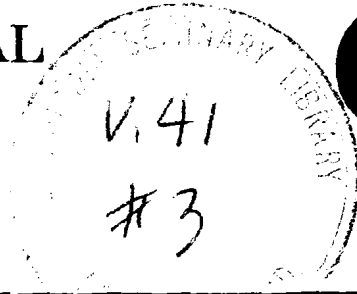


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An Invitation to Ishmael

C. George Fry

In recent years there has been a considerable interest in Biblical prophecy concerning Israel. Great international gatherings have been held in places as diverse as Los Angeles and Jerusalem to discuss this issue. Much controversy—and some insight—have been generated regarding the relationship of post-biblical Jewish history to the promises recorded in the Old Testament. Concurrently, there has been a considerable interest in Biblical prophecy concerning the New Israel, the Church. Conferences on this topic have been convened in cities as distant as Philadelphia and Adelaide. Much heat—and some light—have been generated regarding the relationship of post-apostolic Christian history to the promises recorded in the New Testament. But it has surprised me, that while there has been much interest in what God's Word has to say about Abraham's heirs through Isaac—the Jews and the Christians—there has been virtually no concern for what the Scriptures say about the Patriarch's progeny through Ishmael. This is a sad situation. It has led to a very dangerous ignorance in the Church, for Ishmael is prominent in the plans of God.

If nothing else, this should be evident from his name. Dr. Martin Luther, preaching on the Genesis text that recites the covenant made with Ishmael, observed:

The name 'Ishmael' is very meaningful, for it means 'God hears.' Of that name Hagar's descendants, no doubt, were very proud. Abraham's sons Isaac and Jacob did not receive such beautiful names.'

As Stephen was the man with the angelic face (Acts 6:15), so Ishmael was the patriarch with the heavenly name. Ishmael is not merely the man whose name is a promise, he is the person whose name keeps recurring in the Bible. His initial homeland, Arabia, is mentioned in twenty-five books of the Old Testament, five books of the New. References to the Ishmaelites are made by Moses, David, the Chronicler, and the authors of Judges and Job. Much is said concerning Ishmael in the Christian Scriptures.

An important point made by both Testaments is the amazing parallelism between Israel and Ishmael. There were twelve tribes of Israel; there were twelve tribes of Ishmael (Gen.17:20; Gen.25:12-18). Both were promised a land, one Palestine, the other Arabia. Both claimed physical descent from Abraham, one through his first wife, Sarah, the other through his second spouse, Hagar. Both demanded preeminence in the house of

Abraham—Israel, for being mothered by Abraham's free-born and first wife; Ishmael, because he was the first-born, the elder son of the family. Both share the rite of circumcision, given by God to their father Abraham. For both this is a physical token of their covenant with God. Both use the same name for God, *El* or *Elohim* in Hebrew, *Allah* in Arabic. Both are strict monotheists. Both stand under the protection of God. Both receive promises from God. Both have fathered new world religions. That is the crucial point for us. Martin Luther, was the first Protestant commentator to see the significance of Ishmael for modern man. Preaching on one of the Abrahamic texts in Genesis, Father Luther said: "Today the descendants of Ishmael are one with the Turks. . . . They live in the deep darkness and blasphemy of Islam."² Ishmael, for us, is Islam.

For that reason it behooves us as Christians to study very carefully the original passage in Genesis that explains just precisely what it is that God promised Abraham concerning Ishmael and his heirs. (Gen.17:18-21).

And Abraham said to God, 'Oh that Ishmael might live in thy sight!' God said, 'No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful; and multiply him exceedingly; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.'

From this text we Christians can determine exactly what it is that God has promised the children of Ishmael. Having done that, we can ascertain our duty toward them. There are six promises made in this text.

1. One promise is demographical. The heirs of Ishmael shall be numerous. This promise is repeated at least twice in Genesis, that Ishmael would have "a seed that could not be numbered for multitude" (cf. Gen.16:10, Gen.21:18). Ishmael is the physical father of the Arabs. No one is sure how many people speak Arabic today. Professor Sydney S. Culbert of the University of Washington estimated that at least 121 million people use Arabic as their native language. That means that Arabic is now a major world-language, alongside Spanish, Russian, Chinese, French, and English. Observers predict that it will soon be the sixth official language of the United Nations.

Ishmael is also the spiritual father of the Muslims. No one is sure how many people on planet earth are Muslim. A rough rule

of thumb is that one of every seven inhabitants of our planet is a Muslim. That means there are at least 600 million Muslims, and some authorities place the figure even higher, at about 800 million believers. Islam is second in size only to Christianity. Islam is larger than any one branch of Christianity. There are more Muslims than Roman Catholics, there are twice as many Muslims as Protestants, and there are about six times as many Muslims as Orthodox Christians. Or, to put it yet another way, one out of every three people living in the non-Communist world is a Muslim.

The Lord has kept his promise to Ishmael's mother, that "I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude" (Gen.16:10). Ishmael means "God hears." Behold him, and marvel at the way in which the Lord Jehovah honors his promises.

