



Exposition of Genesis 16: Exploring the Message of Tolerance and Harmony in Religious Pluralism through the Story of Hagar and Ishmael

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the story of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16, with a focus on the moral message that can be applied in the context of religious pluralism and social tolerance. Through an expositional text hermeneutic approach, this study delves into the deeper meaning of the text and its relevance to contemporary social issues, such as acceptance of marginalized groups and harmony in multicultural societies. The analysis results show that the story of Hagar and Ishmael teaches about tolerance, acceptance, and respect for differences. God shows care and love for Hagar, even though she comes from outside the nation of Israel, which reflects an inclusive attitude that does not discriminate based on social status, ethnicity, or religion. Thus, this story offers an important message to strengthen tolerance and build a more harmonious society in religious and cultural diversity. This article also proposes several suggestions, such as the importance of religious tolerance education, facilitating interfaith dialogue, and inclusive policies to strengthen social harmony in pluralistic societies.

Keywords: Genesis 16; Hagar and Ishmael; Religious Tolerance; Religious Pluralism; Inclusivity; Social Harmony; Hermeneutics; Social Acceptance

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly pluralistic and multicultural world, one of the greatest challenges is how to create harmony and tolerance between different groups with varying religions, cultures, and beliefs. Modern society is often confronted with religious tensions, discrimination, and social injustice, which exacerbate divisions in communal life. Hipolytus states that religious pluralism, although a reality, can pose serious problems. Each religion has its own strong and unique truth claims, which not only strengthen the faith of its adherents but also influence social life. In the social realm, religious pluralism often generates conflicts that are difficult to resolve because they are related to abstract faith and concrete social life. (Kewuel et al., 2017, p. vii)

Dewita states that Indonesia is rich in ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity, making it vulnerable to discrimination. Therefore, an attitude of tolerance needs to be cultivated from an early age to foster a sense of responsibility, discipline, and critical thinking skills, so that society can appreciate differences and perspectives. (Nurhayati, 2023)

In this context, it is important to find the foundational values that can support peaceful coexistence and mutual respect, even amidst significant differences. For Christians, these foundational values can be found in the Bible, which teaches principles of love, forgiveness, and mutual respect.

The book of Genesis, chapter 16, which tells the story of Hagar, a marginalized servant woman, and Ishmael, the child born from her relationship with Abram, provides us with a narrative that touches on themes of social injustice, discrimination, and acceptance of the marginalized. Although Hagar was in a weak and oppressed position as a servant woman treated unjustly God showed His care and love for her, offering hope and salvation, even for those who are considered worthless in the eyes of society.

The text of Genesis 16 is very interesting to study. Several researchers have conducted studies on this text, highlighting it from different perspectives. However, none have delved deeper into the social and moral relevance of the story, especially in the context of religious and social pluralism. When examined more closely, this text can offer a message that is highly relevant to the challenges faced by contemporary pluralistic societies, namely how to develop attitudes of tolerance, understanding, and acceptance toward groups or individuals who are different.

Lawrence conducted research on the text of Genesis 16, focusing on the meaning of God's promise to Hagar. Lawrence concluded that: Genesis 16 records God's promise to Hagar, that her descendants would be very numerous (Gen. 16:10), that she would bear a son named Ishmael (Gen. 16:11), and that Ishmael would live like a wild donkey, opposing others (Gen. 16:12). This promise was fulfilled through Ishmael, who had 12 children, and although Ishmael was born to a slave woman, his status changed to that of a free person after Isaac was born and Sarah asked Abraham to expel Hagar and Ishmael, thus making them free from slavery. (Lawrence Christian, 2000)

Sonny and Ayu focus on the story in Genesis 16 from the perspective of the ongoing conflict. Here is the conclusion from their research: The conflict between Sarah and Hagar reflects the difficulty of achieving peace among Abraham's descendants in the Middle East, which is divided into three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Each group positions itself as the rightful and primary heir, with different versions of the conflict. This conflict reflects the competition for inheritance rights and status, which continues through the generations of Abraham's descendants, with the main question being who has the right to control the land of Canaan and be considered the legitimate descendants. (Zaluchu & Seniwati, 2020)

