

Ishmael & Isaac

*in the
Three Monotheistic Faiths*

PASSIA

Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs

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This publication is presented as part of PASSIA's Religious Studies Unit 2019 and kindly supported by the Alquds Fund and Endowment.



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First Edition – 2019

PASSIA Publication 2019
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Introduction

For the past 10 years, the Religious Studies Unit at PASSIA has strived towards maintaining and advancing interfaith dialogue between the three monotheistic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This sincere commitment is derived from our belief that contemporary societies continue to recognise the importance of religious dogma and its surrounding culture as a key component of community and the basic spirituality of mankind. As an organisation whose purpose revolves around a peaceful political solution to the Palestinian question, appreciating how all nations in the Middle East share an intimate link with religious phenomena allow us to conclude that this study is one that should be persevered; both for believers and non-believers alike.

What we hope to achieve from this series of monographs¹ is to provide a literary avenue for eminent, regional theologians to evaluate the significance of religious figures from within their belief systems. This is done in order to give the reader a ‘direct line’ to opinion within religious communities, free

¹ Previously published were *Abraham* (1999), *Joseph* (2002), *Moses* (2003), *Jesus* (2007).

from distortion and misinterpretation. In doing so, the reader can ascertain the overreaching similarities and differences of the author's interpretations of the holy text and to deduce which one is personally gratifying to their own experience.

The story of Abraham and his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac (peace be upon them), serves as perhaps the best representation of the theological nexus between the 'People of the Book' (*Ahl-al-Kitab*) since Islam's inception in the 7th Century AD. It is a story that becomes ever so more poignant in application to the present Palestinian/Israeli conflict that so frequently mirrors a "sibling rivalry", a rivalry that has been a part of the monotheistic, scriptural narrative for centuries. This narrative (which often unfortunately emulates the shape of a 'double helix') has been instrumental in shaping both the socio-political context of the region and its current reality, as such, it is a story that should be scrutinised with distinct reverence and care². Traditions derived from the collective memory of different people serve as a constant reminder that inter-faith dialogue remains a crucial medium to extrapolate the religious imaginings of two peoples with the pragmatic formation of their political identity.³

² Robert I. Rotberg, "Building Legitimacy through Narrative," in *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict: History's Double Helix*, edited by Robert I. Rotberg (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 2.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, "After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (extracts)," in *The MacIntyre Reader*, edited by Kevin Knight (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1998), 94.

Contextually, **Ishmael** (*Yishma'el* in Hebrew and *Ismail* in Arabic), the first-born son of Abraham and his wife Sarah's handmaiden, Hagar, is characterised in the Holy Qur'an as an important prophet of Islam and whose descendants (the Ishmaelites) are regarded by both the Jewish and Islamic traditions as the ancestors of the Arab people. **Isaac** (*Yiṣḥāq* in Hebrew and *Ishaq* in Arabic), on the other hand, holds the position in the Jewish faith as the second patriarch of the Jewish people, famous for his central role in the "Binding of Isaac" that bears testament to Abraham's unwavering devotion towards Ha Shem/The Lord/Allah. Followers of the Christian faith maintain this perspective, consistent with the Biblical "Old Testament".

The great gulf between theological traditions among Jews, Christians and Muslims revolves around who Abraham chose to be sacrificed. Whilst all three religions agree that Abraham's unconditional devotion to God led to his willingness to sacrifice a son, Muslims dispute the Hebrew Bible's account that said son was Isaac. Nevertheless, at the heart of this allegorical story there remains a parable that exemplifies the qualities of sacrifice, persistence and unconditional love that mankind, in faith, has the propensity to possess. In the current times of adversity that many involved in the Palestinian peace process lament, we must draw upon the experiences of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac to unravel the shared ontological values that followers of the three distinctly share. For in order to comprehend the totality of the self, one must treasure the "face of the other".

In concluding this introduction, we take deep solace in that the most illuminating contemporary study of the “Other” has been compiled by a Palestinian (Edward Said’s “Orientalism”), as such, we at PASSIA believe the perseverance of religio-political harmony remains the noblest of aims.

Ishmael and Isaac in Jewish Tradition: Implications for our Time

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In chapter 12 of Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible, the patriarch Abraham is called by God to leave his homeland, his community of origin, and his father's household and to journey to an unknown land which the Eternal will show him. In exchange for this sacrificial act of faith, Abraham is promised by God a blessed future and is told, "through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." This is as inclusive a blessing and promise that the Bible records. The text does not say that all of humanity will coalesce into one Abrahamic family; instead, it says that the vast multitude of families within the human species will share a Divine blessing through this faithful patriarch.

Given what transpires in subsequent chapters, and what has unfolded on the pages of history since those verses were first written, two central questions have emerged: (1) if all human families were to be blessed through Abraham, why was his own family so tragically conflicted, with two wives and their sons seemingly

pitted against each other in the Biblical narrative? and (2) since Jews, Christians, and Muslims have competed for Divine favor and “chosenness” over many centuries, how can anyone imagine that the Abrahamic blessing can ever be shared among them?

These two questions and their internal tensions prompt this reflection. The primary lens for examining the relationship between Abraham’s first two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, is that of Jewish tradition, both ancient and contemporary.¹ As an Israeli Jew who has devoted many years to promoting Jewish-Arab and Jewish-Christian-Muslim reconciliation, I recognize that this exploration is more than an academic pursuit. It has direct ramifications for healing the bitter conflict between Jews and Palestinians over the Holy Land of Promise. On the surface level, this 100-year-old conflict is being fought over territory and national sovereignty. On a deeper level, it is a clash of two national liberation movements, each struggling for freedom and dignity in self-referencing terms. And on an even more profound, existential level, the conflict is being waged over collective identities, historical memories (both traumatic and uplifting), core emotional investments, and aspirations for future generations.

Transforming the deeper dynamics of this conflict from mutual negation to mutual solidarity and interdependence requires a political strategy fundamentally different from those attempted over the last century. In parallel with diplomatic initiatives that address competing interests, what is needed is a psycho-spiritual approach

¹ I am pleased that this essay will appear alongside reflections from the Muslim and Christian traditions. It is mutually enriching when Jews, Christians, and Muslims read Biblical and Qur’anic texts in tandem and engage in inter-religious dialogue about their respective, often complementary, messages. Such an exercise or spiritual practice can be termed “intertextuality.”

to peacemaking that heals wounds and opens hearts. Such an approach takes into account how religious texts and the sacred stories they convey contribute to a community's self-understanding, to its sense of collective heritage and group loyalty, and to its hopes for a more blessed future. This study is offered as a modest contribution toward that kind of social and political transformation in Israel/Palestine and the wider Middle East.

For Jews the Genesis texts about Abraham and his family are foundational sources. The rabbinic sages of the post-Biblical period considered the stories about Ishmael and Isaac so important that they prescribed Genesis chapters 21 and 22 as the central Torah passages to be read aloud in synagogues on the two-day New Year festival of Rosh Hashanah. This means that at the beginning of every year, as we Jews the world over engage in introspection and acts of repentance and spiritual renewal, we are compelled by our tradition to ponder, first, the episode of Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion from the household of Abraham and Sarah, and then the account of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. We will look at the implications of these two critical stories, and their connection to Jewish prayer and practice, below.

These powerful Biblical narratives are also central for Jewish understandings about covenantal continuity and fidelity. The Biblical concept of covenant connotes a relationship of mutual obligation and blessing between the Divine and the human. In the Hebrew Scriptures the covenantal focus progressively shifts from a more universal scope, as in the Noahide covenant made with all living creatures after the Flood, with the celestial rainbow as a visible sign; to a more localized focus on one family, Abraham and his progeny, with circumcision as the defining physical mark; and then to a particular people, the Israelites (later called Jews), who receive

God's Torah at Sinai, with the two Tablets of the Covenant, *luchot habrit*, as the accompanying sign or symbol. In the establishment of the Sinai covenant, the Jewish people is summoned by God to be a priestly and prophetic community living according to the Torah's commandments. This sacrificial lifestyle, combining renunciation with celebration and service, is understood to serve as an exemplary vanguard for all of humanity. The tradition envisions a messianic future when other peoples will join with Jews in serving the One God through acts of justice and compassion.

