

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte = Revue suisse d'histoire religieuse et culturelle = Rivista svizzera di storia religiosa e culturale

**Herausgeber:** Vereinigung für Schweizerische Kirchengeschichte

**Band:** 114 (2020)

**Artikel:** Abraham und Hagar, paragons of fugitives

**Autor:** Poorthuis, Marcel

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-882494>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 01.09.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Abraham and Hagar, Paragons of Fugitives

Marcel Poorthuis

The Biblical world shows two antagonistic tendencies: one stressing the importance of settling in a promised land; second emphasizing the necessity to be on the road, in the desert and leaving one's family and habitat. It would be easy to explain this as a chronological sequence: in order to enter a new land, one has to leave the old land. However, there is more at stake here. The nomadic experience and a mobile sanctuary remind people of a temporary abode on earth, a not so popular notion nowadays. In addition, hospitality to strangers may be dependent upon empathy, upon the memory that you yourself have been strangers in a strange land. It means that the notion of Abraham leaving his country, his family, former religion and culture, should be regarded as more than a temporary experience, to be forgotten once he has settled in a promised land.

In a way, the experience of leaving everything behind doubles itself in the story of Sarah and Hagar. The latter is sent away in the desert, together with child and with hardly enough water to survive for one day. This experience of a female refugee becomes more or less the foundation story of Islam.

In addition, the orally delivered post-Biblical stories about Abraham in *Ur of the Chaldeans* have profoundly marked the image of Abraham as the father of monotheist religions. One may even venture a challenging proposition to see in Abraham the first in world history to claim freedom of religion. When read carefully, Abraham may even be called father of the humanists, for he rejected the gods even before he believed. Obviously, we are not dealing then with a historical reconstruction of who Abraham was, but with a hermeneutical approach in which later narrative expansions play their role and even receive a new coloring in the

light of questions of today.<sup>1</sup> A certain freedom of thought is allowed here, without, however, compromising the figure of Abraham altogether. We should realize that precisely in the <oral narratives>, the protagonists may be evaluated highly differently. We will come across Abraham's dubious behavior, but no less Abraham as a visionary prophet. Anyhow, ample reason to explore the stories surrounding this giant of human history, whose impact upon world history should be compared to that of Buddha, Socrates and Jesus, somewhat more closely.<sup>2</sup> Still, *his story* does not fully encompass our theme of being a fugitive. It should be supplemented by that of that forgotten spiritual giant Hagar, in which Abraham plays a less heroic role, so it seems. Again, Hagar's behavior may be considered as prone to idolatry, but no less as heroic, being the founder of a new religion. In all these stories, the notion of being exiled, banished or on the run, is crucial.

### *Abraham's calling according to post-Biblical narratives*

The Bible relates how suddenly, in the wake of the building of the tower of Babel, Abraham is called to leave his country. The God who is calling may hardly be known, absorbed as the people are by building a tower towards heaven. The divine calling seems to cause a rift within the family: Abram's father Terach seems to have taken the initiative (Gen 11:31), followed by Abram and Sarai, but Terach dies in Haran.

In Gen 12:1–3, God calls Abram again with the famous words:

«Now the Lord said to Abram, «Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.»»

Oral tradition, documented in the midrash (Rabbinic interpretations), in the Church Father Jerome and also in the Qur'an, describes a whole pre-history of this call to leave.<sup>3</sup> This pre-history clarifies the scattered remarks in the Qur'an, such as in Sura 6:74–78:

<sup>1</sup> See in general about Abraham: Martin Goodman/George H. van Kooten/Jacques T.A.G.M. van Ruiten (eds.), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites (Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham)*, Leiden 2010; Bernard Beer, *Das Leben Abraham's nach Auffassung der jüdischen Sage*, Leipzig 1859; Geza Vermes, *The Life of Abraham, in: Scripture and Tradition in Judaism (Haggadic Studies)*, Leiden 1973, 67–126.

<sup>2</sup> The main reason why this is not really recognized is that Abraham is considered to belong to a <confessional> identity, not to human culture at large.

<sup>3</sup> See for early Jewish sources: Book of Jubilees 12 (2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE), Genesis Rabba 38:13 (5<sup>th</sup> century CE); Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on Genesis* on Gen 11:28, explaining the name Ur of the Chaldeans (and Vulgate on Neh 9:7); Islamic sources will be quoted presently.