The text of Genesis 16 has also been the subject of research by Muryati. Muryati highlights it from the perspective of emotion and power. The conclusion drawn is as follows: The story of Sarai and Hagar illustrates how culture and emotions can damage the relationship between mistress and servant. Sarai, who is barren, asks Hagar for help in bearing children, but this decision results in suffering for Hagar. On the other hand, Hagar belittles Sarai, who then uses her power to oppress Hagar. The two women hurt each other, demonstrating the emotional ambiguity of Sarai, who both needs help and resents the one who assists her. (Muryati, 2023)

Meylianus focuses on the story of Hagar as the main subject of his research, highlighting Hagar's suffering while still demonstrating extraordinary resilience. In his conclusion, Meylianus evaluates Hagar not as a weak woman, but as a strong individual. Despite her significant role in Abraham's life, she often does not receive the recognition she deserves. (Doki, 2023)

The issue that arises is: How can we draw moral and social lessons from the story of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16 to be applied in the context of religious and social pluralism today? Although this text carries strong theological value, there is great potential to use this story as a source of inspiration for fostering tolerance and harmony among different groups. However, this is rarely studied explicitly in the context of religious pluralism.

The text of Genesis 16 contains a message about honoring those who are marginalized, as well as accepting differences. The story of Hagar, who represents the marginalized group, illustrates that God does not show favoritism and is ready to offer hope to anyone in need, even in difficult and unjust situations. Therefore, there is a need to reinterpret this text in a broader social context, especially in addressing the challenges of religious pluralism and social harmony in the modern world.

This research aims to explore how the message from the story of Hagar and Ishmael can be understood as a call to build tolerance and harmony in a diverse world, and how this text can offer a more inclusive perspective in discussing interfaith and intergroup relations. Using a hermeneutic and expositional text approach, this article will attempt to uncover fundamental values that can enrich our understanding of living together in difference. With this background, the main problem to be solved is how the story of Hagar and Ishmael, often considered a personal or theological narrative, can be read as a message to address the challenges of religious and social pluralism today, and provide insights into how to build tolerance and harmony in a multicultural society.

In the context of an increasingly pluralistic and multicultural world, a major challenge faced is how to create harmonious relationships between groups with differing religions, cultures, and beliefs. Contemporary society is often caught in social tensions, religious conflicts, and the marginalization of certain groups, which can worsen divisions. In this situation, it is important to explore values that can strengthen tolerance, respect for differences, and social cohesion.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16 has the potential to provide insights into tolerance and acceptance of the marginalized. However, this text is often read only in a personal and theological context, without considering its application in social life and religious pluralism. Therefore, there remains ambiguity regarding how the messages from this story can be connected to the challenges of religious pluralism and building tolerance between different groups.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using the expositional text hermeneutic method. This methodological framework emphasizes the interpretation of biblical texts through critical, linguistic, and contextual analysis. According to Purba (2018), hermeneutics is a scientific method for interpreting texts by considering not only the textual elements but also the historical background, original language, and contextual dimensions surrounding the text.

The research adopts an expositional text hermeneutic approach, which systematically analyzes the text to uncover its meaning and relevance. This approach involves interpreting the text of Genesis 16 by integrating literary, historical, and theological dimensions. The focus is not merely on exegesis but on a structured hermeneutical process that connects the text with its original context. The primary data source is the biblical text of *Genesis Chapter 16*, analyzed in its original Hebrew form and several reputable English and Indonesian translations. The secondary data sources include scholarly commentaries, hermeneutical studies, theological journals, and academic works on religious pluralism, tolerance, and social ethics.

These secondary materials serve to support and enrich the interpretation process. Data will be collected through library research, which includes: Identifying and gathering relevant biblical commentaries, theological studies, and hermeneutical resources related to Genesis 16.

Reviewing academic literature on theories of tolerance and religious pluralism that provide conceptual grounding for interpretation. All data are documented systematically to ensure accuracy and traceability during the analysis process. The analytical process in this study follows three interrelated stages: The researcher conducts a close reading and exposition of Genesis 16, focusing on the narrative structure, linguistic elements, and characterization. This includes identifying key themes and motifs within the text.