2. A second promise was geographical. The heirs of Ishmael shall be "a great nation," or "a large state." The initial home of the Ishmaelites was Arabia, a land that

. . . embraces an area about the same size as that of the United States east of the Mississippi River plus Texas and California. The southern shore facing the Indian Ocean from Aden to Muscat is as far as from New Orleans to Boston; on the west, the Red Sea is as wide as Lake Erie is long, and the distance from Aden to Port Said is nearly the same as from New York to Denver.³

From their original patrimony, the Arabs have moved

. . . far and wide; they have ascended more than a hundred thrones; and have established their colonies, their language, their religion from the Senegal to the Indus, and from the Euphrates to the islands of the Indian Ocean.⁴

The Arab Empire stretches from Mauritania to Mesopotamia, from Georgia to Nigeria.

The Lord has delivered into Ishmael's hands the Middle East, the "land in the center," the meeting place of three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa; of three races, white, yellow, and black; of three great centers of civilization, Europe, India, and China; of three economic systems, Capitalism, Communism, and Socialism; and the crossroads of world commerce from the Atlantic and Indian Oceans through the narrow passages of Gibraltar, Malta, and Suez.

The Lord has delivered into Ishmael's hands the Middle Earth, for the Islamic Empire stretches further than the Arab world, to girdle the earth at its equator. For two thousand miles across North Africa, then through Southwest Asia, then over Persia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, then on to Bangladesh,

the Philippines, and the islands of Indonesia the world of Islam extends, finally leapfrogging the Pacific and starting up once more in the Republic of Guyana on the northern slopes of South America. When we remember, as Paul admonishes us, that God has "determined allotted periods and the boundaries" of men's habitations (Acts 17:26), then we cannot fail but be impressed in the manner in which the Lord has honored his promise to make of Ishmael "a great nation."

3. Yet another promise is political. The heirs of Ishmael shall be powerful in the earth. Liberty is the source of political power. Of all the peoples of the Middle East, only the Arabs have never been conquered. Armies came and went, but the Arabs remained independent. Alexander and Julius Caesar, Justinian and Genghis Khan, Napoleon and Hitler, Churchill and Eisenhower, all sent mighty armies and armadas into the region, but not one of them subdued Arabia. God has honored Ishmael, the son of a slave, by guaranteeing his offspring freedom.

But others have lost their liberty to the Arabs! As Ishmael was an archer, fearful in battle, so his heirs have been successful in war. Today there are at least twenty-one Arab countries and about forty-three Muslim states. That is a very impressive commonwealth of nations.

Thrice in history God has allowed the heirs of Ishmael to build empires. Once was in the Middle Ages, when the Lord raised up three Arab Empires - the Caliphate, the Umayyads, and the Abbasids - to chasen a corrupt Christendom. Another occasion was during the Renaissance and Reformation, when there was a Muslim Renascence, and three mighty non-Arab Empires appeared - that of the Turks, the Persians, and the Moghuls, controlling all the territory between Vienna and Delhi. Now, in our own times, a third Muslim awakening is at hand, as the children of Ishmael set once more upon the task of building an empire.

4. Still another promise is economical. The heirs of Ishmael shall be rich. In the past that was true because they were the great merchants of the earth. After all, it was the Ishmaelites who carried Joseph off to Egypt in order to sell him into slavery (Gen.37:25). They traded many commodities, from antiquity to the present. Living in the Middle East, they were the middle-men of the earth.

In our own times the Arabs are moving once more from poverty to prosperity. Through a strange quirk of history, the West invented the very means of Arab enrichment, the gasoline engine. As Charles Issewi, the Lebanese historian remarked, "where there are Muslims, there is oil." The Arab world

literally floats on oil, and the land that God promised Ishmael is, in fact, a gigantic bank. The wealthiest nations of the world are no longer the United States and Canada, but instead Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Persian Gulf tribalities. They have the earth's highest standard of living, and not even West Germany and Japan can match the Arab East in income. Even after the vast amounts of petroleum have been consumed, the Arabs will remain financially powerful, for they will be the economic masters of the earth. Within a quarter century they will have bought out the industrial world. Few of us in the West realize what a massive transfer of the earth's wealth is under way. It is already too late to stop it, let alone reverse it. The pendulum of pecuniary power has swung back to the East. "I will bless him," said the Lord of Ishmael. The epic of Ishmael reminds us dramatically that the Lord keeps his promises.

5. Yet another promise is psychological. The heirs of Ishmael shall retain their identity. Throughout history, they will be distinct and unique. The other nations of the ancient East—the Phoenicians, the Phrygians, the Akkadians, the Babylonians, the Hittites, the Romans—and we could continue the list indefinitely—have disappeared. But the children of Ishmael endure. Bishop Newton once observed:

It was somewhat wonderful, and not to be seen by human sagacity, that a man's whole posterity should so nearly resemble him, and retain the same inclinations, the same habits, and the same customs, throughout all ages! These are the only people besides the Jews who have subsisted as a distinct people from the beginning. . . .⁵

An amazing continuity is part of the Lord's answer to Abraham's prayer, "Oh that Ishmael might live in thy sight!"

