

A God Who Sees and Hears the “Other”: Hagar’s Theophany as an Illustration of the Lord’s Benevolence Toward Those Outside the Covenant

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Introduction

There is no more pivotal, defining, and foundational figure among the world’s monotheists than Abraham.¹ All three major monotheistic religions assert their ancestral linkage to him.² “Despite countless revolutions in the history of ideas, Abraham remains a defining figure for half the world’s believers.”³ The Hebrew Bible focuses on Abraham’s descendants through Isaac and Jacob who become known as the Children of Israel. The Christian faith sprang from Judaism with the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was the long-awaited Jewish Messiah, and the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham that through his progeny all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The Muslim faith sprang from the sands of Arabia with the claim that Muhammad was the last and greatest prophet

¹ Abraham is referred to as Abram, and Sarah as Sarai, prior to the name changes in Genesis 17:5, 15. This article will use the names Abraham and Sarah except in citations of biblical passages where the names Abram or Sarai are used.

² Carol Bakhos states, “According to all three traditions, he is the father of monotheism, the true *Urmonotheismus*. But *in* each faith he plays a major role as well. To Jews, Avraham (the Hebrew name) is the father of the Jewish people; to Christians, Abraham is the father of the Christian family of faith; and to Muslims, Ibrahim (Arabic) is the father of prophets in Islam. Thus he is at once a unifying and divisive figure with respect to how we conceive of these religions.” Carol Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Interpretations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1.

³ Bruce Feiler, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 10.

called by the one, true God of Abraham to restore the radical monotheism ostensibly corrupted and lost through the centuries.

Some critics allege that monotheism itself, particularly the legacy of Abraham's descendants, has caused the world great conflagration.⁴ Significant carnage and destruction could have been avoided if only monotheism had not arisen in the first place. Regina Schwartz argues that the identity constructed on the basis of covenant, land, and kinship drawing a distinction between insiders and outsiders through the beginning of the Hebrew Bible, gives monotheism a certain predisposition to violence that otherwise would not be present.⁵

This article will examine two narratives (Gen 16, 17) involving the firstborn son of Abraham, Ishmael, in light of the covenant promises made to Abraham.⁶ Although the book of Genesis identifies Abraham's second-born, Isaac, as the covenant child and heir to the fullness of the promises, Genesis records that some of the covenant blessings would also apply to Ishmael. Through the narratives of Gen 16 and 17, the description of the Lord's interaction with Ishmael's mother Hagar indicates a sympathy for one who was an outsider in her own household. The Lord's benevolence toward Hagar speaks to the character of the divine in the book of Genesis as one who is not inherently hostile toward the outsider. This kindness gives an example that followers of Jesus can emulate as heirs to the Abrahamic covenant today (Rom 4:12; 9:7–8; Gal 3:7, 29).

Hagar and Ishmael

The focus in the book of Genesis on Abraham as the one chosen by God for his special purposes carries a sense of irony in the Lord's interactions with him. When Abraham is first introduced in Genesis 11:26, until Genesis 17 when God changes his name, he is known as Abram which can be translated "a great father."⁷ Despite the name, Abraham and Sarah had no children. They lived in this condition for years, in a culture

⁴ Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Jan Willem van Henten, "Religion, Bible and Violence," in Pieter G. R. de Villiers and Jan Willem van Henten, eds., *Coping with Violence in the New Testament* (Leiden: BRILL, 2012), 12.

⁵ Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 4–13.

⁶ The author's initial exposure to this idea was in Stephen Dickie, *Islam: God's Forgotten Blessing* (Kasson, MN: Strawberry Meadow Association, 2006), 25–32.

⁷ John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman and David E Garland, rev. ed., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 180.

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that considered barrenness to be a curse from the gods.⁸ It is in this context that they desperately seek a solution. Abraham and Sarah's childlessness leads them to look to Hagar as a possible source for a solution.⁹

Hagar as Second Wife

Genesis 16:1 presents the barrenness of the household as a prologue to the story that follows, "now Sarai, Abram's wife, had not borne him children."¹⁰ In ancient times this circumstance was a cause of significant disgrace. In instances of infertility the woman was seen as the one at fault, and thus was considered responsible for the deity's displeasure.¹¹ Sarah bore this shame, and its accompanying guilt, heavily and desperately sought a solution to remove the burden from herself and her household. In addition, Mesopotamian legal codes dictated that inheritance which belonged to a woman would pass on to her offspring, but not necessarily any of the other offspring her husband may have with other women.¹² Philip Drey suggests that Sarah's concern regarding an heir was not connected to the Lord's covenant with Abraham, instead she was seeking to ensure an heir for the dowry she brought to the marriage, rather than have it be lost altogether.¹³ Sarah's actions do not appear connected to a belief in the covenant promises, and her concern regarding the inheritance is at the forefront of her subsequent attitude toward Ishmael (Gen 21:10).

Genesis 16:1 continues by identifying Sarah's servant as a part of the household, "and she had a female Egyptian servant, and her name was Hagar."¹⁴ Abraham had previously traveled to Egypt and had lived there for a period of time during a famine in the area of Canaan (Gen 12:10). Pharaoh had shown Abraham favor because of Sarah's beauty and her

⁸ John H. Walton, "Genesis," in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. John H. Walton, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 67–68; W. Gunther Plaut, "Genesis," in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, ed. W. Gunther Plaut (New York, NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 111.

⁹ The translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ For a summary and critique of the source-critical view of the Genesis 16:1–16 narrative, see Tony T. Maalouf, "Ishmael in Biblical History" (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1998), 23–31. This article will approach Genesis 16:1–16 assuming the historicity and unity of the passage.

¹¹ Walton, "Genesis," 67–68; Plaut, "Genesis," 111.

¹² Philip R. Drey, "The Role of Hagar in Genesis 16," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 40.2 (2002): 188–89.

¹³ Drey, "Hagar," 186–89.

¹⁴ For a discussion regarding the possible origins of Hagar's name, see Drey, "Hagar," 181–82.

