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WOMEN IN THE DESERT
(THE STORY OF HAGAR AND NIRMALA BONAT)

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Keywords: Oppression, women, perpetrator, protection, God, advocacy, story, theology.

Introduction

C.S. Song writes that:

Life begins with stories, not with texts. History is made up of stories. God, creator of the universe, source of all lives, inspirer of human imagination, is both the story-teller and story-
listener. It is this God who empowers us to tell stories and listen to them. Stories expand our horizon while texts delimit it. Stories deepen our awareness of mysteries of life and creation, whereas texts restrict it. Story enables us to traverse space and time (Song 2005).

In this paper, I will seek to find the story within the story of Sarai and Hagar written in Genesis 16:1-16 because I, like Song, believe that within the texts, there are untold stories that cry out loud to be heard by us. And from those untold story also we can find the main sources of theology that according to Song, “enable us to listen to the heartbeats of God in the heartbeats of humanity”. I will also let this story interact with the story of a maid-servant, Nirmala Bonat who was abused by her mistress in Malaysia. At the end of my effort to retell those stories, I will show that the story of Nirmala Bonat corrects the story of Hagar because unlike Hagar who refused to tell her story, that caused her to be oppressed even more, Nirmala Bonat was not afraid to tell her story and as a result, it changed the story of her life. It changed her future.

Therefore, I will begin with telling the story of Abram, Sarai and Hagar in Genesis 16:1-16 and the story of Nirmala Bonat. I will also describe the historical background of the Sarai and Hagar’ story and then finally analyze them together with Nirmala Bonat’s story in order to find the meaning and the theology that can come out from those stories.

The Story of Sarai and Hagar (Genesis 16:1-16)

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, “You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her”. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then Sarai said to
Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!” But Abram said to Sarai, “Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please”. Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her. The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am running away from my mistress Sarai”. The angel of the Lord said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her”. The angel of the Lord also said to her, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude”. And the angel of the Lord said to her, “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 odds with all his kin”. So she named the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are El-roi’; for she said, ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. Hagar bore Abram a son and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ismael.

The Story of A Maid-Servant, Nirmala Bonat
(www.drliew.net 2004)

A 19-year-old Indonesian maid was repeatedly burnt with an iron and scalded with boiling water by a wealthy Malaysian housewife in the worst case of abuse even seen in the country. All the major newspaper carried front page pictures showing shocking pictures of Nirmala Bonat’s beaten face and horrifically scared back and chest after she was rescued by police from five months of beatings. The Indonesian embassy is providing shelter for the teenager from Kupang, Nusa Tenggara East, and police have detained the 35-year-old housewife.
Nirmala’s plight was exposed after a guard at the upscale condominium where she worked saw her crying on Monday and noticed that she had ugly bruises all over her swollen face and was bleeding from the head and mouth. Police were called and Nirmala said her employer’s wife had abused her for the last five months, burning her with a hot iron, pouring boiling water on her and beating her. Describing her ordeal to local reporters, she said it all began after she broke a mug while washing it. “She then threw boiling water on me. One day she got upset while I was ironing. She said the clothes had not been properly ironed and slapped me”, the maid said. “She took the iron out of my hand and pressed it against my breasts. When I go back, what am I going to tell my parents when they see all the scars?”

The Historical Background of the Story of Sarai and Hagar

The stories in Genesis are well known as the Patriarchal Narratives that intertwined history and legend. They were written by males who emphasized certain events that focused on males’ roles in the society and tended to forget other stories that did not meet the need of the times in which they wrote. Therefore, the choosing of females’ stories to be put together with males’ stories must have something to do with the significant roles that those women had in the time when those stories were written. There is no historical evidence to prove the existence of those women historically but at least, the appearance of their stories in the bible suggests that the stories about them entrenched in the culture therefore, the authors felt obligated to put their stories together with the patriarchal narratives (Teubal 1990).