«And [mention, O Muhammad], when Abraham said to his father Azar, «Do you take idols as deities? Indeed, I see you and your people to be in manifest error.» And thus did We show Abraham the realm of the heavens and the earth that he would be among the certain [in faith]. So when the night covered him [with darkness], he saw a star. He said, «This is my lord.» But when it set, he said, «I like not those that disappear.» And when he saw the moon rising, he said, «This is my lord.» But when it set, he said, «Unless my Lord guides me, I will surely be among the people gone astray.» And when he saw the sun rising, he said, «This is my lord; this is greater.» But when it set, he said, «O my people, indeed I am free from what you associate with Allah. Indeed, I have turned my face toward He who created the heavens and the earth, inclining toward truth, and I am not of those who associate others with Allah.»»

The Qur'an generally does not describe whole stories, but admonishes the listener by referring to stories, generally orally communicated and are apparently already known. By using Jewish stories we may be able to outline the story in more detail, although we realize that this approach will not be shared by all Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

The basic outline is as follows: Nimrod was a tyrant, who organized the idolatrous building of the Tower of Babel, which reduced people to slaves. He demanded an absolute obedience and veneration from his people for he considered himself divine. As happens more often with tyrants, he had a dream in which a brilliant star devours the other stars. His astrologers explain that a child will be born who will be the rightful ruler. Nimrod commands to kill all male babies. Due to a miracle the pregnancy of Abraham's mother remains undiscovered for months. For the last months of her pregnancy she flees to a cave. The plight of the future mother on the run is described with just a word: «full of fear», and reminds of similar situations of pregnant women, such as during the slavery in Egypt (Ex 1:17), in future expectations of disaster (Mt 24:19), as well as in the daily broadcasting of refugees in our days.

In the cave Abraham is born. He grows miraculously fast and sitting at the entrance he contemplates sun, moon and stars. At first he assumes that these are gods, but upon noticing that the sun sets, the moon wanes and the stars become invisible, he decides that the Creator of heaven and earth must transcend all these natural phenomena. This rejection of idolatry is remarkable, for it precedes God's

<sup>4</sup> The Islamic Isra'iliyyāt, stories from Jewish spokesmen, served that same purpose for authors like al-Tabari and al-Tha'labi, but were in the course of centuries frowned upon by Muslim authorities. Especially the so-called «minor midrashim», as collected by A. Jellinek, *Bet Hamidrash*, I–VI, Jerusalem 1967, I: 25–34 (*Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu*, II: 118 (*Ma'aseh Avraham*) show many affinities with Islamic stories. See also Moses Gaster, *The Chronicles of Jerahmeel. Prolegomenon* by Haim Schwarzbaum, New York 1971, 42–46 (with literature).

revelation to Abraham. This is why Abraham is called not only the father of believers, but also the father of humanists and atheists, in so far as atheism can be interpreted as the refusal to give up one's integrity and responsibility. In that sense, this critical attitude remains a permanent reminder to all religions not to replace responsibility by infantile dependency.<sup>5</sup>

Grown up, Abraham refuses to bow down for Nimrod and he is sentenced to death. The motif of death by a fire oven is obviously derived from the book of Daniel. This has nothing to do with plagiarism or forgery, but in this universe of story-telling one borrows freely to enhance the greatness of a Biblical figure. The motif of the fiery oven is further fostered by the name of the place: Ur Kashdim: the fire of the Chaldeans.

Another narrative line exploits the rift between father and son, between Terach (in the Qur'an: Azar) and Abraham / Ibrahim. Terach owns a shop of statues of gods. He leaves one day and entrusts the shop to the young Abraham. Abraham serves the customers, but cannot help ridiculing them for searching the aid of dumb puppets. Eventually he smashes them all, except for the biggest one, to whom he gives an axe. When his father returns home, he is shocked. Abraham explains that the statues started to quarrel and the biggest one smashed all the others. Terach cannot believe that for «they cannot do anything». «Precisely», Abraham answers, «this is what I wanted to hear». The people tell Nimrod what has happened and Abraham is taken prisoner.<sup>6</sup>