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presence in his harem, rewarding Abraham with livestock and male and female servants (Gen 12:16). Hagar may very well have been one of those female servants.¹⁵ Because of the circumstances surrounding the events in Egypt, Hagar would have been a reminder for Sarah of that troubling episode between herself and Abraham where Sarah had been humiliated in a manner similar to a slave.¹⁶

In circumstances like that of Abraham and Sarah, it was an accepted practice in the Ancient Near East for a barren couple to find a surrogate woman to bear a child.¹⁷ There were provisions made in marriage contracts for just this eventuality:

Marriage contracts of the ancient world ... anticipated the possibility of barrenness and at times specifically dictated a course of action. Solutions ranged from serial monogamy (divorcing the barren wife to take another, presumably fertile one), to polygyny (taking a second wife of equal status), to polycoity (the addition of handmaids or concubines for the purpose of producing an heir), to adoption. The third option is the one pursued here; this attempted remedy is consistent with contemporary practice as a strategy for heirship. This option was often more attractive because if the wife were divorced, there would be an economic impact on the family (she took her marriage fund/dowry with her). Concubines bring no dowry, only their fertility to the family.¹⁸

“It is therefore plausible that Sarai is simply invoking the terms of her marriage contract.”¹⁹ This invocation would change Hagar’s place within the household, for Hagar would no longer be merely a slave but would be elevated to at least a concubine. In v. 3, Hagar is referred to as Abraham’s *’išâ* (“wife”).²⁰ In the Ancient Near East, “in the event a wife gives her female slave to her husband as a secondary wife, any property rights the

¹⁵ Jacques B. Doukhan, *Genesis*, vol. 1, *Seventh-day Adventist International Bible Commentary* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2016), 229. See also Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold, 5th ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1912), 1:223; Drey, “Hagar,” 183.

¹⁶ Doukhan, *Genesis*, 229.

¹⁷ Gladys Rebeca Cabrera Piñango, “Discordia en la tienda de Abraham: una relectura del Gn 16, 1-21; 21, 1-21. Vientre en alquiler: una realidad bíblica, un problema moral de hoy” (PhD diss., University of Seville, 2015), 67–72.

¹⁸ Walton, “Genesis,” 87.

¹⁹ Walton, “Genesis,” 87.

²⁰ For a discussion regarding the place of wives and concubines in the Ancient Near East, see Maalouf, “Ishmael,” 41–43.

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primary wife continues to enjoy over her slave are trumped by her subordinate relationship to her husband.”²¹

Hagar's change in status within the family structure is reflected in the terminology used by Abraham and Sarah to describe Hagar. In Genesis 16:1, the narrator refers to Hagar as a *šaphâ* (“female slave”).²² In 16:2, Sarah herself refers to Hagar as her *šaphâ*. But in 16:3, the narrator states “then Abram's wife Sarai took her Egyptian female slave ... and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife.” The description changes from *šaphâ* to *išâ* (“wife”). This conflict in status within the family is evident in the narrative, as when Hagar conceives with Abraham's child, she despises her mistress (Gen 16:4–5). Hagar's respect for the authority of her mistress is now diminished in light of the new status she has achieved.²³ Hagar's actions harmonize with the contemporary custom that, according to the Lipit-Ishtar Code, her child would have the possibility of receiving at least a portion of Abraham's estate, as well as have the legal rights to Sarah's dowry (see Gen 21:10).²⁴

Sarah reacts to Hagar's disdain by blaming Abraham for the predicament and treating Hagar harshly (Gen 16:5–6). In verse 5, Sarah considers Abraham responsible and says “my opprobrium be upon on you, I gave my female slave into your embrace and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes. May the Lord judge between me and you.”²⁵ Despite Sarah's initiating the plan, when subsequent events do not conform to her expectations she castigates Abraham. Abraham responds in verse 6, “behold, your female slave is in your hand, do to her

²¹ Philip Y. Yoo, “Hagar the Egyptian: Wife, Handmaid, and Concubine,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 78.2 (2016): 218; Scott Ken Nikaido, “Intertextuality and Ideology in the Hagar Narratives” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2002), 9–10.

²² Drey suggests that *šaphâ* may indicate a female slave given as a gift that not only serves as a maid, but could also be understood to provide a “sexual component,” possibly as a concubine. See Drey, “Hagar,” 183–86.

²³ Pamela Tamarkin Reis, “Hagar Required,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25.87 (2000): 82–83.

²⁴ S. N. Kramer, “Lipit-Ishtar Lawcode,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplement*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 160.

²⁵ Reis suggests that the last part of verse 5 “May the Lord judge between me and you” should be vocalized to indicate that Sarah is no longer talking to Abraham, instead the personal pronominal suffix should be second-feminine and indicate that Sarah is addressing Hagar. See Reis, “Hagar Required,” 84–85.

what is good in your eyes.” Sarah may have hoped that Abraham would emancipate Hagar, in accordance with the Lipit-Ishtar Code:

If a man married a wife (and) she bore him children and those children are living, and a slave also bore children for her master (but) the father granted freedom to the slave and her children, the children of the slave shall not divide the estate with the children of their (former) master.²⁶

The key to this law’s application is that even though Hagar belonged to Sarah, the law stipulated that the father would have to emancipate the slave. Abraham refuses to intervene and grants to Sarah the authority to decide Hagar’s fate, this proposed solution would not resolve the problem.²⁷

Sarah’s only apparent choice, from her own perspective, was to make the circumstances so uncomfortable for Hagar that she would leave of her own volition.²⁸ Though the Bible does not record the nature of Sarah’s oppression, the code of Ur-Nammu offers a possibility when it records, “If a man’s slave-woman, comparing herself to her mistress, speaks insolently to her (or him), her mouth shall be scoured with 1 quart of salt.”²⁹

Hagar concluded that her only option in the face of her mistress’ treatment was to return home. Genesis 16:6b records, “when Sarai oppressed her, she fled from her presence.”³⁰ In a time and place where any individual would be unlikely to survive apart from the family encampment, a woman who could be considered a fugitive slave was particularly vulnerable.

Genesis 16:7b identifies the place at which the angel of the Lord encounters her is “by the spring on the way to Shur.” From the region where Abraham and his family would have been camped in Mamre, Shur

²⁶ Kramer, “Lipit-Ishtar,” 160; The Code of Lipit-Ishtar was a series of laws compiled during the first half of the nineteenth century BCE in Mesopotamia, predating the Code of Hammurabi by about 100 years. See Kramer, “Lipit-Ishtar,” 159.