Using hermeneutical principles, the researcher interprets the text by integrating historical, social, and theological contexts. The analysis involves correlating textual meaning with its broader canonical and cultural background. Emerging themes such as justice, marginalization, and interpersonal relations are thematically categorized. A comparative analysis is also conducted between traditional interpretations and contemporary hermeneutical perspectives to identify interpretive continuity and divergence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Text Analysis of Genesis 16: Messages of Tolerance and Harmony in Religious Pluralism. The story of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16 reflects themes of social injustice, acceptance of the marginalized, and the challenging relationship between individuals with different social statuses. In this study, the analysis will focus on how this text can be interpreted in the context of religious pluralism and how the moral messages contained in it can help build tolerance in a society with diverse religions and cultures. Text Exposition:

Genesis 16:1-2 – Sarai Makes Her Own Decision

Because she could not have children, Sarai decided to give her servant, Hagar, to Abraham as a second wife, so that through Hagar, Sarai could have a child. At that time, in the culture of ancient Middle Eastern society, it was legal for a wife who could not have children to give her servant to her husband as a wife. The goal was to ensure the birth of a child who could represent the legitimate wife in terms of inheritance rights and social status, especially if the legitimate wife could not have children of her own. The child born from the servant would then be considered the legitimate child of the wife, ensuring the continuity of the lineage and the protection of the wife's rights within the social structure of that time.

In this text, Sarai blames God for her barrenness. The phrase "has kept me from having children" is translated from the Hebrew word "צָרַר" (atsar), which means "to restrain," "to block," or "to prevent." It is used in the context of holding back or preventing something from happening. In Genesis 16:2, this word is used to indicate that God actively withheld or prevented Sarai from bearing children. Chia states that Sarai blames God for her barrenness, which leads her to take Hagar and give her to Abraham. (Chia, 2020, p. 57)

Sarai, despite knowing about God's promise, shows her unbelief in God's timing in fulfilling His promise. She chooses to "solve her problem" in a human way, through her own actions, rather than waiting for God to work according to His timing.

Genesis 16:3-6 – Hagar Becomes Pregnant, Tensions Rise

In verse three, Hagar is referred to as "ishah" (אִשָּׁה), which is the Hebrew word for "woman" or "wife." However, despite the same word being used, Hagar's status as Abraham's "wife" is very different from Sarai's status as the first, legitimate wife according to the cultural and religious laws of that time. Albertus states that although the Hebrew word used is "ishah," which can mean woman or wife, Hagar's status is different from Sarai's. Hagar is

merely a servant whose womb was borrowed to bear a child. Hagar is like a walking incubator. (Albertus Purnomo, 2019, p. 82)

Hagar became pregnant after having relations with Abraham. When Hagar realized that she was carrying a child, she began to look down on Sarai, who could not bear children. This caused tension between Sarai and Hagar. Sarai, feeling mistreated, then complained to Abraham and blamed him for the situation. Abraham decided to leave the matter to Sarai, which led Sarai to treat Hagar very harshly. Hagar, feeling hurt and oppressed, eventually fled into the wilderness.

Genesis 16:7-14 – God Encounters Hagar in the Wilderness.

In the wilderness, Hagar encountered the angel of the Lord, who called her and asked why she had fled. The angel of the Lord gave Hagar instructions to return to Sarai and submit to her. The angel also told her that she would bear a son, who would be named Ishmael. The angel of the Lord mentioned that the child would be a free man, and his descendants would be numerous.

The angel of the Lord who appeared to Hagar was not an ordinary angel. This angel of the Lord was God Himself, a term known as Theophany. Muriwalli provides several reasons why the angel of the Lord is identified as God Himself. Here are the reasons: This angel of the Lord is identified as God, known as God, calls Himself God, receives worship, and speaks with divine authority. (Matalu, 2017, p. 467)

Peter offers a profound reflection on this situation. He begins with a thought-provoking question, "What kind of God allows someone to be oppressed?" Hagar fled because she could not bear the pressure from her mistress, but God told her to return and submit to that oppression. In response to this question, Peter explains that such struggles must indeed be faced, for behind them lies God's purpose that is filled with goodness. If Hagar had stayed in the wilderness, she and the child she carried would have been in great danger. God allowed Hagar to be oppressed for a time, but from her suffering, a child would be born who would eventually become the source of a very large offspring. (Setiadarma, 2022, pp. 4–5)

