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Why Muslim Women Come to Christ



Hagar. Single mother. Victim of forced sex. Abandoned in the desert with no child support.

Yet an integral part of the story of Abraham, that great leader of faith. Jews, Christians and Muslims all trace their heritage through Abraham.

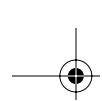
Originally Hagar was a slave—illiterate chattel at the bottom of the heap. Her owner was Sarah, Abraham's wife.

But Sarah was infertile. For years she struggled to get pregnant. After awhile it was heartbreaking. Finally, still determined to have children in the house, Sarah did what she thought was the next best thing: she pushed Hagar at Abraham. Maybe her marriage contract required her to provide an heir through a servant if she couldn't produce one herself.

Then the plot thickened. As soon as Hagar got pregnant, Sarah regretted her move. Hagar started showing off. Sarah retaliated by abusing her servant. Hagar couldn't take it. She ran off.

Alone in the desert, Hagar had no future. But God came to Hagar and stopped her in her tracks with his presence and his promises.





The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." The angel added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count."

The angel of the LORD also said to her:

"You are now with child

and you will have a son.

You shall name him Ishmael,

for the LORD has heard of your misery. . . ."

She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." (Genesis 16:7-11, 13)

When God confronted this pregnant, single nobody, how did she respond? She said, "God, you see me." In spite of the desolate wilderness that surrounded her, in spite of the social structure in which she was insignificant, the miracle was that God saw her. God knew her as an individual. She was not alone in the universe. She was a creature of God. That changed the direction of her life. She turned around, went back and was obedient to Sarah.

Still, fourteen years later, Hagar got kicked out again. This time it was permanent.

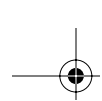
The reason was simple. Some years after Hagar's baby was born, Sarah surprised everybody, most of all herself. She got pregnant and gave birth to a boy.

One day Hagar's son teased Sarah's.

Sarah exploded. "Get rid of that slave woman and her son!" she said to Abraham. "That slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac!"

So Abraham turned Hagar and Ishmael out of his camp. He gave them some food and water and sent them away. Hagar hiked with her boy. Maybe she hoped for a passing caravan where they could hitch a ride. But none appeared. The day came when the water was all used up. This time there was no spring.





When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there nearby, she began to sob. (Genesis 21: 15-16)

Then God came to Hagar again.

God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar?" (v. 17)

What was the *matter*? Hagar must have been ready to spit out a bitter riposte, when the angel continued:

Do not be afraid. God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.

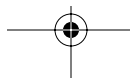
Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. (vv. 17-19)

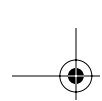
In Muslim tradition, too, God provided water for Hagar and Ishmael, although the details differ from the biblical story. When Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away, according to Muslim teaching, he resettled them in Mecca, a desolate place in the wilderness. He commissioned them to be pioneer missionaries, spreading the true faith in this unreached region. Together Abraham and Hagar built the Ka'bah, a small building, and dedicated it to the worship of the one God. Later, when Hagar searched desperately for water, the fountain of Zamzum miraculously sprang up.¹ Twenty-five hundred years later, the Ka'bah and Zamzum would figure in the story of the prophet Muhammad. Today they are central sites visited by those who make the annual pilgrimage to Mecca.

Muslims trace their heritage from Abraham through Ishmael, Abraham's oldest son. Some consider this their genetic ancestry. For others it is metaphorical. Either way, Hagar stands as the mother of the line.

In Jewish-Christian tradition, Hagar, along with Abraham and Sarah, is one of the people of God who has shown us a little more of what it means to interact with God. She is part of our roots.

This book focuses on "daughters of Hagar," women of Muslim ancestry who have experienced the grace of God through the Lord Jesus Christ. As God provided a spring in the desert for a needy woman four thousand





years ago, so today he pours out life and freshness for vulnerable women all over the globe.

Who Are Muslim Women?

Almost one-tenth of the world’s population are Muslim women.

Who are they? Arabs, first of all. The prophet Muhammad was an Arab, and Islam’s most sacred site is in Arabia. To Arabia pilgrims journey by the millions every year. Beyond Arabia, the Arab world extends north through the Fertile Crescent and west across North Africa.