²⁷ Drey, “Hagar,” 190–1.

²⁸ Drey, “Hagar,” 190–1.

²⁹ J. J. Finkelstein, “The Laws of Ur-Nammu,” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplement*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 525; “Ur-Nammu (2112–2095) was the founding ruler of the 3rd Dynasty of Ur.” Finkelstein, “The Laws of Ur-Nammu,” 523.

³⁰ For a discussion of the verb עָנָה, and its use in this verse in relation to its appearance in 15:13, see Reis, “Hagar Required,” 87–88.

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was about 60 miles to the south on the way to Egypt.³¹ In her desperation, her only apparent choice was to attempt to return home. Egypt would have afforded her the protections of familiar surroundings and possible reunification with her family.

Hagar and the Angel of the Lord

Genesis 16:7 is the first time that the *mal'ak YHWH* (“angel of the Lord”) appears in the biblical canon.³² Multiple times through the Hebrew Bible, the phrase *mal'ak YHWH* is used interchangeably with references to the Lord himself (Gen 18:1–16; 22:11–18; Ex 3; Judg 6:11–16, 21–24; 13:3–22).³³ This would indicate that at a minimum, the Bible writers understood *mal'ak YHWH* to refer to the deity in some way.³⁴ Rad pointed out that *mal'ak YHWH* has Christological qualities, and is “a form in which Yahweh appears. He is God himself in human form.”³⁵ The Lord is not an angel, but at times he appears as a messenger in order to facilitate communication with human beings.³⁶ There are several commentators who take the position that the *mal'ak YHWH* was the preincarnate Christ appearing to human beings before taking upon himself human flesh at the incarnation.³⁷

The first time that the angel of the Lord appears in the Hebrew canon is to Hagar.³⁸ The angel of the Lord will play significant roles later in the Hebrew Bible as he appears to Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3:2), to Gideon (Judg 6:11), to Samson’s parents (Judg 13:3), and to David while judgment falls on Israel (2 Sam 24:16). The angel of the Lord sees fit to meet with an Egyptian female slave fleeing the persecution that she

³¹ Maalouf, “Ishmael,” 52; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, rev. ed., OTL, ed. G. Ernest Wright et al. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1972), 192; John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 155.

³² For a discussion of the theophanic nature of the encounter, see Maalouf, “Ishmael,” 51–52.

³³ Stephen L. White, “Angel of the LORD: Messenger or Euphemism?,” *TynBul* 50.2 (1999): 303–5.

³⁴ White, “Angel,” 303–5.

³⁵ Rad, *Genesis*, 193–94.

³⁶ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 110–13.

³⁷ Walter C. Kaiser Jr. et al., *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 191–92; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, *TOTC*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1967), 33–34; Maalouf, “Ishmael,” 51–52.

³⁸ Jo Ann Davidson, “Genesis Matriarchs Engage Feminism,” *AUSS* 40.2 (2002): 172.

suffered at the hands of the Lord's chosen covenant family. This is one of the reasons why Trevor Dennis states that Hagar is "more highly honoured in some respects than almost any other figure in the Bible."³⁹

In Genesis 16:8, the angel of the Lord identifies Hagar by name, and queries her regarding her journey. Hagar describes her circumstances to the angel but omits the answer to the question regarding her intended destination. Doukhan suggests this omission is because Hagar's flight primarily has a spiritual motivation more than a response to Sarah's persecution.⁴⁰ This conclusion assumes that Hagar would intend to hide her destination out of a spiritual motivation, and she would have reached the conclusion to hide it because she knew she was talking with the angel of the Lord. The passage is not clear about when Hagar realized with whom she was speaking.⁴¹

The conversation continues with the angel of the Lord issuing an unusual command. In verse 9, the angel of the Lord tells Hagar "return to your mistress and submit yourself under her hands." This directive can lead the reader to conclude that part of the Lord's plan involves Hagar and her child deriving some benefit from being in Abraham's camp and presence. The word *'anâ* ("to submit") is the same word with a different meaning as in verse 6 *'anâ* ("to oppress"). Hagar is commanded to *'anâ* ("submit") to the one who chose to *'anâ* ("oppress") her.⁴² The angel knows that there are future implications that affect the wellbeing of Hagar and the child, and the Lord recognizes the child as being a partial heir to the promises made to Abraham (Gen 17:20; 21:13, 18).⁴³

Though the narrative continues in v. 10, this article will return to the content of v. 10 in the context of the covenant promises. Proceeding to v. 11, the angel of the Lord continues by announcing to Hagar "behold, you are pregnant, and you will bear a son, and will call his name Ishmael because the Lord has heard of your oppression." Hagar already knew she was pregnant; the new information is the gender of the child. There are

³⁹ Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 176.

⁴⁰ Doukhan, *Genesis*, 232–3.

⁴¹ Rad, *Genesis*, 193.

⁴² Doukhan, *Genesis*, 1:233; Maalouf, "Ishmael," 54; Streit characterizes this interaction as the Lord taking on the role of slavemaster. Judith Ann Streit, "The God of Abraham: A Study in Characterization" (PhD diss., The Iliff School of Theology and University of Denver, 1996), 143 Given the broader context of the story and the Lord's subsequent interaction with Hagar, this interpretation is rejected.

⁴³ Maalouf, "Ishmael," 54–55.