We may note two different forms of idolatry: one the divination of a human being, second the veneration of statues. The violent element in the story should not escape us: is Abraham's action comparable to the Taliban's smashing of the Buddha statues? We may be sure that the Taliban also knew of this story of Abraham! We should note, however, the element of oppression: Abraham is forced to venerate Nimrod and he claims the right to freedom of religion. Obviously, this story does not teach us about all statues being idols, which would make a highly intolerant message for many religions, including Catholicism. Apparently, it is not the outer form that is determinative, but the inner attitude of alienation and loss of responsibility. The story expands upon the rift between Abraham and his

<sup>5</sup> See my study: «Abraham, the first humanist and father of the believers», available on the internet: <[www.duyndam.demon.nl/E-Journal\\_of\\_the\\_Levinas\\_Society\\_Vol16\\_2011.pdf](http://www.duyndam.demon.nl/E-Journal_of_the_Levinas_Society_Vol16_2011.pdf)>. Obviously, this is a hermeneutical portrait which may be challenged (but perhaps not completely refuted) by historical data.

<sup>6</sup> Cp. the pre-Christian Jewish Book of Jubilees 12:12–16, in which Abraham burns the idols; further Gen Rabba 38:13; Qur'an 21:58. See for later Jewish and post-Quranic Islamic sources: Abraham/Ibrahim, oergestalte van de oecumene, in: Juliette van Deursen/Leo Mock/Marcel Poorthuis, Abraham, Ibrahim. De spiritualiteit van gastvrijheid, Pardes 2015, 74–79. See for the notion of the «biggest idol» also Qur'an 21:63.

father, and emphasizes that his calling implies leaving parents behind. In that respect this vocation is comparable to Jesus' calling of his disciples. In addition, it shows the repressive actions of a tyrant who wanted to kill the male children, comparable to Pharaoh and King Herod. The birth of the Father of believers receives a Messianic ring: a counterforce subverting tyrannical oppression by the vulnerability of a child. Abraham status as a «wandering Aramean» makes him to a powerful counterforce against mighty empires. It is no coincidence that Jesus and his disciples employ the same weapons against the Roman empire: those of a wanderer without a place to lay one's head on. Abraham is thrown into the fiery furnace, but an angel comes to his rescue and God speaks to the fire: «Be cool»!<sup>7</sup>

When reading Gen 11:27–12:4 again, we realize that the creative oral tradition weaves a whole story behind the Biblical text, which is considered unchanging but like stenographic shorthand, hiding innumerable meanings below the surface. The experience of persecution, exile and even martyrdom has been retrojected unto Abraham and woven into this small episode. This founding experience is determinative for Abraham's identity and for the followers in his track: Jews, Christian and Muslims, each in their own way. It even seems that although Abraham finally arrives at Canaan, he remains a stranger and a wanderer. Even Jacob, considered the actual ancestor of the people of Israel, is called a «wandering Aramean» (Deut 26:5), sometimes translated as «an Aramean refugee». By fleeing Laban, Jacob had neither protection nor land. This belongs to the curious collective memory of Israel after arrival in the promised land. In a way, Israel should remember for always that they have themselves been strangers in Egypt. This is the basic message of most of the religious feasts in Judaism. It is not sure, however, that with «the wandering Aramean» Jacob is meant: it could as well be Abraham. We should realize that in the debates of the New Testament, physical descent of Abraham does not count: God can make from stones children of Abraham (Mt 3:9; cp. Rom 4:10 and Qur'an 3:67).<sup>8</sup>

If we turn once more to the Qur'an, Ibrahim's role is now easier to understand. Sometimes the gods of the people are referred to, at other times Ibrahim refers to the stars:

«[And] when he said to his father and his people, «What do you worship? Is it falsehood [as] gods other than Allah you desire? Then what is your thought about the Lord of the worlds?» And he cast a look at the stars. And said, «Indeed, I am [about to be] ill.» So they turned away from him, departing. Then he turned to their gods and said, «Do you not eat? What is [wrong] with you that you do not speak?» Then

<sup>7</sup> The same line in Qur'an 20:69, possibly quoted in the Jewish (!) midrash Ma'aseh Avraham Avinu, in: A. Jellinek, *Beth Hamidrash I*, Jerusalem 1967, 34.

