

## Article

# Remembering Hagar and Her Son (Gen 21: 9–21): A Narrative Reading of Helpless Victims and Hopeful Survivors in the Wheel of Providence

Blessing Onoriode Boloje 

Department of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0028, South Africa; pstbobson@yahoo.co.uk

**Abstract:** Narratives are fundamentals of storytelling. In Biblical literature, narratives do not only tell what happened (the context for God’s revelation), they also indicate why what happened matters (the purpose of history). Employing a narrative methodology and a hermeneutic of identification as an interpretive approach, this article explores the Hagar–Ishmael narrative in Genesis 21: 9–21 against the background of those who have been marginalized, exploited, excluded, trafficked, and sitting in a wilderness of despair, struggle, and mistreatment and are in need of survival. The exploration seeks to understand the narrative structure, plot, characters, and themes within the text. The Hagar–Ishmael position is too painfully close to the realities of many today. In this narrative account, one finds a pitiable scene of human suffering and misery, and yet it is bounded by divine mercy and compassion. The stream of helplessness and consequent hope of survival shows that, no matter how mistreated people might have been, they can rise above their “victimization” and embrace the promises of God by staving off defeat, shaking off despair, and vanquishing discouragement. Thus with a hermeneutic of identification, readers are encouraged to identify with the characters, situations, and experiences described in the biblical narrative.

**Keywords:** Genesis 21; Haggai–Ishmael; helpless victims; human suffering and misery; providence; survival



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## 1. Introduction

Narratives are fundamentals of storytelling. In their nature, the rhetoric of a narrative discourse differs from didactic literature. They are used by writers in literature to present and show their stories to readers rather than telling them what to do (Long 1993, pp. 165–81). Interestingly, “Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity” (Adichie 2016). In Biblical literature, narratives do not only tell what happened (the context for God’s revelation), they also indicate why what happened matters (the purpose of history) (cf. Berlin 1983, p. 13). In this regard, the actions or inactions of characters are of great importance. Tushima (2018, p. 1) holds that characters “constitute a major confluence of literary artistry and the ideological or ethical orientation of narrative discourse. Deriving ethical formulations from narratives therefore requires paying diligent attention to their characters”. Narratives are considered to be in close connection to the biblical stories, and the testimonies they offer. They serve as a means of understanding and communicating the meaning and message of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, and especially the characters within the book of Genesis.<sup>1</sup>

As a unique literary composition that emerged “sometime during the early Persian Period (539–330 BCE)” (O’Connor 2018, p. 3), the book of Genesis addresses the most profound questions and issues of life, in both of its two major blocks of material, namely the Primeval History (Gen 1–11) and the ancestral narratives (Gen 12–50) (Westermann 1985, p. 23; Arnold 2009, p. 1; Schuele 2014, p. 333). With respect to its contents and genres, and

probably because of its very literary history, no unified set of norms and values is displayed in Genesis. Again, the ethical system that runs through the unfolding narrative of the book lacks clarity (Schuele 2014, p. 334). While not historiographical in character, the narratives of Genesis do possess certain features that are associated with historical writing, and the language of the story may be most helpful in determining how these materials functioned for Israel (Fretheim 1994, p. 324). Sailhamer (1990, p. 10) remarks that, “the overall literary form of the book is historical narrative, which is the representation of past events for the purpose of instruction”. In its narrative context, readers discover that human agency is not the only, or even the most powerful, influence on morality in the world. Consequently, even when human morality is completely absent or fails, the sense of what is good that drives divine agency remains unshakable.

Genesis, like many narrative materials in the Hebrew Bible, presents an anthropological realism. In fact, it showcases a distinct inclination to portray the full range of human behaviour, particularly when it comes to human characters (Schuele 2014, p. 338; Towner 2001, pp. 140–42; Wenham 1987, pp. 290–91). Thus, it seems reasonable to say that the biblical authors and/or editors depict the heroes of the Genesis stories in ways that attract the reader’s sympathy. As human characters, they are perhaps not absolute ethical role models but certainly figures with whom the readers can identify (Schuele 2014, p. 338). Since anthropology has contributed to the understanding of biblical genealogies<sup>2</sup> (cf. Andriolo 1973, pp. 1657–63; Hess 1989, pp. 241–54; Crusemann 1996, pp. 58–60; Levin 2001, pp. 11–46; Hendel 2005, pp. 9–13), and since the genealogies found in the Bible are means of providing social identification for individuals or specific groups, and relating them to others in the narrative (Knoppers 2001, p. 18), the narrative reading of Hagar–Ishmael is thus set against this background of anthropological realism and identification for contemporary application.