This is the wider context in which to view the Isaac-Ishmael stories. Judaism tends to see the covenantal promise running from Abraham through Isaac, then Jacob, and then to all the Children of Israel (Jacob's second name). This Judeo-centric understanding of covenant or "chosenness" can easily become self-referencing and self-preferencing, and it often appears that way to non-Jews.² Since the promise of land, as a collective inheritance, is part of the covenantal dispensation recorded in the Bible, it creates a potential for conflict with other claimants to the same land. And, of course, we see this conflict playing out today in the territorial dispute between Israelis and Palestinians. Each people has its own religious and cultural lens through which to view its attachments to the land, viewed as sacred in different ways, and its own notions of legitimate rights or claims to that land. For religiously oriented peacemakers who take the land's holiness seriously, the crucial question is: How can the two peoples, as followers of different monotheistic

² There is no small irony in the accusations of Jewish self-centeredness, since Christians and Muslims have often displayed their own brands of self-aggrandizing triumphalism. Adherents of all the monotheistic traditions, especially in our time, are challenged to develop inclusive theologies of religious plurality that accord legitimacy to other faiths which proclaim the Oneness of the Divine and translate that core belief into acts of justice and loving kindness.

traditions, consecrate the land together rather than desecrate it through injustice and bloodshed?

For a Jewish response to this challenge, we need to look more closely at the Biblical text and at the different interpretations of its teachings that have emerged over the centuries. Let us start with the figure of the first-born Ishmael, then with the second-born Isaac, and then with how their relationship is presented in various sources.

ISHMAEL'S CHARACTER AND DESTINY

The first references to Ishmael are in chapter 16 of Genesis. Sarah, who is barren, gives her Egyptian bondswoman Hagar to Abraham as a second wife and surrogate mother. When Hagar becomes pregnant, she acts disrespectfully toward Sarah. Sarah becomes angry and, with Abraham's permission to do what she deems appropriate, she treats Hagar so harshly that the pregnant bondswoman flees to the desert. An "angel of the Eternal" (the first such Biblical designation) finds Hagar by a fountain of water and tells her to return to Sarah and submit to her abuse. Whatever despair Hagar may be feeling then is countered by the Divine promises she receives. She is told that the baby she is carrying³ is a boy who is to be called "Ishmael," meaning "God will hear," because "the Eternal has heard your [cries of] affliction."

There are voices in Jewish tradition that criticize Sarah and Abraham for the harsh treatment meted out to Hagar. For example, the medieval commentator Nachmanides writes:

³ Some rabbinic commentaries claim, oddly, that Hagar miscarried and is being reassured by the angel that, once she returns to Sarah and Abraham, she will conceive again and then give birth to Ishmael.

“Sarah our foremother transgressed in afflicting Hagar, as did Abraham in permitting it; therefore, God heard her affliction and gave her a son who would be a *wild-ass of a man* [see below] to afflict the descendants of Abraham and Sarah.”

In her *Studies in Genesis*, Nehama Leibowitz, a 20th-century Bible professor at Tel Aviv University, cites Nachmanides’ condemnation of Sarah and Abraham and then adds:

Radak [David Kimchi, 12th-13th century France] takes a similar attitude and considers that Sarah did not behave in a manner befitting her character. Although Abraham in this matter gave her free reign [to] “do to her that which is good in [your] eyes,” she should have desisted out of respect to him [not out of compassion for Hagar -YL]. She should have been magnanimous and not taken advantage of her power over her handmaid. Thus our commentators find no excuses to condone Sarah’s behavior, look for no psychological explanations in extenuation of her deeds. No appraisal of Sarah’s character could condone the sin of “Sarah dealt harshly with her.” Perhaps the Torah wished to teach us that before man undertakes a mission that will tax all his moral and spiritual powers he should ask himself first whether he can maintain those same high standards to the bitter end... Had Sarah not wished to suppress her instincts and overcome every vestige of jealousy for her rival, had she not dared to scale these unusual heights of selflessness, she would not have fallen victim to the sin of “Sarah dealt harshly with her” – and there may not have been born that individual whose descendants have proved a source of trouble to Israel to this very day. Who knows?

While the ethical critique of Sarah and Abraham shared by commentators over the centuries, the sympathy extended to the mistreated Hagar, and the notion of moral consequences extending across generations are all highly commendable⁴, the negative stereotyping of Arabs (seen as Ishmaelites) as Divinely ordained adversaries of the Jewish people is a lamentable way of reading both a sacred text and historical events. Seeing the birth and the life of Ishmael through such a negative lens, as a curse or punishment from God rather than a Divine blessing – is a very narrow, self-referencing perception that makes it impossible to see, let alone grasp, God-given opportunities to transform rivalry and conflict to partnership and reconciliation.

Returning to the text in chapter 16 (v. 12), the angel reveals more information to Hagar about the child she is carrying:

“And he shall be a wild-ass of a man (*pere adam*); his hand shall be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the face of all his brethren.”

⁴ One of the notable aspects of Jewish tradition is the readiness to see the flaws in even the most exemplary Biblical figures, including the patriarchs, matriarchs, and prophets. The rabbinic notion of moral payback or reciprocity for harmful behavior, in the same person or group’s lifetime or in a future generation, is called *midah keneged midah*, “measure for measure.” A more typical rabbinic application of this principle to the text being considered is this: since Hagar was an Egyptian, the hardship suffered by the Israelite slaves in Egypt could be viewed as collective punishment or retributive justice for the abuse she suffered, compounded by her expulsion from the household of Sarah and Abraham in chapter 21. (The same Hebrew word is used to describe the abuse Hagar suffered and the oppression of the Israelite slaves). But this idea is also problematic, given the Jewish teaching that children are not to be punished for the sins of their parents or, even more, their ancestors. A more common understanding is that the virtues, rather than the lapses, of the patriarchs are deemed merits (*z’khuyot*) extending to their descendants, particularly when Jews as a people are judged by God for their transgressions.

Hagar's response is to call the God Who has spoken to her a "God of Seeing" (or "the God Who sees me," *El Ro'i*), adding that she and God have seen each other.⁵ The text then records that the well which sustained Hagar in the desert was named *Be'er LaChai Ro'i*, the "well of the Living One Who sees me."⁶ The chapter then concludes with the terse report of Hagar's giving birth and Abraham, age 86, calling his newborn son Ishmael.

The twelfth verse of chapter 16, with its somewhat cryptic three-part description of Ishmael's character and destiny while still in Hagar's womb, requires interpretation. The first two parts – a "wild-ass man" in conflict with those around him – sound negative, and they have indeed occasioned harsh judgments of Ishmael by Jewish commentators over many centuries. The third part, referring to Ishmael living among, or "in the face of," his brothers, suggests a more positive future, one of conviviality and harmony. Arthur Waskow, a contemporary rabbi-scholar-activist, has this to say in his book *Godwrestling – Round 2*:

The Torah itself prophesies that Isaac and Ishmael will not always have to live in enmity and fear. God prophesies to Hagar about Ishmael: *A wild ass of a man shall he be [wandering as a nomad]. That much is done. His hand against all, hand of all against him [no longer just a wanderer but an enemy]. That much is done. In the face of all his brothers he shall be present [no longer an enemy but truly a brother]. Not done. Not yet...When*

⁵ It is interesting to note how the Divine quality of "hearing," reflected in God's name for her son, *Yishma'el*, is then supplemented by the quality of "seeing," reflected in the reciprocal naming of the Divine by Hagar.