The stories about Sarai and Hagar, Abram’s women and the mothers of the people, were told in Genesis 16:1-16 and 21:9-22. I refer to the scholars such as Gottwald, who believe that those narratives were written by at least two different authors who used the same traditions. It happens because each author of the text used different language and style to narrate his story that indicates the different emphasis related to ethical and theological concepts in the text. It is possible because each
author came from a different historical standpoint with different sociopolitical and religious conditions and concerns (Gottwald 1985). Therefore, following the source criticism theory, I in line with Teubal, argue that the first story in Genesis 16:1-16, belonged to Jahwist (J) source and the second story in Genesis 21:2-22 belonged to Elohist (E) source (Teubal 1990).

These two different redactions can be recognized by several points. In Genesis 16:1-16, J. source called God *Yahweh*, and addressed the maidservant with the word *Shifrah* in Hebrew. In contrast, E tended to call God *Elohim* and used *Amah* the word in Hebrew to address the maidservant. Besides, one can see two different theologies in these two chapters. In the first story, the basic theology is Yahweh promised to Abram that he would create a great nation through Abram’s son and how Sarai was not patient enough to wait the fulfillment of the promise. And later on, in the next story, *Yahweh* proved his promised by giving Isaac. So, the motif of the J story is trust *Yahweh* completely. While the second story that belonged to E emphasized the critical moment in which Ishmael, Hagar’s son almost died in the desert because of the lack of water. But, at the end of the story, we are informed that *Elohim* saved Ishmael. So the motif of E story is the rescue of the son who is in danger. The same motif is also relevant for the story of the offering of Isaac, where at the climax of the story, he was saved by *Elohim* from the hand of his father who tried to kill him as an offering to God.

By keep in mind a socio-historical background of the story of Sarai and Hagar, let us now look closer to the content of the story.

**Women in the Desert (The Story of Hagar and Nirmala Bonat)**

Now, Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, “You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her (Genesis 16:1-2).
The narrative in Genesis 16:1-16 opens with the information about Sarai. Here, we are not only informed that she is Abram’s wife but also the fact that she bore no children for her husband. In agricultural society such as Israel and Asia, the meaning of Children in the family is very significant because the children, especially a son, can carry the father’s surname and will get all his father’s possession/inheritance. That is why, the birth of the children especially son plays the most important role to protect the families status and ‘face’ in society. Besides, there is a stigma that children can help the relation between husband and wife becoming closer, because they share the same responsibility for their children, and it helps a wife to be recognized by her husband’s family, as a daughter-in-law, because her son will take her husband’s surname. While the woman who does not give birth will never understand how life is, and will be blamed as an unrespectable wife. She is a burden and a shame to her husband’s family. And as a woman, she fails to perform her duty as a good wife (Eun-Shil 1997). And this is what Sarai felt also. As the wife of Abram, who was highly respected in his society and a successful herdsman, Sarai was a rich woman in the eyes of her community. But this reality meant nothing, as soon as we are informed that she was barren. She was rich but had no children. She was a woman of enormous social and economic standing but failed to play her significant role as a wife to her husband and her husband family.

But our narrator continues his story by telling us that, even Sarai bore no children, but as a wealthy woman, she had a slave-girl whose name is Hagar. Here, we are struck by the contrast between these two women. Sarai was a Hebrew woman while Hagar was an Egyptian. Sarai was a high-class woman, while Hagar was only a slave with no social status in the community’s eyes and powerless. Sarai was rich, while Hagar was poor. Sarai was old and barren while Hagar was young and fertile.

From the differences between these two women, we can see that the problem between them was not only about the fact that they came from different ethnic backgrounds or their
capacity to produce children. They were different fundamentally in the reality that they had different economic positions. And this matter always becomes a hindrance in the friendship between women because the rich woman tends to look down at the poor one, and sometimes consider her as instrument whom she can use whenever she wants, and as a result the poor one feels inferior and tends to regard herself just as no more than an instrument. This is how Sarai looked at Hagar. She regarded her no less than a property, an instrument whom she could use according to her will.