What is Ishmael's character? Literally the book of Genesis describes Ishmael as "a wild ass of a man." S. R. Driver explored the analogy, remarking that "the wild ass is a wayward, intractable creature, whose home is the prairie"⁶ In Job (39:5-7) the further explanation is given of the one

. . . whose bonds God hath loosed, whose home he hath made the wilderness, and the barren land his dwellings; he scorneth the multitude of the city, neither regardeth (he) the crying of the driver; the range of the mountains is his picture.

That portrait penned in antiquity is almost identical to that offered in two studies of the Arab personality published last autumn. The Arab, like Abraham his father, is a rugged individualist, a loner, a pilgrim, a pioneer, a brave denizen of the wilderness, a natural-born puritan, courageous, brave, given to generous hospitality, greatly gifted, filled with poetic

imagination, possessed of amazing intellectual insight, but who, like the rest of us, is filled with the fatal flaw of pride. The Arab predicament is the universal human dilemma, that of self-justification.

6. This trait shows us in the last promise concerning Ishmael, that he is a theological man. Ishmael, like Abraham his father, is religious. Today Ishmael's heirs, the Muslims, are very pious men. They pray five times daily. They give great sums of money to help the poor. They fast at least one month each year. By the hundreds of thousands they make a long and dangerous pilgrimage to their holy city. They honor the prophets, including Moses, David, and Jesus. They respect the Scriptures, especially the Pentateuch, the Psalter, and the Gospel. But while they are religious, they are not spiritual, for in their pride they have forgotten one crucial respect in which they differ from the Jews and the heirs of the promises made to them: the covenant of grace.

The Lord said, "But I will establish my covenant with Isaac." Or, as Jesus said twenty centuries later, "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). That truth has been too much for Ishmael to accept. No wonder, for even Abraham was staggered at the thought. The patriarch had prayed, "Oh that Ishmael might live in thy sight!" (Gen.17-18). By that he meant not merely earthly prosperity, as Calvin indicated, but also spiritual priority, as Luther pointed out. Abraham hoped that the Messiah would be born of the house of Ishmael, not the line of Isaac. But "God said, 'No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him. . . .'" (Gen. 17:19). Ishmael was promised much—power, wealth, empire—but he was not to produce the Savior. That has been too much for Ishmael's pride to accept.

In the seventh century after Jesus there appeared in the East a man named Muhammad. He said he was descended directly from Abraham through Ishmael by way of Kedar and the Kurayish. Muhammad went on to say that Ishmael was "a messenger and a prophet" (Surah 29:55), who was offered up by his father Abraham on Mt. Moriah, who then aided the Patriarch in the construction of the House of God at Mecca, who at his death was buried, with Hagar his mother, in the Holy Kaaba in Arabia. Muhammad then identified the well of Zemzem near Mecca as the place where God had raised a fountain for Hagar and promised her that salvation would come through the House of Ishmael. Then Muhammad informed his countrymen that the Jews and Christians had garbled the revelation of God, but that in these last days the Lord Allah had sent an infallible Word to earth in the *Quran*. This book

taught the truth about Jesus, who was born of the Virgin Mary, worked great miracles, spoke beautiful words, and was saved from death by Judas Iscariot. Having escaped the cross, Jesus ascended to heaven, promising the Comforter, Muhammad, who would "guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). And what was "all the truth"? Salvation by the Law.

Pride caused Ishmael's error, the heresy of Islam. It is the same sin we can recognize in ourselves. For the natural man despises the Gospel, for it is an offense to our reason, a shame to our sophistication, an insult to our deeds. Yes, pride must be crucified, if we are to receive salvation—by grace alone. In a providential way Paul, the Apostle, has given us the invitation we can offer to Ishmael. In the fourth chapter of Galatians he specifically talks about Hagar, and he compares her to Mt. Sinai in Arabia, "in slavery with her children." But then he proceeds to speak of Isaac and the children of promise, and exclaims that we are saved not by law, but by love, and that we are summoned not to slavery, but to liberty. Grace, amazing grace—that is my invitation to you, and that is our invitation to the lost sheep of the House of Ishmael with the hope, that one day, Christ's Great Day, all the children of Abraham shall come to salvation, and our Lord's desire will be reality, as "many" come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven"(Matt.8:11).

FOOTNOTES

1. Martin Luther, *Luther's Commentary on Genesis*, translated by J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), I, p. 284.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 311.
3. Sydney Nettleton Fisher, *The Middle East: A History*, second edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), p. 3.
4. Patrick Fairbairn, "Ishmael," *Fairbairn's Imperial Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, edited by Patrick Fairbairn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957), III, pp. 172-173.
5. Adam Clarke, *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments with a Commentary and Critical Notes* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d.), I, p. 116.
6. S. R. Driver, "Ishmael," *A Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909), II, p. 503.