⁶ This special well with life-sustaining water has the Islamic parallel of the *Zam Zam* spring that produces water for Hagar/Hajer when she is in the parched desert.

will it be possible for Ishmael and Isaac to wrestle God - the God-of-Things-As-They-Ought-to-Be – and on the morning after, rise from their wrestle to embrace each other, face each other, see each other not in a cloudy mirror but truly face to face?⁷

The esteemed medieval commentator Rashi (11th-12th century France/Germany) understands *pere adam* to mean “one who loves the desert and to hunt wild animals,” as confirmed later by Gen. 21:20, “And he dwelt in the desert and became an archer”; and he interpreted the next phrase in Gen. 16:12 to mean a “robber” or “bandit” whom “everyone will hate and attack.” The Aramaic Targum Onkelos renders wild-ass man as “untamable,” while Abraham ibn Ezra (11th-12th century Spain) asserts that Ishmael would take whatever he wanted by brutal force. Other interpretations include: “he will be a wildass from his mother and a man from his father” (Sforno’s reading, 16th century Italy); “a wildass in the form of a man” (an even more demeaning, even dehumanizing, interpretation by Levi Shapiro, 18th century Germany); and “he will be totally unruly” (Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, 19th century Lithuania/ Belarus). Nachmanides (13th century Spain) cites Rashi’s remarks and then adds:

The correct interpretation is that *pere adam* is a construct form, meaning that he will be a wild-ass man accustomed to the wilderness/desert, going forth to his work, seeking for food, devouring all and being devoured by all. The subject pertains to his children/descendants who will increase, and they will have wars with all the nations. Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra said: *‘His hand shall be against every-*

⁷ Waskow is drawing a parallel with Jacob’s night-long wrestling with a mysterious figure (identified in rabbinic midrashic sources as the guardian angel of Esau) before encountering his estranged twin brother the following day and seeing in Esau’s face a reflection of the Divine Countenance (Gen. 33:11).

one' in that he will be victorious at first over all nations, and afterwards, *'everyone's hand shall be against him,'* meaning that he will be vanquished in the end. *'And in the face of all his brethren,'* who are the sons of Qeturah [see below], *'he shall dwell,'* meaning that Ishmael's children will outnumber those of Qeturah.

We shall see that these largely negative images of Ishmael and his descendants, based primarily on Gen. 16:12, were tempered by more positive, even laudatory, interpretations of other verses. But honesty demands that we look critically, from a 21st-century vantage point, at the legacy of condescension and contempt that has resulted from centuries of harsh portrayals of Ishmael, and of Arabs generally. There tends to be, particularly in traditionalist or "Orthodox" circles, a tendency to stereotype whole peoples, positively or (more often) negatively, based on rabbinic commentaries that describe their Biblical forebears in generalized terms. A mindset of prophetic determinism has evolved, augmented by the hardships suffered by Jews through the ages at the hands of others. Theologically, this has generated a worldview among traditionalists centered on a belief in a preternatural hierarchy favoring Jews that is based on Divine election and preferential dispensation. And this worldview, in turn, colors how many, if not most, traditionally educated Jews see themselves and other peoples, including Muslims and Christians.⁸ Among more modernist, liberal Jews such tenden-

⁸ By the Middle Ages, following the rise of Islam and with the Crusades pitting Christian and Muslim empires against each other with Jews on the sidelines of history and often suffering at the hands of Christian authorities, the rabbinic imagination had turned Ishmael into an archetype for Arab Muslims and Jacob's fraternal twin brother Esau into an archetype for European Christians. These symbolic identifications have retained their mythic power in traditionalist quarters until our own time.

cies are far less prevalent, giving rise to more inclusive and egalitarian readings of Torah texts, including the Genesis narratives.

Now we turn our attention to the next Biblical passage involving Ishmael, in Genesis chapter 17. This is a central episode in the Torah narrative that occurs 13 years after the birth of Ishmael, when Abraham is 99 years old. In it God appears to the patriarch and changes his name from *Avram*, in Hebrew, to *Avraham* (and *Sarai's* to *Sarah*). This name change is linked in the text to the everlasting covenant that God reaffirms with Abraham and his descendants. Abraham's new name signifies his destiny as the "father of a multitude of nations," with numerous descendants, including kings, to issue from him. As part of the covenantal dispensation, God says to Abraham, "I will give to you and your progeny after you the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." Along with the Divine promises, there is an obligation from the human side stipulated by God: every male encompassed by the covenant is to be circumcised, in succeeding generations on the eighth day of a newborn boy's life. (This remains the Jewish practice, unless the baby boy's health situation forces a delay). When God adds that Sarah is to give birth to a son, Abraham laughs and wonders how such an elderly couple could be parents, adding "Oh that Ishmael might live before You!" Abraham is grateful for the son he has already been blessed with through Hagar; another son through Sarah seems beyond belief or more than he is worthy of. Another possible explanation is offered by Nachmanides: Abraham fears that a child through Sarah, if he supplants Ishmael as the spiritual heir, may put Ishmael's very life at risk, so he implores God to keep Ishmael alive and prosperous.⁹

⁹ Former British Chief Rabbi J. H. Hertz offers a similar interpretation in his own Bible commentary: "Abraham, despairing of the possibility of having issue by

But God makes it clear that Sarah will indeed bear him a son, to be called Isaac/*Yitzhak* (from the Hebrew root for “laughter”), and that God will establish the Divine covenant with him and his descendants. God adds: “And as for Ishmael, I will make him fruitful and will increase him exceedingly. He will become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation.” So in addition to bearing God’s name (*El*) in his own, Ishmael is blessed by God with a large and distinguished lineage, including twelve notable descendants (enumerated in Gen. 25: 13-16) paralleling the twelve tribes of Jacob/Israel. But blessing is to be distinguished from covenantal connection and heritage, as God makes clear in the next verse (21): “And/but I will establish My covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this time next year.” Rashi comments:

“I might think that the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Qeturah [whom Abraham marries later – see below] are included in the establishment (of the covenant). Therefore, it is said, ‘I will establish My covenant with him’ and not with others.”

Rashi then affirms, citing another rabbinic source (Genesis Rabbah 47:5), that while Ishmael is indeed blessed, Isaac becomes the recipient and transmitter of the covenantal dispensation.

Since Ishmael is circumcised together with Abraham, why is he not included in the covenantal dispensation granted to his father by

Sarah, expresses the hope that Ishmael ‘might live before Thee,’ in order that the promises made to Abraham might be fulfilled through him. It is also possible to understand it as a prayer that, though Ishmael is excluded from the spiritual heritage, he may yet live under the Divine care and blessing.” This choice of language reflects the binary thinking of inclusion/exclusion and a narrowly defined “spiritual heritage,” rather than a broader, more inclusive heritage and legacy in keeping with the all-inclusive blessings given by God to Abraham.

God? Reuven Firestone, in his book *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims*, addresses this question:

Why Ishmael is excluded from the covenant is never explained in the Bible. Scholars tend to believe that the purpose of this story [which tells of Ishmael's descendants], as of many of the other tales in Genesis, is to explain the close ethnic and linguistic relationships between the Israelites and the peoples among whom they lived. Ishmael serves in the Bible as the patriarch of the Arab peoples. Some of his sons listed in Genesis 25, such as Hadad in 25:15, have Arabic names. Others have names that sound like the names of known places in Arab lands, such as Duma (Dumat al-Jandal in the desert of Syria) or Tema' (Tayma' in Arabia). Ishmael's son Kedar has the same name as an Arab tribe that lives in the Wadi al-Sirhan in present-day Jordan. According to this view, the kinship relation between Ishmael and Isaac would explain the similarities that Israelites noticed in the ancient Arab peoples with whom they had social and economic contacts.

Following the revealed instruction regarding circumcision, Abraham and Ishmael (who is called "his son" three times in the five verses that conclude chapter 17) are indeed circumcised, along with all the other men in Abraham's household. As mentioned above, Abraham is 99 and Ishmael 13 when they are circumcised. Rashi comments, at the end of chapter 16, that delineating Abraham's age of 86 at the time of Ishmael's birth, which is redundant information, is done "in praise of Ishmael, to let us know that he was 13 years old when he was circumcised and did not oppose it." This is one instance among many where the rabbinic sages find reason to praise Ishmael, even though he is not considered Isaac's spiritual peer. We will see other examples below.

From Genesis 17 we move ahead to chapter 21, which relates the climactic episode in the narratives about Ishmael and his mother Hagar. In this chapter, which is read in synagogues on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, we are told how God's promise to Abraham and Sarah is fulfilled when Isaac is born. Sarah says, "God has made laughter [*tzchok*] for me; everyone who hears will laugh [*yitzchak*] on my account," with Isaac's Hebrew name, *Yitzchak*, used as a term for rejoicing. The text continues, "And the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned."

