

ARTICLE

## Constructive Problematizing Dialogue: A New Model for Abrahamic Exchange

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### Abstract

Interreligious exchange, particularly within the Abrahamic family, often risks three pitfalls: First, Harmonization, where interlocutors assimilate characteristics of other religions to that of their own. Second, Doctrinal Avoidance, where issues of belief are omitted for fear of conflict. Third, an inability to form relationship bonds quickly enough to warrant deeper exchange. To address these issues of exchange, this essay proposes the Constructive Problematizing Method, suggesting a typology of shared scriptural characters for conversation in a Scriptural Reasoning format. Using this typology, interlocutors can explore the nuances of their traditions with varying degrees of conflict engagement based upon desired outcomes for the exchange. The result is a means of dialogue that centralizes religious differences in hopes that such differences, rather than commonalities, may become the means for interreligious cooperation and affection.

### Keywords

Scriptural Reasoning, Comparative Theology, Abrahamic, John Kaltner, conflict, characters, dialogue

### A Case for Character-Based Dialogue as a Means of Constructive Problematizing

In the Spring of 2022, I had the privilege of facilitating a session of Scriptural Reasoning (SR)—a methodology to be discussed at length

later in this article—on the campus of Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. About fifty participants were present, largely Christian seminarians, with a healthy representation of Muslims, and a smattering of Jewish participants. During this session, excerpts from the Tanakh, the Christian New Testament, and the Qur’an were communally discussed and explored, as is typical for most SR sessions. Here, participants had the opportunity to be guests in the scriptures of their Abrahamic interlocutors. It was a thoughtful discussion, marked by civility, enthusiasm, compassion, and interest, all the qualities of a successful exchange.

Following that conversation, I spoke with several participants about their experience. While no one denied the cordiality of the evening, for many, several key factors seemed to be absent. First, participants noticed that those outside the discussed faith tradition seemed to be doing a kind of scriptural harmonization, meaning that participants were taking a text from outside their tradition and assimilating its meaning into their own theological framework.<sup>1</sup> The result was a kind of misrepresentation of the discussed scripture’s parent tradition as looked upon through the lens of another participant’s differing faith tradition and practice.

Second, in conversation with a colleague, I realized there was significant apprehension in the room concerning the level of honesty and transparency that a participant would be willing to risk for fear of dialogic transgression. This colleague, a Palestinian Christian, expressed reticence around expressing a high Christology of Jesus when discussing an excerpt from the Gospel of Matthew. His context had taught him that such assertions in the presence of Jews and Muslims were not only inhospitable; they were dangerous.

These concerns are by no means isolated. Authentic interreligious discourse is often hindered by a two-fold problem: harmonization and doctrinal avoidance. While interreligious theorists such as Leonard Swindler and Catherine Cornille have contributed much with their frameworks for interreligious dialogue, their work focuses largely on the spirit one brings to dialogue, as well as the protocol for civil engagement within the encounter.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Catherine Cornille gestures to this phenomenon as a symptom of “The Problem of Hegemony” or the “instrumentalization or domestication of the other religion for one’s own religious purpose.” See Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020), 104–108.

2 See, for instance, Leonard Swindler’s “Dialogue Principles,” versions of which have been published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* since 1978 (<https://dialogueinstitute.org/>); or Catherine Cornille’s “Conditions for Inter-Religious

Less attention is given to the actual programmed content of interreligious dialogue and its capacity to aid as pedagogical tools in fostering genuine exchange.<sup>3</sup>

This essay strives to contribute a pragmatic solution to help fill a programmatic void within interreligious dialogue. Utilizing a taxonomy of my own creation, based upon my own experience within interreligious conversations and the methods used to frame dialogue, I craft a methodology of Abrahamic dialogue that holds contestation at the center in order to foster reconciliation and understanding among religious interlocutors. In this essay, I assert that the key to constructive interreligious dialogue is thoughtful engagement of fundamental hermeneutic differences within the zone of proximal development.<sup>4</sup> This is a methodology I refer to as Constructive Problematizing Dialogue. I further assert that the most effective means of engaging with these differences is through Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue. Whereas Thematic-Based Interreligious Dialogue focuses on ideas or themes shared within the text, Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue focuses on characters as they are represented in the respective scriptures of the Abrahamic traditions. This essay argues that, although the thematic approach has its value and can be geared toward Constructive Problematizing Dialogue, the character-based methodology is predisposed to bring interlocutors into a place of revelatory tension.

*“Who do you say that I am?”—a Biblical Inquiry*

For a primary example to illustrate the inherent potency of Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue, we turn to the figure of Jesus. Jesus will be discussed later, not only as a specific type of scriptural figure, but also as a point of departure for Constructive Problematizing Dialogue. For now, it will suffice to feature Jesus as a way of directly addressing the apprehensions of my

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Dialogue,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2013), 20–33.

- 3 A significant exception to this is found in Cornille’s *Meaning and Method*, where she describes the different kinds of learning within comparative theology and identifies, in different language, similar side effects to religious dialogue that I describe in this article. Cornille still, however, does not offer programmable solutions to these issues and reflects on them philosophically rather than pragmatically (see pages 114–141 in particular).
- 4 Zone of proximal development (ZPD) was popularized by early twentieth-century psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. For a summary of ZPD and Scaffolding theory, see <https://www.simplypsychology.org/zone-of-proximal-development.html>.

Palestinian colleague, exploring how Jesus is presented within each of the three Abrahamic spheres.

In the Western Christian liturgical calendar, January 18<sup>th</sup> marks the feast of the Confession of St. Peter. This biblical event is recorded in each of the synoptic Gospels. Mark, commonly regarded as the earliest of the synoptics, details the event thusly:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him (Mark 8:27–30 NRSVUE).

Whether anyone intended it, be it Jesus, St. Peter, or St. Mark, this passage illustrates an early example of Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue. True, and important to remember, everyone featured is a committed Second Temple Jew. Christianity, according to Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin, would not crystallize as its own separate religion until as late as the fourth century with the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople.<sup>5</sup> Still, this pericope provides the groundwork for what would eventually become defining doctrinal differences between Christianity and Judaism.

In asking “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus is asking an initially intrareligious question. He is asking how his ministry fits within the Jewish context. The disciples respond by bringing up figures from their recent (John the Baptist) and distant (Elijah) past in attempts to make theological statements on the nature of Jesus. However, Catholic scholars John R. Donahue, S.J. and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. note that “while there is some truth in each of these... identifications, there is [according to St. Mark] much more to Jesus’s identity than any one of them conveys.”<sup>6</sup> It is not until

5 Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels: The Story of the Jewish Christ* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 13. Boyarin’s claim is one of many concerning the Jewish-Christian “parting of the ways,” although such a summary is beyond the scope and focus of this essay. For a survey of this topic, see Kim Doosuk, “The Parting of the Way: A survey of the Relationship between Jews and Christians in the First and Second Centuries,” *Themelios*, 46 no. 1 (2021), 79–98.

6 John R. Donahue, SJ and Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, “The Gospel of Mark,” *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington, SJ (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 260.

St. Peter asserts that Jesus is in fact “the Messiah” that St. Mark’s assertion has been made. St. Matthew’s rendering of St. Peter’s Confession offers additional layers to consider:

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that *the Son of Man* is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the *Son of the living God.*” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:13–19 NRSV).

Here, additional figures beyond John the Baptist, Elijah, and the prophets are brought into the dialogue to further explain Jesus’ status. First, St. Matthew (through Jesus’ self-identification) links Jesus to “The Son of Man.” Peter, upon responding, names Jesus as “the Son of the living God.” Boyarin explains, at great length, that “‘Son of God’ referred to the King of Israel, the earthly king of David’s seat, while ‘Son of Man’ referred to a heavenly figure,” especially as described in the seventh chapter of the book of Daniel.<sup>7</sup> Assigning these two preconceived titles/characters to Jesus solidifies St. Matthew’s assertion that Jesus is the Christ, both human and divine. While Boyarin asserts that all of these labels for Jesus are still within strictly Jewish terms, at the same time it is the naming of *Jesus* as the Son of God/Man that forms the crux of what would become the Jewish/Christian divide. Simply put, those who would become Christians would name Jesus as the Son of God/Man, and post-second temple Jews would not.<sup>8</sup> Already, in this passage from a single faith tradition, character-based dialogue reveals problematizing interreligious differences.

7 Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels*, 26. For a survey regarding the Son of Man, Boyarin recommends Delbert Royce Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

8 Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels*, 70.

*“Who did you say that you are?”—a Qur’anic Response*

Islam’s emergence in the 7<sup>th</sup> century brings a third voice to the question of the nature and personhood of Jesus. John Kaltner notes “the Islamic understanding of Jesus presents some unique theological and interreligious challenges because the Qur’an does something regarding him that it does not do in its interpretation of Hebrew Bible Characters and stories—it flatly denies central Christian beliefs about Jesus.”<sup>9</sup> This is seen in several locations within the Qur’an, most notably in a setting of dialogue between Allah (God) and ‘Īsā (Jesus):

When God says, “Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people, ‘Take me and my mother as two gods alongside God?’”<sup>10</sup> He [‘Īsā] will say, “May You be exalted! I would never say what I had no right to say—if I had said any such thing You would have known it: You know all that is within me, though I do not know what is within You, You alone have full knowledge of things unseen—I told them only what you commanded me to: ‘worship God, my Lord and your Lord.’ I was a witness over them during my time among them. Ever since You took my soul, You alone have been the watcher over them: You are witness to all things” (Q 5:116–17).<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere, the Qur’an details the consequences for those who make a confession like that of St. Peter:

Those who say, “God is the Messiah,<sup>12</sup> son of Mary,” have defied the truth. The Messiah himself said, “Children of

9 John Kaltner and Christopher G. Frechette, *How the Qur’an Interprets the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 2020), 11.