With a narrative methodology and a hermeneutic of identification as an interpretive approach, this article explores the Hagar–Ishmael narrative in Genesis 21: 9–21 and seeks to understand the narrative structure, plot, characters, and themes within the text. The hermeneutic of identification encourages readers to identify with the characters, situations, and experiences described in the biblical narrative. It emphasizes the idea that readers can connect personally and emotionally with the story. While narrative methodology primarily concerns itself with scholarly analysis, the hermeneutic of identification takes a more personal and experiential approach, encouraging readers to connect with and find meaning in the biblical narrative on a deeper level. These two approaches can complement each other, providing a more holistic understanding of biblical texts. In this hermeneutic of identification, the captivating nature of the story has the power to immerse the reader in such a way that it encompasses their entire life, bridging the gap between a story set in the past and the present reality of the reader. In this merging of horizons, the story becomes intimately connected with the reader’s own experience.

Clearly, the Hagar–Ishmael narrative offers an exercise in self-understanding and identification. In the following sections, an attempt is made to analyse Genesis 21: 9–21 and its narrative structural developments, and the synthesis of this analysis, namely how readers can relate to and engage with the narrative on a personal level, serves as the high point and conclusion of this literary endeavour.

## 2. Genesis 21: 9–21 and Its Narrative Structural Developments

Genesis 21: 9–21 is a narrative that is often considered as a doublet with the story of Hagar’s escape from slavery (Gen 16) (Brueggemann 1982, p. 183; Fretheim 1994, p. 487; Weis 1996, pp. 253–73; Frymer-Kensky 2002, p. 226; Claassens 2013, p. 1; O’Connor 2018, p. 297). In this narrative “doubling”, Hagar and Ishmael become prominent characters in the Abraham story, receiving almost as much attention as Isaac. These two figures cannot be set aside as minor diversions in the larger story (Fretheim 1994, pp. 487–88). The narrative is seen to be the most problematic text in which Hagar is mentioned in Genesis (cf. 16: 1–16, 21: 9–2; and 25: 12) because of its dealing with, “the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael

from Abraham’s household, their travails in the desert, salvation by a divine agent, and settlement in the wilderness of Paran” (Pinker 2009, p. 1).

Shaped by “different traditions, Priestly and non-Priestly” (Marzouk 2018, p. 3), it is thus a matter of scholarly debate to determine as much as possible, “whether the running away of Hagar in Gen 16 and her expulsion along with Ishmael in Gen 21: 8–21 were independent variant stories or whether the expulsion narrative in Gen 21: 8–21 is familiar with, assumes, and complements the birth narrative of Ishmael in Gen 16” (Marzouk 2018, p. 4). The similarities between chapter 21 and the events in chapter 16 can hardly escape the attention of even the casual readers (Sailhamer 1990, p. 165). The Hagar–Ishmael traditions in Genesis 16 and 21 are considered to be post-priestly with the primary objective of reducing, “the impact of the Priestly writer’s ‘ecumenism,’ especially concerning the legitimacy of sharing the land of Canaan with other sons of Abraham” (de Pury 2000, p. 179). While diversity of opinions exists in scholarly discourse on the historical contexts and formation of the traditions regarding the Hagar–Ishmael narratives, Marzouk (2018, p. 4) remarks that, “redaction criticism is useful in unpacking the diversity of the theological and political point of views among ancient Israelites with regard to the inclusion/exclusion and oppression/survival of both Hagar and Ishmael”. Commenting on the narrative setting and its literary source, Westermann (1985, p. 338) holds that the narrative “had its life in the oral tradition of the small migratory groups whose existence was determined by such experiences, particularly by family conflict and the threat of the desert”. Marzouk believes that the traditions concerning Ishmael and Hagar have emerged in some form from the pre-exilic period. He thus read the theological diversity of the narratives through the lens of purity of the “holy seed” and the complexity of intermarriages in the Persian period (Marzouk (2018, pp. 4–5).

In this narrative plot, the arrival of Isaac in the biblical text is a momentous occasion. The portion of the text immediately following the birth announcement is needed to give voice to Ishmael’s role now that Isaac has entered the picture of the family (Arnold 2009, p. 194). The fulfilment of the divine promise in the birth of Isaac undoubtedly brings about both challenges and opportunities. One immediate challenge revolves around the relationship between Abraham’s two sons. Although both sons are children of promise, their dynamic presents a unique set of issues (cf. Gen 25: 12, 19); God, however, made a distinction between the sons (cf. Gen 16: 10; 17: 19–20; 21: 13, 18). In the narrative of Hagar–Ishmael, the dynamics related to this divinely determined distinction and the associated prerogatives are carefully navigated and explored in the following sections with the Hebrew verses and English translation. The story delves into the intricacies and consequences of these divine arrangements, allowing for a deeper understanding of the implications they hold.