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also only four instances in which a mother is promised a son by God himself, Hagar, Manoaah's wife (Judg 13:4), the Isaian prophecy (Isa 7:14) and Mary (Matt 1:21; Lk 1:31).⁴⁴ The name of the child, *yīšmā'ēl* ("Ishmael"), speaks to the character of the Lord. An outsider, Hagar, who had been oppressed by Sarah and was now fleeing for safety was the one to whom the Lord was listening. The child would bear the name that highlighted his mother's plea and the name itself had been given by the Lord. This is the first time in the Hebrew Bible that the Lord tells parents what to name a child before he is born, a distinction that includes five other Bible characters, Isaac (Gen 17:9), Solomon (1 Chron 22:9), and Josiah (1 Kgs 13:2), and in the New Testament, John the Baptist (Lk 1:13) and Jesus (Lk 1:31).⁴⁵ Only Hagar and Mary experience an announcement from God directed to a mother that identifies both the gender and the name of the child, and Hagar is first.⁴⁶

The only person in the Bible to coin a name for the Lord is Hagar in this theophanic encounter.⁴⁷ Verse 13 states "and she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are a God who sees [*'atā 'ēl ro'ī*]' for she said, 'have I also seen here the one who saw me?'" Though the patriarchs named places where they encountered God (Gen 22:14; 28:16–19; 32:31; 35:15), and Hagar does the same in verse 14 "therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi," Hagar is the only human to give a name to the Lord himself.

The Lord has given Hagar a unique interaction on several accounts. The first appearance of the angel of the Lord in the Bible is to Hagar; the first time that the Lord identifies a boy to his mother before birth and

⁴⁴ Davidson, "Matriarchs," 172–173.

⁴⁵ W. Gunther Plaut identifies six men who were named before their birth, Ishmael, "Isaac, Moses, Solomon, Josiah, and the Messiah." Plaut, "Genesis," 144. The Messiah can be understood to have been named Emmanuel in Isa 7:14, though this is likely not Plaut's understanding. Moses, however, was not named before his birth, instead Plaut suggests that the name Moses may have had prophetic significance. W. Gunther Plaut, "Exodus," in *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, ed. W. Gunther Plaut (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981), 388; For a parallel comparison of the various birth annunciations, see Maalouf, "Ishmael," 56–57.

⁴⁶ Sarah overhears the announcement by YHWH that she will have a son (Gen 17:9–10), but the announcement is given to Abraham. See Davidson, "Matriarchs," 172–73.

⁴⁷ Streit, "God," 144; Doukhan, *Genesis*, 234; Maalouf, "Ishmael," 72–73; Rad suggests that he may agree with Wellhausen that Hagar named the well, but did not name YHWH himself. See Rad, *Genesis*, 194–95. This argument is based on a speculative emendation of the Hebrew text, and there is no textual evidence to support the emendation. See Maalouf, "Ishmael," 73.

names him is to Hagar; and the first and only time that a human being gives God a name is Hagar's name given to the Lord. In addition to these unique aspects of the encounter, God also assures Hagar that he will apply the promise previously made to Abraham, to her son. In verse 10, the Lord says, "I will multiply your seed exceedingly, and it will not be numbered because of [the] multitude." This promise echoes the promises made to Abraham regarding his descendants in Gen 13:16 "I will make your seed as the dust of the earth" and Gen 15:5 "he took him outside and said, 'Look now to heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' And he said to him, 'So will your seed be.'" With this promise, Hagar is the "only woman in the Bible to whom God gives such a promise of multiplication of seed."⁴⁸ Because the promise was made to Abraham, the child Hagar is carrying will be Abraham's firstborn son, Hagar has been directed to return to Abraham's household, Ishmael will subsequently participate in the sign of the covenant and be circumcised (Gen 17:23), and the multiplication of descendants was a central component of the Lord's promises to Abraham. One could conclude that this promise is God's acknowledgement of the partial fulfillment of the covenant promise through Hagar and Abraham's son Ishmael.⁴⁹

The distinction separating the previous covenant promises from the promises made to Ishmael is the difference in the land. Though the Lord had previously promised the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants, the land promise to Ishmael recognizes that there will be further children born to Abraham, and Ishmael will not inherit the land of Canaan. Genesis 16:12b states "he will dwell in the presence of all his brothers." The promise was a description of tension, a reminder that Ishmael's descendants would not receive the land of Canaan, but that the Lord would indeed preserve them in the same area as Abraham's later descendants.⁵⁰

The Promises of the Abrahamic Covenant

In order to understand the place Ishmael had in relation to the Abrahamic covenant and the way in which a portion of the promises would apply to him, it is necessary to examine the promises of the Abrahamic covenant in the book of Genesis. This section will briefly delineate three

⁴⁸ Maalouf, "Ishmael," 55.

⁴⁹ Doukhan, *Genesis*, 233; Drey, "Hagar," 193; Carol Bakhos, "Abraham's Marginalized Descendant: Rabbinic Portrayals of Ishmael" (PhD diss., The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2000), 35–36.

⁵⁰ Doukhan, *Genesis*, 233.

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encounters between the Lord and Abraham described in Genesis prior to Ishmael's birth (Gen 12:1–3, 7; 13:14–18; 15:1–6), with particular attention paid to the promises that would apply to Abraham.

Genesis 12:1–3, 7

The first encounter the Bible records between the Lord and Abraham is the first iteration of the Abrahamic covenant. The Lord promises to Abraham to lead him from his father's house. In Genesis 12:1, the Lord assures Abraham that he will lead Abraham "to the land which I will show you." At this point, the Lord did not identify what land it would be; he simply left the matter to Abraham's trust in God to fulfill the pledge.⁵¹ It is following this invitation that God makes several promises.

The first promise that the Lord makes is found in verse 2, "I will make you into a great nation." This is the blessing of many descendants, a promise that in ancient times represented the future of the care of the parents in their old age and generational inheritance.⁵² The second promise that the Lord makes follows in verse 2, "I will bless you and I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." The Lord's affirmation of his intent to bless Abraham is central to the very covenant that he is making with Abraham. Some variation of the word *brk* ("to bless") appears five times in verses 2–3 indicating that it is central to the intention of this covenant.⁵³ The covenant will have far-reaching consequences for Abraham's direct descendants and the whole world. The Lord's intent was both to make a great nation of Abraham's descendants and to make Abraham himself a blessing.⁵⁴ Doukhan notes that this is a duty incumbent upon Abraham's descendants to take up their responsibility to be a blessing and share the message of the blessings of the Lord with the nations.⁵⁵

The Lord continues the explication of his call to Abraham in Gen 12:3 by noting "I will bless those blessing you and curse the one cursing you, and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you."⁵⁶ God asserts that he will treat those interacting with Abraham and his descendants in a sowing and reaping framework. Those who bless Abraham, and his

⁵¹ Rad, *Genesis*, 159.