In verse 11, the angel of the Lord tells Hagar that she will bear a son. The child born to Hagar will be named Ishmael (יִשְׁמָעֵל, Yishma'el). This name consists of two parts: first, "Yisma" – derived from the Hebrew root word (שָׁמַע, shama) which means "to hear" or "to listen." In this context, the word refers to the act of listening or paying attention. In this narrative, it points to God's action of hearing and attending to Hagar's suffering. Second, "El" (אֱלֹהִים, El) – is the Hebrew word for "God." It refers to God as the source of strength and the highest authority.

So, Ishmael (Yishma'el) means "God hears." The name Ishmael reflects God's comfort and attention to Hagar's suffering. It serves as a reminder of God's care for the difficult situation Hagar faced at that time.

Hagar named the Angel of the Lord El-Roi (אֱלֹהֵי רֹאִי, El-Ro'i). This name carries deep and significant meaning, especially in the context of Hagar's suffering and limitations. The name El-Roi consists of two parts in Hebrew: first, "El" (אֱלֹהִים, El) – as previously explained, this is the Hebrew word for "God," referring to God as the Almighty or all-powerful entity. Second, "Roi" (רֹאִי, Ro'i) – derived from the Hebrew root word "ra'ah" (רָאָה, ra'ah), meaning "to see" or "to pay attention." With the suffix 'i' signifying the first person singular, El-Roi literally means "God who sees me." In this context, it refers to a God who is attentive and concerned about the condition of an individual.

Genesis 16:15-16 – The Birth of Ishmael

Hagar returned to Sarai's house and gave birth to a son named Ishmael. When Hagar gave birth, Abraham was 86 years old. This text ends by showing that, although God had given guidance to Hagar, the situation remained a part of the uncertainty and tension within Abraham's family.

Character of the Figures

In this section, the author highlights the main characters in this story. First: Hagar, a servant woman marginalized in a patriarchal society, who becomes a symbol of those who are marginalized and undervalued. Second: Abraham and Sarah, important figures in the Biblical narrative, who, despite being given a great promise by God, are involved in injustice toward Hagar and her son. Third: God, even though Hagar is in a marginalized and lowly position, shows His love by giving special attention to Hagar and her son, as well as a promise to bless them.

The Moral Message of Tolerance in the Story of Hagar and Ishmael

Genesis 16 describes the injustice experienced by Hagar as a result of the patriarchal social system and the powerlessness of women in that culture. However, God shows that even though Hagar is a marginalized woman with no social standing, she is still cared for by God. God shows love and attention to someone regardless of their social status. This message illustrates that in a world full of differences in status, religion, and ethnicity, God does not show favoritism.

The message for religious pluralism can be found in the way God responds to the injustice against Hagar. Even though she was not part of the people of Israel, God shows compassion and gives a promise to bless her son, Ishmael. This shows that God's blessings are not limited to one group or religion, but can be obtained by all individuals, regardless of their religious or cultural background. In the context of religious pluralism, this can be interpreted as a call to develop an open and inclusive attitude, accepting religious differences and valuing each person as a being created by God.

Relevance in Religious Pluralism

Elly et al. state that moderation is important in a diverse society because it can create a harmonious environment and reduce the potential for conflict. Several aspects of moderation include: first, tolerance, which means accepting and appreciating differences in opinions, beliefs, and cultures; second, balance, which avoids extreme views or actions in both social and political contexts; third, dialogue, which encourages constructive and open communication between different parties to achieve mutual understanding; fourth, conflict avoidance, which seeks to resolve differences peacefully without causing tension; and fifth, pragmatism, which emphasizes realistic solutions that can be accepted by all parties rather than getting trapped in rigid ideologies. (Elly Warnisyah, Salsabilla Utami, Mely Sahtriani, Muhammad Fahrezi, 2024)

Amani et al. state that religious pluralism in contemporary society includes several important aspects. First, appreciating and understanding religious diversity to create a safe and peaceful atmosphere. Second, addressing discrimination against different religions and traditions. Third, encouraging interfaith collaboration and harmony by respecting each other and working together. (Amani et al., 2024)

The story in Genesis 16 has deep relevance to the issues of religious pluralism faced by society today. In a world that is increasingly fragmented based on differences in religion and beliefs, the story of Hagar teaches us the importance of tolerance and acceptance of differences. In the context of religious pluralism, every group or individual, despite differences in beliefs, has the right to be respected and given equal standing in society.

