

The Poem *Hagar* by Isaac Da Costa

*God loves
Ishmael*

In his book *The cross above the crescent*,¹ Samuel Zwemer published part of the poem *Hagar*. He learned about it through a Dutch clergyman and described it as 'one of the finest missionary poems in the wide world of literature, the epic of Hagar by the celebrated Dutch poet, Isaac Da Costa.'² The translation below is not literal but expresses the thoughts of the original Dutch poem in a wonderful rhythmic way.

Hagar

*"What marvels met thine eye, thou Orient desert Queen!
Eternal land of drought, of crags and rocks between
A shifty sea of sand, vast, limitless . . .
A sea of solitude, oppressive, comfortless .
Whose waves of sand and rock refresh no aching eye,
But leave earth barren 'neath a burning sky.
How oft beneath those skies the storm-winds thou hast seen.
Fiercer than oven-blast, hotter than mid-day beam,
Chainlike unfolding in their onward path,
Whilst knelt the caravan obedient to their wrath;
Until, storm-built and driven by the blast,
The simoon's awful chariot had rolled past.*

*But in the solemn hour, recalled by poet's muse,
Silent the desert wastes. The rushing storm winds lose
Their faintest whisper. Solitude. Save one!
With bold, yet downcast eye, a woman walks alone.
Sorrow hath filled her soul."*

Then follows the vision of Hagar and the promise of the Lord. The second part tells of Ishmael's mocking, the exile, Hagar's prayer, and the renewed promise of GOD to her seed:

*"Ishmael, thou shalt not die! The desert waste,
Which dared to boast itself thy grave, shall taste
And tell thy glory . . . "*

Here the Bedouin life is sketched in a few matchless stanzas portraying the ship of the desert and the Arabian steed - the peculiar twofold treasure of the peninsula from time immemorial. Passing by the centuries of silence, the poet suddenly places before us the Saracen invasion and its onward sweep into North Africa and Spain:

*. . . "They leap upon the lance, but lances wound them not;
A hemisphere at once falls to the Arab's lot.
And, as a new plowed field sown thick with summer hail
Pressed from the thunder cloud, so swift their nomad trail*

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*Sweeps everywhere along . . .
The day of vengeance falls! The Koran and its sword!
Those half-truths, wrapped in fascinating lore
Your idols can confound, but not your GOD restore.
Yet conquer must that Christendom which sold
Her substance for a form; for glitter lost her gold,
And thus waxed weak. Egypt, once more obey
The nomad's law, like Hyksos rule in earlier day!
Proud Alexandria, bow! Yield, yield thy costly store.
Thy libraries of learning and their treasured lore,
With all thy boasted schools? The latest blood
Of old Numidia now lies reeking on the sod,
Nor Carthager, nor Vandal, can ward off the blow . . .*

*All Africa's at stake, and Europe shares her woe.
They've mounted high Gibraltar, lovely Spain
Lies just beyond . . . 'tis Christian but in name;
The fierce West - Goth sees all his temples sacked
Till turns the tide of time by greater Power backed.
Alas! Still ebbs the flood. No Pyrenees can bar
The eagle's lofty flight nor stay the scimitar.
Awake, ye north winds, and drive back the horde
Barbarian; Karel, rise, thou Martel, break their sword!
GOD's hand makes true Thy name. Regain our loss
And save from Crescent rule the lands that love the
Cross . . . "*

Next, we have in the poem a full-length portrait of the prophet, Mohammed, the greatest of the sons of Hagar. These stanzas defy translation because of their beauty and idiom and marvelous condensation. There is often a volume of thought in a single line, and nowhere do I know of a more just, generous, and yet critically truthful delineation of Mohammed's character. The seventh division of the poem opens, as do all the others, by addressing Hagar. But this time as the bondmaid; Ishmael in subjection to Isaac; the Cross rising triumphant above the Crescent:

*"Mother of Ishmael!
The word that GOD hath spoken
Never hath failed the least, nor was His promise broken.
Whether in judgment threatened or as blessing given;
Whether for time and earth or for eternal heaven,
To Esau or to Jacob . . .*

*The patriarch prayed to GOD, while bowing in the dust:
'Oh that before thee Ishmael might live!' - His prayer, his trust.
Nor was that prayer despised, that promise left alone*

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*Without fulfillment. For the days shall come
When Ishmael shall bow his haughty, chieftain head
Before that Greatest Chief of Isaac's royal seed.
Thou, favored Solomon, hast first fulfillment seen
Of Hagar's promise, when came suppliant Sheba's queen.
Next Araby the blest brought Bethlehem's newborn King,
Her myrrh and spices, gold and offering.
Again at Pentecost they came, first-fruits of harvest vast;
When, to adore the name of JESUS, at the last
To Zion's glorious hill the nation's joy to share
The scattered flocks of Kedar all are gathered there,
Nebajoth, Hefa, Midian . . .*

*Then Israel shall know Whose heart their hardness broke,
Whose side they pierced, Whose curse they dared invoke.
And then, while at His feet they mourn His bitter death,
Receive His pardon . . .
Before Whose same white throne Gentile and Jew shall meet
With Parthian, Roman, Greek, the far North and the South,
From Mississippi's source to Ganges' giant mouth,
And every tongue and tribe shall join in one new song,
Redemption! Peace on earth and good-will unto men . . .
The purpose of all ages unto all ages sure. Amen.
Glory unto the Father! Glory the Lamb, once slain,
Spotless for human guilt, exalted now to reign!
And to the Holy Ghost, life-giver, whose refreshing
Makes all earth's deserts bloom with living showers of blessing!*

*"Mother of Ishmael!
I see thee yet once more,
Thee, under burning skies and on a wave-less shore!
Thou comfortless, soul storm-tossed, tempest-shaken,
Heart full of anguish and of hope forsaken,
Thou, too, didst find at last GOD's glory all thy stay!
He came. He spake to thee. He made thy night His day.
As then, so now. Return to Sarah's tent
And Abraham's GOD, and better covenant,
And sing with Mary, through her Saviour free,
'GOD of my life, Thou hast looked down on me.' "*

¹ Zwemer, Samuel M. *The cross above the crescent*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1916. p276-281

² Zwemer, Samuel M. *Sons of Adam*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1951. Ch3