10 Kaltner points out that “this passage appears to claim that Christians worship Mary/Maryam as a deity and that they consider her to be a part of the Trinity;” and that this belief is not reflected in “mainstream Christian theology.”

11 All Qur’an verses, unless otherwise noted, are from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem’s translation, Oxford University Press, 2016.

12 Kaltner notes that this understanding of Messiah may not be synonymous with either the Jewish or Christian understanding of the term. According to Kaltner, “The Qur’an does not provide a description of the role of the Messiah/al-Masīh, and, given the fact that the designation is used only for Jesus/‘Īsā, it is probable that the title was adopted due to Christian usage of it without full understanding of its meaning.” See *The Bible and the Qur’an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 122–23.

Israel, worship God my Lord and your Lord.” If anyone associates others with God, God will forbid him from the Garden, and Hell will be his home. No one will help [such] evildoers (Q 5:72).

Kaltner is quick to advocate for hermeneutic goodwill:

Christians must not jump to the wrong conclusions about why the Qur’an rejects key elements of their faith. Such rejection does not imply animosity or disrespect for Christianity, but simply reflects the way Islam understands monotheism, which is so central to its system of belief. Muslims believe that God is one, and anything that violates the divine unity (*tawḥīd*) is considered an example of sin of the association (*shirk*) of something in the created world with the uncreated nature of God. The Qur’an teaches that belief in the divinity of Jesus is an example of such an association and therefore a violation of God’s oneness.<sup>13</sup>

Who, then, is ʿĪsā according to the Qur’an? Kaltner believes that, in summary, ʿĪsā’s own first words as an infant leave little room for confusion:

[Jesus] said: “I am a servant of God. He has granted me the Scripture; made me a prophet; made me blessed wherever I may be. He commanded me to pray, to give alms as long as I live, to cherish my mother. He did not make me domineering or graceless. Peace was on me the day I was born, and will be on the day I die and the day I am raised to life again.”<sup>14</sup> Such was Jesus, son of Mary (Q 19: 30–34).

Considering that no shortage of ink or blood has been spilled over these scriptural differences, it is evident that a question as simple as “Who do you say that I am?” begets substantial theological and sociological ramifications.

13 Kaltner, *How the Qur’an Interprets the Bible*, 23.

14 Resurrection here refers to the Islamic concept of communal resurrection of the dead, and not the Christian doctrine of Christ’s particular resurrection.

*Moving towards a Constructive Problematizing Method*

The question remains: how can such stark fundamental differences become constructive means of dialogue? The example of Jesus/‘Īsā illustrates several important interreligious concepts. First, it is a keen illustration of the revelatory power that Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue possesses. Within even just a brief excursus, one can see how conversation surrounding a figure such as, but not limited to, Jesus prompts discussion of philosophy, theology, history, and the list goes on. Second, it reveals the stakes of engaging in dialogue in the first place, as the figure of Jesus/‘Īsā, regardless of Abrahamic affiliation, cuts to the core of religious identity forged through centuries of contestation. Lastly, connected to the stakes, is the removal of the ability to “harmonize” interpretations. Thematic-Based Interreligious Dialogue, dialogue that focuses on images or ideas within scripture, certainly has the potential to offer equally rich exchange. However, lest the themes be intentionally problematized (ethical issues, doctrinal issues), there remains more room for scriptural harmonization in which fundamental differences are sidestepped in favor of solely highlighting religious compatibility.

I have begun this essay by utilizing a brief excursus to respond to a specific dialogic dilemma (Christology) and to offer a look into the natural disposition of Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue as a breeding ground for Constructive Problematizing Dialogue. Next, I delve into the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue, citing methodologies from Scriptural Reasoning, comparative theology, and educational neuroscience. After articulating these values and foundations, I build from the work of John Kaltner, taking his writings on Biblical-Quranic characters and arranging them in a pedagogical typology for structuring dialogue based upon the values of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue. I then examine a single character from a specific category of that typology to illustrate the dialogic avenues available once Constructive Problematizing Dialogue is applied. In presenting this method, I argue that the key to truly profitable Abrahamic dialogue that engages both theologically and sociologically is the intentional and nuanced centering of fundamental religious difference.

**Constructive Problematizing Dialogue**

At the onset of this essay I identified two primary issues that vex Abrahamic dialogue, particularly at the non-academic discursive level. I named these

issues Harmonization and Doctrinal Avoidance. Here, we will explore each issue in depth.

*A Soteriology of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue*

*Harmonization* (my own term) is a form of assimilation in which a participant engaging with a text or concept outside of their own religious traditions misrepresents the parent tradition's assertion, imposing instead their own hermeneutical framework upon another religion. Simply put, in the act of harmonization, a well-meaning interlocutor softens religious uniqueness in favor of a constructed commonality. Such an impulse may come from a natural fear of difference and a subconscious desire to minimize difference to avoid conflict. Harmonization may also stem from a sort of misplaced empathy as participants venture to reach out in compassion and understanding but only succeed in reaching into themselves. Or, to offer a third option, Harmonization may be symptomatic of a liberal understanding of religious pluralism. Marianne Moyaert credits much of this understanding to the work of philosopher John Hick. According to Moyaert, Hick "claims that all religions are historically and culturally determined interpretations of the ineffable Real."<sup>15</sup> In this view, "pluralism presupposes unity in diversity," however this view "all too often ends up undermining particular religious traditions."<sup>16</sup>

Harmonization should not be confused with other dialogic endeavors. The work of Francis Clooney, SJ in comparative theology makes a similar move of engaging with another tradition and then seeing what is revealed in one's own religious tradition because of the exchange.<sup>17</sup> As Michael Barnes describes, "[In comparative theology] one's own tradition is read with proper attention to the defining doctrines of the tradition but also with an awareness of how analogous themes and ideas are conceived and ordered by the other."<sup>18</sup> Harmonization might also be confused with "holy envy," as posited by Krister Stendahl, in which a participant finds "that which is beautiful and

15 Marianne Moyaert, "Scriptural Reasoning as Inter-Religious Dialogue" in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2013), 65.

16 Moyaert, "Scriptural Reasoning," 65.

17 For an overview, see Francis X. Clooney, SJ, "Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue" in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Interreligious Dialogue*, 51–63.

18 Michael Barnes, "Reading Other Religious Texts: Intratextuality and the Logic of Scripture" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46, no. 3 (2011): 392.

moving within the religion of the other”<sup>19</sup> and finds themselves longing for it in their own faith. However, both comparative theology and holy envy evade the pitfall of harmonization, each requiring an intimate familiarity of the uniqueness of each religion as distinct from one’s own. Where Clooney and Stendahl acknowledge distinction, harmonization seeks to nullify it.

This should not, however, disregard the inevitability and usefulness of a religious hermeneutic beyond that of the scripture’s parent tradition. Moyaert details how in SR,

Jews, Christians, and Muslims can read and discuss one another’s texts on an equal basis without having to bracket their own faith commitments. Thus, for example, Jews are not the only ones who can make statements about the (final) meaning of a text from the Tanakh. Every text is read, studied, and critiqued inter-religiously. There is no room here for possessive claims and exclusivist demands.<sup>20</sup>

Harmonization, then, is different from viewing a different scripture through your own eyes. It is assuming that the way you view scripture is the equivalent of how the parent tradition views their own text.