The message from the story of Hagar and Ishmael also suggests that justice and compassion know no boundaries of religion or specific groups. God does not only favor the group that is considered "socially" or "religiously" right, but also those who are marginalized or disregarded. This is highly relevant in building interfaith tolerance, as every religion teaches love, peace, and respect for others, which should serve as a common foundation for living together in diversity.

Acceptance of the Marginalized: Implications for Social Harmony

The story of Hagar provides a powerful illustration of how society can become more accepting of marginalized groups. Hagar, as a symbol of social injustice, teaches us to reject discrimination against those who exist outside the mainstream of society, especially within the context of religious differences. In the framework of religious pluralism, this entails treating every individual regardless of their religion or beliefs with equal respect and ensuring that all have the same opportunities to participate fully in social life.

God's presence in this story listening to Hagar's cries and sorrow demonstrates that every person who feels marginalized still has a voice in God's eyes. In the modern world, this reminds us of the moral responsibility to ensure that the voices of marginalized groups those who may lack political or social power are also heard, respected, and valued

The story of Hagar and Ishmael can be viewed as a moral call to build a more inclusive, just, and tolerant society. Its message about the importance of embracing diversity and valuing each individual is vital in an increasingly pluralistic world. Tolerance within the context of religious pluralism is not merely about allowing others to hold different beliefs, but also about intentionally creating spaces for understanding, acceptance, and peaceful coexistence amid profound differences.

CONCLUSION

The story of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 16 contains moral messages that are highly relevant to issues of tolerance, acceptance, and religious pluralism in modern society. Although Hagar was a marginalized woman in a patriarchal society, God showed His attention and love for her, and made a great promise for her son, Ishmael. The main message contained in this text is that every individual, regardless of social status, ethnicity, or religion, receives equal attention from God.

This story teaches that tolerance in religious pluralism not only involves accepting religious diversity but also respecting each individual as part of a larger community. God does not differentiate who is worthy of His love and blessings, which shows that values of love, justice, and compassion should form the foundation of relationships between groups with different religions and cultures. In the context of pluralism, this story also reminds us of the importance of avoiding discrimination against marginalized groups and building an inclusive and just society. Thus, Genesis 16 provides important insights for modern society in strengthening attitudes of tolerance and social harmony, as well as valuing religious differences as part of communal life in an increasingly pluralistic society.

Suggestions

Based on the analysis conducted, several suggestions for further research and the application of the values from the story of Hagar and Ishmael in the context of religious pluralism are as follows: First, Religious Tolerance Education: Religious-based education that teaches values of tolerance, inclusivity, and respect for differences should be introduced more widely in various educational institutions. The story of Hagar and Ishmael can be used as teaching material to educate the younger generation about the importance of respecting differences and treating others fairly regardless of religion, race, or social status.

Second, Interfaith Dialogue:

In the midst of religious and cultural diversity, it is essential to facilitate interfaith dialogue aimed at building mutual understanding and reducing tension between religious groups. The story of Hagar and Ishmael teaches that although there are differences, every religion has values that lead to peace and harmony. Through dialogue, society can learn to live together more harmoniously.

Third, Strengthening Inclusive Policies:

The government and social institutions should encourage policies that support diversity and religious pluralism in society. Inclusive policies will ensure that all religious groups feel valued and accepted, just as God showed His attention to Hagar despite her being from outside the people of Israel.

Fourth, Further Research:

Further research can be conducted to explore the application of Biblical values in a broader social context, particularly in terms of ethnic and religious diversity. Researchers can explore more Biblical narratives related to pluralism and acceptance to create a more harmonious and supportive society with these conclusions and suggestions, it is hoped that the moral message contained in the story of Hagar and Ishmael will inspire more people to build a fairer, more tolerant, and harmonious society, where differences in religion and beliefs are valued and respected.

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