Then the story shifts suddenly and dramatically from gladness to tragedy, as Sarah's jealousy and anger re-emerge. What is the trigger for her hostility this time? Verse 9 describes the key, and cryptic, turning point: "And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, who had borne (that child, Ishmael) unto Abraham, making sport [*metzachek*]." The last word of this verse suggests another linguistic play on Isaac's name. The translation "making sport" is but one possible interpretation; others suggested by commentators include "mocking" and "laughing derisively." Rashi, the most influential commentator, sees more sinister intentions on Ishmael's part. Citing other Biblical verses with similar language in different contexts, he interprets *metzachek* as suggesting either idolatry, or a homosexual advance toward Isaac, or even as attempted murder motivated by Ishmael's jealousy over the eventual inheritance that is to be divided between the two sons of Abraham. A more modern reading, grounded in psychological studies of identity development, has Ishmael crossing boundaries distinguishing himself from his younger half-brother, appropriating elements of *Yitzchak*-ness in an act of unwarranted usurpation or "identity theft." Arthur Waskow, cited above, has this to say:

If Isaac was the essence of the joyful, triumphant laughter of Sarah and Abraham given a son in their old age, Ishmael responded with the hurt and mocking laughter of the displaced son. The laughter laughed at!

Suddenly it seemed that Ishmael was too much like Isaac for Sarah to bear: Alike, but unlike, as a steamy mirror reflects a clouded image. Sarah is struggling for her son's identity. She feels he cannot grow up to be himself if he is constantly with this other self, so like but so unlike. So she banishes that cloudy other "laughter."

Whatever the nature of Ishmael's act that alarms Sarah¹⁰, she immediately responds and sets into motion the process by which Ishmael and his mother Hagar are expelled from the household. Sarah demands that Abraham banish them both so that Ishmael "will not inherit with my son, with Isaac." Abraham is very upset, since he loves his son Ishmael. But God intervenes, telling him not to see Sarah's demand as grievous or evil and commanding him to do whatever Sarah tells him to do, "for through Isaac shall your seed/descendants be called." God adds: "And also the son of the bondwoman will I make into a great nation, for he (also) is your seed." The story then unfolds poignantly and painfully. Abraham does Sarah's bidding, sending Hagar and Ishmael off into the desert with some bread and water. The water soon runs out, and Hagar, fearing for her son's life, places Ishmael under a shrub to provide him a bit of shade, then goes a short distance away to avoid seeing her boy die. The text then says that, as she cries out

¹⁰ All of the commentators I have consulted seem to accept that in verse 9 Ishmael actually does something inappropriate and unacceptable. None of them suggests the possibility that Sarah's jealousy or anxiety caused her to "see" through a distorted subjective lens, projecting onto an innocent act sinful intent and meaning.

and weeps, God hears *Ishmael's* voice and sends an angel to reassure Hagar that God has heard “the voice of the lad where he is,” or “as he is now.” Interestingly, rabbinic tradition gleans from this last expression the teaching that God listens to the prayers of penitents and judges them based on where they are in that moment of contrition – suggesting that Ishmael himself was a penitent entitled to Divine mercy, whatever his moral lapses in the past or future.

The angel continues to console Hagar, telling her that God will make of Ishmael “a great nation.” God then opens Hagar’s eyes, and she sees a well of water from which she sustains her dehydrated son – this is the second time that an underground water source is miraculously revealed to her. (Here there is no explicit reference to the well mentioned in Genesis 16, *Be’er LaChai Ro’i*). The text then presents the subsequent highlights of Ishmael’s life: “God was with the lad, he grew up, and he settled in the desert and became an expert archer.¹¹ He lived in the desert of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt (her homeland).”

Since the narrative shifts to other matters and will focus in the following chapters on the life of Isaac (our own focus in the next section), many Bible readers think that the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in chapter 21 marks the end of their involvement in the scriptural drama. It turns out, however, that Ishmael reappears at the burial of Abraham in Genesis 25:8-9: “And Abraham expired and died in a good old age...and was gathered to his people. And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the Cave of Makhpelah in the field of Ephron the son of Tzohar the Hittite which is opposite Mamre.” What does Ishmael’s presence at that crucial moment

¹¹ Rashi here comments that Ishmael became a desert bandit, robbing passersby when he was not active as a hunter and driver of mules and camels, citing the earlier phrase, “his hand shall be against everyone...”

indicate? He has not been mentioned for four whole chapters, so why now? On the surface, it seems that the two half-brothers, separated many years before, have somehow reconnected and reconciled.¹² Rabbi Hertz of Great Britain offers this interpretation, based on earlier sources, but does not elaborate. Rashi, also basing himself on earlier rabbinic teachings, focuses on the order in which the two sons are mentioned in verse 9. Since Isaac, the second-born, is named first, he writes, “from here we may derive that Ishmael repented and [humbly] allowed Isaac to go ahead of him. This is why [the expression] ‘good old age’ is used concerning Abraham” in the previous verse – that is, Abraham, at the time of his death, was gratified by Ishmael’s return to the path of virtue and the reconciliation between his two sons. On verse 25:9 Nachmanides cites the *Bereishit* (Genesis) *Rabbah* compendium of midrashic interpretation: “Here the son of the handmaiden bestowed respect on the son of the mistress” by yielding precedence to Isaac.

Several verses later, after the text enumerates the twelve princely sons of Ishmael, his death is recorded in 25:17: “These are the years of Ishmael’s life: one hundred and thirty and seven years. He expired and died and was gathered to his people.” Since this description parallels the language used for Abraham’s death, and since Ishmael’s life span (137 years) is specified in the text as is Abraham’s (175) and Sarah’s (127), Rashi and others in the rabbinic tradition conclude that Ishmael is to be considered, overall, a righteous man. We will return to the burial of Abraham by his two sons at the end of our examination of Isaac’s life, to which we now turn.¹³

¹² A reconciliation between the two half-brothers is not explicitly mentioned in the text; it may be inferred from the “hints” (Hebrew, *remazim*) in the Torah which rabbinic tradition has disclosed and interpreted (see below).

¹³ This essay examines Ishmael’s life before Isaac’s, and his name appears first in the title, as a reciprocal gesture of respect in line with the rabbinic

ISAAC'S CHARACTER AND DESTINY

As we have seen, Jewish tradition views Ishmael ambivalently – as the cherished first-born son of Abraham who becomes an archetypal “outsider.” He is the progenitor of another “great nation” (the Arabs) alongside the Jewish people, with twelve distinguished sons paralleling the twelve sons of Jacob. He is blessed by God and carries the Divine Name (*El*) in his own... but he is not the chosen heir of Abraham through whom the covenantal promises will flow, even though he was circumcised along with Abraham in Genesis 17. That special merit belongs to Isaac. (Islam, of course, sees the Divinely sanctioned chain of spiritual blessing differently – extending from Abraham/Ibrahim through Ishmael/Ismail, across succeeding generations and culminating in the exalted Prophet Muhammad, pbuh). Isaac is seen in Judaism as the second of the three patriarchs or forefathers (*Avot*) of the Jewish people. This accords him special status, but there is ambivalence in how he is portrayed, too. His accomplishments do not rival those of his illustrious father Abraham, nor do they command the sustained attention which the Bible accords his son Jacob. Since Jacob is renamed “Israel” in an epic nighttime struggle (Gen. 32:25-30), and his descendants carry that name as the “Children of Israel” or “Israelites,” Isaac is left in the double shadow of his father and his son. Ironically, he might be best described as the son of Abraham (as in Gen. 25:19) and the father of Jacob.¹⁴

appreciation of Ishmael's virtuous character. The order also symbolizes this author's sense that we Jews owe Ishmael and his descendants a more positive assessment, as part of a more inclusive re-evaluation of God's plan and purpose in the whole of Creation. The implications of this for Middle East peacemaking are explored in the final section of this essay.

