

Hagar Speaks to the Modern World

Vivienne Stacey

© 2003 with acknowledgements to Karen Darnell

Preparing Bible studies for Muslims: designer studies – custom-made

Introduction

Among the outstanding women of the Bible do we omit or avoid Hagar because of the position of Ishmael in Islam? Is Galatians 4:21-31 bad press for Hagar? Shouldn't we pay more attention to her especially in the Genesis accounts in chapters 16; 17:15-27 and 21:8-21?

GENESIS

- 16:1 **Hagar has much to say to us and to Muslims in our world today,** especially in regard to identity, relationships, polygamy, abuse, divorce and single parenthood. Her name Hagar was Hajar in the Egyptian pronunciation of the Arabic translation. The Arabic radicals or root letters in her name are h, j and r. From the same root comes *hijra*, 'flight' or 'migration', *mujahar* 'refugee' and *muhajaran* 'refugees'. Hajar is probably a nickname meaning 'refugee', perhaps given to her by Abram's servants in the camp. The name was found on an ancient seal in Jericho. According to Bukhari's Hadith 578 a tyrant gave Hagar as a servant to Sarah. Hagar found her identity through her connection and developing relationship with the Creator God, the Covenant God of Abraham.
- 16:2 **Sarai's initiative.** She blamed Allah and was concerned with her own honour rather than Allah's.
- 16:3 Hagar is almost a non-person. She is not spoken to, but appears as an object under Sarai's control. The maidservant becomes the second wife (Hebrew *ishshah* not the word for concubine *pilegash*). Sarai plans to build on Hagar according to the custom of surrogacy.
- 16:4 Hagar became pregnant and felt honour and spiritual joy as Abram's wife and prospective mother of a great nation. She now despised Sarai and went from feeling the honour of being chosen by Abram to the pride of despising Sarai.
- 16:5 Sarai wanted to expel Hagar from the camp. Abram loved Hagar. It was illegal for him to expel her under the code of Hammurabi, section 146.
- 16:6 Abram gave Hagar to Sarai to treat her as she wished. Even Abram could not treat his wives equally. Look up Qur'an 4:3. Sarai afflicted Hagar and looked down on her. As a woman, Sarai should have respected Hagar. Hagar fled from what was in Sarai's eyes. She knew the desert route to Egypt.
- 16:4-7 Note the false pride, the false blame and false neutrality respectively in the three persons in this section.
- 16:7,8 **This was the first visitation by an angel to a human in the Bible.** Muslims think this spring is Zam Zam, the spring from which they obtain holy water during the pilgrimage for taking home with them. The water is highly valued. The angel's first word was "Hagar". For the first time someone called her by name. Allah knew her just as He knows us and finds us. She began to forget her pride. If Allah cared enough to send his

angel to talk to her, she would listen. “Where have you come from, and where are you going?” “From the face of my mistress Sarai.” Hagar drew attention to her growing identity. She indicates possession – “my mistress”. “Where are you going?” She had no answer, but she did not want to bear her son in Egypt outside the camp where people did not know Allah. Identity tells us where we are going. Identity begins by asking Allah so that destination and purpose become clear.

- 16:9 **This is the angel’s second speech.** Although there was dysfunction in Abram’s camp Allah told Hagar to go back and submit (*islam*). Hagar must return to the eyes and hands of her oppressor. Hagar would raise her son where he could learn about Allah and submission. When to submit and when to stay? When to leave? Abused women have sometimes to face these questions.
- 16:10 **A promise from Allah to Hagar.**
- 16:11-12 **An annunciation in 3 parts:** announcement of a son, the naming of the child and a prediction of his future – he will be blessed, have a possession, multiply, and be free in his restless lifestyle. Genesis 17:20. Hagar is now included with such women as Hannah, Elizabeth and Mary. Compare this annunciation to the one to Mary (Maryam, the only woman named in the Qur’an). Here is the first naming by Allah. Ishmael means ‘God hears’. *Shamai* means hearing. Hearing is one of the seven attributes of early Islamic theology. Ishmael was a very important person. Allah gave a message to Hagar and to Sarai through this name. Allah hears the oppressor as well as the oppressed. Abuse must stop. He sees the afflicter as well as the afflicted one.
- 16:13 **Hagar has a new understanding of Allah** so she gave him a new name. Hagar perceived Allah as the One who sees her. A two-way relationship had developed. Seeing (*basir*) is another of the seven attributes of Allah in early Islamic theology. The others are hearing, life, purpose, will, speaking and knowing. Three of these are mentioned in our passage – speaking, hearing and seeing.
- 16:15-16 A close relationship developed between Abrah, Hagar and Ishmael – father, mother and son.
- 17:15-16 Allah’s promise to Abraham.
- 17:17 Abraham took the news rather badly.
- 17:18 Abraham’s prayer – “O that Ishmael might live before thee!”
- 17:20 Allah’s answer – “As for Ishmael, I have heard thee.”
- 21:9 Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. Sarah would have interpreted Hagar’s presence at the party as a threat to Isaac’s inheritance.
- 21:10 Sarah referred by name only to Isaac in this verse.
- 21:11 Sarah’s statement was distressing to Abraham because Ishmael was also his son.
- 21:11,12 Allah reassured Abraham on four points – (1) Don’t worry, (2) Do what Sarah tells you, (3) Through Isaac your offspring shall be reckoned, and (4) Ishmael is your offspring too.
- 21:14 Abraham was not stingy. He did what Allah said. Allah told him that He would care for Hagar and Ishmael. They knew this too. There was no need to burden them with goods. Both Abraham and Hagar trusted Allah who

speaks, hears and sees. Hagar again became a refugee and got lost, but Allah guided her to Beersheba.

21:15 Hagar brought the dying Ishmael to the feet of Allah under one of the bushes. The seventeen-year old Ishmael was wasted and weak.

21:16 Hagar refused to accept the possibility of Ishmael's death.

21:17 Allah heard and saw what was happening.

21:18 Allah confirmed the covenant promised.

21:19 **Allah opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.** This was not a miracle of water but a miracle of seeing. Hagar gave Ishmael a drink from the spring and he partook of his mother's vision. Hagar, like the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-42, realised that Allah can give water that goes on refreshing the inner soul and that sustains others also. Look up what the prophet Jesus said of himself in John 7:37-39.

Building Bridges of Understanding – February 2003