2.1. *Ishmael Playing with Isaac and Sarah’s Demand (vv. 9–11)*

MT	<p>9 ותרא שרא את־בן־הגֵר המצֵרית אשר־ילדה          ל־אברהם מצחק:          10 ל־אברהם גֵרשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְתֹאמֶר          וְאֵת־בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירֶשׁ בְּנֵי־הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת          עִם־בְּנֵי עַם־יִצְחָק:          11 וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אֲבִרְהָם עַל אֹדֶת          בָּנָו:</p>	ENG	<p>9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she gave birth to for Abraham, playing.          10 And she said to Abraham, “drive out this maid and her son, because the son of this maid shall not share in the inheritance with my son, Isaac”.          11 And Abraham was greatly distressed by the matter, because the maid’s child too was his son.</p>
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Upon the birth and weaning of Isaac, the general tone of the preceding paragraph (cf. Gen 21: 1–8) is laughter, rejoicing, and celebration at the birth of Isaac; however, the present narrative abruptly changes moods. Here one finds a picture of a dysfunctional family, one in which laughter; joy, rejoicing, and celebration are not long-lived, as laughter among sons becomes its downfall (O’Connor 2018, p. 299). According to Westermann (1985, p. 339), the clause that leads to the action, ותרא שרא, is significant for ancient narratives. Only the action, “she threw a glance” is mentioned. The intent of her glance is described in two

qualifications about the child's mother: "Hagar the Egyptian, and whom she gave birth to for Abraham". This is the source of the conflict; Sarah saw Hagar's son, Ishmael, playing (מְצַחֵק).<sup>3</sup>

The simple stem of the verb מְצַחֵק (playing) conveys the idea of laughter (Fretheim 2007, p. 100; Howard-Brook 2010, p. 67), whether in joy or incredulity. In the intensive form of the verb, it is used positively for playing a musical instrument or rejoicing, and negatively for mockery. This form does, however, progress toward more positive concepts. It depicts children playing (Zech. 8:5) or even God's wild creatures playing on the mountains (Job 40:20) and in the ocean (Ps. 104:26). Here Ishmael is "laughing" or "playing" with his half-brother, whose name means "laughter", but at the same time, the family wounds from chapter 16 remain painfully fresh and alive: "laughter between Abraham's sons provokes bitterness, not joy, and threatens Sarah again" (O'Connor 2018, p. 299). Thompson (2007, p. 23) remarks that the Hebrew מְצַחֵק (playing) in the narrative in which Ishmael is "playing" with his brother Isaac is interpreted by the rabbis as a term that was linked with reprehensible and shameful deeds: "fornication, or idolatry, or attempted homicide". Pinker (2009, p. 4), citing rabbinic sources on the probable meaning of מְצַחֵק, notes:

... that מְצַחֵק refers to immoral behavior does not seem to have any relation to the issue of sharing in the inheritance of Abraham's wealth. Similarly, one would be hard pressed to justify the exclusion of Ishmael from the inheritance on religious grounds ... Certainly Abraham would have been aware of Ishmael's behavior as much as Sarah and he clearly did not favor the expulsion of Ishmael, considering him his legitimate son (Gen 21: 11). It is also hard to accept R' Elazar's view that מְצַחֵק refers to murder. How could Sarah, confined to the women tents be an eyewitness to such acts? For this same reason we have also to reject R' Azariah's suggestion. We find much merit in the opinion of R' Shimon bar Yochai that מְצַחֵק is connected with the issue of inheritance. Ishmael was 'chuckling' because he assumed that as the firstborn he would inherit the bulk of the property.

Judging from the perspective of age, Speiser (1964, p. 155) notes, "Ishmael would now be at least fifteen years old. But his 'playing' with Isaac need mean no more than that the older boy was trying to amuse his little brother". While several interpretations exist in Jewish, Islamic, and Christian scholarship on Sarah's observation (cf. Tribble 1985, p. 244; Thompson 1997, p. 218; Reis 2000, pp. 95–96), one might conclude that the meaning of "playing—with her son Isaac" is ambiguous, and thus it makes no sense for one to attempt to fill the narrative gaps with intelligent hypotheses. Because Sarah fears for Isaac's future, she proleptically sees into that future and takes drastic action to protect her son's inheritance (Arnold 2009, p. 196). Sarah's reaction to her own son playing with "the son of the maidservant" is the harsh demand that Abraham expel the maid and her son (Gen 21: 10). Sarah's strategy is difficult to understand. Sarah's demand that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away (גֵּרַשׁ הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־בְּנָהּ) recalls the language used by Pharaoh in his action in Exodus 12:30 (which led to Israel's liberation) (Fretheim 1994, p. 488). At stake for Sarah is the inheritance for her and her child alone (Gunkel 1997, p. 226; O'Connor 2018, p. 300): כִּי לֹא יִרְשׁ בְּן־הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת עִם־בְּנֵי עַם־יִצְחָק (because the son of this maid shall not share in the inheritance with my son, Isaac).