*Doctrinal Avoidance* refers to the sensation of having to hide elements of one’s religious self within interreligious dialogue. Reasons for this are plentiful. Historical interreligious trauma, to say nothing of current events, creates justifiable tension around self-disclosure. The location of the dialogue may also feed into this, be it in a house of worship, academic setting, or, to think more broadly, within cultures that prioritize a certain religious ideology or even secularity. Scripture specifically, as David Ford notes, carries particularly high stakes in interreligious discourse:

The Tanakh, the Bible and the Qur’an are the main platforms of those within each tradition who stand against dialogue and in favour of self-protective or aggressive confrontation. Each of these scriptures has texts that can be used to legitimate violence, claims to superiority, blanket condemnations, cruel punishments, suspicions, oppressive morality, and hostility to those who are not believers in God

19 Todd H. Green, *Presumed Guilty: Why We Shouldn’t Ask Muslims to Condemn Terrorism* (Fortress Press, 2018), 166.

20 Moyaert, “Scriptural Reasoning,” 68.

as identified by one's own tradition. Their scriptures are where the particularity of each is evident "warts and all" and have been widely used in polemics between them as well as in attacks on each by secular critics.<sup>21</sup>

Given that "scriptures are usually seen as an insurmountable obstacle to the success of inter-religious dialogue," it is not surprising that the impulse would be to shy away and refrain from self-disclosure within dialogue.<sup>22</sup> However, if Ford is right in saying that "each tradition's scripture is at the heart of its identity," and thus uniquely capable to "not only bring core identities (of each tradition) into conversation, [but] sustain them there,"<sup>23</sup> then the mission of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue is to avoid dilution of these core identities and allow for, to quote Nicholas Adams, "making deep reasonings public," resisting the lure of "closeted" religion.<sup>24</sup>

I will add a third and final problem that Constructive Problematizing Dialogue aims to address. I refer to this phenomenon as the "square one" phenomenon. The logic of "square one" believes that it is only through enduring, lasting, and repeated encounters with interlocutors that depth can be achieved in interreligious conversation. For a certain level of sophistication to be achieved, the participants either need to be of a certain pedigree or the community engaging in dialogue needs to have built a profound level of trust with one another. It is certainly a worthy aspiration that interlocutors have this deep relationship, as it is the hope and aim of any dialogic endeavor to foster relationship and understanding. However, for aspiring dialogue participants who do not have the luxury of time or repetition, episodic dialogue may be the only recourse. In such episodic engagement, oftentimes it feels as though the conversation is starting over repeatedly, or, always at "square one." Constructive Problematizing Dialogue, therefore, aims to bypass this sensation with a pedagogy that centers conflict in an approachable and achievable framework.

In constructing this framework, it is vital to understand the different gifts, or limitations, that each religion brings to dialogue. Ben Quash notes:

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21 David Ford, "An Interfaith Wisdom: Scriptural Reasoning Between Jews, Christians and Muslims" *Modern Theology* 22:3 (2006): 345–46.

22 Moyaert, "Scriptural Reasoning," 71.

23 Ford, "Interfaith Wisdom," 345, 346.

24 Nicholas Adams, "Making Deep Reasonings Public" in *The Promise of Scriptural Reasoning*, ed. David F. Ford and C. C. Pecknold, 41–57 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 54.

Modern, western Christians have a strong internal imperative to find the “right” meaning, the “right” interpretation, and then all to agree on it. This is partly because of an idea...that Christian life is about being nice to each other (and avoiding or eliminating conflict in our relationships), and partly because we have imbibed a very strong modern idea that the meanings of the texts we regard as authoritative should be clear, single and unambiguous... the Jewish tradition... has a sophisticated account of how texts can yield a vast range of meanings, and a robust account of how argument is the best way to make it happen.<sup>25</sup>

Given SR’s history with textual reasoning, which finds its roots in the chavruta style of discourse,<sup>26</sup> Jewish participants may feel right at home in this format (and, in my own experience, be underwhelmed by the learning curve necessary for the other religions). Constructive Problematizing Dialogue strives to “level the playing field,” establishing a culture and pedagogy unto itself that fosters the skills for participants to engage without the prerequisite of time, study, or repetition.

#### *Philosophy and Commitment of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue*

The goal of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue (CPD) is to intentionally bring interlocutors into a place of ideological discomfort, to “problematize,” as it were, in order to encourage the skill building of conflict engagement. Thus, in addition to SR, CPD resources philosophical aspects of comparative theology as well as pedagogical techniques as informed by the fields of neuroscience and education.

CPD is principally born out of the philosophy and methodology of SR, particularly SR’s commitment to honoring the distinctiveness between each religion. As Moyaert explains:

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25 Ben Quash, “Deep Calls to Deep: The Practice of Scriptural Reasoning,” 9, The Matheson Trust for the Study of Comparative Religion, <https://www.themathesontrust.org>. Quash groups Muslims broadly in this understanding as well.

26 Moyaert, “Scriptural Reasoning, 68.

Scriptural reasoners believe in the power of serious, deep, collegial, and inter-religious study of texts, the aim of which is not so much to obtain agreement beyond differences, but to make respectful disagreement possible. They believe dialogue is meaningful only when the “core identities” of the three faiths concerned are brought into conversation with one another. Instead of downplaying inter-religious differences, scriptural reasoning even seeks to “articulate and preserve the separate identities of each of the three religions”. Perhaps this rather “conservative” inclination explains why this form of dialogue is attractive to believers who object to the liberal presuppositions that often undergird inter-religious encounters. “Rather than turning aside from [inter-religious] differences in an attempt to preserve some putative peace (not really peace at all), [SR proposes that it] is precisely through exploring these differences together that [Jews, Christians, and Muslims] learn the meaning of [their] profound interdependence.” For them, participating in the interpretation and questioning of the scriptures of another faith tradition does not mean a relativization of their own faith commitment, but forms an incentive to read their own scripture anew, and to understand them anew.<sup>27</sup>

Where CPD and SR part ways, however, is in their text selection. Adams notes how “choosing texts for scriptural reasoning is in fact something that is not as controlled as one might anticipate, and this is a useful illustration of scriptural reasoning’s general openness to luck.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, by Adams’s description, scriptural reasoning “shows itself shaped more by luck than planning,” and attempts to overly program the texts “would be very much against the spirit of openness to luck and surprises which scriptural reasoning exhibits.”<sup>29</sup> While CPD admires the spontaneity of honest exchange that SR upholds, this “openness to luck and surprise” also leaves ample room for the challenges that CPD hopes to combat.

Turning now to comparative theology, we have already briefly discussed the work of Francis Clooney, SJ. By Clooney’s own estimation, comparative theology and SR are two “discipline(s) that [have] both reading and

27 Moyaert, “Scriptural Reasoning,” 65.

28 Adams, “Making Deep Reasonings Public,” 47.

29 Adams, “Making Deep Reasonings Public,” 48.

dialogical features.”<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, Clooney is adamant that the two fields are different, as comparative theology maintains a “minimized sociality” of learning as compared to SR.<sup>31</sup> For comparative theology, “there are no longer settled groups of interlocutors, neatly sorted out on either side by religious identification,” and as a result “boundaries are ideally blurred, echoes and references multiplied, lineages interwoven.”<sup>32</sup> I believe this insistence of differentiation on Clooney’s part is a missed opportunity. Where theological conclusions and assertions generally go beyond the scope of SR, they are precisely where comparative theology thrives. Through CPD, readings can be chosen with an eye on theological ramifications, allowing theological differences to become transformative forces in the experience of the conversation partners. Conversely, comparative theology runs the risk of infiltration and near colonization as it seeks to “blur the boundaries” between religious “others.”<sup>33</sup> That is precisely where SR offers remedy, centering the witness, experience, and identity of each conversation partner rather than encouraging the siloed departure-and-return experience of comparative theology. CPD aims to be the meeting place of these rich interreligious disciplines, at times extending them beyond their limitations and at others offering thoughtful restraint.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, we turn to neuroscience and educational pedagogy. In her book, *Our Brains at War*, Mari Fitzduff goes into extensive detail on the neurological processes that influence human proclivities towards conflict. Though she focuses predominantly on violent conflict, her work is invaluable in crafting peacebuilding programming. As Fitzduff details, we are neurologically predisposed to “us” versus “them” schemas in social navigation. It is no secret that religion constitutes a monumental differentiator within this binary, and Fitzduff herself notes how “even the apparently smallest of social, historical, or theological differences, such as those between Sunni or Shia Muslims, can and do provide a framework for violent social conflict in many parts of the world.”<sup>34</sup> Waxing biblical, Fitzduff comments how “one’s pronunciation of a particular word can in many places be enough of a marker to kill or be killed” and how “in biblical times, the Gileadites would test the Ephraimites to pronounce a

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30 Clooney, “Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 57.

31 Clooney, “Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 57.

32 Clooney, “Comparative Theology and Inter-Religious Dialogue,” 58.

33 See Cornille, *Meaning and Method*.

34 Mari Fitzduff, *Our Brains at War: The Neuroscience of Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 37.

word correctly as the only way to tell their enemy from their friend (Judges 12:6).”<sup>35</sup>

Centuries of interreligious strife have also taken their neurological toll. Dialogic efforts between the Abrahamic traditions alone will quickly collide into the traumatic epigenetics (effects of the environment on genes) and collective memories of Crusades, the Holocaust, and myriads of other belligerent tragedies in our shared history to say nothing of current events.<sup>36</sup> Between a natural disposition toward “othering” and compounded trauma, neurological problems demand neurologically sensitive solutions.

This is where CPD can provide such solutions. If we hold that conflict engagement is in fact a “skill,” then certain criteria are necessary for growth and certain strategies can be resourced to meet those criteria. To complement Fitzduff’s neurological exploration, I commend the work of Daniel Coyle found in *The Talent Code*. In this piece, Coyle travels the world, seeing how some of the most skilled practitioners in a variety of fields are trained. Articulating that what we perceive as skill is neurologically actualized through Myelin (fatty tissue that surrounds neurological connections) growth within the brain, Coyle asserts three principal attributes that foster this production, namely: Ignition; Expert Coaching; Deep Practice.<sup>37</sup> Such neurology offers fascinating opportunities for interdisciplinary consultation when designing occasions for exchange. In conjunction with pedagogical methods to most efficiently activate skill building, a comprehensive understanding of the neurology of conflict could change the entire playing field of crisis engagement within interreligious dialogue. CPD attempts to do just that. Specifically, it brings participants into what Coyle terms “deep practice” by placing them well into the zone of proximal development, such that the challenge is just enough that participants feel an element of stress, but not so much that frustration outweighs determination. CPD offers the necessary scaffolding to allow conversation partners to intentionally engage with conflict, avoiding harmonization and doctrinal avoidance, such that neurological adjustments can occur to build the skills necessary for conflict engagement.