<sup>8</sup> I translate the «hanifan musliman» not as: «an upright Muslim», which would simply be an Islamic claim against Jewish and Christian claims, but as: «who surrendered himself wholeheartedly» (to God).



the people came toward him, hastening. He said, «Do you worship that which you [yourselves] carve, while Allah created you and that which you do?» They said, «Construct for him a furnace and throw him into the burning fire.» And they intended for him a plan, but We [= God] made them the most debased. And [then] he said, «Indeed, I will go to [where I am ordered by] my Lord; He will guide me.» (Qur'an 37:85–99).<sup>9</sup>

When Ibrahim asks the gods: «do you not eat?», this may reflect the shop of idols, known from Jewish stories. The emphasis upon the people opposing Ibrahim may reflect Muhammad being opposed by his own audience. Obviously, Muhammad strongly identified with Ibrahim. Ibrahim's trust in God preludes upon his being saved from the furnace.

Pausing for a moment we notice how leaving one's habitat is almost a precondition for spiritual insights. The unsettling experience of leaving one's family, soil and comfort, is a recurring pattern: Buddha left his palace and the luxury it offered to search for enlightenment, Moses left Pharaoh's palace to identify with his kinsmen in slavery, Jesus as a child was a fugitive to Egypt, and when grown up, he started his public life with a stay in the desert. Even today, we may recognize similar patterns: post-modern pilgrimages like the one to Santiago de Compostela offer spiritual enrichment by the exhaustion of the journey and the unsettling experience to leave everything behind.<sup>10</sup> Young people who join the Catholic World Youth days by the hundred thousands are spiritually uplifted in a way they have never felt at home. Even vacations, if not spent at a resort or on the beach, which may be a too homely environment, may induce people to light a Candle in little churches, a ritual they would not think of at home.

Let us now turn to the second experience of a refugee, this time a female one. Her wanderings in the desert are at least partly caused by Abraham himself, which may prove that having experienced hardship and homelessness oneself does not automatically induce empathy for others.<sup>11</sup>

### *The experience of the bondwoman: Hagar*

In spite of Abraham's founding experience of leaving his country and his family, he behaves with little empathy towards Hagar. Hagar had given birth to Ishmael and by a complicated ritual Sarai, who had been infertile, wants to adopt the child as her own. However, initially she apparently could no longer stand the presence

<sup>9</sup> Cp. Qur'an 26:70 ff. The anonymous tyrant in Qur'an 2:258 may be Nimrod as well.

<sup>10</sup> The identity of Santiago, the first century saint James, who according to legend killed many Muslims centuries later in Spain, deserving his cognomen Matamoro, «killer of the mores», can hardly be the source of spiritual enrichment.

<sup>11</sup> Obviously, our approach should be considered as existential hermeneutics rather than as a historical reconstruction, as the stories of Abraham's youth postdate the Hebrew Bible.

of Hagar, who taunted her with her barrenness (Gen 16:4). And after Sarah eventually gave birth to Isaac, Hagar's and Ishmael's presence were no longer needed. Abraham is honored in later tradition as the paragon of hospitality: his tent was open to four sides so that no one had to walk more than necessary, and he welcomed strangers without knowing that God himself visited him in company of angels (Gen 18 in Jewish and Christian interpretations).<sup>12</sup> Still, pressed by Sarai, his behavior seems rather weak by now sending Hagar himself into the desert (Gen 21:14). The black theologian Delores Williams has recognized in the fate of Hagar the plight of women made slaves. «The slave's woman story is shaped by the problems and desires of her owners.»<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, because of Sarai's barrenness, Abraham follows her advice and makes Hagar pregnant (Gen 16:1–4). She will give birth to the boy Ishmael, but this only after her first expulsion into the desert (Gen 16:15). About Hagar's consent to Abraham nothing is said. Hagar's pregnancy made her contemning her barren mistress. This creates an antagonism which eventually leads to Hagar's first expulsion. By blaming Abraham, Sarai seems to acknowledge patriarchal authority, although obviously she is the source of the decision. Hagar may have thought that, in spite of her status as a bondwoman, her relationship with Abram would protect her, but that appears not to be the case: Sarai invokes God's authority to decide over the matter, but eventually the pregnant Hagar has to flee because of the hardship Sarai imposed upon her. We may get the impression that Sarai does not succeed in letting Abram do the job. Still, by giving Hagar back to Sarai with the words: «Your slave-girl is at your disposal. Treat her as you think fit» (Gen 16:6), Abram seals Hagar's fate. Fleeing to the desert on the way to Egypt, Hagar discovers that God's authority turns out to be different from Sarai's revengeful attitude (although Sarai had invoked God to decide), for an angel of the Lord rescues Hagar and promises her a numerous offspring. Hagar being without support or family, returns to her mistress, who still needs her to secure the continuation of the family.