¹⁴ It is worth noting that Isaac's second son, Jacob's fraternal twin Esau, does not even merit the kind of complimentary language bestowed on Ishmael in

But Isaac has virtues of his own that warrant enumeration and examination. Following his birth in chapter 21 and the feast organized for his weaning, the next we hear of Isaac is in the following chapter, when Abraham's faith in God is sorely tested – and Isaac's faith, also. The story is familiar to anyone who has read the Bible; for it tells the memorable, indeed harrowing, tale of the aborted killing of a son, Isaac, by his father, Abraham.¹⁵ In Judaism this crucial episode in Gen. 22:1-19 is called *Akedat Yitzchak*, the "Binding of Isaac" (rather than the "sacrifice" of Isaac, since the son's life is spared¹⁶). Recall that this is the Torah portion prescribed by the Jewish sages for public reading on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. This two-day festival is part of the Days of Awe in Jewish life and liturgy, climaxing on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement eight days later. In this penitential season of introspection and renewal, one of the themes highlighted by the tradition is the virtue or merit of the patriarchs (*z'khut Avot*), since it is held that their merit abides, will be recalled by God, and will help Jews in later generations receive God's mercy and forgiveness, even if they do not fully deserve it.

In interpreting the story of the Binding of Isaac, most of the theological and ethical attention in both Judaism and Christianity has focused on Abraham, the friend and servant of God who is

Jewish tradition. The sole virtue ascribed to Esau is the deep respect he grants his father Isaac, in fulfillment of the commandment to honor one's parents.

¹⁵ Reuven Firestone notes: "See Qur'an 37:99-113, which names neither son. The identity of the intended sacrifice (*al-dhabih*) is identified by later commentators and traditionalists." Over time, most Qur'anic commentators came to see Ishmael as the son mentioned in this incident.

¹⁶ There are some rabbinic sources that see Isaac as actually being killed by Abraham, then resurrected. These interpretations stem from the absence of Isaac's name at the end of the story (v. 19).

tested by God's command to offer up Isaac as a human sacrifice.¹⁷ What about Isaac's role and conduct in this episode? Does he display any exemplary behavior in Genesis 22?

For most of the chapter Isaac is silent.¹⁸ He is presented as a dutiful son¹⁹ accompanying his father, the fervent champion of monotheism, on a sacrificial mission lasting three days. Here is how the Torah describes the last leg of the journey to Mount Moriah in Jerusalem:

¹⁷ Jewish tradition views this episode, explicitly labeled a test or trial in Gen. 22:1, as the last of ten trials which Abraham confronted and, in the view of most commentators, passed. In vv. 16-18, God blesses Abraham through an angel and promises him countless descendants "because you have hearkened to My voice." But not all Jewish thinkers believe that Abraham acted honorably in being willing to kill Isaac at God's command; some criticize him severely and think he failed the test by complying with God's order instead of resisting it. (His uncritical submission here stands in marked contrast to his courageously assertive stance on behalf of potentially innocent residents of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18). In his book *Very Near to You: Human Readings of the Torah*, Avraham Burg, former Speaker of the Israeli Knesset, argues that Abraham failed twice, first by expelling Ishmael together with his mother and then agreeing to kill Isaac. One additional point worth making: Sarah is absent from chapter 22 and then dies at the beginning of the next chapter. Various Jewish sources see Abraham's failure to inform Sarah of his intention to sacrifice their son as the cause of Sarah's sudden death. So even if his son is spared, he ends up paying for his zealous devotion to God by losing the life partner who gave birth to that son.

¹⁸ On the whole, Abraham is silent, also. We are given no information about the thoughts or feelings of either father or son during their three-day journey to Mount Moriah, where the sacrifice is to occur. Various midrashic sources have "the Satan" trying to dissuade either or both of them from going through with the mission, but they refuse to take the Satan's bait.

¹⁹ Some rabbinic sources see Isaac as a grown man of 37 when this episode happens. Some also see Ishmael as one of the two attendants who accompany Abraham and Isaac on their journey from Hebron to Jerusalem (the other being Abraham's servant Eliezer). If Isaac is 37 at the time, then Ishmael would be 51.

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife; and they walked both of them together. And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father." And [Abraham] said, "Here I am, my son." And [Isaac] said, "Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "God will Himself provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." And they walked both of them together. (Gen. 22:6-8)

The text does not explicitly tell us what the father and son are feeling as they walk together. The language used, especially the use of "my father" and "my son," reflects a close bond between Isaac and Abraham. But is the father withholding the truth about the mission? Is he deceiving Isaac when he tells him that God will provide a lamb, when he has been told at the outset to sacrifice Isaac? (The language in verse 2 is exceedingly poignant: "Now take your son, your only son, whom you love, even Isaac..." and offer him up as a burnt sacrifice). Or does he intuitively know that God will, at some point, stop the process and substitute an animal for his son (which is what actually happens)? The consensus within rabbinic tradition is that Abraham's use of "my son" at the end of his reply, followed by the repetition of the matter-of-fact statement "and they walked both of them together," tell us that Isaac now knows he is the intended sacrifice and, nevertheless, continues to walk alongside his father with a unity of purpose and in full acceptance of the terrible fate awaiting him. This submission to God's will, as communicated to him by his father, makes Isaac the first exemplar of willful martyrdom in the tradition.

As the *Artscroll Tanach Series* on Genesis teaches, in different midrashic sources Isaac says to Abraham just before he is bound to the altar:

“Father, I am a vigorous young man and you are old. I fear that when I see the slaughtering knife in your hand I will instinctively jerk and possibly injure you. I might also injure myself and render myself unfit for sacrifice. Or my involuntary movement might make you unable to perform the ritual slaughter properly. Therefore bind me well so that at the final moment I will not be deficient in filial honor and respect, and therefore not fulfill the commandment properly,”

whereupon Abraham binds his son’s hands and feet to the altar.

The willingness to die is the ultimate test and testimony of faith, one that Jews have assumed all too often throughout history. In fact, the Binding of Isaac story, often referred to simply as “the *Akedah*,” has become a paradigmatic narrative standing for the tragic fate of the Jews, forced time and again to sacrifice their lives rather than renounce their faith.²⁰ There is a supreme irony, along with profound tragedy, in this somber part of Jewish tradition. For many commentators, the central point of the drama in Genesis 22 is that God abhors human sacrifice, which was a cultic practice engaged in by some Canaanites at the time of the patriarchs. The ram which Abraham finds caught in the thicket after Isaac is spared (v. 13) serves as a transitional symbol marking the irreversible shift from human to animal sacrifice. That Jews and many others were, and today still are, slaughtered in the name of idolatrous pseudo-

²⁰ For a modern classic in religious literature, which is a learned commentary on interpretations of the *Akedah* story, see Shalom Spiegel’s *The Last Trial*. It is based on a powerful poem from the time of the Crusades, expressing the anguish of Jews whose communities were decimated by murderous Crusaders on the way to liberate the Holy Land from Muslim rule.

religions²¹ is cause for vigorous protest and concerted counter-action to halt such horrors.

A perspective that is colored by the atrocities of recent history, especially those suffered by the Jews of Europe before and during World War II, is offered to us by Elie Wiesel. Wiesel, the renowned writer and Nobel Peace Prize winner, included a chapter on the Binding of Isaac in his volume of meditations on Biblical stories and characters entitled *Messengers of God*. He begins by calling the *Akedah* a “strange tale [that] is about fear and faith, fear and defiance, fear and laughter.” He continues:

Terrifying in content, it has become a source of consolation to those who, in retelling it, make it part of their own experience. Here is a story that contains Jewish destiny in its totality, just as the flame is contained in the single spark by which it comes to life. Every major theme, every passion and obsession that make Judaism the adventure that it is, can be traced back to it: man’s anguish when he finds himself face to face with God, his quest for purity and purpose, the conflict of having to choose between dreams of the past and dreams of the future, between absolute faith and absolute justice, between the need to obey God’s will and to rebel against it; between his yearnings for freedom and for sacrifice, his desire to justify hope and despair with words and silence – the same words and the same silence. It is all there.

²¹ With trenchant and bitter irony the genocidal slaughter of the Jews during World War II, which included death camps with crematoria, was given the name “Holocaust,” referring to a sacrifice consumed by fire. The Jews were the primary sacrificial victims on the Nazi “altar” of racial purity and global domination.

Wiesel sees the characters in the story, Abraham, Isaac, and indeed God, playing meta-historical roles in this “austere and powerful” drama. “This very ancient story is still our own,” he writes, “and we shall continue to be bound to it in the most intimate way. We may not know it, but every one of us, at one time or another, is called upon to play a part in it. What part? Are we Abraham or Isaac?”