35 Fitzduff, *Our Brains at War*, 37.

36 By *epigenetics* is meant effects of the environment on genes; by *collective memory*, “widely shared knowledge of past social events that are collectively constructed through communicative social interactions, which can have a significant impact on our behaviour, feelings, and thoughts.” Fitzduff, *Our Brains at War*, 21, 50.

37 Daniel Coyle, *The Talent Code* (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), 32.

*On Thematic-Based Interreligious Dialogue*

Before beginning to apply this methodology, a quick word regarding Thematic-Based Interreligious Dialogue. Up to this point, CPD has held a character-based approach as the chief locus of problematizing. Having now explained the logic behind CPD, it should be apparent (along with my excursus at the beginning of this essay) that Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue inherently brings interlocutors to that zone of proximal development, thus optimizing the “deep practice” that pedagogical neuroscience commends. This is, however, not without its drawbacks. Kaltner himself admits that focusing on Qur’anic characters is only a starting point in accessing “the content and style of the entire Qur’an.”<sup>38</sup> Such a narrow focus, while necessary for deep practice, can hardly represent each scriptural tradition in toto. Can, then, the constructive problematizing endeavor be achieved using themes as a locus rather than characters? A response would certainly be “yes,” but with several caveats. First, generic themes imply a commonality amidst the scriptures, just as Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue does. This baseline commonality is necessary to ensure that a conversation can even take place. However, this commonality is very easily harmonized amidst the religions. Often, if a topic such as “Dreams,” “Fasting,” “Light,” or “Migration” is chosen, each participant feels as though the texts say roughly the same thing trans-scripturally, if but in different ways.<sup>39</sup> Second, themes create very unwieldy categories. A dialogue could be focused on discussing ethical or theological themes within scripture, such as “soteriology” or “eschatology,” but now this over-particularizes the thematic qualifications and assumes that these categories are remotely present amidst other religions. Theological, ethical, and thematic considerations are certainly major categories that are worthy of conversation. CPD dictates, however, that conversation topics be curated such that 1) each religion is able to speak authentically in its own religious language; 2) differences are centralized as to not be harmonized or avoided; and 3) the differences, or commonalities, are not so daunting that the conversation becomes over- or underwhelming.

CPD is born of the very best of the philosophies and methodologies of SR. However, it calls for a pedagogical turn in which materials discussed are programmed in such a way that discussing differences is inevitable and approachable. This scaffolding enables the necessary neurological pathways

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38 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur’an*, 4.

39 See <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/text-packs.html> for examples of such excerpts.

to be formed to equip people to engage with conflict and be able to apply it throughout their life. Such skill building has the capacity to not only improve the quality of interreligious dialogue but will further broaden humanitarian peace efforts by creating a culture of bravery paired with higher thresholds of tolerance and compassion. Let us now see how CPD might be utilized within Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue to structure and optimize Abrahamic Dialogue.

### Developing a Typology for Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue

We began our exploration into constructive problematizing through an illustration of Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue. By focusing on the figure of Jesus, an array of multifaceted considerations—such as theology, history, and literary differences—came into view. One primary difference, however, remained the centerpiece of the excursus. In theological terms, this might be referred to as Christology. However, more broadly, and using an etic description as opposed to a term emic to the Christian theological traditions, this can be understood as Jesus’s function within the narrative. In Christianity writ large, Jesus is the Son of God, the Son of Man, the *logos*, the savior of the world, and a person in the Trinitarian Godhead. In Islam, Jesus is a *rasūl*, a messenger sent by God, and a prophet (*nabī*), but, in all cases, a man like any other.<sup>40</sup> In Judaism, Jesus does not make canon. However, a wide range of Jewish understandings contextualize Jesus as a rabbi, prophet, and messianic figure.<sup>41</sup>

The first move in Constructive Problematizing is to identify a central point of departure for each scriptural character shared among the three Abrahamic traditions. Invariably, this point of departure affects the character’s function within the tradition. Here, I will propose a typology that, for purposes of dialogue, organizes Biblical/Qur’anic characters according to their literary function and point of departure in comparing each scriptural text. The purpose of this typology will eventually be a constructive turn in

40 Abjar Bahkou notes that though the Qur’an also calls ‘Īsā “the Word” (*al-Kalimah*), “the Christian idea of Jesus being the word of God is totally rejected by Islam.” See Abjar Bahkou, “The Islamic Claim of Jesus and the Christian Response,” *Concordia Journal*, 42, no 4 (2016): 322–31.

41 For conversation about Jewish perspectives of Jesus, see Zev Garber, *The Jewish Jesus: Revelation, Reflection, Reclamation* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011).

which each type is utilized for different objectives within dialogue. For now, the task ahead is establishing a single, concise departure for each character.

### *The Work of John Kaltner*

As a cornerstone of this endeavor, I will be principally engaging the scholarship of John Kaltner, a preeminent scholar in this comparative work. His *The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (2018), co-authored with Younus Y. Mirza, details each of the characters that are shared between the Biblical and Qur'anic traditions. In each chapter, Kaltner and Mirza offer thorough descriptions of each character depending on their scriptural context. For some, the differences are subtle. In others, the variations are poignant and potentially jarring. Here, I summarize and reflect upon Kaltner's scholarship, distilling his character overviews into a typology for use in CPD.

A quick word of consideration regarding Kaltner's approach: much of Kaltner's work aims to enable non-Muslim readers to engage with the Qur'an. When speaking about scripture, Kaltner and Mirza organize character realizations into two scriptural streams: Biblical and Qur'anic. They additionally categorize certain materials, such as Jewish Midrash, Christian non-canonical Gospels (such as the Gospel of Thomas or the Protoevangelium of James), and Islamic "Life of the Prophets" literature, as extra-scriptural. It is worth noting the risk factors in this Biblical/Qur'anic dichotomy. Referring to a single stream as "Biblical" risks anachronism. There are many "biblical" characters, such as Jesus, that are not biblically canonical within Jewish tradition. Kaltner and Mirza's delineation risks furthering a Judeo-Christian mythos that is not inherently constructive in Abrahamic dialogue, conveying an implicit supersessionism for Christian-Jewish relations and a "two-against-one" mentality in relation to Muslims. Given, however, that this is the structure that Kaltner uses in the breadth of his work, we will treat this dichotomy (Bible/Qur'an) as a shorthand worthy of interrogation and elaboration. I will nuance Kaltner and Mirza's category of "Bible" by further distinguishing the "Jewish Canon" and the "Christian Canon" whenever possible, honoring Christianity's adherence to the Hebrew scriptures without belittling Judaism's distinct scriptural identity. Later, I will prioritize separating out the three unique voices of each tradition more fully.

*Typology Overview*

My proposed typology (Figure 1) builds upon Kaltner's scholarship by taking the characters featured in *The Bible and the Qur'an* and organizing them into three principal categories based upon character *function*. While I will argue why certain characters belong in the categories they have been assigned, there is certainly room for interpretation and amendment. However, using this notion of function triggers varying levels of theological and contextual problematizing, aiding in the constructive problematizing endeavor.

Category 1 characters maintain a similar function in both the Bible and the Qur'an. In these texts, though there may well be variation and differing theological implications, their overall role and purpose in either scripture remains essentially the same. Category 2 characters, in contrast, are characters *exclusive* to each tradition. In this category, there is little to no room for common ground between the scriptural traditions.<sup>42</sup> Category 3 returns to shared characters; however, in this case, their function within their narratives have radically changed.<sup>43</sup> Characters in bold have the capacity to span several categories depending upon desired usage.

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42 This category is complicated by the status of non-Qur'anic scripture in Islamic tradition. Even if a character is not mentioned in the Qur'an by name, that character may still be considered part of the Islamic tradition as long as it does not contradict the Qur'an. Mirza offers a succinct explanation of the history and controversy of the *isrā'īlyāt* tradition in "Ismael as Abraham's Sacrifice: Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathīr on the Intended Victim", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 2013, Vol. 24, No. 3), 279–83. Similarly, there are a number of characters in the Qur'an that may or may not have Biblical parallels, such as Dhū al-Kifl (Q 38:48), who Kaltner notes has been paired with a number of Biblical counterparts (see John Kaltner and Younus Y. Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an* (London: T & T Clark, 2018), 42.

43 Kaltner notes that "In general, the Qur'an presents the biblical figures in a way that conforms to Islamic beliefs and practices." (Kaltner, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 4). In this sense, all the Biblical characters have undergone some sort of function change, as their Qur'anic function serves to articulate and depict faithful Muslim life. However, even considering this, some functional shifts are more dramatic than others.

