CHAPTER 5

Making Meaning of the Hagar/Hajar Narratives

The first texts from the Islamic and Christian canonical scriptures that were read and discussed in the group were the narratives about Hagar/Hajar. The texts from both the Old Testament and the Hadith were sent to the participants by mail before the meeting with the invitation. This was done to give the participants the opportunity to prepare for the discussions of the texts if they wanted to and to show which textual versions of the stories would be the starting point of the discussion. The participants’ possible pre-knowledge about the narratives was not mapped beforehand.

The texts were in Norwegian, and the text from Genesis was edited to include the whole story about Hagar and exclude other parts of the narrative about the family of Abraham. The Hajar story from the Hadith includes one verse from the Koran. The biblical text in Norwegian was taken from the most commonly used version, i.e., that by the Norwegian Bible Society 1978 (Bibelen 1978). The Norwegian version of the Hadith narrative was taken from a textbook of source texts used by Norwegian teachers in religious education (Thomassen and Rasmussen 1999: 198-99). In this work I will use English editions of these texts: the New Revised Standard Version (Bible 1989) and an English translation of the hadith by Al-Bukhari (CMJE 2008-2009). My criterion for selecting these versions was their degree of proximity to the Norwegian text versions used in the group. I looked for similarity in both content and wording.1

The reading, conversation, and discussion of the Hagar/Hajar narratives took place during the last half of the second meeting and during the third meeting.

1 Some verses in the Norwegian translation of the Genesis text, however, are closer to the King James Version (Prickett and Carroll 1997).
Four of the discussions/conversations from the meaning-making process of the Hagar/Hajar narratives are presented in this chapter. They are selected because of their relevance for showing various meaning-making strategies and for portraying discussions I found interesting, important, and conducive to the aim of the study. The presentation of the discussions follows the chronology of the group’s communicative process, except for the first and second discussions, which overlapped in time. The first discussion concerns the practice of naming women in relation to their children, and it took place before and after the second discussion. The second is a discussion that started with questioning how Hagar/Hajar could leave Ishmael, her son, in the desert, and engages the participants in discussing possible answers. The third is a more general, reflective sequence that addresses several themes, but this discussion is marked by longer contributions and more thorough reflections on the narratives, many of them testimonial in character. The fourth discussion is concerned with the notions of obedience and forgiveness and their relevance in illustrating differences between the Christian and Islamic traditions.

At the second meeting both Hagar/Hajar stories were read aloud in the group by Susanne and Eva, who shared the reading of the Genesis story about Hagar between them, and Aira who read the text from the Hadith. This meant that Christian participants read the text from the Christian tradition and a Muslim participant read the text from the Islamic tradition. The readers volunteered and, following my suggestion, the biblical text was read before the text from the Hadith.² The third meeting also started with reading the two texts, but this time

² The question of which text that should be read first represented a challenge. Obviously, one of the texts had to be read before the other. Since both texts were made accessible to the participants in advance, and thus presented simultaneously to them before the meeting, I suggested that the biblical text be read first, for historical reasons. No one objected. The chronological argument represents some problems, however, because this in itself may give the impression of a hierarchy among the texts. There was, however, no break between the readings of the two texts, so the discussion started with both texts at the same time.