⁵² Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 43.

⁵³ Rad, *Genesis*, 159.

⁵⁴ Sailhamer, "Genesis," 156.

⁵⁵ Doukhan, *Genesis*, 200.

⁵⁶ For a discussion regarding the grammatical-syntactical issues of וְנִבְרַכְוּ, see Sailhamer, "Genesis," 156–57.

descendants, will themselves be blessed, and the one cursing Abraham will herself be cursed. The blessing received by other families—nations—is contingent on their interaction with Abraham’s progeny.

In Gen 12:7, the Lord clarifies the previously undefined land to which Abraham was traveling. Upon Abraham’s arrival in Canaan the Lord states, “to your seed I will give this land.” Notably, the promise is made to Abraham’s seed, or descendants, not to Abraham himself.⁵⁷ This detail anticipates that Abraham and his descendants would continue their nomadic lifestyle and not settle in the land until after the captivity in Egypt, the Exodus, and the wilderness wanderings. There would yet be several centuries before the land promise would begin to be fulfilled.

Genesis 13:14–18

After having traveled together for a period of time, Lot, Abraham’s nephew, parted ways with him and settled in the area near Sodom while Abraham settled in Canaan (Gen 13:12). In contrast to the Lord’s previous conversation with him, which took place in Haran (Gen 12:4), Abraham was now residing in the land of promise. After the Lord drew Abraham’s attention to the four cardinal directions of the expanse of the territory, the Lord adds the promise “for all the land which you see, I will give to you and to your seed forever.” The Lord had previously promised the land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendants, the same promise is emphasized here. The promise is reiterated in verse 17.

The Lord also repeats the promise regarding Abraham’s descendants while adding an analogy to the dust of the earth. The Lord states, “I will make your seed as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could number the dust of the earth, in the same way will your seed be numbered.” The same word *hā’āreṣ* (“the earth”) is used in both the promise of the territory, and the source of the dust. This wordplay emphasizes that the people are tied to the land.⁵⁸ Abraham’s descendants would both multiply exponentially and dwell in the land promised to him.

Genesis 15:1–6, 18

Several events transpire, Lot had been taken captive, and Abraham went and rescued him (Gen 14:1–16). Abraham had an encounter with the mysterious Melchizedek, and Abraham still does not have an heir. As Abraham’s anxiety continues to grow regarding his progeny, he makes a

⁵⁷ Rad, *Genesis*, 162.

⁵⁸ Doukhan, *Genesis*, 210.

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desperate statement to the Lord, “what will you give me since I am going childless, and the heir of this house of mine is Eliezer of Damascus?”⁵⁹ In ancient times, there was a consideration that when a couple was unable to have children, a slave could be considered a de facto heir or even be adopted.⁶⁰ It appears that Eliezer could fulfill this ancient allowance and Abraham’s desperation is evident.

In verse 4, the Lord clarifies that the promised descendants would be Abraham’s biological children. “This man will not be your heir, rather one who will come from your body, he will be your heir.” Up to this point in the narrative, the Lord had not explicitly clarified the means through which the many descendants would come, and this left room for doubt in Abraham’s mind. It is important to note that even at this stage, the Lord had not explicitly identified Sarah as the one through whom the promise would be fulfilled. It is this impatience with regard to the Lord’s timing and Abraham’s willingness to find culturally acceptable alternatives to the traditional process of inheritance that he will demonstrate again in Genesis 16 with regard to Hagar.

After clarifying that the heir will be Abraham’s own flesh and blood, the Lord incorporates another analogy to explain the large number of Abraham’s descendants. Verse 5 states, “he took him outside and said, ‘Look now to heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And he said to him, ‘So will your seed be.’” The analogy of the stars, like that of the dust, incorporates a natural phenomenon considered impossible to be counted.⁶¹

The main components of the promises made to Abraham regarding the future of his descendants were to make him a great nation, to bless all families of the earth through him, to give him land, and to multiply his descendants as the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky. All of these promises had been made before Abraham had any biological child of his own, and God had only specified that the heir would be his direct descendant. It is at the age of 85 that Abraham is willing to consider alternate approaches to fulfilling God’s promises.

⁵⁹ For a discussion regarding the translation of רֵבִי־מִשְׁקֵי, see Sailhamer, “Genesis,” 171.

⁶⁰ Walton, “Genesis,” 84; Doukhan, *Genesis*, 221; Rad, *Genesis*, 184.

⁶¹ The comparison of an innumerable quantity to the stars of the heavens is attested elsewhere in the ancient world. See Walton, “Genesis,” 84–85; Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 712.

Isaac and Ishmael

Repetition of covenant promises

Genesis 16:16 closes the chapter by stating, “Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram”, and the following chapter opens with the statement, “Now it was when Abram was ninety-nine years old, that the Lord appeared to Abram.” According to the time accounts given, thirteen years pass between the close of Genesis 16 and the beginning of Genesis 17 (Gen 17:24, 27).⁶² The Lord has remained silent during the intervening time, but he has new announcements to make.

The Lord echoes the promise that Abraham will have an abundance of descendants. He states in Gen 17:2b, “I will multiply you exceedingly.” The Lord continues in 17:5b–6 by stating, “I have made you a father of many nations. And I will make you exceedingly fruitful; nations and kings will come from you.” Some have attempted to resolve why the Lord would repeat the promises surrounding the covenant in Gen 15 by distinguishing the emphasis in previous iterations on the land and the emphasis here on the descendants.⁶³ In this passage, however, the promise regarding the land of Canaan is also repeated in 17:8.

Isaac, the Child of the Covenant

What is new in Gen 17 is that Sarah is now designated as the one through whom a child will be born who will be the heir of the covenant. In Gen 17:16 the Lord says of Sarah, “I will bless her and give you a son through her, and I will bless her, and she will be [the mother] of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.” Jacques Doukhan points out that this passage elevates Sarah to the same place with regard to the covenant recognition as Abraham.⁶⁴ Though the promises had previously been specifically made to Abraham in Gen 17:5–6, the same wording applies to Sarah’s descendant, making it clear that the Lord’s intent is to make Sarah’s descendant the full heir of the covenant.⁶⁵

⁶² Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Narrative*, 155; Curt Leviant, “Parallel Lives: The Trials and Traumas of Isaac and Ishmael,” in *Abraham & Family: New Insights Into the Patriarchal Narratives*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2000), 96.