In this 21st century, there are so many Sarais and Hagars who are separated by their economic positions. In the developed countries such as Indonesia, due to financial crisis that happened since 1997, many lower-class women that use to be home makers were forced to work outside their houses because their husband's salaries were no longer enough to cover their daily need. Almost all of them have no sufficient skills that allow them to compete with other women workers who gained good educations. Therefore, the only possible and easy way for them to earn money is to become maidservants. And since there are not many available jobs in Indonesia these days, those women decided to leave their country and work as maidservants in countries such as Saudi-Arabia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Malaysia. From those women, we heard so many stories especially about the relationship between them and their mistresses. And again, it is very true that the economic differences between them frustrated their friendships because there is no such equality in that kind of relationship.

In the Sarai relationship to Hagar, Sarai saw her as the answer of her problem. She could use her to bear a child for her. Therefore she said to Abram:

"Go in to my slave-girl"

What Sarai was not something new in her society. In fact, she was only following what has been practiced in her community in her time. We remember the story of Rachel who could not bear a child for Jacob. At that time, she also gave her maidservant, Bilhah, to Jacob so that through her, she could
have children. Leah also did the same, for even though she bore children herself, she still saw the need to give her own maidservant, Zilpah, to Jacob as wife (Genesis 30:1-24). Here, it is important to highlight the function of Hagar as the property of Sarai, so even though she became the wife of Abram, it had nothing to do with her status. She, in Sarai’s eyes, would always be her slave. Therefore, Sarai still had every right to control her life including her sexual association with Abram (Teubal 1990). It was proved by the reality that she only had one son during her life with this family for seventeen years. It means that as soon as Sarai knew that Hagar was pregnant, she no longer allowed her slave to sleep with her husband because to her the mission was accomplish already and so was the destiny of Hagar’s role as Abram’s wife. It also means that she had no power over her own child, for as soon as she gave birth, the child would belong to Sarai. It can be seen in Sarai’s word to Abram:

“It may be that I shall obtain children by her.”

Here, one can imagine Hagar’s feelings. As a mother to be, she was forced to acknowledge from the beginning that her own child would never become her son but nothing she could do to stop it, for her life was not in her own hand. She was simply powerless. She was not in the position to voice her feelings or opinions because through her womb, Sarai sought esteem and honor for herself, not Hagar’s. But the narrator continues his story that Abram heard the voice of Sarai and went in to Hagar and she got pregnant.

“But when Hagar saw that she had conceived, her mistress’ honor was lowered in her eyes.”

What Sarai had planned did not work accordingly to her will. Instead of esteem, she was looked down. Instead of honor, she received contempt by her own slave. We do not really know what was going on between Sarai and Hagar. We are not really sure whether Hagar really looked down at Sarai was true or it was only Sarai’s insecure feeling, because we just hear Sarai’s version while Hagar was silent. But I do agree with Weems who argues that as soon as Hagar realized that she carried her
master’s child in her womb, something tremendous must be happening to her that transformed her into another person in Sarai’s eyes. Perhaps the pregnancy made her realize her changed status, from being an unnoticed slave to an important figure, because she got Abram’s full attention. Perhaps, she had a sense of self-worth. This is for the first time; she got up every morning with the feeling that finally she had a purpose and direction in her life. She thought that her status would be raised up at the high level through her son. Besides, there was a prospect of being loved by her son genuinely because her son wouldn’t care about her status or background (Weems 1988). To him, she was simply his mother. This is something that Sarai would never understand because Sarai never experienced being a slave; therefore she could not put her position into Hagar’s shoes. She understood Hagar’s self-transformation as the arrogance that would make her lose her high status. Therefore, this was the time to show Hagar, who was the boss. It was her not Hagar. She went to Abram and said:

May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!