Wiesel probes the *Akedah* story for its elusive lessons. Why Abraham and Isaac were tested in this seemingly cruel way by a merciful and just God, why they both consented without protest, and why Isaac’s life was spared at the last moment – all remain mysteries. For Wiesel the Holocaust survivor, the mystery of his own confrontation with death (on a massive scale), and of his survival against all odds, becomes conflated with the *Akedah* narrative, “an unfathomable mystery given to every generation, to be relived, if not solved.” And he poses sharp questions:

Why did Abraham, the would-be slaughterer, become, in our prayers, the symbol of *hesed*: grace, compassion and love? A symbol of love, he who was ready to throttle his son?

And Isaac, why was he called Isaac? *Yitzhak*? He who will laugh? Laugh at whom? At what?... Why was the most tragic figure in Biblical history given such a bizarre name?

Wiesel notes that the *Akedah* theme has served as a template for the suffering of Jews throughout history. “All the pogroms, the crusades, the persecutions, the slaughters, the catastrophes, the massacres by sword and the liquidations by fire – each time it was Abraham leading his son to the altar, to the holocaust all over again.” Reflecting on the story’s meaning for our own time, he writes:

Of all the Biblical tales, the one about Isaac is perhaps the most timeless and most relevant to our generation. We have known Jews who, like Abraham, witnessed the death of their children [Wiesel refers to midrashic sources in which Isaac is killed]; who, like Isaac, lived the *Akeda* in their flesh; and some who went mad when they saw their father disappear on the altar, with the altar, in a blazing fire whose flames reached into the highest of heavens.

Wiesel subtitles his chapter, “A Survivor’s Story,” and he identifies with Isaac as one who defied death and lived, though with psychic if not physical scars. “Isaac survived,” Wiesel declares. “He had no choice. He had to make something of his memories, his experience, in order to force us to hope. For our survival is linked to his.” And what of Isaac’s life after his near-death experience? Before returning to the text of the Torah, let us grapple with Wiesel’s answers:

What did happen to Isaac after he left Mount Moriah? He became a poet – author of the *Minha* service [the afternoon prayers, attributed in rabbinic midrash to Isaac] – and did not break with society. Nor did he rebel against life. Logically, he should have aspired to wandering, to the pursuit of oblivion. Instead he settled on his land, never to leave it again, retaining his name. He married, had children, refusing to let fate turn him into a bitter man...Suffering, in Jewish tradition, confers no privileges. It all depends on what one makes of that suffering. Isaac knew how to transform it into prayer and love rather than into rancor and malediction. This is what gives him rights and powers no other man possesses. His reward? The Temple was built on Moriah. Not on Sinai.

In concluding his chapter, Wiesel returns to his earlier question: “Why was the most tragic of our ancestors named Isaac, a name which evokes and signifies laughter?” And then he answers, with echoes of self-identification:

Here is why. As the first survivor, he had to teach us, future survivors of Jewish history, that it is possible to suffer and despair an entire lifetime and still not give up the art of laughter. Isaac, of course, never freed himself from the traumatizing scenes that violated his youth²²; the holocaust had marked him and continued to haunt him forever. Yet he remained capable of laughter. And in spite of everything, he did laugh.

We have examined the Binding of Isaac story at length because it remains the central and most powerful episode in the Biblical portrayal of the second patriarch. But Isaac’s life unfolds beyond the 22nd chapter of Genesis, and we need to learn what the later passages in which he features have to teach us. This is especially so because, if we combine the *Akedah* story with three others, we might easily come to the conclusion that Isaac was a passive victim crippled by fear or post-traumatic anxiety, not a proactive agent who shaped his own life and legacy. The first episode we have already cited, the one (v. 21:9) in which Ishmael behaves in a way that alarms Sarah, his action referred to by the term *metzachek*. If Isaac is involved, he is presumably an object of someone else’s action, not a subject. In the second scene (26:6-11), Isaac reprises the questionable behavior of his father Abraham, who had told Pharaoh (12:11-20) that Sarah, his wife, was actually his sister in order to save his own life. Isaac tells a similar lie to the Philistine

²² Here Wiesel is thinking of a youthful Isaac bound on the altar, not the 37-year-old man in some rabbinic sources.

king Abimelekh, so that his own wife Rebecca will not be seized and his own life terminated. This ruse, prompted by fear, is uncovered when Abimelekh sees Isaac behaving with Rebecca in a way that shows they are husband and wife – here (26:8) the verb used to denote Isaac’s action is also *metzachek*, but evidently a kind of sporting or intimate playing that was not inappropriate between spouses.²³ And the third scene in which he appears passive or inert, even manipulated by his wife Rebecca and their son Jacob, is related in Genesis 27. Now Isaac is old and almost blind, and he is portrayed as a vulnerable dupe who is tricked into giving the “wrong” (but providentially intended) blessing to Jacob when he appears before Isaac in his brother Esau’s goatskin clothing. When the truth emerges upon Esau’s arrival, and Isaac grasps what he has done and how he was deceived, he “trembled with exceedingly great terror,” suggesting that fate had dealt him another terrible blow. These varied scenes of Isaac-as-victim, reactively controlled by others, help to make him appear very weak, especially when compared to Abraham and Jacob, the other two patriarchs.

To at least balance, if not correct, this harsh view of Isaac, let us look at two other Biblical episodes in which he takes initiative and assumes the pro-active role of peacemaker. For they will not only

²³ The Hebrew phrase is *vehinei Yitzhak metzachek et Rivkah ishto*, (“and behold Isaac was *tzachek*-ing with his wife Rebecca”), which may suggest that Isaac is finally growing into his own name and what it represents. The *Artscroll Tanach Series* has this interpretive note: “All commentators agree that the term *metzachek*, “jesting” – which is the same term used of Ishmael in 21:9 – is, in this context (since Rebecca is specifically described as his wife), a euphemism for intimate relations (*Rashi*); physical closeness (*Chizkuni*); or at the very least undue familiarity which would be inappropriate between brother and sister (*Abarbanel*).” If the word *metzachek*, as used here, does mean “relating intimately,” it helps to explain why some commentators see Ishmael’s behavior with the young and impressionable Isaac as homoerotic play.

help us see some of Isaac's more positive character traits; they will also serve as exemplary lessons for our own conflict-ridden times.

The first passage is found in Genesis 26, following the incident with Abimelekh in which Isaac tries to pass his wife off as his sister. The text reports (v. 12) that he is very successful in farming, with God's favor helping his crops yield a hundred-fold increase in only one year. He grows more and more prosperous until his success evokes the envy of the neighboring Philistines. A serious challenge then emerges as the Philistines begin to fill in the wells which Abraham's servants dug in the previous generation (vv. 21:22-32), and even when Isaac relocates to avoid a confrontation, the Philistine herdsmen clash with Isaac's men over other wells. These verses, describing a conflict over water resources in Canaan, have a contemporary ring to them. After digging two wells that are contested and giving them names reflecting contention and enmity, Isaac oversees the digging of a third well, and this attempt succeeds without strife. Isaac calls the third well "Rechovot," indicating spaciousness, and says, "for now the Eternal has made room for us and we shall be fruitful in the land." (26:22) The story continues with God appearing to him and blessing him, promising him many descendants "for My servant Abraham's sake." Then Abimelekh and his military chief Phicol, seeing how God has blessed Isaac, come to the patriarch to negotiate a settlement of the water dispute. Isaac makes a covenant with the Philistines, a kind of nonaggression pact. The text then reads, "they arose early the next morning and swore (an oath) to one another, Isaac sent them (the Philistine leaders) away, and they departed from him in peace." From this story, we see that Isaac has considerable skills in the area of conflict resolution: avoiding direct confrontation, striving to resolve conflict nonviolently, and reaching an agreement with his adversaries when conditions of mutual respect and benefit emerge.

From Isaac's success in peacemaking with adversarial neighbors, we turn to his remarkable reconciliation efforts within his own conflicted family. Those who call themselves children or heirs of Abraham/Ibrahim have much to learn from Isaac's example in both arenas.

It is unfortunate that not many Bible readers, Jewish or Christian, connect the "dots" in the following way, preferring to adopt the dichotomous reading in which Isaac and Ishmael remain separate and estranged, with Isaac claiming center stage and Ishmael relegated to the wings, if not the shadows.²⁴

⇒The first textual basis for an alternative reading is Genesis 24:62.