Figure 1\*

| Category 1  | Category 2  | Category 3   |
|---|---|--|
| <p><b>Aaron/Hārūn</b><br/>                     Abraham/Ibrāhīm<br/>                     Adam/Ādam<br/>                     Cain/Qābil and Abel/Hābīl<br/>                     Elijah/Ilyās<br/>                     Eve/Hawwā'<br/>                     Gabriel/Jibrīl<br/>                     God<br/>                     Gog/Ya'jūj and Magog/Ma'jūj<br/> <b>Isaac/Ishaq</b><br/>                     Jacob/Ya'qūb<br/>                     Job/Ayyūb<br/>                     John/Yahyā<br/>                     Jonah/Yūnus<br/>                     Lot/Lūṭ<br/> <b>Mary/Maryam</b><br/>                     Moses/Mūsā<br/> <b>Satan/Shayṭan</b></p> | <p>Hārūt and Mārūt (Q)<br/>                     Malik (Q)<br/>                     Specific Apostles (NT)<br/>                     Dhū al-Qarnayn (Q)<br/>                     Various Prophets (HB)<br/> <b>Iblīs (Q)</b><br/>                     Jinn (Q)<br/>                     Hūd (Q)<br/>                     Šālīḥ (Q)<br/>                     Shu'ayb (Q)<br/>                     Luqman (Q)</p> | <p><b>Aaron/Hārūn</b><br/>                     David/Dāwūd<br/>                     Ezra/'Uzayr<br/>                     Goliath/Jālūt<br/>                     Haman/Hāmān<br/> <b>Isaac/Ishaq</b><br/>                     Ishmael/Ismā'īl<br/>                     Jesus/'Isā<br/>                     Joseph/Yūsuf<br/>                     Potiphar's Wife (HB)/Pharaoh's wife (Q)<br/>                     Korah/Qārūn<br/>                     Lot's/Lūṭ's wife<br/> <b>Mary/Maryam</b><br/>                     Moses's/Mūsā's Mother<br/>                     Noah/Nūḥ<br/>                     Pharaoh/Fir'awn<br/>                     Pharaoh's/Fir'awn's Family<br/>                     Queen of Sheba<br/> <b>Satan/Shayṭan</b><br/>                     Saul/Ṭālūt<br/>                     Solomon/Sulaymān<br/>                     Zechariah/Zakarīyā</p> |

\*Characters in bold have the capacity to span several categories depending upon desired usage.

*Category 1: Consistent Literary Function*

We begin by exploring Category 1, which is home to some of the most illustrious Biblical/Qur'anic figures. The advantage of this category is that, by and large, there is a copious amount of textual information found within both scriptures. In this first category of characters, the point of departure between traditions is delayed and the similarities are frontloaded. And, even as the function of each character remains relatively unchanged, the differences are enough to warrant considerable theological discussion. Let us briefly focus on Abraham/Ibrāhīm as an exemplar of this category.

For many reasons, Abraham/Ibrāhīm is a logical place to begin any Abrahamic character exploration. Kaltner notes how “The Qur’an text shares a great deal with the Genesis account [of Abraham] in terms of their similar cast of characters and common plot outline.”<sup>44</sup> Many similar stories

44 John Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur’an for Bible Readers* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 103.

are found in both texts.<sup>45</sup> However, the Qur'an lacks the sense of chronology found in the biblical account.<sup>46</sup>

In Hebrew, the name Abraham means “father of a multitude.” This pairs with Abraham’s function within the Hebrew Bible as the progenitor of the covenant people of Israel. The same could be said of Ibrāhīm, a forerunner in a chain of revelation that acts as a frequent refrain throughout the Qur'an. Like his Biblical counterpart, Ibrāhīm acts as a pioneer of the faith, and, as Kaltner notes, “Muhammad is repeatedly told in the Qur'an that he should follow the ‘religion of Abraham/Ibrāhīm.’”<sup>47</sup>

Rather than analyze each difference between the realizations, we will instead focus on the point of departure. In the case of Abraham/Ibrāhīm, this point of departure centers around the nature of his covenant with God. The biblical account offers several distinct narratives in which God establishes a covenant with Abraham. Here is its rendering in Genesis 17:

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. <sup>2</sup>And I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous.” <sup>3</sup>Then Abram fell on his face, and God said to him, <sup>4</sup>“As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall

45 “Abraham/ leaves behind his family and homeland to journey to a new land (19:48–50; 21:70–71; see also Gen 12:1–6), where he sets up a shrine for worship (2:124–29; see also Gen 12:8; 13:18). God instructs Abraham/Ibrāhīm to enact an unusual ritual that involves the division of animals and/or birds into parts (2:260; cf. Gen. 15:7–11). In both texts, Abraham/Ibrāhīm is visited by messengers sent from God who tell him that he and his wife will have a son, and then the messengers announce their plan to destroy the city where Lot/Lūt is living (11:74–76; see also Gen 51:24–37 and Gen. 18:20–33). Prior to the city’s destruction, Abraham/Ibrāhīm makes a plea to God in an effort to save Lot/Lūt’s people (11:74–76; see also Gen. 18:22–33). Finally, in both the Bible and the Qur'an, Abraham/Ibrāhīm nearly sacrifices his son, but in each case, it turns out to be a test from God and the son is spared (37:99–113; see also Gen. 22:1–19).” Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 12.

46 A trend true for most of the characters in the Qur'an.

47 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 11. See also Q 16:123 and Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac*, 119 for treatment of Ibrāhīm as a forerunner of the prophet Muhammad. Kaltner notes that this handling of Ibrāhīm indicates another key Qur'anic trend, “whereby the lives of prominent figures of the past are presented in ways that support and validate Muhammad’s claim to be a prophet.” Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*. This will be a recurring theme in examining these characters, regardless of placement in the typology.

be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup>No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup>I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. <sup>8</sup>And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding, and I will be their God” (Gen 17:1–8).

In Genesis, Abraham’s covenant is characterized by “the election of Israel as a chosen people” of God’s covenant “and the promise of the land as a visible sign of that covenant.”<sup>48</sup> Compare this to the Qur’an’s response to such claims.

Children of Israel, remember how I blessed you and favored you over other people, and beware a Day when no soul can stand in for another. No compensation will be accepted from it, nor intercession be of use to it, nor will anyone be helped. When Abraham’s Lord tested him with certain commandments, which he fulfilled, He said “I will make you a leader of people.” Abraham asked “And will You make leaders from my descendants too?” God answered, “My pledge does not hold for those who do evil” (Q 2:122–24).

In analyzing this passage, Kaltner notes Ibrāhīm can be understood as more of a “universal ancestor” rather than the forerunner of a particular group of people, given that “Islam maintains that all people are born Muslims.”<sup>49</sup>

This differing notion of “covenant,” then, becomes a defining point of departure for all three Abrahamic faiths.<sup>50</sup> Abraham is a literal ancestor for Jews; a spiritual one as Gentiles are “grafted onto the vine” of the covenant

48 Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac*, 118.

49 Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac*, 104.

50 As with terms such as *ʿĪsā* as “the word” and “the messiah,” the Qur’an uses the word “covenant” but with different theological meanings than found in the Bible. See Il Joo Kong, “Textual and Contextual Reading of Biblical Abraham and the Qur’anic *ʿIbrāhīm*” in *Prophets in the Qur’ān and the Bible*, edited by Daniel S. Baeq and Sam Kim (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2022), 54.

(see Romans 11); and a universal ancestor in Islam. What remains constant, however, is Abraham’s function as a progenitor of a faith, placing him squarely in Category 1.<sup>51</sup>

*Category 2: Narrative Exclusivity*

We now turn to Category 2, the opposite of Category 1. Category 2 consists of characters either found in the Qur’an that are not present in the Bible (such as prophets like Hūd, Šālīh, and Shu’ayb or characters such as Luqman), or characters not elaborated upon in the Qur’an.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the characters unto themselves are points of departure, even if they are broadly referenced trans-scripturally.

One challenge within this category is the lack of scriptural resources about them. Many of these particular characters are mentioned briefly or appear only in a list of names within the Qur’an.<sup>53</sup> Some characters, despite their brevity, offer fascinating windows into scriptural historical inclusion, such as Dhū al-Qarnayn (Q 18:83-98), “who is generally held to be Alexander the Great.”<sup>54</sup> Scarcity of scriptural reference, therefore, does not imply lack of theological intrigue.

This category is far too wide to comprehensively represent every character within it. Instead, we will briefly explore a single character group, jinn—non-biblical figures featured in the Qur’an whose presence in Arab culture predates their inclusion in Islam.<sup>55</sup> According to Kaltner and Mirza, jinn are “invisible creatures, often associated with parts of the natural world, who [interact] with humans in both positive and negative ways.”<sup>56</sup> Amira El-Zein beautifully describes the contrasting and yet interwoven relationship between humans and jinn in the Qur’an:

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51 Kaltner argues a further function of Ibrāhīm, calling him “The Critic of Polytheism” and the “Champion of Monotheism.” See Kaltner, *How the Qur’an Interprets the Bible*, 85–89. While these functions serve a purpose distinct to Islam’s mission of radical monotheism, they harmonize Abraham’s commitment to the God of Israel and pair with Midrashic accounts of Abraham’s protests of idolatry (see Bereshit Rabbah, Ch. 8).