Reading Sarai’s statement to Abram, one may ask why Sarai did not come to Hagar directly to talk to her about this matter. Instead, she had to go to Abram not only to blame him but also to seek a solution. Teubal suggests that Sarai’s action is not uncommon since she only followed Hammurabi regulation in eighteen century B.C.E. concerning the potential conflict between a prospective mother and substitute mother that became an issue at that time. It emphasized that no rights are given to the mother, who is a slave and may be punished for misconduct (Teubal 1990). Here, I believe that maybe Sarai thought that Abram played a significant role in Hagar’s misconduct to her. Perhaps, Abram was too happy that finally he could get a child that made him give an overwhelmed treatment to Hagar that gave the slave an idea that her status might be raised. Therefore, the blame should go to Abram and by talking this matter to him, Sarai wanted to claim her right
back by using law statement, “may the Lord Judge between you and me!”

Our narrator continues his story by telling us that Abram understood Sarai’s legal right over her slave and then gave her every single right to do whatever she pleased to Hagar. And Sarai took Abram sentence as the approval to let her oppress Hagar as she wished because after all, Hagar is only an instrument in her eyes. Therefore, ‘Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her’. We do not know what kind of treatment that Sarai gave to Hagar or how she did that. The only thing we know is Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar. But at least we get some idea about the violence that the owners always gave to their slaves: beatings, verbal insults, ridicule, strenuous work, degrading tasks, and many more. Those afflictions must be so violence enough that Hagar could not stand it any longer and then finally she ran away from her mistress.

**From Hagar to Nirmala Bonat**

This story brings us to the story about Nirmala Bonat, a young girl from West Timor – Indonesia who went to Malaysia to work as maidservant with an expectation in mind that she could make some money to send to her parents so that they could survive in West Timor, a land of poverty. She then worked in the house of a very wealthy woman named Yim Pek Ha. Nirmala Bonat told her story, that one day she broke a mug while washing it and as a result, her mistress threw boiling water on her. And one day her mistress got upset while she was ironing and said to her that the clothes had not been properly ironed and slapped her. Nirmala continued her story,

“She took the iron out of my hand and pressed it against my breast.”

What kind of human who could do such things? What kind of human who could lose her sense of humanity and deal harshly to another human over simple reasons. How could this woman who regarded herself as a highly educated woman from a high-class family behave no less than a monster?
The stories of Sarai and Hagar and Nirmala Bonat and Yim Pek Ha are the stories that happen all over the world. It is not merely limited in one specific place on one specific race or people and it is more than ethnic prejudice. The stories of the oppression, women afflicting other women are everywhere because everybody has a tendency to be evil as soon as we have a chance to do so. The oppressors can be those who are wealthy and in the position to over power those who are poor and work as employees. The oppressors can be those who gain a higher education and have a chance to work in higher positions than those who, again because of financial issue, cannot gain higher education. We all can be Sarais and there are so many Hagers outside and even maybe in the past we are the victims but once we get good positions, we tend to act as the oppressors. Therefore, the story of Sarai and Hagar reminds us to be careful with our self-destructive, potency to act cruelly to others.

But as Christian women, we must set ourselves free from the demon side within us, for we have heard Jesus said in Matthew 22:37-39: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Here, Jesus said these commandments in the context when he was tested by the Pharisees about the greatest commandment. Jesus simply said that the greatest and the first commandment is that our love to God should be total. It should be mingle in our bodies, minds, and souls until we cannot see ourselves without feeling God within us, the part of our nature as humans. But Jesus continues his words by saying that our love to God needs to be expressed. It shall be passed out to others as much as to ourselves. When we want somebody to treat us good because we do not want to feel hurt, then we shall do the same to others. Love will make us make the right choices in our lives; even sometimes that decision comes from a long painful struggle against the demon sides in our hearts that sometimes do not allow us to see others as our neighbors who need our love. Here I echo C.S. Song who says that love is a moral power (Song 2003). Therefore as women, when we are in the higher positions than others, then our loves to God and our love to
others will prevent us from treating others as bad as what Sarai did to Hagar. Here the power of love can help us defeating the destructive power within us.