In chapter 24, most of the narrative concerns the mission which Eliezer undertakes, at Abraham's request, to find a suitable wife for Isaac from among his kindred back in Mesopotamia. As the servant is returning home with Rebecca, his mission successful, we encounter this odd statement: "And Isaac came from the way of *Be'er LaChai Ro'i*, for he dwelt in the land of the south/*Negev*." Why should the text insert this geographical reference before the verses that follow, describing Isaac's reception of Rebecca and his taking her as his wife? If we recall that this place-name is associated with Hagar's encounter with the Divine eight chapters before (16:13-14, see above), it seems evident that the Torah is telling us, almost as an aside ignored by many readers, that following the death of his mother Isaac has gone to seek out Hagar and his half-brother Ishmael. This interpretation is based on the presumption that Hagar and Ish-

²⁴ For Christians, the larger story becomes more complicated and challenging through the Apostle Paul's inversion of the Sarah/Hagar symbolism in Galatians 4. Though he reverses the roles played by the two wives of Abraham, he retains the binary paradigm of superior and inferior dispensations.

mael have settled in the place where Hagar had been blessed by God and where the miraculous “Well of the Living One Who sees me” remains to give sustenance in the desert. And why not? Would it not be likely that Hagar, banished from the household and saved twice from deadly thirst, would return with her son to that place of grace, the sacred oasis where she encountered and named God? And would it not be reasonable for Isaac to try to reunite with the “lost” side of his family, especially now? His mother Sarah has died, and his father has almost killed him. It would be most understandable if he were to pursue family reunification to heal old wounds and find some solace for his losses and the pain they cause him.

⇒ Jewish tradition adds another intriguing element to this drama of family reconciliation. A few verses later, at the beginning of chapter 25, the text informs us that Abraham takes another wife named Qeturah, who bears six children. (They are all named, along with their own children). Some commentators see Qeturah as a concubine or a less-than-full wife with a status compared to that of Hagar. But Rashi, the most esteemed Jewish Bible interpreter, comments on Gen. 25:1 that Qeturah *is* Hagar, basing his view on Rabbi Judah’s interpretation in Genesis Rabbah 61:4. Rashi adds: “She was called Qeturah because her deeds were as beautiful as *qetoret* [the incense in the ancient Jerusalem Temple] and because she ‘tied’ her opening [a word-play on the Aramaic for “knot”] and did not mate with any man from the time she separated from Abraham.”

This understanding of Hagar/Qeturahas one and the same woman with two names creates fascinating interpretative connections. First of all, why would she bear two different names? One possibility is that her true Egyptian identity is Qeturah, but

in the Hebrew household of Abraham and Sarah she assumes the identity of Hagar, which is related to the status of “stranger” or “alien,” as in the common Biblical phrase, *ha-ger hagar betokhachem*, “the (non-Israelite) stranger who dwells among you.”²⁵ This instance of dual identity is paralleled elsewhere in Scripture by the example of Queen Esther, whose real Jewish identity within Persian society is Hadassah. In Hagar/Qeturah’s case, her separation from Abraham and (especially) Sarah is a necessary step in the growth and strengthening of her independent identity, so that by the time she rejoins Abraham she has developed her own sense of individuality. Another intriguing aspect of this alternative reading, prompted by the recurrence of *Be’er LaChai Ro’i* and the conflation of Qeturah with Hagar, is that Isaac, in this scenario, is depicted as a matchmaker for his bereaved father just as his father is trying to find a wife for him!

Since the Biblical text does not usually describe the feelings that motivate or accompany the actions of its characters, the notion of Isaac the family peacemaker adds a sentimental dimension to a generally dry narrative. For a more emotionally attuned approach to reading scripture, with a feminine perspective missing in most rabbinical sources, we can turn to Ellen

²⁵ Steven Kepnes has developed the theme of Hagar as the archetypal “Other” who is actually a suppressed part of ourselves as Jews – part of our identity and part of our extended family. See his *The Future of Jewish Theology* and his reflection on “Hagar and Ishmael as Other and Same” in his essay “Hagar and Esau: From Others to Sisters and Brothers” included in *Crisis, Call, and Leadership in the Abrahamic Traditions*, edited by Peter Ochs and William Stacey Johnson. With Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, Kepnes sees a relationship between Hagar’s status as the Egyptian *ger*, or alien, in the first Hebrew family as presaging the status of the Israelites, Abraham and Sarah’s descendants, as *gerim*, aliens, in Egypt. The complex intertwining of destinies, with Divinely bestowed blessings presaging ultimate redemption for all of Abraham’s progeny, is an undercurrent of the Biblical narrative which is too often overlooked.

Frankel's Torah commentary entitled *The Five Books of Miriam*. Frankel imagines what Sarah would say if she were to assess her son Isaac's emotional journey:

Love did not come easy to Isaac. When he was a child, his half-brother, Ishmael, hated him for dispossessing him. Later, his father undermined their relationship when he almost sacrificed him on Mount Moriah. And I, who had waited ninety barren years for him, did not – could not – love him enough to stop Abraham from leading him off to the slaughter. So what could he know of normal love? How could he trust that his God-intoxicated father would choose a proper wife for him? It was only after marrying Rebecca and bringing her into my tent that Isaac discovered that love can heal as well as wound. As it is written: “Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death” (24:67).

⇒ The scenario of Isaac visiting Hagar/Qeturah and Ishmael in the desert (perhaps more than once), as a peacemaker trying to heal his broken family as part of his own healing journey, helps to explain how Ishmael reappears to join Isaac for the burial of Abraham in 25:9 and why Abraham dies a contented man. It is a lovely image: Hagar/Qeturah reunited with her husband Abraham, and the two half-brothers bonding after years of separation. This picture of a family finally at peace after so much strife is reinforced by the verse (29:11) that follows Abraham's funeral: “And it came to pass after the death of Abraham that God blessed Isaac his son, and Isaac dwelt by *Be'er LaChai Ro'i*.”

With his father and mother both dead, it would be natural for Isaac to want to live at that sacred oasis with his half-brother Ishmael, after working to overcome years of estrangement, and

with Hagar/Qeturah, the woman who was like a second mother to him in his youth, and who, like her son, is again part of his family in later life.

ISHMAEL AND ISAAC: LESSONS FOR ARABS AND JEWS TODAY

- ⇒ We have seen in the course of this study how Judaism views both Ishmael and Isaac ambivalently, with strengths and weaknesses, merits and flaws. And we have noted that these mixed assessments, along with the ambivalent portraits of Abraham and Sarah, are in line with the overall Jewish approach to Biblical personalities: none is flawless; each is presented as a figure combining light and shadow.²⁶ Such honest portrayals of Biblical figures are humanizing and reassuring, for we can more easily identify with morally flawed heroes than with holy and sinless ones.

- ⇒ Examining the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac as the Bible presents it, through the variegated lens of Jewish tradition, we can glean some important lessons to help us address the present challenges facing their descendants, Jews and Arabs caught up in a territorial dispute over a shared holy land.

- ⇒ A key point to make is that the Isaac-Ishmael relationship is part of a pattern within the Book of Genesis that colors most of the families described in its pages. Those families exhibit a dy-

²⁶ Moses, the greatest prophet in Jewish tradition, is denied entry into the land of Canaan because of the one-time lapse of striking a rock (twice) to bring forth water, rather than speaking to it as commanded by God; and David, the exemplary king, is denied the opportunity to build the first Temple because of his background as a militia leader who had shed blood.

dynamic of conflict that recurs across generations, starting with Cain and Abel and extending to Joseph and his brothers. In each case except the first, which ends in fratricide, there is a struggle between brothers over the birthright and its attendant blessing, with Divine favor comingling with a preferential dispensation bestowed by a father toward one of his sons. In at least two cases, the mother (first Sarah, then Rebecca) intervenes to determine which son receives the better blessing. (In the Biblical narrative, daughters are not even eligible for a comparable blessing and dispensation). From Abraham onward, a dimension of covenantal chosenness and continuity is added to the sibling rivalry, prefiguring the covenant made between God and the entire Israelite (later Jewish) people at Sinai. In the patriarchal period, Isaac and Jacob are favored over Ishmael and Esau as heirs to the Abrahamic covenant. As noted above, this favoritism may appear discriminatory and unjust, since God is generally understood to be universally fair and loving. This critique of the Biblical narrative, and of how it has been used historically to make superiority claims, warrants some unapologetic responses.