Indeed, it is insufficient and imprecise to label Sarah's motive as simply proud "dissdain" or jealousy. Instead, her actions can be better understood as an unwavering and persistent intervention driven by her unwavering commitment to her son and their shared future. In the context of the early society depicted in the narrative, where a woman's prospects often depended solely on her son, Sarah's actions carry great significance and meaning. What Sarah is providing for is her son's future and even her own existence (Westermann 1985, p. 339). Because she knew that Ishmael, as the first son, was entitled to the larger share of Abraham's estate, she asked: How could the poor woman's son receive the same as the rich woman's son? How could Ishmael be blessed along with Isaac? They must be cast out. Sarah's demand troubled Abraham (v. 11): וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אֹדוֹתָם: בְּנֹה. The demand is cruel for all who are concerned, the father, the mother, and the child, as

it leads to a bitter conflict with no settlement in sight (Westermann 1985, p. 340). Abraham does not want to split his family no matter how fractious it is. To him, his two sons belong together: Israel and Ishmael (O'Connor 2018, p. 300).

## 2.2. Execution of Sarah's Demand (vv. 12–16)

### MT

12 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אַל־יִרְעַב בְּעֵינֶיךָ  
עַל־הַנְּעָר וְעַל־אֲמָתֶךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ  
שָׂרָה שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בְיִצְחָק יִקְרָא לָהּ זֶרַע:

13 אֶת־בְּנוֹת־הָאָמָה לְגוֹי אֲשִׁימְנֶה כִּי זֶרַעָהּ הוּא: וְגַם

14 וַיִּשְׁכֶם אַבְרָהָם בַּבֹּקֶר וַיִּקַּח־לֶחֶם וְחֶמֶת מִיָּם  
וַיִּתֵּן אֶל־הַגֵּר שָׁם עַל־שִׁכְמָהּ וְאֶת־הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּשְׁלַחֶהּ וּמִלָּךְ  
וַתֵּתַע בְּמִדְבַר בְּאֵר שָׁבַע:

15 וַיְכַלּוּ הַמַּיִם מִן־הַחֶמֶת וַתַּשְׁלֵךְ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד תַּחַת  
אֶחַת הַשִּׁיחִים:

16 מִנְּגִיד הַרְסִיק כַּמִּטְחָוִי קָשָׁת לָהּ וַתִּשָּׁב וַתִּלְךָ  
כִּי אָמְרָה אֶל־אַרְצָהּ בְּמוֹת הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּשָּׁב מִנְּגִיד וַתִּשָּׂא  
אֶת־קוֹלָהּ וַתִּבְרַךְ:

### ENG

12 However, God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the young boy and your maid; listen to whatever Sarah tells you, for your descendants shall be named through Isaac.”

13 “Moreover, I will make the son of the maid a nation also, because he is your offspring”.

14 Early in the morning, when Abraham arose, he took bread and a flask of water, and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered off into the wilderness of Beersheba.

15 When the water in the flask was completely used up, she abandoned the child under one of the shrubs.

16 But then she went off and sat down opposite the child, about a bowshot away, for she said, “I cannot bear to see the child die”. While she sat down opposite him, she raised her voice and began to cry.

While Abraham was contemplating Sarah's harsh demand, surprisingly, God takes Sarah's side, as a divine oracle now enters the situation. The divine oracle has two parts: the instruction (both positive and negative) and the promise, which is its basis, likewise in two parts, (last clause of v. 12: זרעה לקרא לה כי ביצחק יקרא לה זרעה: “listen to whatever Sarah tells you, for your descendants shall be named through Isaac”) and v. 13: וגם את בנות האמה לגוי אשימנו כי זרעה הוא (Moreover, I will make the son of the maid a nation also, because he is your offspring) (cf. Westermann 1985, p. 340).

The opening sentence of the divine oracle, which has correspondence to Genesis 12: 1, וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אַבְרָהָם (However, God said to Abraham), takes up Abraham's reaction to Sarah's demand and counters it: עַל־הַנְּעָר וְעַל־אֲמָתֶךָ אַל־יִרְעַב בְּעֵינֶיךָ (Do not be distressed because of the young boy and your maid!). While this addition is part of the “narrative subtlety”, it is however followed by the positive instruction to yield to Sarah's demand (Westermann 1985, p. 340). Both sons are recognized as Abraham's offspring (זרע v. 12–13), but God's particular future will be worked out through Isaac. At the same time, Abraham is assured that God will take care of the future of Ishmael; He will make him a great nation too (vv. 13, 18) (O'Connor 2018, p. 300). God's rationale for siding with Sarah repeats what had been told to Abraham earlier (Gen 17: 19–21), thus making it doubly clear that Abraham must make a choice and, finally, he does not stand in the way of God's direction (Fretheim 1994, p. 488).