But our story is not ended just like that. Our narrator continues his story by informing us that during her flight from her mistress, Hagar was found by the angel of God near a spring on the way to Shur. And he said,

“Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?”

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates the Hebrew word Malakh for angel but here I do not want to translate it that way because that translation carries so much first Christian century influence in it. I like to translate it literally as the messenger of the Lord because it can be referred to anyone. When the messenger of Lord found Hagar by the spring, she was a desperate young woman. I imagine that she sat in front of the spring, and cried over her uncertain future. But her crying was interrupted when she heard somebody approach her and then talked to her. She did not know that this somebody who talked to her was the messenger of the Lord. All she knew was that this person was interested in where she came from and where she wanted to go. This question did not surprise Hagar for she understood that it was awkward for somebody to see a woman wandering by herself in the middle of nowhere. No, it was the normal question. She was only surprised because this unknown person knew her name and her mistress. He addressed her with ‘Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai’. Suddenly she was alarmed that maybe this person was sent by her mistress to bring her back. And if that were true then maybe there would be two kinds of treatments that she might get. Perhaps her mistress finally realized her wrongdoing of treating her so violently while she carried her mistress heir. Or perhaps, her mistress was so angry because she ran from her; therefore she wants her back to treat her even worse than before. In her fear, she answered this unknown person:

“I am running away from my mistress Sarai”.

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We hear how Hagar answered the question which indicates how she understood herself. She answered the question by simply saying that she was a runaway slave. Here, we know that even physically Hagar was free, but she still recognized herself no less than a slave who could not live without her mistress. It seems that Sarai’s bad treatment to her had destroyed her sense of self-worth that she found recently. It seems that the violence that happened to her dehumanized her again and brought her back to her former thought of herself as a property of her mistress. So when she heard somebody addressed her with ‘Hagar, the slave of Sarai’, she could not help but agreed with that. In my opinion, Hagar could do better than that. Instead of putting herself back to her former identity as a bound-person, she should realize that running away from her mistress actually could be meant as a chance to pursue a real freedom that she already had in mind, a chance to seek help in order to change her destiny. And she could only do that by beginning to tell her own story.

I think in this sense, Hagar’s reaction is different from Nirmala Bonat. After being afflicted by her mistress, she, like Hagar, also ran away and was found by a guard at the upscale condominium where she worked. The guard who saw her crying then asked her what happened. Nirmala, unlike Hagar, saw this chance as a chance to tell her story, her true story because she understood that by doing that she could seek help from those who had empathy to her. Therefore, instead of saying, “I am running away from my mistress”, she said, “My mistress has afflicted me so bad. She threw boiling water on me and she took the iron out of my hand and pressed it against my breast”. By telling her story, the guard who found her then checked whether her story was true or not. And when he saw her ugly face bruises all over her swollen face and the blood that was bleeding from her head and mouth, he knew that she did not lie. And therefore, he called police to take care the problem and then police brought this problem to Indonesian embassy in Malaysia to do the further investigation.

Here we understand that Nirmala was powerless but she did not live alone in this world. By letting others know about
her story, she let them to help her, because they are more powerful than her. What Nirmala has done is in line with Herman who writes that:

By making a public complaint or accusation, the survivor defies the perpetrator's attempt to silence and isolate her, and she opens the possibility of finding new allies. When others bear witness to the testimony of a crime, others share the responsibility for restoring justice. Furthermore, the survivor may come to understand her own legal battle as a contribution to a larger struggle, in which her actions may benefit others as well her herself [Herman 1997].