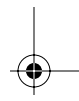
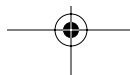
East from Arabia we find Iranian Muslim women, who are different from Arabs ethnically and religiously. Most are Shiite Muslims rather than Sunni. West and North is Turkey. This nation once dominated the Muslim world. It hosted the last great caliphate. Today Muslims speaking Turkic languages number well over one hundred million. Over sixty million live in the region of the former Soviet Union, in the great frontier states of Central Asia. Because of a robust birth rate, this population is growing fast.

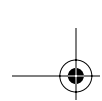
The biggest bloc of Muslims in the world is in South Asia—Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan. In Southeast Asia is the single biggest Muslim-majority nation, Indonesia. Here too are Muslim-oriented Malaysia and the Muslim section of the Philippines. Women tend to take active roles in leadership in daily life in these Southeast Asian communities.

Mosques are being constructed up and down the continent of Africa, where many Muslims live. Islam is most pervasive in East Africa, just a dhow’s sail away from Arabia. China supports nearly twenty-five million Muslims, who live especially in the northwest but also in little enclaves scattered throughout the country. Europe is building new mosques rapidly, both for the “guest workers” and immigrants from Muslim countries and for local converts. It is estimated that in the United States there are four to six million Muslims.

Who are Muslim women? Clearly they differ according to their national or ethnic identity. A woman’s concerns also will be shaped by

- her role in the life cycle
- her economic situation





- her ideological community
- her personality

Consider the life cycle. Women dream new dreams and feel fresh needs at different points in their lives, such as

- a daughter in her father's house
- a single professional woman sharing an apartment with other young women
- a married mother
- a childless married woman
- a divorced mother, head of household
- a widowed grandmother living in her son's household

Sometimes knowing a woman's role in the life cycle is more important than knowing her nationality.

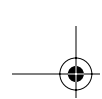
Economically, several of the richest countries in the world are Arab. Yet in other Arab communities poverty is cruel. Certainly among the Muslims of South Asia are many malnourished women, side by side with millionaires. Some Muslim women have Ph.D.s and big stock portfolios. Millions of others are illiterate. Some rich women move regularly between homes in Arabia, France, London and the United States. These are not necessarily "liberated" women. Some of the very rich may not be allowed to drive cars or to go out without a male companion or a veil.

As for religion, many Muslim women have been taught little about Islamic doctrines and theology. They resort to folk religion, shrines, sacrifices, amulets, divination and spirit possession as often as they turn to Muslim institutions. Others are well grounded in the teachings of the faith. Some belong to radical fundamentalist sisterhoods. For others, political activism in solidarity with other Muslims or conationals is what counts, rather than religious activism.

Vocationally, too, there is diversity. Even in a simple village, some women may specialize as herbalists, while others are textile weavers, others food dryers, others cheese makers, others perfumists, others Qur'anic reciters, others musicians, others occult women and others land speculators.

Finally, each woman has unique gifts from God, a distinct personality and distinct life experiences and opportunities.





What Draws Muslim Women to Christ

No disrespect for Islam is intended when we write about Muslim women coming to Christ. Spending time with Muslims, I have been blessed by their high concept of the nature of God. Their prayerful life. Their emphasis on community. Their insistence that faith must be expressed in the public sector. Their concern for ethics in society. Again and again, Islam points us to our Creator.

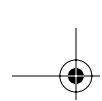
Yet if a faith doesn't lead to God in Christ, it misses something right at the core. In Christ, God visited this planet in human form. In Christ's death, God experienced the depths of human pain. In Christ's resurrection, God generated the power for new beginnings, for transformation of life. Muslims continually refer to God as "the merciful and compassionate." It is in Christ that God most fully demonstrates those qualities. This is why Muslim women come to Christ. Through Christ, the God whom they knew far off and incompletely becomes their personal Father.

There are all sorts of specific paths by which Muslim women come to the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Some come when they read the gospel story.
- Others come because they see Jesus in visions or dreams.
- Others, during a struggle with demons or spirits, find that the name of Jesus brings liberation and help.
- Some have been abused in dysfunctional relationships and find Jesus offering them healing and dignity.
- Others have been schooled in the ideals of righteousness and long for justice in their society. They find the power for this in the Lord Jesus.
- Some come because of Christ's affirmation of women.
- Some who have lived promiscuously cry out for a moral foundation for their own lives.
- Others fear death and long for assurance of paradise.
- Two women whom I interviewed hungered for God almost single-mindedly from their earliest childhood.
- Many come because their family has decided jointly to follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Muslim women are human beings, and their motives are complex.