The divine concern was implemented immediately, and that meant misery and distress for Hagar and her Child (vv. 14–16). Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael off the next morning to the desert of Beersheba with the provision of food and water; however, the provision was insufficient for their journey. Reading the narrative as an aetiology of connection and fracture, O'Connor (2018, pp. 300–1) remarks:

The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael presents a sorrowful tableau of separation and danger. Abraham promptly obeys the divine command to listen to Sarah. Rising ‘early in the morning,’ he provides bread and water for his concubine and their son, places a water skin and the child on Hagar's shoulder, and sends her away (21:14). With the barest provisions, mother and child depart for the

wilderness to face great danger and probable death. The story's restrained style underlines its poignancy.

It is interesting to note that the narrator creates a poignant picture in v. 14—without a single utterance made; only what is necessary is said. The text no doubt remains ambiguous as to whether Ishmael—now about sixteen years old—is placed on Hagar's shoulder.<sup>4</sup> So Hagar and Ishmael wander about in the wilderness, where survival depends on access to water and shelter (O'Connor 2018, p. 301). When water supplies deplete and death approaches, in immense pain, Hagar succumbs to despair. She puts Ishmael under a bush and moves away, in deep sorrow, for she could not bear to see her only child die. Abandoned and frightened about her child's fate, she wept irrepressibly. Her worries are a clear indication of a mother caring and loving, looking up in faith to God for help. As noted by Janzen and Noble (2020, p. 519), "Hagar's words, together with her weeping, constitute a prayer that Ishmael's life may be spared". Her sitting position of a "distance of a bowshot" (v. 16) is aptly described by O'Connor (2018, p. 301), "The archery reference hints at Ishmael's future as a warrior". It was, at this moment of despair, when all seemed lost, that God brought a change in fortune (vv. 17–21).

### 2.3. Divine Providence and the Reversal of Fortune (vv. 17–21)

#### MT

17 הנער ויקרא מלאך אלהים אל־הגֵר מן־השמים  
ויאמר לה מה־לך הגֵר אל־תיראי פִי־שמע  
אלהים אל־קול הנער באִשֶׁר הוא־שם:

18 קומי שאי את־הנער והחזיק את־יָדְךָ בו  
גְדוֹל אֲשֵׁי־מִנּוֹ: כִּי־לְגוֹי

19 ויפקח אלהים את־עיניה ותרא באר מים ותלך  
ותמלא את־הסמט מים ומשק את־הנער:

20 ויהי אלהים את־הנער ויגדל וישב במדבר ויהי  
רֶכֶב קִשָׁת:

21 וישב במדבר פָּאֵרָן ותקח־לוֹ אִמּוֹ אִשָּׁה  
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

#### ENG

17 And God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What is the matter with you, Hagar? Fear not, God has heard the voice of the boy from where he is".

18 "Arise, lift up the boy, and hold him in your hand, for I will make him a great nation".

19 And God opened her eyes, and she saw a spring of water. So she went and filled the flask with water and gave the boy a drink.

20 And God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the wilderness, and became an archer.

21 And while he was dwelling in the wilderness of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

These verses of the narrative can be understood as the high point and goal of what the narrator intends, namely God has heard the voice of the boy. It tells the story of rescue from death (Westermann 1985, p. 342). Although there exist difficulties in the structure of verses 17–19, it is interesting and sufficient to note (cf. vv. 17–18) that the promise concerning Ishmael, which only Abraham had heard in verse 13, must also be promulgated to Hagar since she has assumed the role of Ishmael's father, as verse 21 shows (Westermann 1985, p. 342). Thus with a salvation oracle, God quells her fear and assures her of Ishmael's future. As it were before when the Angel of the Lord found Hagar in the desert of Shur (16: 7–10), so here the מלאך אלהים (the angel of God) hears the boy crying in the desert of Beersheba and comes with comfort and assonance that Ishmael would become a great nation (vv. 17–19). While in the previous parallel narrative, God instructed Hagar to return to her role as a servant in the ancestral household of Abraham, here however, God simply provided her with resources in the desert to meet their needs (v. 19; Arnold 2009, p. 197). In the previous encounter the severity of God's command to Hagar is noted by Tribble (1984, p. 16):

... return and submit to suffering, bring a divine word of terror to an abused, yet courageous, woman. ... Inexplicably, the God who later, seeing the suffering of a slave people, comes down to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians, here identifies with the oppressor and orders a servant to return not only to bondage but also to affliction.