52 The Qur’an Sura 31 is named for Luqman, but he is not featured in Kaltner’s work.

53 Though are often elaborated upon in extra-scriptural resources.

54 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur’an*, 56.

55 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur’an*, 89.

56 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur’an*, 89.

In many instances, the Qur'an mentions the elements from which the jinn are composed: "Surely, We created mankind of a clay of mud molded, and the jinn created We before of scorching winds" (Qur'an 15:26–27)...The jinn are subtle and secret beings whose extremely refined elements veil them from us, fire being a pure energy, and wind being the vital breath of the universe, the vehicle of light par excellence and of the invisible; it is that which we feel around us without being able to touch, almost an intelligent power that appears to direct things.<sup>57</sup>

Although the jinn are unique to Islam within Abrahamic dialogue, any conversation focused on jinn will inevitably result in the discussion of other similar categories of Biblical creatures such as angels and demons. Indeed, the most famous of these figures is Iblīs, the enemy of humanity. An argument could be made for Iblīs's inclusion in a different category within the typology, for "prior to his refusal to bow down to the first human he was known as Iblīs, but after refusing to submit to the divine will he became Satan/Shayṭān."<sup>58</sup> This is further complicated by Iblīs's presence as the tempter in the creation narratives within the Qur'an, reconciling both Jewish and Christian understandings of the garden episode. Here, the inclusion of the jinn offers narrative clarification to Satan's presence not otherwise explicitly offered in the Bible, and thus deserving of the Category 2 classification.

### *Category 3: Diverging Literary Function*

With Categories 1 and 2 representing the extremes of comparison between the Bible and the Qur'an, we now turn to the *via media* of Category 3. Whereas characters in Category 1 shared the same function in both the Bible and the Qur'an, and Category 2 offered little to no overlapping content, Category 3 characters have radically different functions in their scriptural realizations. In other words, the point of departure is much earlier than Category 1, resulting in dramatically different interpretations of these scriptural figures. Jesus/Īsā is perhaps the most notable exemplar of this category, as described in the introduction of this essay. However, for reasons

57 Amira El-Zein, *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 32–33.

58 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 63.

to be discussed later, we will use the figure David/Dāwūd to introduce this Category.

In the biblical tradition, King David is arguably one of the most complex and pivotal characters of the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand, he is the progenitor of the messianic line and marks the zenith of the kingdom of Israel. On the other hand, he is a deeply flawed character with highly questionable morals, such as the Bathsheba narrative in 2 Samuel. Not so in the Qur'anic text. There, Dāwūd is considered a prophet, with “much of the biblical material related to his life...not found in the Islamic text, including traditions about his rise to power and his reign as king of Israel.”<sup>59</sup> Mark Durie summarizes Dāwūd's Qur'anic representation succinctly:

Compared to some other biblical figures, Dawud receives comparatively little attention in the Qur'an. There is, for example, no vestige of...messianic theology ...[and] he is not afforded the biblical title of messiah (al-masih), which in the Qur'an is reserved solely for 'Isa. Instead the figure of Dawud is pressed into service, first in the Meccan surahs as an example of a righteous prophet who receives Allah's (miraculous) favors, in the form of special abilities which include wisdom and knowledge, understanding the language of birds, and a supernatural ability to make coats of mail from iron. Later, in the Medinan surahs, he is presented as a fighting, cursing prophet whose enmity is directed against his own people.<sup>60</sup>

While biblically notorious episodes such as the slaying of Goliath/Jālūt are present in the Qur'an, noticeably absent is David's episode with Batsheba. Such behavior would be unacceptable to the Islamic notion of a prophet, “[conflicting] with the Qur'anic doctrine of the moral infallibility (*ismah*) of messengers as righteous, God-fearing, and rightly-guided.”<sup>61</sup> However, the Qur'an includes a passage (Q 38:16–28) that “has much in common with what is described in the Bible in 2 Samuel 12 when the Prophet Nathan confronts David for the sins he committed.”<sup>62</sup> Kaltner and Mirza go on to note that this passage “is remarkable because it is a rare instance

59 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 34.

60 Mark Durie, “Dawud,” in *Prophets in the Qur'an and the Bible*, ed. Daniel S. Baeq and Sam Kim, 89.

61 Durie, “Dawud,” 88.

62 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 35.

of a prophet seeking repentance in the Qur'an."<sup>63</sup> The omission of these vital stories, as well as David/Dāwūd's function as a prophet in the Qur'an obligating him to adhere to the prophets' conventions, makes him a fascinating example of a Category 3 character.<sup>64</sup>

Utilizing Kaltner's extensive study of Biblical/Qur'anic characters and applying the principles of CPD, we have grouped these shared and unshared figures into a typology for the purpose of constructively problematizing interreligious dialogue. In each example, we have isolated what function the character serves in each text, and what theological ramifications the shift implies. Category 1 offers a great deal of commonality with just enough difference to maintain scriptural uniqueness. Category 2, in contrast, offers virtually no common ground on which to tread. Category 3 is the middle ground between the two, but it is certainly not a "happy medium." Quite the contrary: Category 3, by virtue of such an early departure point, offers characters who provide the greatest amount of interreligious dissonance. It is in this category we will linger, exploring the contributions of one figure, Ishmael/Ismā'īl, as a locus for interreligious dialogue.

### **Ishmael, a Locus for Interreligious Dialogue**

Before we begin our exploration of Ishmael/Ismā'īl, it is important to reiterate that each category in this proposed typology should be viewed as having its own gifts to offer CPD. Category 1 offers the security of similarity. Interlocutors can revel in their mutual commonality, while simultaneously highlighting the theological importance of the differences as they emerge. This is ideal for initial interreligious dialogue, bridge building, and establishing relationships. Category 2 offers the opposite: with no commonality to cling to, conversation partners must engage head on with the uniqueness of each tradition. This category is best used when differences are meant to be the highlight of a dialogue rather than similarities. The third category is the most nuanced of the three because of the acute dissonance that it creates. Familiar figures in both traditions are presented with significantly different literary functions. It is this category that warrants

63 Kaltner and Mirza, *The Bible and the Qur'an*, 35.

64 Made all the more pertinent to Category 3, as pointed out by Karel A. Steenbrink, by the different retellings of King David's story within the Hebrew Bible itself. See 1 and 2 Chronicles as compared to 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings. See Karel A. Steenbrink, "Reading the Bible Together with Muslims: David as Sinner King and Repentant Prophet," in *Exchange* 50, no. 3-4 (2021): 196-208.

further exploration, as it offers the greatest capacity for both conflict and revelation.

*Redefining a Paradigm: Jesus Revisited*

At the beginning of this essay, I used the figure of Jesus to illustrate the potency of Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue in the CPD endeavor. As I illustrated, each of the Abrahamic faiths hold some sort of stake in the figure of Jesus, be it as a deified figure, a prophet *par excellence*, or simply a specific cultural representative. Having now set up a typology according to the principles of CPD, it should be clear that the figure of Jesus resides in Category 3, as his function changes in each scriptural tradition (including his absence in the Tanakh).<sup>65</sup>

There is something equally alluring and repelling about using Jesus as a locus for interreligious dialogue. On the one hand, Jesus, in many ways, gets to the very heart of Abrahamic difference. His status as a member of the Trinitarian Godhead within Christianity forms a bedrock of many Christian denominations and stands diametrically opposed to modern day messianic assertions from Judaism. This is to say nothing of Islam's stark stance on the sole-humanness of the prophet 'Īsā (Jesus), as well as Qur'anic inclusion of Jesus narratives found in non-canonical Christian sources (such as the Gospel of Thomas and the Protoevangelium of James) and the exclusion of much of the ministry and teachings of Jesus found in the New Testament. Certainly, for the willing interlocutor, a focus on the character of Jesus yields much interreligious fruit.

On the other hand, one cannot and should not ignore how charged discussing a figure such as Jesus can be. For many Christians, the notion of the divinity of Christ being denied is too abrasive, and the temptation to evangelize too strong. For many Jews, the figure of Jesus evokes generational trauma of accusations of being "Christ deniers." The ramifications of Matthew 27:25 still fuel anti-Jewish sentiment and rightfully elicit suspicion and skepticism.<sup>66</sup> For many Muslims, the claim of Jesus as divine

65 This does not account for a typological reading in the Christian tradition of the "Old Testament," which certainly offers its own contributions to the constructive problematizing effort.

