society.

However, rereading the biblical story of Sarah and Hagar through the lens of biblical criticism and ecumenical perspectives could pose a serious challenge to many Jews who view the story as foundational to their belief system. Orthodox Judaism, similar to conservative tendencies

within Protestantism and Catholicism, rejects biblical criticism. Orthodox Jews, whether in the modern world or the medieval, hold steadfastly to a doctrine called “Torah from Heaven" (Meyer, 1999, p. 194). This doctrine asserts that both the Written and the Oral Torah were literally revealed by God to Moses at Sinai and are therefore, wholly of divine origin, though not in the same literalist fashion as the inerrancy believed by some Protestants.

As such, Orthodox Jews reject all modern attempts to suggest that any portion of the Torah was not written by Moses at God’s behest. This position implies that rereading the story of Sarah and Hagar with an ecumenical approach might undermine a particular theological stance that many Orthodox Jews find essential for their identity, such as the covenant. While groups or individuals who are traditionally oppressed or excluded from the covenant, and who identify with Hagar (such as non-white Christians or Muslims), may find attempts to reread the biblical story liberating, the same cannot be said for Jews who may feel that such attempts undermine their religious identity. This perspective also suggests that attempting to build ecumenical partnerships without considering Orthodox views might exacerbate the existing divide between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, pushing them even further apart.

## Conclusion

In the contemporary context, our access to history and current scholarship allows us to reflect on the past experiences of Jewish people in exile and the early formation of Christianity during Paul’s life in the first century CE. We can learn from their experiences that the history of oppression does not guarantee that we cannot become oppressors ourselves. The story of Hagar and Sarah should be read critically in a historical context and should not be used to indicate theological superiority over another. As discussed above, God has blessed both Sarah's son and Hagar's son in His own way, and neither woman nor her son was a victor or a loser. While early Jewish and Christian theologians used this story to develop and maintain their identity, contemporary readers should avoid using the same interpretation to reinforce prejudices and perpetuate misunderstandings.

Muslim readers and interfaith activists can benefit from reading the historical context of Sarah and Hagar's story to recognize theological debates and appreciate the moral messages it carries for Jewish and Christian believers. The story of Sarah and Hagar, including Ishmael and Isaac, as presented in Genesis, is very different from the version preserved in Islamic tradition. In the Islamic tradition, Abraham is known to have taken Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca, not to the Negev desert. The tradition also mentions that Abraham visited Ishmael twice, indicating that he never abandoned his son. However, the story from the Islamic tradition can be reconciled with the one from the Jewish and Christian narrative in Genesis, as both traditions acknowledge God's grace towards humanity. By considering the story of Sarah and Hagar as an important component of Jewish communal identity, which has been significant from the time of exile until the present, modern readers can attain valuable insights and inform themselves in current debates on social justice and interfaith relations, avoiding further division among Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

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