⁶³ Sailhamer, “Genesis,” 179.

⁶⁴ Doukhan, *Genesis*, 240.

⁶⁵ Rad argues that the promise here is radically distinct from the promise in Gen 15, but this is rooted in his presupposition of this being a passage composed by the Priestly writer, whereas Gen 15 was composed by the Yahwist. See Rad, *Genesis*, 202.

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Abraham had been living under the assumption for the thirteen intervening years that Ishmael had been the fulfillment of the promises. This is made clear in 17:18 where Abraham says to God, “oh that Ishmael might live before you.” In an age in which infant mortality was high, Abraham’s inclination was to go with a child who was at least twelve years old rather than another child who would face all of the risks of being born and growing up.⁶⁶ God reassures Abraham that he has not forgotten Ishmael and will keep the promises that he has made with regard to Ishmael’s descendants. In 17:20, God references the meaning of Ishmael’s name when he says, “as for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold I have blessed him. I will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He will father twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.”⁶⁷ God again introduces the terminology of blessing, fruitfulness, and multiplication that had just been used to describe the promise fulfillment through Sarah’s son.⁶⁸ In addition, Isaac’s descendant Jacob would also have a nation of twelve sons that would become the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen 49:1–27).⁶⁹

Though Abraham’s concern has been for Ishmael, God’s focus is shifting toward the anticipated child of Sarah. In 17:19, 21 God announces that Sarah will have a son, the boy’s name will be Isaac, and Isaac will be the child of the covenant that God had been working all along to establish with Abraham. In this passage, the divergence between God’s disposition between the sons of Abraham becomes abundantly clear. Even though Ishmael was the firstborn son, Isaac would be the one through whom God’s promises would be fulfilled, specifically the land promise and the blessing to all nations, the coming Messiah.⁷⁰ Ishmael is to be the recipient of a portion of the covenant blessings promised to Abraham because he is in a son of Abraham.⁷¹

As Abraham carries out God’s instructions to circumcise all of the male’s in his house (Gen 17:9–14), Ishmael is circumcised along with the servants and children of the servants (Gen 17:23–27). Because circumcision was a rite practiced in Egypt and Canaan at the time of Abraham, but not in Mesopotamia or Assyria, John Walton suggests that Abraham may have considered this sign of circumcision to have been a

⁶⁶ Rad, *Genesis*, 203.

⁶⁷ Doukhan, *Genesis*, 241.

⁶⁸ Sailhamer, “Genesis,” 183.

⁶⁹ Sailhamer, “Genesis,” 183.

⁷⁰ Doukhan, *Genesis*, 241; Sailhamer, “Genesis,” 183; Rad, *Genesis*, 203.

⁷¹ Drey, “Hagar,” 194; Davidson, “Matriarchs,” 172.

means of including Ishmael within the community that God was setting up.⁷² God made promises regarding Ishmael's descendants, and now Ishmael was a participant in the sign of the covenant as God had instructed Abraham to practice it.

Hagar and Ishmael in the Rest of Genesis

Genesis 21:8–21

God has provided a clarification that Isaac is to be the child of promise, but Isaac must grow up to take that place in the household. In the ANE, there was a party for a child who reached the age at which it could be weaned, typically at the age of three.⁷³ Once a child was weaned they had a better chance of survival and thus the context of the feast indicates that Abraham's reliance on Ishmael to be the heir who would carry on the family line is greatly reduced.⁷⁴

Sarah recognizes the change in circumstances within the household and sees an incident that is recorded in Gen 21:9, "then Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing." Whatever it was that Sarah saw caused a visceral response; in her estimation, Hagar had to leave.⁷⁵ Regardless of the nature of the action, Sarah was concerned that Ishmael may take the inheritance away from her now viable son Isaac when she said in v. 10 "the son of this female slave will not be an heir with my son Isaac."

The issue of Ishmael's rights of inheritance are made explicit in this passage. Sarah does not consider Ishmael to be her legal son despite the original impetus that appeared in Gen 16:2. This again raises the issue that has previously been considered in theory. In the Mesopotamian legal codes, the child of a slave could claim a portion of the inheritance unless the father was the one who emancipated the slave mother and thus made the inheritance claim void.⁷⁶

Abraham's reluctance to dismiss Hagar and Ishmael demonstrates the care and concern that he had for his firstborn son. Abraham had already appealed to God that he would recognize Ishmael as the one whom would

⁷² Walton, "Genesis," 89.

⁷³ Maalouf, "Ishmael," 82.

⁷⁴ Maalouf, "Ishmael," 89.

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the meaning of the word מצחק, see Tanya Ivy Hershon, "More Than Metsahek: The Consequence of Finding a Lost Pun for the Understanding of Genesis 21:9" (MA Thesis, Concordia University (Canada), 2009), 36–58, 89–97; Maalouf, "Ishmael," 83–86.

⁷⁶ Maalouf, "Ishmael," 90–91.

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be recognized as his legitimate heir who would fulfill the covenant (Gen 17:18).⁷⁷ God had said that the child of the covenant would be Isaac (Gen 17:19), and in the narrative in Gen 21:12–13 God again repeats the plan to work out his purposes through Isaac.⁷⁸

God specifically states in Gen 21:13 that the reason that Ishmael would become a great nation was “because he is your seed.” God had been promising since before Ishmael was born that he would make of his descendants a great nation. This promise had been a part of the covenant as listed earlier in this article. In this passage, God is recognizing that even though Ishmael was not to be the child whom he had elected to carry out the fullness of the covenant he had previously stated, there would still be a portion of the promise that would be fulfilled through Ishmael because he was the “seed” of Abraham.⁷⁹

Despite his reluctance, Abraham complies with Sarah’s demand and God’s command and sends Hagar and Ishmael away into the wilderness. Abraham concern is for his son’s wellbeing and so he sends them with as many provisions as he can and possibly a blessing.⁸⁰ He gives them “bread and a skin of water,” but in the desert conditions of the wilderness of Beersheba the provisions are insufficient to sustain life for any significant length of time.⁸¹

When Hagar and Ishmael’s provisions run out, Hagar is concerned that they will not survive. Genesis 21:15 records “then she laid the boy under one of the shrubs,” and the word שָׁלַךְ can carry the meaning of “exposure” or “casting dead bodies.”⁸² Hagar was convinced that Ishmael would die and says in v. 16, “let me not see the child’s death.”⁸³ It is in this desperate

⁷⁷ Doukhan speculates that at the time of Gen 21 Abraham may still hold to the idea that Ishmael should be considered the legitimate heir. See Doukhan, *Genesis*, 268.