Delores Williams poses the question whether the advice of the angel of the Lord can be called liberating? Still, the positive point is the promise of numerous offspring, similar to the promise made to Abram in Gen 15:2–6. Here are God's promises to Hagar, voiced by the angel of the Lord: «I will surely multiply your

<sup>12</sup> Emmanuele Grypeou/Helen Spurling, *Abraham's Angels: Jewish and Christian Exegesis of Genesis 18–19*, in: idem, *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Antiquity*, Leiden 2009; see my article: *Halakhic Abraham in the Encounter with the Three Visitors*, to be published.

<sup>13</sup> Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: the Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Maryknoll, N.Y. 1993, 15–35.



offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude» (Gen 16:10). This promise must imply a safe journey home, both for mother and the unborn child.

The second act of this drama unfolds at the moment Isaac is born. Now Sarai has an additional reason to be jealous, for she does not want her son Isaac to share the heritage with Ishmael. Apparently, she no longer considers Ishmael as her own son (and did she in fact adopt him, as was her intention?), although Ishmael is entitled to inherit, which was not the case for slaves, Delores Williams observes.

Again Abraham is forced to expel Hagar, which caused him great pain (Gen 21:11). Enigmatically, God seems to exhort Abraham to perform his duty, because Isaac will be the heir to continue Abraham's name. However, God adds: «But the slave-girl's son I shall also make into a great nation, for he too is your child» (Gen 21:11–13).

Abraham's supply to Hagar of bread and a bag of water has baffled many readers, for obviously this means a certain death sentence in the desert. Anyway, homelessness and the life of a fugitive is the fate of mother and child, unless... Abraham fully trusts the divine promise for Hagar and realizes that Hagar has to leave to fulfill the promise. Ishmael's name «God will hear», offers the clue: God repeats the promise to Hagar to make the boy into a great nation and she discovers a well in the desert (Gen 21:18–19).

The experience of God being with the slave-girl as a lonely mother, abandoned by her master and mistress, appealed to generations of black women. The spirituals sing of trust in God and protection in the midst of abandonment: «Sometimes I feel like a motherless child», «Nobody knows the trouble I feel, nobody knows, but Jesus». Heavenly protection was not merely a phantasmagoric «opium of the people», but helped to remain immune to the insults and beatings of the slave master. Simultaneously the necessity to be liberated by that same God likewise is sung in well-known songs: «Go down Moses», «We shall overcome».

It is striking how the Midrashic explanations of the story of Hagar seem to burden her plight even more. «Abraham was distressed», but not because of his love for Hagar, but because of her (supposedly negative) behavior (Gen Rabba 53:12). The bag of water was miraculous, the midrash argues, because always full, except...when one commits idolatry (Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer [9<sup>th</sup> century] 30). This has been the case with Hagar and Ishmael, the rabbis maintain, by turning Hagar and Ishmael into pagans. In addition, the promises given to Ishmael that from him twelve (!) princes will descend (Gen 17:20 and 25:12, compare the

twelve tribes of Jacob), hardly gets any attention in Rabbinic commentary. Undoubtedly, Rabbinic concern to explain Abraham's and Sarah's behavior in a positive light has induced this apologetic line of interpretation.<sup>14</sup>

All the more surprising is the last episode we will turn to, which contains no less than a counter-story of Hagar's wandering. Abrahams' behavior is vouchsafed, because as a prophet he knew in advance that Hagar's journey would be essential for salvation history and according to God's plan. We are referring here to Hagar's discovery of Mecca, according to Islamic tradition.