However, several milestones recur on these journeys again and again:

- Scripture
- spiritual power encounters
- the love of Christians
- sex and beauty issues
- social justice issues

Myths About Ministry with Muslim Women

In the popular mind and in anthropological studies, missionaries often have been labeled paternalistic, judgmental, condescending and colonialist. In his book *Orientalism*, for example, Edward Said argues that missionaries and other expatriates during the Age of Empire viewed Muslim history, culture and ethics through Western lenses. Therefore their reports were faulty.²

There is some truth to this. An article in the magazine of the premier American women's mission agency observed in 1866:

The degradation of the female sex in many parts of the East is not sufficiently considered in Christian lands. . . . They are utterly destitute of nearly all those blessings which distinguish us, as rational and religious beings, and without which we should deem life insupportable.³

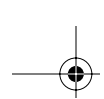
The “deplorable state of heathen women” . . . “utterly benighted” . . . “less favored sisters” . . . “pathetic, pitiable, downtrodden”—such phrases were common during the nineteenth century, the “Great Century” for missions in general and for women's missions in particular.

Certainly there were abused women in Muslim countries, as elsewhere. Even in loving Muslim families today there are millions of women who need schooling, health care, income-generating skills and, above all, the words of the gospel.

Yet when we focus on the weaknesses of another culture, we miss its strengths and beauties. We also miss the sins in our own culture. For example, Muslims are appalled at Western family life when they hear about abortions, promiscuity, disrespect for parents and neglect of the elderly.

In any case, even at the height of the Age of Empire, *women* missionaries often lived and worked closely with local women. Women's ministry never has been merely cerebral. It always has been holistic, involving





body, mind and spirit. And as women have worked together, rested together, laughed together and cried together, *de facto* empathy has grown. Sisterhood has bonded women across cultures, whatever the missionaries' ideology.⁴

And some early women missionaries did see the difference between their culture and the gospel. In Iran in 1903, Dr. Winifred Westlake wrote, "We don't want to Anglicize the Persian women, do we? No, if we may be used to set them free from the trammels of Mohammedanism, placing them in the light of the Gospel of Christ, they will develop as God wills, and who can tell what they may do in His honour and glory?"⁵

Today there are new assumptions, new "myths" about ministry with Muslim women. Some focus on ministry strategy. Such myths can mislead us. They include

Myth 1. Muslim women are passive and submissive. They rarely think for themselves or exert much leadership.

Myth 2. Muslim women usually cannot come to Christ and grow in Christ unless their husbands become believers too.

Myth 3. A Muslim family will feel more threatened if a daughter or wife believes in Christ as Lord than if a son or husband does.

Myth 4. Muslim women and men can be evangelized and disciplined together effectively, using the same strategies and the same Scripture texts.

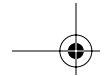
Myth 5. Muslim women ought not to be evangelized until there is a Christian man available to evangelize the men. To do otherwise would be poor stewardship of personnel, since women will not lead a lasting fellowship.

This book will give us background for evaluating these myths. Consider myths 4 and 5. Can women be evangelized and disciplined just like men? Should women's evangelism be subsumed under men's?

The short answer is "Sometimes." How beautiful it is when a household follows Jesus together. How natural it is in places where most important decisions are made corporately.

Unfortunately, Islam so resists the lordship of Jesus that even if a kin group initially hears the gospel together, members may hold each other back from moving closer. Then individual seekers have to pursue truth privately.





Sometimes the opportunities to speak to women arise before there are opportunities to speak to men. Sometimes Christian women are available to reach out before there are Christian men to do the same. Sometimes the abuses women have suffered or, alternatively, the richness of women's worlds call for a gendered approach.

Hagar surely would have resonated with this. Fiercely nurturant, desert-competent, spiritually alive, quiveringly vulnerable, Hagar went on to network a future for her boy. After they drank from God's well in the wilderness, they revived. The boy grew and became a strong hunter. In time Hagar got him a wife from Egypt, and he had sons and daughters. Some of those sons appear when the prophet Isaiah envisions a grand procession around the throne of God at the end of time. Descendants of Nabaioth, Hagar's first grandson, and Kedar, another grandson, march in that train. No longer are they outsiders. God accepts their offerings (Isaiah 60:7).

Hagar's daughters will be there too. Meanwhile, some of them are here in the pages of this book.