⁷⁸ Maalouf, “Ishmael,” 91–92.

⁷⁹ Jonathan Edwin Culver, “The Ishmael Promises in the Light of God’s Mission: Christian and Muslim Reflections” (Ph.D., Fuller Theological Seminary, School of World Mission, 2001), 87–88. Maalouf states “God made a covenant to bless Hagar.” See Tony T. Maalouf, “The Inclusivity of God’s Promises: A Biblical Perspective,” *Cultural Encounters* 7.1 (2011): 31–32.

⁸⁰ For a discussion regarding whether Hagar was carrying Ishmael or both of them were carrying the provisions, see Maalouf, “Ishmael,” 93. Rad, however, takes the position that Ishmael was a small child whom Hagar carried. See Rad, *Genesis*, 233.

⁸¹ Walton, “Genesis,” 95–96.

⁸² Doukhan, *Genesis*, 270.

⁸³ Doukhan sees a parallel between the account of Ishmael’s near-death experience in the wilderness of Beersheba and Isaac’s near death on Mount Moriah in Gen 22:1–19. See Doukhan, *Genesis*, 270.

situation that the meaning of Ishmael's name again comes to the forefront of the narrative, God hears the cries of a desperate single mother and her ailing son of Abraham.⁸⁴

God responds to Hagar's call and *mal'ak 'elohim* ("the angel of God") speaks to her in her condition. This angel who addresses Hagar is the same being who spoke with her in Gen 16:7.⁸⁵ Again, as in the previous encounter, a well is the place of God's encounter and God's provision. The well provides water to fill the skin that Hagar is carrying and again enables God's promise to be carried forward in the person of Ishmael. The angel again reassures Hagar "I will make of him a great nation."⁸⁶

While the focus of Gen 16 was on Hagar as the expectant mother of Abraham's child and God's special encounter with her despite Sarah's mistreatment, the focus in Gen 21 is on God's election of Isaac, his remembrance of Ishmael, and the promises made to Hagar and Abraham. God was going to accomplish his purposes in the midst of the difficult circumstances brought about by the decisions made by Abraham and Sarah regarding the fate of Hagar and Ishmael.⁸⁷

Ishmael in the Rest of Genesis

Ishmael's portrayal in the rest of the book of Genesis is a sympathetic one. In Gen 25:9, Ishmael is portrayed as being present with his brother Isaac to bury their father Abraham. This account is followed in Gen 25:12–18 with the genealogy of Ishmael's descendants, specifically the twelve sons who are described as *něši'im* ("princes"). Following Ishmael's death described in Gen 25:17, the next time that Ishmael is mentioned is in Gen 28:9 where Esau is said to have married his cousin Mahalath, Ishmael's daughter.⁸⁸

The last time that Ishmael is mentioned in the book of Genesis is in the story in Gen 37:25–28 when Joseph's brothers sell him to Ishmaelites traveling by caravan to Egypt accompanied by other family members, the

⁸⁴ Despite the fact that Ishmael is not named in Gen 21, his name is invoked in the explicit reference to God hearing the cry of Hagar and her child. Sailhamer, "Genesis," 207.

⁸⁵ Rad points out the difference in the manner of address between Gen 16 where the angel appears as a man and Gen 21 where Hagar hears a voice from heaven. He attributes the difference to the Yahwist and Elohist sources. See Rad, *Genesis*, 233.

⁸⁶ Rad, *Genesis*, 233.

⁸⁷ This harmonization is drawn from Maalouf, "Ishmael," 97. For a view that assumes redaction and inconsistencies between the two accounts, see Rad, *Genesis*, 234–35.

⁸⁸ Maalouf, "Ishmael," 108.

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Midianites. Though the interaction does not make reference to any recognition on the part of either party that they share a common ancestor, the Ishmaelites unintentionally and unknowingly participate in providing an alternative for Joseph's brothers that replaces their plot to kill him (Gen 37:20).⁸⁹ They become the means by which God accomplishes his purposes to take Joseph to Egypt to prepare for the subsequent events in which Joseph will become the tool that God uses during the coming famine.

Application and Conclusion

According to Carol Bakhos, the story of Hagar and Ishmael was used by rabbinic writers from the tannaitic period to the early Middle Ages as a characterization of the "other."⁹⁰ The portrayals prior to the emergence of Islam in the seventh century were mixed, but following the arrival of Islam the portrayals of Ishmael, as he was associated by a number of writers with Islam, became generally negative.⁹¹ This indicates that the portrayals were often significantly motivated by the perceived contemporary application of the stories rather than more exegetical approaches to the study.

Some have characterized monotheistic faiths as being inherently hostile toward those who are not part of the same faith, even to the extent of finding a religious justification for violence against the "other." It is in this context that one such scholar poses the question, "How foreign is the Ishmaelite, the half-brother of Isaac and son of Abraham?" She characterizes the Ishmaelites as "foreigners" in relation to Israel.⁹² Though Ishmael and his descendants were not those recognized as the full heirs to the covenant promises, the narrative in Genesis portrays Hagar and Ishmael not as estranged from God's beneficence but rather in need of God's concern and care. The same God who had chosen Isaac to be the covenant child is portrayed as going to extra-ordinary lengths to reassure, protect, care for, and provide for Hagar and Ishmael.

If the God of the Hebrews were in fact hostile toward those who are outsiders or foreigners, the argument might hold up. It is, however, in the household of the founder of monotheism that the one who is a quintessential outsider is given beneficent treatment by God himself.

