

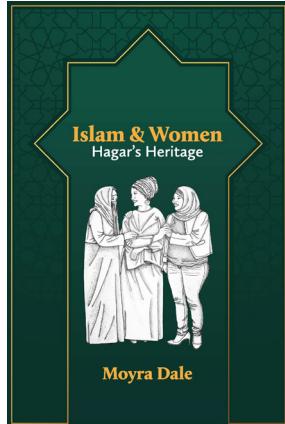
Islam and Women: Hagar's Heritage

by Moyra Dale

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Reviewed by V. Phillips

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The Twelve Percent: Often Talked About but Rarely Listened To

“Muslim women comprise about 12% of the world’s population,” yet many mission organizations overlook the importance of addressing their special needs in planning their program strategies (2). In her newly published book, *Islam and Women: Hagar’s Heritage*, Moyra Dale challenges us to consider the unique world of Muslim women if we desire to reach them with the hope of the gospel message and bring them into the body of Christ.

Looking through my bookshelves and the resources available to me on Islam over the years, I note as Dale does that many of the teaching voices are men – even a few of those focused on women’s ministry. I am

grateful for the valuable insight into the Islamic worldview these materials offer. I agree with the author, however, that most writers miss the female perspective that is important for understanding a Muslim woman's "frame of reference" for daily life and faith.

Just last weekend, I attended a ministry training in a popular strategy method promoted for reaching Muslims. All the examples and information presented by the male workshop facilitator as convincing evidence of this method's effectiveness were with men. When I raised the question to him about Muslim women and their reactions to this method of gospel presentation, his response was to simply assure me that it worked well—an answer that left me more frustrated than convinced.

The insights of women scholars and practitioners grounded in personal experience provide an invaluable resource that can help our relationships with Muslim friends to grow and increase our knowledge of how to create safe places to share Christ with them. In order to reach this beloved and precious twelve percent of the world's population needing to hear the gospel, the voices of women working with Muslim women are important additions to any discussion on mission planning and strategy.

“Binocular” vision

Dale, a scholar herself and co-founder of the excellent web-based resource, *“When Women Speak....”*, has served with Interserve Australia in the Middle East for many years. Her book reflects her own rich experiences and ethnographic research into the social spaces of her Muslim friends. I found I could relate well with Dale's descriptions of her two decades on the field discovering concerns and issues that influence women's everyday lives.

She starts each chapter with a short anecdotal story to introduce a theme, a lived experience that will resonate with field workers. The stories remind us that conversations with women are framed by real,

day-to-day life events and issues and rarely by apologetic arguments over religious scriptures. Conversations happen in the context of relationships where discussions can open doors for heart-level dialogue and deeper discovery of truth.

In order to gain and understand a balanced perspective of a Muslim woman's life and have these heart-level types of conversations, Dale encourages going beyond traditional viewpoints and stereotypes to see how these women objectively perceive their own lives. Women working in the Muslim world can all testify to the privilege of spending time with our friends, listening to them, and learning from them as they describe their cultural and religious values. Dale takes us on her own journey of listening to and learning from her Muslim friends.

Women workers in the Muslim world generally find that relational methods are more useful than using direct approaches that involve dialogue on a gospel presentation or comparing and arguing about religious beliefs. Over the years, I have adopted approaches that feel more holistic and incorporate oral methods as a bridge to deeper conversations and opportunities to share the good news of Christ. Having familiarity with a lot of Islamic scripture has not always seemed important in my experience, but I appreciate how Dale includes so much insight on the Qur'an and Hadith in order to understand a Muslim woman's worldview.

From her experiences, Dale recognizes several themes that she organizes into 18 chapters relevant to a Muslim woman's social and religious worldview. Her goal in these chapters is to provide a balanced, or "binocular" as she calls it, view of Muslim women in order to form a better overall perspective of their world. The chapter titles reflect two significant areas in the lives and faith of Muslim women, the first section covering more general and common themes across the Muslim world, and a second section with more practical subjects that look at everyday life.