66 "Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'" Often quoted as an antisemitic and anti-Jewish proof-text citing Jewish complicity in the killing of Jesus.

is considered *shirk* (association), an egregious sin within Islam.<sup>67</sup> For these reasons, a new paradigm is necessary for Abrahamic dialogue.<sup>68</sup> I assert that it can best be found in the figure of Ishmael.<sup>69</sup>

*Justification and Critiques for Ishmael as an Interreligious Locus*

Jewish Scholar Carol Bakhos offers a moving depiction of the compelling nature of Ishmael as a character:

Perhaps no other biblical figure evokes a sense of liminality quite like Ishmael. He is Abraham's firstborn, circumcised with Abraham, yet he is not the son of the covenant but the son of a promise. He is a full-fledged member of the family, yet he is sent away, and Genesis 22:2 can speak of Isaac as Abraham's "only" son. His presence is felt, yet his actions are few. He is spoken about yet never speaks. God hears his voice, but the reader hears silence. He will be a great nation, but "his hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand against him." He is loved, and although expelled from Abraham's house, he is not rejected.<sup>70</sup>

It is perhaps this liminality that makes Ishmael an illustrative candidate for a new Character-Based Interreligious Dialogue paradigm. As Bakhos notes, "Ishmael plays different roles in each religious tradition's explanation of who constitutes the family of Abraham."<sup>71</sup> These different roles staunchly place Ishmael in Category 3 of our typology, meaning that each tradition will hold this figure to a different function despite commonalities among

67 *Shirk* is "a theological term referring to the association of someone or something with God, that is, putting someone or something in the place of God, thus deviating from monotheism." *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 293.

68 This is not to suggest that Jesus cannot be an effective figure for Dialogue. See, for example, the Institute for Islamic Christian and Jewish Studies presentation on Jesus.

69 One might suggest Abraham as an effective locus for such dialogue, given that he is in all three the progenitor of the Abrahamic faiths. While certainly this does make him an effective locus, Ishmael's placement as a Category three character situates him to better serve the constructive problematizing endeavor.

70 Carol Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 154.

71 Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 188.

the narratives. But more than Ishmael's literary position, his theological and cultural placement makes him an embodiment of the Abrahamic predicament. Bakhos reminds us that "since antiquity, Ishmael has been considered the progenitor of the Arab people, and since the medieval period he has symbolized Islam."<sup>72</sup> In each scripture passage, this metonymic placement will offer both insight to the history of conflict within the Abrahamic family, as well as potentially exciting possibilities for cooperation.

Alongside these assets of Ishmael as an interreligious locus come challenges. As will become immediately apparent, there is a disparity between the traditions regarding scriptural content containing Ishmael. For Islam in particular, much of the material containing Ishmael is found in extra-Qur'anic sources, including stories found in both Islam and Judaism.<sup>73</sup> The temptation to expand discussion past Biblical and Qur'anic texts presents an rich opportunity, but complicates notions of what constitutes scriptural authority.

Additionally, using Ishmael instead of Jesus as an interreligious locus does not inherently lower the stakes of the conversation. Each tradition holds the figure of Ishmael with conviction, even if he does not regularly appear in day-to-day religious life. However, perhaps it is this shared yet different sense of conviction that will give Ishmael the appropriate positioning to be an effective locus in constructive problematizing.

### *Methodology of Figure Analysis*

What follows will be a survey of the scriptural passages in which Ishmael directly or indirectly appears. As we did previously, we will limit our conversation to narratives found in the Bible and the Qur'an, alluding to extra-scriptural traditions when pertinent.<sup>74</sup> Contrary to the impulse to go chronologically from a historical perspective (Judaism, Christianity, Islam),

72 Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 156.

73 For example, the story of Abraham visiting the wives of Ishmael, found in both Pikei de Rabbi Eliezar and "extra-Qur'anic" texts, summarized in Bakhos *The Family of Abraham*, 184 and retold in Louis Ginzburg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1937), 266–69.

74 This is not to suggest, however, that extra-scriptural materials should not be used in CPD or SR. Quite the contrary: such inclusion would more than likely further the CPD cause. However, such inclusion would need to be done with care, unsure "like" was being put in conversation with "like." Otherwise, further misrepresentation could be risked in the exchange.

as is the impulse of most scholars doing this comparative work, we will take a different approach. Rather, we will begin to follow the rationale of a session of SR, in which each tradition will offer up its unique contributions to the discussion and the other two traditions will offer responses in light of that contribution. Thus, even as one tradition acts as “host,” each of the following sections will aim to be innately dialogic, emulating the goals of this project as a whole and offering an example of the process of CPD in lieu of a case study.

*Islam as Host: Ismāʿīl in the Qurʾan*

Given Ishmael’s metonymic role in history as the ambassador of Islam, we will begin with Ishmael’s presentation in the Qurʾan. As might be expected, Ishmael is a prominent figure in the Islamic tradition. Ironically, Bakhos humorously notes that “Ishmael’s presence within the Qurʾan (itself) is relatively unremarkable.”<sup>75</sup> His principal moment is in the building of the Kaʿba with his father, Abraham.<sup>76</sup>

We made the House (*al-Kaʿba*) a resort and a sanctuary for people, saying “Take the spot where Abraham stood as your place of prayer.” We commanded Abraham and Ishmael: “Purify My House for those who walk round it, those who stay there, and those who bow and prostrate themselves in worship... As Abraham and Ishmael built up the foundations of the House [they prayed], “Our Lord, accept [this] from us. You are the All Hearing, the All Knowing. Our Lord, make us devoted to You; make our descendants into a community devoted to You. Show us how to worship and accept our repentance, for You are the Ever Relenting, the Most Merciful. Our Lord, make a messenger of their own rise up from among them, to recite Your revelations to them, teach them the Scripture and Wisdom, and purify them: You have the power to decide” (Q 2:125; 127–129).

75 Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 183.

76 “Cube-shaped ‘House of God’ located in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Focal point of the hajj pilgrimage and a world spiritual center that all Muslims face during prayer... some believe that Adam built it and Abraham and Ishmael only rebuilt it. Often call the earthly counterpart to God’s throne in heaven.” *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 165.

Here, as with all the prophets of Islam, Ishmael is presented as a model of the faith: obeying God and giving God the reverence due to him. Also, Ishmael is depicted as the partner of Abraham. This may prove jarring for those only familiar with the Biblical narratives of Ishmael, in which Ishmael is cast out from the family (to be explored in detail when we explore the Torah text). Here, however, and exclusive to the Qur'an, Ishmael functions both from a place of prophethood and alignment with the faith of Abraham. Given this posture, it is even more striking when Abraham sets out to sacrifice Ishmael:

When the boy was old enough to work with his father, Abraham said, "My son, I have seen myself sacrificing you in a dream. What do you think?" He said, "Father, do as you are commanded and, God willing, you will find me steadfast." (Q 37:102)<sup>77</sup>

Jews and Christians will immediately identify this passage as the parallel to the *akedah*, the binding/sacrifice of Isaac found in Genesis 22:1–19. Those familiar with the Biblical retelling will also immediately notice a striking point of departure: Ishmael's consent to the intended sacrifice. As M. Shahid Alam articulates: "In this narrative, Abraham and Ishmael are co-equals or near co-equals."<sup>78</sup> This is a stark difference to the Genesis account, in which Isaac is never consulted.

<sup>6</sup>Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. And the two of them walked on together. <sup>7</sup>Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" <sup>8</sup>Abraham said, "God

77 The identity of "the boy" is never named within the Qur'an, however it is commonly held that it refers to Ishmael. For a full treatment on this, Ayaz Afsar points to surah 37: ayat 99–113 in volume 4 of Ismail b. 'Umar Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-Azim*, Urdu tr. *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (Karachi: Nur Muhammad Karkhanah-i Tijarat, n. d.), 37–43; and in volume 15 of Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami Ahkam al-Qur'an* (Damascus Maktabat al Ghazzali, n. d.), 99–101. See Ayaz Afsar, "A Comparative Study of the Intended Sacrifice of Isaac/Ishmael in the Bible and the Qur'an," *Islamic Studies* Vol. 46, No. 4 (Winter 2007): 495f.

78 M. Shahid Alam, "Ishmael and Isaac: An Essay on the Divergent Moral Economies of the Qur'an and the Torah," *Islamic Studies* 51, no. 2 (2012): 145–46.

himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”  
And the two of them walked on together. (Genesis 22: 6-8)

For Alam, this point of departure evokes questions of how personal autonomy and faith interact in each tradition.

The Qur’an views the individual (including sons and daughters in relation to their parents) as endowed with reasoning, understanding and free will, and, therefore, free to chart his or her life, to reject or embrace God’s guidance. As a result, each individual — except for children, the mentally insane, and persons in a state of sleep — is fully accountable only for his or her actions. Repeatedly and emphatically, the Qur’an enunciates this principle. In the Torah, the line between individual, collective and inter-generational responsibility gets blurred. An individual may inherit rewards or punishments for the actions of his ancestors; and conversely, God passes on the sins and merits of one individual to his descendants. This principle is central to the Jewish Bible since upon it is based the doctrine of God’s election of the Jewish people.<sup>79</sup>

It may be tempting to condense Ishmael’s function in the Qur’an to a reversal with his brother Isaac: as Isaac was the favored son in Genesis, so Ishmael is in the Qur’an. However, Ayaz Afsar reminds us that “The Qur’an gives equal honour and status to the two sons of Abraham.”<sup>80</sup> Unlike the Biblical text, there is no sense of the chosen and not chosen son. However, Ishmael’s validation of the prophethood of Muhammad, a convention of the prophets in the Qur’an, is heightened given that Muhammad is the direct descendent of Ishmael.<sup>81</sup> Thus, Ishmael’s function as the dutiful prophet and partner Abraham is essential in legitimizing Muhammad as the mouthpiece of God and bearer of the Qur’an.