In the second and current divine encounter, she is invited unto an experience of liberation. Commenting on the redemptive force of God's invitation to Hagar, O'Connor (2018, p. 301) notes:

When God invites her to take action, everything changes. Just at the moment of no hope, God urges this desperate single mother to assume her proper role as her child's protector: "Come lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him" (v. 19). In this place of deep impossibility, God expands the promise made to her in 16: 7–13, a promise similar to those given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It was only at this point that God opened Hagar's eyes to show her the well of water that would enable the survival of mother and child. Here a basic pattern of reversal of expectations in Genesis finds further fulfilment; when all hope seems lost, God creates life anew (O'Connor 2018, p. 301; cf. Fretheim 1994, p. 489). The narrator's conclusion of the episode (vv. 20–21) relates the final and definitive separation of Ishmael from Isaac and the rest of the ancestral family, both geographically and socially (Arnold 2009, p. 197). According to Fretheim (1994, p. 489), the narrative closes with three themes that bode well for the future of both mother and child: "God was with the lad"; Hagar exhibited no little strength to care for his need to find a wife for him among her own people (the only time a mother does this in the HB/OT), like a patriarch of any ancient family (cf. O'Connor 2018, p. 302). Indeed, Ishmael's skills as an expert hunter and the various aspects that shaped his life are significant. However, what truly stands out are the presence of God with him and the promise of God to be actively involved in shaping his life in a creative manner. This divine presence and promise bring a unique and powerful dimension to Ishmael's life journey.

### 3. Hermeneutical Synthesis for Self-Understanding and Identification

The primary objective of this article was a (re)reading of the Hagar–Ishmael biblical narrative through a hermeneutic of identification. Such a narrative methodology helps readers explore the biblical text and gain important insights which can provide stimulating and profound encouragement about the design, plot, and message of the narrative. The Hagar–Ishmael position is too painfully close to the realities of many today. Many modern readers would like to identify with Abraham rather than with Sarah regarding the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. No doubt, such a move must occur if Abraham's sons are to shape their separate destinies and futures consistent with God's providence (cf. Gen 17: 19–20). This is a historical and theological reality for the narrator. Sarah's objective seems to be on target, though the means are unnecessarily harsh. It might be troubling that God allows Sarah's strategy for the expulsion. Here, one must understand that God works through complex circumstances and imperfect human beings to actualize divine purposes. Thus Sarah's strategy, however harsh and inadequate, seems to be God's provision for the future based on this particular moment in the life of Abraham's family (Fretheim 1994, p. 489). No doubt, the narrative of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21 has been interpreted in various ways and can be applied to the contextual experiences of people today in several ways. In this article, the analysis of the narrative developments of Genesis 21: 9–21 offers an exercise in self-understanding and identification in the following directions.

#### 3.1. Marginalization, Exclusion, and Migration

The narrative of Genesis 21: 9–21 shows how Hagar and Ishmael became victims of marginalization and exclusion in Abraham's household. Their status as foreigners and Hagar's position as a slave contributes to their vulnerability. While the role she plays in the life of the proto-ancestor of the Israelites, Abraham, is not to be overlooked, however, with the twist of events, Hagar finds that she has been exploited. Following the birth of Isaac, she was considered to have outlived her value and significance in Abraham's household. They are both removed from their previous family, place, social identity, and support system and find themselves in a space of powerlessness and psychological distress in Sarah's

household and in the wilderness that lacks the necessities for survival. They are cast out upon the world, subject to unknown chances.

Reading the narrative of Hagar–Ishmael through a hermeneutic of identification, the biblical text presents these characters as seemingly lowly and marginalized outsiders. With a hermeneutic of identification, African–American feminists have read and interpreted the Hagar–Ishmael narrative as a model of a history of descendants of slaves and survivors of racial oppression, as well as a figure of courage and survival (Williams 2006, pp. 171–84). Hagar is seen as a victim of ethnic prejudice mixed with economic and social exploitation in relation to Sarah, her abusive and jealous mistress (Weems 1988, pp. 1–21). In reading and interpreting Genesis as mirroring disaster and the promise of life, O’Connor (2018, p. 8) notes:

Memories of past violence find symbolic expression in Genesis in three ways: through stories I call ‘disaster narratives,’ themes of impossibility, and promise of new life... Genesis moves beyond tragedy and death to proclaim that God who brought all things into being will recreate the people of Judah.