In her discussion of each chapter topic, Dale mixes Islamic scriptures (Qur'an and Hadith), historical influences, and socio-cultural dynamics with the issues relevant to a Muslim woman's religious and daily life. Her approach is both unique and helpful – showing how a Muslim woman would understand and apply particular scriptural texts in her day-to-day existence. Dale then introduces biblical texts related to the issues for comparison and contrast with Islamic teachings. Her non-critical approach is a positive guide for disciple making and for helping new believers develop a Christian worldview.

I found the chapter breakdown to be fascinating and beneficial in thinking through issues of significance to women. Surprisingly (for me at least), Folk Islam was not addressed as a subject on its own but was found in the chapters on "Power" and "Life Cycles and Life Rituals." Dale compares power as a means of dealing with "failure-biased forces" such as envy and the evil eye versus "success-biased powers" like baraka/blessing (92-94). The influence of the belief in "limited good" and the need to find advantage through manipulating the unseen and uncontrollable spirit world with charms or a hand of Fatima helped me interpret this as a more protective purpose rather than an overtly negative association of a draw to occult power. Even more importantly, the success-biased focus on blessing offers us a chance to share a message of our hope in Christ, the ultimate blessing.

In a similar way, I found the chapter on reciprocity and patronage to be revealing and helpful, seeing it in a much more positive light than I have before. Dale describes patronage as foundational to maintaining communal relationships, and therefore providing women areas of influence and power that we as Westerners are quick to misinterpret in a negative light. Her explanation of patronage and grace with God as our righteous patron is lovely (108-109), again reminding us that the Bible shows that the Lord puts high value on relationships and generosity.

Each chapter ends with a set of practical questions as a simple means of personal reflection on your own worldview and as an aid for use in observation and/or in conversation with your Muslim friends. Dale

encourages looking and listening, being aware of social implications or expectations, finding commonalities as well as differences, and examining our own attitudes and responses. Being able to take content that is informative and interesting—for personal application in our relationships—is a great asset of the book.

Good Reading for Women...and Men

Since we have already noted the need for more female voices to be added (and Dale would emphasize adding and not replacing) to the world of mission teaching, planning, and strategizing for Muslim women, it is not surprising that this book would be highly recommended. Dale's blend of the academic with the practical makes the book a great reference for information related to understanding Muslim women. I appreciate her heart for meaningful themes that touch on the larger context for many working in the Muslim world (including diaspora areas) and to see those themes within the practical issues of daily life. From cultural realities like honor/shame to the everyday significance of wearing or not wearing the veil, Dale provides an excellent overview of the world of Muslim women.

Women working with Muslims will find Dale's book to be a great resource, for both those new to the field and for long termers processing their own experiences and conversations. Personally, I found the first section on culture and texts to be more helpful than the everyday life, probably because the focus is on what is common to all Muslims to some degree. Her examples from her cultural work contexts were good but not always comparable to my own. I think men would also benefit from reading it – many of Dale's thoughts on women reveal truths relevant to working with men and the Muslim worldview in general. One specific mission strategy Dale draws attention to is our team plans to reach heads of household, while failing to recognize that often it is the women who have the main influence within a home or over their children.

The Hagar Heritage

Many times, my Muslim friends have asked me whether God really hears their prayers or cares about their daily concerns or problems. They often feel their value is not much greater than that of the animals in their barns. They desperately need to know God loves them and does indeed hear and see them. Hagar's story is one they can relate to on many levels.

In her conclusion, Moyra Dale has us look at what we know about Hagar from Islamic and biblical texts. Her role as the mother of Ishmael is obvious, but Hagar's story has deeper points to draw out. In her most vulnerable moments, when she was powerless and alone with her young son, the Lord meets Hagar in the desert (twice). In her story, he is the God who sees and hears her oppression, rejection, struggles, and helplessness in the face of cultural patterns. The God who provides and blesses meets her in her moment of need. "Hagar invites women, whatever the cultural attitudes that they encounter, to take up their role as co-image bearers of the Divine, called into relationship with God" (224).

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