*Hagar's flight and the discovery of Mecca*<sup>15</sup>

There is no doubt that the post-Quranic story of Hagar discovering Mecca has been influenced by Jewish narrative motifs. Abraham / Ibrahim is considered a prophet, hence his reputation is saved in a way similar to Rabbinic interpretation.<sup>16</sup> By expelling Hagar, Ibrahim knew that God's wish would be fulfilled and the holiest sanctuary of Islam be (re)discovered. Hagar draws a bag of water behind her back, a notion known already from Midrashic embellishments, meant to emphase her status as a bondwoman. In Islam however, this motif receives a wholly different interpretation: by following the tracks in the sand Ibrahim could easily follow Hagar's wanderings, which he eventually did. However, when Hagar flees to the desert and threatens to die from thirst, she runs seven times to and fro between two hills. This ritual is re-enacted yearly in the pilgrimage to Mecca, the Hajj! The two hills Safa and Marwan form the two poles of a sevenfold walk. The first time this ritual has been performed, according to Islamic understanding, has been when Hagar as a refugee searched for water. In addition, Ishmael discovered, by thrusting his foot into the sand, a miraculous well. Until today that well is known in Mecca as the miraculous well Zam-zam. Not long afterwards Ibrahim joined mother and son and together with Ishmael, Ibrahim discovered the foundations of «the house» (Qur'an 2:127), presumably the Ka'aba.<sup>17</sup> The wording

<sup>14</sup> See numerous examples from the midrash in my article: Hagar's wandering: between Judaism and Islam, in: *Der Islam* 90/2 (October 2001) 213–237.

<sup>15</sup> See for the complicated issue of the post-Quranic sources (al-Bukhari in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, being dependent upon one of the earliest post-Quranic Muslim writers Abd al-Razzaq, [8<sup>th</sup> century], *Musannaf* 5:105), again my article quoted above. A general overview of the stories in Al-Tabari (9<sup>th</sup>–10<sup>th</sup> century), *Ta'rikh* (ed. De Goeje), I:275; *The History of al-Tabari, volume 2: Prophets and Patriarchs* (Tr. W. Brinner), New York 1987, 69–81.

<sup>16</sup> The notion of «infallibility of the prophets» already plays a role in Rabbinic interpretations, to become a principle of faith in Islam. See my article: From Noah to Nuh: the Making of a Prophet, in: Bob Becking/Hans Barstadt (eds.), *Prophets and Prophecy in Stories*, Leiden 2015, 214–225.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, some Islamic authors claim that Ibrahim discovered Mecca «together with Hagar and Ishmael», but that obscures Hagar's paramount role.

suggests that even Ibrahim was not the first to discover the place. Apparently Adam already knew about this center of the earth, according to Islamic tradition. After Abraham, the place fell into oblivion and pagan cults, until Muhammad purified the place again by removing the idols and by re-establishing the monotheistic cult, as Islamic tradition has it. Still, we should note that the central role of Ibrahim might obscure the even more crucial role of the fugitive Hagar. It remains the question whether Hagar's central role is really commemorated in Islam in such a way that it would lead to religious emancipation of women. In that respect, her fate may be compared to that of the prophetess Miriam in Judaism, or that of the virgin Mary in Catholicism. In spite of the prophetic voices of women in the past, religious authority seems to be firmly anchored in male religious institutions.

We might object that the Quranic reading constitutes no less than a complete revolution compared to the Biblical text. However, matters are not that simple: the Biblical text should be considered as a kind of steno, or, to use a musical example, the symbols of a tune upon which many improvisations are possible. We may note that God's promises to Hagar predate her plight, so that an indication of a happy end can be found in the text itself, even if Abraham did not know about that! Even more enigmatic is the moving but succinct announcement of Abraham's death: «His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Makhpela» (Gen 25:9). Were the two brothers reconciled with each other? Was it perhaps the death of their father which brought them together? We cannot tell, but the Bible stimulates telling about it.

### *Conclusions*

It is striking to note that being a refugee is a recurring pattern in the Bible. One gets the impression that expulsion is nearly a precondition for becoming a spiritual hero. In addition, political overtones should not be ignored: often a tyrant imposes hardship and slavery upon the inhabitants coupled with forced veneration of his own person or idols. Although the latter expression can only be understood in a polemical light, the accompanying violence clarifies that freedom of religion is also at stake here.