⁸⁹ Doukhan describes the arrival of the Ishmaelites at "that precise moment" as "providential." Doukhan, *Genesis*, 418. Maalouf describes the Ishmaelites as "sovereignly used by God to provide for His anointed one." Maalouf, "Ishmael," 245.

⁹⁰ Bakhos, "Abraham's Marginalized Descendant," 4-5.

⁹¹ Bakhos, "Abraham's Marginalized Descendant," 4-7; Culver, "Promises," 123.

⁹² Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*, 84.

Hagar is not marginalized nor excluded by God, instead she is the recipient of significant events that either are unique to her or occur to her for the first time in the biblical narrative. To review, the first time that *mal'ak YHWH* (“the angel of the Lord”) appears in the biblical canon is to Hagar. The first time that God names a child is Ishmael. The first time that God announces the birth of a boy is to Hagar. The first woman to receive a birth announcement directly from God is Hagar, and she is the only woman to receive the promise of the multiplication of her seed. The only human being to coin a name for God is Hagar. And, the only woman to be the recipient of two theophanies is Hagar.⁹³

God is portrayed in the story of Hagar as one who “listens to the distressed, listens to the poor, listens to the oppressed, listens to the cries of the unwanted and despised, and listens to the cries of people marginalized in history.”⁹⁴ This is a far cry from a deity who demands violence toward the “other.” Instead, the God of the Bible is depicted as seeking the wellbeing of those outside the covenant by means of those who are his covenant people.⁹⁵ God is portrayed in the Bible as having resorted at times to involving those who lived in the area inhabited by the descendants of Ishmael as a part of his plans (Gen 37:27–28; 45:4–8; Exod 2:15; 18:5–27).

Multiple scholars have reached the conclusion that the Bible records that the inhabitants of the lands to the east of Israel, the land of the Ishmaelites, were used by God to provide sustenance and preparation for those whom he had chosen.⁹⁶ Besides the previously mentioned story of Joseph’s purchase by the Ishmaelite and Midianite traders, when threatened by death by the Pharaoh, Moses fled to the Arabian land of the Midianites (Ex 2:15).⁹⁷ The people of Israel wandered through Arabia in spiritual preparation before they entered the land of Canaan.⁹⁸ The Arabian Magi are the first Gentiles to worship the newly born Christ child, and they bring him gifts reflecting the riches of Arabia.⁹⁹ In each instance it is

⁹³ Maalouf, “Inclusivity,” 32.

⁹⁴ Maalouf, “Inclusivity,” 32.

⁹⁵ Maalouf, “Inclusivity,” 35.

⁹⁶ Maalouf suggests that over the course of time the term Ishmaelite came to describe not an ethnic group, but rather the inhabitants of Arabia regardless of their ancestry. See Maalouf, “Ishmael,” 196.

⁹⁷ Maalouf, “Ishmael,” 245.

⁹⁸ Maalouf, “Ishmael,” 245.

⁹⁹ Maalouf, “Ishmael,” 247; For the case for the Arabian origin of the Magi, see Maalouf, “Ishmael,” 202–40; Culver, “Promises,” 109–16.

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Gentiles who are instruments in God's hands to serve even those who were his chosen people.

Christians have often read the story of Hagar and Ishmael through the lens of the portrayal of the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac in Gal 4:21–31.¹⁰⁰ As Maalouf points out, Gal 4:21–31 must be understood in the context of the entire argument of the book of Galatians which makes the argument that there were believers who were joining the church through faith, and there were those who were clinging to the law. In this context, it was Gentiles who were joining by faith, typologically represented by Isaac; there were also Jews who were clinging to the law in the hopes that their own works would save them, typologically represented by Ishmael. The passage reverses the spiritual application from the natural one to make a point regarding the means of salvation and is not referring to the ethnic origins of those to whom the message is being applied.¹⁰¹

The book of Galatians makes a different point in the previous chapter, arguing that the true children of Abraham following the coming of Christ are those who exercise faith in him (Gal 3:26–29). Thus, the true covenant descendants of Abraham are those who have been baptized into Christ (Gal 3:27) and the ethnic origin is irrelevant (Gal 3:28). With a spiritualizing of the nature of the covenant descendants of Abraham for Christians, the same considerations applicable to the portrayal in the Hebrew Bible's portrayal of the "other" are applicable to the Christian view of the "other." The Christian claim is that the Christians worship the same God of Abraham portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. When these two concepts are overlapped, the story of Hagar and Ishmael speaks to the need for Christian believers to have a benevolent view toward those who are outside of the covenant community. Even though God has defined the true followers of Abraham as specifically those who exercise faith in Christ, those who are either not part of a particular branch of the Christian faith that one holds, or even those who do not profess faith in Jesus can be instruments through which God may work out his purposes and can be recipients of God's favor as he would so choose.

This becomes particularly applicable in matters of spirituality in which other faiths claim Abraham as their spiritual ancestor. Though it falls beyond the scope of this article to explore the nature of the Bible's description of the relation God has in contemporary times with the Jews, it is important to consider the implications of the Christian understanding

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion of this topic, see Maalouf, "Ishmael," 98–106.

¹⁰¹ Maalouf, "Ishmael," 106–107.

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of God's covenant in light of the typological application of the covenant promises to the Gentiles who profess faith in Jesus. The religious Jews trace the origins of their faith to Abraham, and Muslims claim Abraham as their spiritual ancestor as well.¹⁰² Thus Christians must be open to the possibility of God working through other professed Christians who are not of the same faith community, through Jews, or through Muslims to accomplish his purposes. All professed believers in Jesus, in order to remain faithful to the biblical narrative, must consider God's beneficence toward the Hagar and Ishmael, and practice an equivalent beneficence today toward those who are the "other."

The Christian message is one of evangelism and discipleship guided by the teaching that appears in Matt 28:18–20. In a time and place where there is a tribalism that is forming that threatens to sweep many professing Christians into the tensions that characterize interactions among peoples of various groups, God's interaction with Hagar and Ishmael stands as a stark reminder of the ideals to which the Bible calls believers.

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¹⁰² Leonard J. Swidler, "Focus on Jewish-Christian-Muslim Commonalities," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 51.2 (2016): 157–58; Plaut, "Genesis," 114, 143.