Today, this narrative can be seen as a stimulating reminder of the ongoing issues of marginalization and exclusion faced by marginalized communities, immigrants, refugees, and those who have been trafficked, exploited, and are sitting in a wilderness of despair, struggle, and mistreatment and in need of survival in various parts of the world. The experience of forced migration and displacement resonates with many people and communities that have experienced displacement due to conflict, environmental factors, or economic hardship. The narrative serves as a reminder of the challenges faced by displaced people and calls for empathy and solidarity with those who are often on the margins of society. The Hagar–Ishmael narrative can be viewed as a call for social justice and empowerment, especially for marginalized and oppressed groups. It encourages societies to address issues of discrimination, oppression, and inequality and work toward greater inclusion and justice.

### 3.2. *Survival, Resilience, and Divine Intervention*

Hagar and Ishmael’s survival in the wilderness highlights the resilience of marginalized and vulnerable populations. Like Hagar and Ishmael, many people in different contextual realities face harsh living conditions and adversity, but they can demonstrate remarkable strength and adaptability in their daily lives. In the narrative, one finds a pitiable scene of human suffering and misery, and yet it is bounded by divine mercy and compassion. When caught up in a cycle of victimhood and oppression, and in their trauma and seemingly hopeless situation, divine providence connects with them and gives them a new identity and a future that holds unimaginable promise, purpose, possibilities of survival, and meaning. Thus by divine providence, Hagar and Ishmael transited from being helpless victims to hopeful victors. God shows compassion to Hagar and Ishmael by providing for them in the wilderness and promising a future for Ishmael.

Following the theological tradition of Genesis, and (re)reading the Hagar–Ishmael narrative with the lens of disaster, impossibility, and promise of new life, the narrative extends an invitation to readers to engage in a profound and often veiled drama of divine intervention and human reaction. The language and encounters of faith maintain a tangible and individualized essence, allowing readers to remain connected to their own reality. The world depicted in this narrative is primarily ordinary, familiar, and relatable, encompassing the delights and unexpected moments, the struggles and hardships, and the intricate and ambiguous situations experienced by individuals in any community (Fretheim 1994, p. 324).

The theme of resilience and divine intervention in the narrative can be seen as a symbol of hope and faith in times of crisis and could thus be interpreted as a message of hope for those facing difficult circumstances today. It underscores the idea that even in challenging times individuals can find strength and sustenance through faith and trust in a higher power. In Hagar and Ishmael’s lamentations, one sees how the narrative witnesses



the workings of the Creator God. Speaking very persuasively and eloquently about how Hagar's experience becomes many things for many people, [Trible \(1984, p. 28\)](#) notes:

Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother with child, the resident alien without legal resources, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affection, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indignant relying upon handouts from power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.

The narrative of the used, abused, and rejected sexual surrogate mother has become for many a fitting symbol of all that is poor and marginalized in the global economy today. The narrative, consistent with the theological thrust of Genesis, delineates God as the creating and self-revealing God in a way that prepares for his soteriological roles in the Bible and human history ([Arnold 2009, p. 19](#)). The promises that God makes to Hagar and her child create a stunning contrast to the disaster and impossibility inherent in the narrative. The promises are not only about the survival of Hagar and her child, but instead, they press toward unimaginable scenes and spaces where those who are marginalized might begin again. God's promise to make a great nation out of Ishmael can be seen as a message of hope and potential for individuals and communities facing adversity. It encourages people to have faith in the future, even when the present may be challenging. The mercy of God is not hindered by human transgression, nor limited by his purpose concerning the destiny of nations in history. God who distributes the favour of His providence according to His purpose will have uttered no harsh decree against individuals to shut them out of salvation and help. In this narrative, one sees God at work among the outcasts, and the refugees of the world ([Fretheim 1994, p. 490](#)). The active involvement of God in the lives of individuals beckons people of faith to participate alongside them, providing support and steadfastness until the wells of blessings and provisions are made accessible. It is an invitation to come alongside others, lifting them up and offering unwavering support until their circumstances improve.

Hagar and Ishmael's survival in the harsh desert environment can be seen as a stimulating symbol of resilience in the face of adversity. There are many who face environmental challenges, such as droughts or desertification, and can relate to the resilience required to overcome these obstacles. This stream of vulnerability and traumatic experiences, on the one hand, and the divine intervention and affirmation in the Hagar–Ishmael narrative, on the other hand, invite readers to reflect on their experiences of vulnerability and to face their reality with hope in the Creator God. The profound impact of the divine comfort that Hagar–Ishmael receives gave them a new sense of identity and empowerment to begin again and to live in the present where life was disjointed. Following Hagar and Ishmael's lamentation, the promise and assurance of salvation emerge. The rhythm of lamentation, which is common in Israel's individual and communal life and evident in the Psalms, permeates the narrative. It invites people to recognize and rejoice in the fact that God's saving actions extend beyond their own community. The promise made to Hagar and Ishmael continues to hold theological significance in the present day.