No less striking is the role of a little child, whose birth is announced by the stars and already causes panic and aggressive measures. These signs should be regarded as a Messianic counter-force against tyrannical dictatorships: Nimrod, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod.

In spite of the undeniable importance in the Bible of the entrance into the land, being a wanderer and a refugee belongs to the core identity of Biblical religions:

Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and should not be considered as merely a temporary state. Remembering that condition of a refugee as a plight of one's ancestors, in prayers and religious festivals, may cause some unrest. However, it may also contribute to the identification with refugees nowadays, by deciding for that paramount Biblical virtue of hospitality, for which again Abraham has been famous. Hagar's courage and care for her child may deserve a permanent place in our collective consciousness.

*Abraham and Hagar, paragons of fugitives*

In post-Biblical interpretations of Abraham, much emphasis is placed on him being persecuted. Abraham leaving Ur of the Chaldeans is interpreted as an escape from the tyranny of Nimrod. Curiously, Abraham is instrumental afterwards in expelling the bond-maid Hagar into the desert. In Black feminist theology, Hagar becomes the paragon of the experience of women made slaves. Even more surprising is the transformation of Hagar in Islam, in which she becomes the first person to perform the Hajj. As such, these examples (of Abraham and Hagar) show how the experience of being a fugitive is constitutive to religious identity.

Abraham – Midrash – Oral tradition – Islam – Hagar – Feminist interpretation – Nomadic existence.

*Abraham und Hagar, Vorbilder von Flüchtlingen*

In den post-biblichen Interpretationen Abrahams wird viel Wert daraufgelegt, dass Abraham auf der Flucht war. Abrahams Verlassen der chaldäischen Stadt Ur wird als Flucht vor der Tyrannei Nimrods gesehen. Seltsamerweise ist Abraham danach massgeblich daran beteiligt, die Leibeigene Hagar in die Wüste zu schicken. In der schwarzen feministischen Theologie wird Hagar so zum Inbegriff der Erfahrung von versklavten Frauen. Noch überraschender ist die Verwandlung Hagars im Islam, in der sie als erste den Haddsch vollzieht. So zeigen diese Beispiele, wie die Erfahrung, ein/e Geflüchtete zu sein, konstitutiv für die religiöse Identität ist.

Abraham – Midrasch – mündliche Überlieferung – Islam – Hagar – feministische Interpretation – Nomadendasein.

*Abraham et Hagar, des parangons de fugitifs*

Dans les interprétations post-bibliques d'Abraham, l'accent est mis sur la persécution. Abraham quittant Ur des Chaldéens est interprété comme une évasion de la tyrannie de Nimrod. Curieusement, Abraham a ensuite contribué à l'expulsion de la servante Hagar dans le désert. Dans la théologie féministe noire, Hagar devient le parangon de l'expérience des femmes devenues esclaves. Plus surprenante encore est la transformation de Hagar dans l'islam, où elle devient la première à accomplir le Hajj. Ainsi, ces exemples montrent comment l'expérience fugitive est constitutive de l'identité religieuse.

Abraham – midrash – tradition orale – islam – Hagar – interprétation féministe – existence nomade.

*Abramo e Hagar, paragoni di fuggitivi*

Nelle interpretazioni post-bibliche di Abramo, molta enfasi è posta sulla sua persecuzione. Abramo che lascia Ur dei Caldei è interpretato come una fuga dalla tirannia di Nimrod. Curiosamente, in seguito Abramo contribuirà all'espulsione della schiava Hagar nel deserto. Nella teologia femminista nera, Hagar diventa l'emblema dell'esperienza delle donne rese schiave. Ancora più sorprendente è la trasformazione di Hagar nell'Islam, dove diventa la prima a compiere l'Hajj. In questo modo tali esempi mostrano come l'esperienza di essere una fuggitiva sia costitutiva dell'identità religiosa.

Abramo – midrash – tradizione orale – Islam – Hagar – interpretazione femminista – esistenza nomade.

*Marcel Poorthuis*, Prof., Dr. professor in interreligious dialogue at the Tilburg School of Theology, Tilburg University.