### *Christianity as Host: Ishmael in the New Testament*

While Ishmael’s largest amount of content can be found in the Torah, we will hold off and give Judaism the last word as host. Instead, we will turn next

79 Alam, “Ishamel and Isaac” 153.

80 Afsar, “Comparative Study,” 494.

81 Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham*, 186.

to the Christian New Testament. While not mentioned by name, Ishmael is invoked prominently within Paul's letter to the Galatians. In this letter, Sarah and Hagar, the mothers of Isaac and Ishmael, become the source of an extended analogy:

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by an enslaved woman and the other by a free woman. One, the child of the enslaved woman, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother... Now you, my brothers and sisters, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? "Drive out the enslaved woman and her child, for the child of the enslaved woman will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman."<sup>82</sup> So then, brothers and sisters, we are children, not of an enslaved woman but of the free woman (Gal. 4: 22–26; 28–31).

As Bakhos explains, "According to the allegory, believers in Christ are the spiritual descendants (of Abraham); observers of Torah are represented by Hagar and Ishmael, for they are slaves to the Mosaic law."<sup>83</sup> Muslim and Jewish readers may find this allegory culturally confusing, as Ishmael here represents the followers of Torah, a concept alien to both Qur'anic and Tanakhic readings of the Ishmael narrative. However, what remains consistent within the Biblical tradition is that Ishmael's function is as the eternal other, as Ishmael represents "the nonchosen son sent away, cut off from the family of Abraham."<sup>84</sup> For Paul, the Ishmael narrative embodies the story of "the new community of believers, those represented by the son born of the spirit (Isaac)" in which "the younger sibling supplants the

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82 Genesis 21:10.

83 Bakhos, *Family of Abraham*, 177.

84 Bakhos, *Family of Abraham*, 177.

older.”<sup>85</sup> It cannot be overstated how this reading of the story fuels the heart of Abrahamic conflict, establishing supersessionist theologies leading to antisemitic and anti-Jewish sentiment and act.<sup>86</sup> However, this reading of Ishmael’s alterity is not unique to the New Testament, as we will now see in the Hebrew Bible’s treatment of Ishmael.

*Judaism as Host: Ishmael in the Torah*

Of the Abrahamic scriptures, Ishmael is most heavily referenced in the Torah. There, he is included in several substantial narratives. The first is in Genesis 16, where Hagar, the Egyptian slave, is cast out of the family of Abraham.<sup>87</sup> In the wilderness, Hagar is pregnant with Abraham’s son, Ishmael, and is visited by an angel who delivers this prophecy:

“Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;  
 you shall call him Ishmael,  
 for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.  
 He shall be a wild ass of a man,  
 with his hand against everyone,  
 and everyone’s hand against him,  
 and he shall live at odds with all his kin” (Gen. 16:11–12).

This prophecy sets Ishmael as the irreconcilable “other.” And, indeed, Rabbinic tradition sets Ishmael as the “wicked” brother, guilty of everything from idolatry to sexual deviance.<sup>88</sup> However, there is a tension within the prophecy in Genesis that offers just as much reconciliation as it does alienation. For here we see the nonchosen son of Abraham endowed with

85 Bakhos, *Family of Abraham*, 177.

86 Boyarin, however, offers an alternative reading of Galatians that avoids an anti-jewish hermeneutic. See Boyarin, “Was Paul an ‘Anti-semitic’? A Reading of Galatians 3–4,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 47 (1993): 47–80. See also Pamela Eisenbaum, “Is Paul the Father of Misogyny and Antisemitism?” in *Cross Currents* 50, no. 4 (2000–2001): 506–24, for a more general and generous reading of Paul in relation to Anti-Jewish interpretation.

87 Much more should be said, and has been said, about the role of Hagar as “the Stranger” who is the first to name God. Focus on Hagar is outside the scope of this paper, especially given her absence in the Qur’an, however her significance in all three Abrahamic traditions (including extra-Qur’anic Islamic tradition) warrants her as prominent a position in Abrahamic dialogue and is highly encouraged.

88 See passages throughout Midrash Rabbah, such as Genesis Rabbah 62:5, 53:1; Exodus Rabbah 1:1, and so on.

his own blessings, echoing those of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12.<sup>89</sup> Indeed, Ishmael goes on to become something of a mirror image to Isaac with his twelve sons being recorded in Genesis 25. The function of Ishmael is further complicated in Genesis 21, where, once again, Hagar is cast out with Ishmael into the wilderness. Here, as Hagar leaves Ishmael to die, again an angel appears and protects the young boy:

And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink (Gen. 21:17–19).

Muslims will find this narrative familiar, recognizing it from “The Stories of the Prophets” literature, which details the rituals of the Hajj.<sup>90</sup> These include “the *say*, or running back and forth seven times between two small hills near the Kaaba in imitation of Hagar’s search for water for Ishmael.” As the tradition holds, “the nearby well of Zamzam is believed to have miraculously appeared to save them from death.”<sup>91</sup>

Also, within the Genesis passage, notice the repeated refrain of “God heard,” which is the meaning of the name Ishmael, and the statement of the covenantal promise to “make a great nation of him.” Though the rabbinic tradition will at times view Ishmael as an antagonist to the covenant people, and indeed biblically set the Ishmaelites as an enemy of Israelites, the scripture points to the purposes of covenant to allow for an understanding of religious plurality.<sup>92</sup> Clare Amos muses:

Is this the hermeneutical importance of the story of Ishmael—not that it offers us the possible existence of a

89 God’s promises to Hagar/Ishmael are not referred to as a covenant (*b’rit*) in the text and could be interpreted as an extension of the Abrahamic covenant. However, this essay is more inclined to consider it a distinct set of God’s promises to Ishmael, indicative of God’s commitment to those outside of the Abrahamic line in a narrow sense.

90 Hagar in Arabic is rendered Hajjar, connected to this term.

91 “Hajj,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, 103.

92 See Psalm 83:6.

covenant which allows him and his physical and spiritual descendants to be incorporated in a neat Judeo-Christian schema. Instead it persists in reminding us that a mature faith and theology of religions needs to allow space both to affirm other human beings as our “brothers”, whose lives are interwoven with ours but who have the right to remain “other”?<sup>93</sup>

Amos’s reading empowers interlocutors to find hope amidst the scriptural conflict; that embedded in the scriptural tradition is the promise of a God-instilled integrity amidst religious difference, where divinity can be found amidst contestation and plurality.

### *Ishmael as Paradigmatic of Constructive Problematizing Dialogue*

Where Abrahamic dialogue is concerned, Ishmael is the complete package. He is a representative that speaks to a people and a tradition, as found within Islam. He is the embodiment of deep histories of contestations and alienation, as found in the Biblical tradition. But, he also presents a scriptural basis for theologies of religious plurality. Here, covenant, understood as God’s promises made as a result of “hearing” those perceived as “other,” indicates divine presence in more than just a single religious understanding. All these elements in tandem make Ishmael an ideal locus for interreligious dialogue that allows for unavoidable engagement with conflict and hope for a way forward.

## **Conclusion**

Since the events on and following October 7, 2023, in Israel and Palestine, a new spirit has been felt amidst interreligious interlocutors. Though for some, such dialogue is more important than ever, for others, the already tenuous space created by such dialogue has been betrayed. The fireproofing power of interreligious dialogue, that which builds sustaining relationships, trust, and goodwill between religious practitioners, is essential when a (proverbial) fire occurs. Fireproofing, however, is already too late once the fire has hit. On account of the geopolitical and humanitarian crises occurring in the Middle East, the Abrahamic traditions are caught now in such a fire.

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93 Clare Amos, “Incomplete without the Other: Isaac, Ishmael and a Hermeneutic of Diversity,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 20, No. 3 (July 2009): 254.

Because religions are inextricably linked to the world events surrounding them, such a high level of conflict demands a higher standard of interreligious dialogue. The methodology presented in this essay presumes, at its heart, that conflict engagement is a skill worthy of deep practice. This deep practice is achieved through thoughtful consideration of the material discussed in dialogue, thus ensuring that religious differences are central and approachable within the conversation. This methodology similarly indicts well-meaning interreligious endeavors, even SR, of conflict avoidance, malforming interlocutors and denying them the internal resources to construct lasting humanitarian peace and theological cooperation.

It may be trite to end with an observation citing the need for thoughtful interreligious engagement in the world today. It would be similarly naïve to ignore the stakes of conflict engagement when so many are depending on reconciliation. I reiterate: there is no substitute for enduring, trusting, and deeply rooted relationship formation. This essay asserts, however, that reconciliation is futile without skilled conflict engagement that avoids the temptations of harmonization or doctrinal avoidance. It further asserts that such engagement is possible even within episodic dialogue. Through such intentional encounters, our differences have the potential to become the very things with which we become enamored, rather than barriers preventing mutual affection. Therefore, what we say within interreligious dialogue has just as much power as how we say it, allowing thoughtful engagement to transcend into heartfelt appreciation, interdependence, and familiarity. If hospitality is coupled with intentional and communal skill building, then there is no telling what interreligious cooperation may be achievable in our lifetime.

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