### *3.3. Family Dynamics, Cultural Identity, and Ethnic Diversity*

The narrative of Hagar and Ishmael raises questions about family dynamics, cultural identity, and ethnic diversity. In the narrative, Hagar's identity is manifestly clear: Hagar, a slave to the desires of her ethnic, social, and economic "superior", is also a slave to the whims, desires, and decrees of another woman named Sarah. These two women, who could have found solidarity, commonality, and equality in another time or place, where rich and poor, Israelite and Egyptian, could stand together in this narrative, are worlds apart. Ishmael's identity as the son of Abraham and Hagar is significant, as it highlights the

complexities of family relationships, particularly in polygamous contexts. For example, in Africa, where diverse family structures are common, this narrative can prompt discussions about family dynamics and identity. The theme of identity and divine recognition in the narrative can resonate with individuals who may feel unseen or unheard in their own ethnic and cultural contexts and lives. It reminds people that their identity and worth are not solely defined by their circumstances but also by their relationship with a caring and attentive God.

The rivalry between Hagar and Sarah, and the tension between their sons, Ishmael and Isaac, highlights complex family dynamics and conflicts. In Africa for example, many cultures have family structures that find significant parallels with the challenges and conflicts that arise from the chain of relationships in this narrative. Ishmael's identity as the son of Abraham and Hagar—the Egyptian, as well as his relationship with his half-brother Isaac, can mirror the complexities of identity and heritage found in many African societies with diverse ethnic, tribal, or religious backgrounds. Consequently, the search for one's roots and the negotiation of multiple identities can be a shared experience. The dynamics in this narrative can be relatable to contemporary African families dealing with issues such as polygamy, step-sibling relationships, blended families, the struggle for rights and recognition, inheritance, or conflicts arising from jealousy and competition. The narrative thus encourages reflection on the importance of communication, reconciliation, and empathy within families. Furthermore, Hagar's ethnic identity and experience as a maidservant and her treatment by Sarah raise issues related to cultural and ethnic diversity, women's rights, and gender equality. Ishmael's descendants are believed to be the forebears of various Arab tribes, emphasizing the diversity of human cultures and ethnicities. This narrative obviously offers profound insights and discussions about the rights and dignity of women in different societies and encourages a celebration of cultural pluralism and the importance of coexistence.

#### 4. Conclusions

The narrative of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21 offers various themes and lessons that can resonate with the experiences of people in various contextual realities today. In applying a hermeneutic of identification to the narrative of Hagar–Ishmael in Genesis 21, contemporary readers can draw parallels between the themes and struggles in the narrative and the experiences and challenges they face today. This approach allows the biblical text to continue to be relevant and meaningful in addressing the human condition across different time periods and cultural contexts. The narrative provides opportunities for reflection on issues such as marginalization, exclusion, migration, survival, resilience, faith, family dynamics, ethnic identity, cultural diversity, social justice, and more. These themes can be used as a foundation for discussions and actions that address contemporary challenges and promote positive change in human societies.

The memory of this narrative serves as a testament to the awe-inspiring workings of the Creator God. Hence retelling the story carries great significance. The story brings life and vitality to the testimony, infusing it with a sense of urgency and animation. It serves as a vibrant reminder that God is the God of all people, extending His care and love even to the outcast and marginalized. The narrative serves as a powerful testament to God's inclusive and compassionate nature, inspiring people to remember and embrace this truth (Fretheim 1994, p. 490).

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Basically, two types of literature are found in Genesis, “narrative and numerative” (Westermann 1984, p. 6), although poetic pieces are incorporated into the narratives as well (Fretheim 1994, p. 324; cf. 2: 23; 3: 14–19; 16: 11–12; 25: 23; 27: 27–29, 39–40; 49: 1–27).
- <sup>2</sup> Steinberg (1989, p. 41) notes that, “Genesis is a book whose plot is genealogy”.
- <sup>3</sup> While the MT omits the phrase “with her son Isaac”, the LXX renders it as παίζοντα μετὰ Ισαακ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτῆς (playing and or dancing with Isaac her son). The NRSV restores the Greek variant “with her son Isaac”, which was probably dropped from the text (see Hamilton 1995, pp. 78–79, for other options for “playing”).
- <sup>4</sup> In Gen 21, Ishmael is a boy (נֶעַר vv. 12, 17 [twice] 18, 19, 20) or the “child” (טָרַן vv. 14, 15, 16), and he languishes helplessly under a shrub (v. 15), whereas according to 17:25, he was about sixteen years old. The “son of Hagar” is never mentioned by name in the text (Wenham 1994, pp. 78, 84; Arnold 2009, p. 196).

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