She summed up her story by asking a question, “When I go back, what am I going to tell my parents when they see all the scars? ’ This question let us think. This question makes us - the story listeners - to feel that we carry the same responsibility to feel her burden. By so doing, we let ourselves to act as “siblings by choice” who show our support by helping the victim to gather a support network that can enable her to stand up in public and speak the truth without fear of consequences (Smith and Riedel-Pfaefflin 2004).

Hagar’s story could be the same like Nirmala but by telling that she was a run-away slave, she surely gave a wrong impression to this messenger who found her because this messenger thought that she might do something wrong that made her ran away from her mistress. Therefore we notice that in his suspicious, the messenger said to her,

“Return to your mistress and submit to her”.

In other words, the messenger wanted to say that she has done something wrong and running away would not solve the problem. She had to go back to her mistress and confessed to

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1 Siblings by choice is the term that used by Smith Jr. and Riedel-Pfaefflin. They argue that every people are born in different cultures and backgrounds which tends to cause conflict. But in terms of facing it, we always have an option either to struggle against one another as enemies or to struggle together as siblings to face unpredictable problem. The decision to struggle together is called siblings by choice. See Smith Jr. and Riedel-Pfaefflin: Siblings by Choice: Race, Gender, and Violence, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press. 2004), 8-9.
her and then let her discipline her. Hagar’s failure to tell her story has caused her being treated even worse. She was promised by the messenger that her offspring would be great, but if one notices, it did not relate her current problem. If only she told the truth perhaps the messenger would answer her differently. Here, we learn not to look down on the power of telling the story. How a single story, the true story, can change one person’s destiny.

At the end of the story the narrator informs us that Hagar, after finally realizing that the person who talked to her is the Lord, called him El-roi (God of seeing or God who sees) because she said, “Have I here seen him after he who saw me?” It is difficult to understand what Hagar really tried to say because the meaning of her words in Hebrew is uncertain in most of English Bible translation. NRSV even translated it, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” Those words can apply two meanings. First, Hagar really believed that she was seeing God who saw her. Second, she doubted that she has really seen God after he saw her. In this confusion, I choose to believe that Hagar’s theology of God was God whom saw her through the person who came to meet her (that we readers know as the messenger of the Lord). But she doubted that God, who she saw, really saw her. He only saw what was outside her, her background, addressed her with name, but failed to see her pain and suffering. This God was God who did not offer her comfort or shelter. This God was God who chose to be in Sarai, the oppressor’s side; this God was God who did not dwell with the poor, therefore this God was God of seeing, but failed to see her. And to me, this is possible to happen because the narrator of this story, who witnessed Hagar’s painful experience, was the one who took sides. As I said in the beginning, this story is patriarchal story, Abram’s story. The story about Hagar and Sarai is apart of the larger story about God who promised to elect his servant Abram. Therefore, the ending of this story should support the interest of the patriarchal. But we learned that there is another version of the ending of the story, namely Hagar’s version. The ending of her story was a bitter ending, full of question and confusion, “Have I here seen God after he who saw me?”
It seems to me that Hagar’s failure to set up her own destiny is influenced by the way she understood herself that inferior in God’s eyes, therefore she did not deserve God’s love, empathy, and protection through others. In other words, her own theology about God has made her kept her story for herself and remained suffered. In contrary, I believe that Nirmala Bonat’s bravery to reveal her story openly is only possible because she trusted in God fully. Her theology about God was God who really saw her suffering. And this God would help her through other people, whom after hearing her story, began to play their role as advocates. They were not only consoling and comforting her, but also finding a support network that empowered her to face her perpetrator in the court room in order to point out the truth that would change her history of life forever.

The using of the comparison method in order to interact two different stories is something that is worth trying in doing theology. Through this way we do not force ourselves to accept the stories in the Bible that mostly were written by males that sometimes promote and support violence, but to analyze them carefully in order to evaluate our own theology about God and human in terms of facing our own problem. For our theology will definitely influence the way we see ourselves, understand our problems and then act on them.

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