- ⇒ As Martin Buber and like-minded Bible scholars have taught us, the Hebrew Bible should not be read as a chronicle of human history in its totality, from the Creation to the end of time. Rather, it is primarily the chronicle of God's relationship with one particular people; and it is that people, the Jews, whose sages selected and canonized the books that comprise the Hebrew Scriptures. This Judeo-centric focus does not preclude the possibility that the same God of Nature and History has established special relationships, including covenants, with other peoples and faith communities. This author believes that Judaism in our time needs to grow beyond the centuries-old

perception of non-Jews as, at best, heirs to the Noahide covenant alone. In our global village, it is incumbent upon Jews (and others) to develop theologies of religious plurality that validate other faiths as covenantally connected to God in their own distinct ways.²⁷ One positive consequence would be a humble acknowledgement that our notions of chosenness and ultimate redemption cannot be self-centered. For most Jews this should not be a radical notion, since Judaism has long taught, through its rabbinic sages, that “the righteous of all nations have a place in the world to come” and that God’s standard of judgment for a human life is moral integrity rather than theological conformity or correctness.

- ⇒ If we shift from theology back to scripture and look more closely at the recurring theme of sibling rivalry in Genesis, we can see that there is some leeway in how we interpret these narratives. In the end, it is up to us to choose whether we read them in a self-referencing and binary or hierarchical way, or more inclusively. For the inner dynamics of the Genesis stories engender ambivalence not only in the characters depicted but in the overall message regarding relationships between siblings as well as the relationship between God and us humans.

- ⇒ A provocative, and for this study a pertinent, perspective on the Biblical theme of sibling rivalry is offered by Jonathan Sacks in his recent volume, *Not in God’s Name: Confronting Religious Violence*. The former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain,

²⁷ This theological re-visioning can begin with Christians and Muslims and then be extended to include other world religions, including the Dharma traditions of East Asia. See my essay, “God as Multiple Covenanter: Toward a Jewish Theology of Abrahamic Partnerships,” in *CrossCurrents*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (March 2015), pp. 57-78.

Sacks has authored many stimulating writings in his distinguished career, including his earlier book *The Dignity of Difference*. In his latest volume, he tackles the enormous challenge of religiously motivated violence from a variety of perspectives: historical, anthropological, psychological, and theological. In his examination of the Bible and how it has been used to justify discrimination and even aggression, Sacks looks closely at the sibling rivalry motif along with the conflict between Sarah and Hagar, and he develops his own alternative to the common binary readings of chosen/rejected, blessed/cursed, or favored/marginalized.

Rabbi Sacks understands the Hebrew Bible to have a more subtle and complex interweaving of messages than we normally perceive. He cites the rabbinic tradition identifying Qeturah as Hagar, together with the link between Isaac and Hagar's well, *Be'er LaChai Ro'i*, before and after Abraham's death, and he writes:

A complete counter-narrative is taking shape. Whether of his own accord or at the prompting of Isaac, Abraham took Hagar back and gave her a place of honour in his household. What does this Midrash tell us about how the rabbis read the text? It tells us that they felt there was something morally amiss about the story as it stood...The story beneath the story, hinted at by [various] discrepant details, is that neither Abraham nor Isaac made their peace with the banishment of the handmaid and child. As long as Sarah was alive, they could do nothing about it, respecting her feelings as God had commanded Abraham to do. But once Sarah was no longer alive, they could engage in an act of reconciliation. That is how Isaac and Ishmael came to be together when Abraham died.

Sacks notes that “Ishmael” was the name of “many rabbis in the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods, from the first century CE onwards... hardly likely – indeed impossible – if Ishmael were a rejected figure in Judaism.” He also highlights a “striking fact: that in the Bible, Abraham does not bless Isaac. God does, after Abraham’s death, but he himself does not. One ancient Jewish tradition states explicitly: ‘Abraham did not bless Isaac because he did not want Ishmael to feel resentment against him [Isaac].’”

Here is how Sacks sums up his analysis of the relationship between the two half-brothers:

On the surface, the story of Isaac and Ishmael is about sibling rivalry and displacement of the elder by the younger. Beneath the surface, however, the sages heard a counter-narrative telling the opposite story: *the birth of Isaac does not displace Ishmael*. [Italics in original] To be sure, he will have a different destiny. But he too is a beloved son of Abraham, blessed by his father and by God. He becomes a great nation. God is ‘with him’ as he grows up. God stays with him to ensure that his children flourish and become ‘twelve rulers’. Abraham and Isaac both make a journey of reconciliation. The two half-brothers stand together at their father’s grave. There is no hostility between them. Their futures diverge, but there is no conflict between them, nor do they compete for God’s affection, which encompasses them both. This reading becomes all the more powerful when, in the Midrash, it is extended to the relationship between Judaism and Islam.

If, as Rabbi Sacks maintains, this “powerful” reading of the text and tradition is the one to be favored, why do so few religiously educated Jews see it that way? Why do most of them prefer what

Sacks calls the “surface” narrative, rather than more expansive, inclusively compassionate readings? A good case can be made for the impact of history, especially the Jewish experience of powerlessness and persecution, on the interpretive approach favored by most Jewish readers, including scholars. This is especially true for Jewish communities and authorities in Europe, who had little or no contact with Arabs. The geographical coordinates were noted for the rabbinic authorities cited above to indicate that they were all European, most of them from central or eastern Europe. The binary perspective of “us against them” that evolved, especially after the Crusades and during later persecutions and pogroms, resulted in a less-than-generous attitude toward Muslims and (especially) Christians, depicted archetypally in the figures of Ishmael and Esau.²⁸

We are living in a new era, one in which Jews are not as vulnerable as they were in the past. National empowerment in the state of Israel, with all of its challenges and moral shortcomings, enables Jews to grow beyond the self-image of eternal victim. The existential shift from exile to home, and from minority to majority status, opens up new vistas of understanding – of self, of others, and of our sacred tradition. Arthur Waskow addresses this radical change in the Jewish condition:

Look down the millennia: When have the children of Israel been able to choose from a place of power how to act toward the children of Ishmael? Not since Abraham – till now. During most of the periods when ancient Israel held power over others, the peoples nearby were Canaa-

²⁸ The great Bible and Talmud commentator Rashi, who lived in France and Germany from 1040 to 1105 CE and saw whole Jewish communities ravaged in the first Crusade, stated in his Bible commentary that it is a “known truth [*halakhah yeduah*] that Esau hates Jacob.”

nites, Philistines, Babylonians, Romans, Greeks – not Arabs. In the Hellenistic-Roman period, Jews and Arabs were both subject peoples. And later, when Jews met Arabs in the Muslim era, it was the Arabs who were conquerors. Not until now have Jews ruled over Arabs. So now the story comes more alive than ever, almost as if it had been set there for us to search and learn from... “*In the face of all his brothers he shall be present.*” [Or “he shall dwell,” in Hebrew *yishkon*, suggesting good neighborly relations in the last third of the prophetic vision regarding Ishmael in Gen. 16:12]. Is it then for our generation to do?

One illustration of the change in outlook which the national return to Israel/Palestine affords religiously oriented Jews is a statement by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. Rabbi Kook was a mystic, a prolific writer, and a revered community leader who served as Chief Rabbi under the British Mandate in Palestine from 1921 to 1935. Writing from Jaffa to a fellow rabbi in 1908, he conveyed his messianic vision in these words:

The brotherly love of Esau and Jacob, of Isaac and Ishmael, will assert itself above all the confusion that the evil brought on by our bodily nature has engendered. It will overcome them and transform them to eternal light and compassion. This broad concept, sweetened by the enlightenment of the true teaching of the Torah, must be our guide on all our ways in the end of days, to seal our understanding of the Torah with the imprint of the Messiah by turning the bitter to sweet, and darkness to light.

Given the ongoing bitter and bloody conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over their common homeland, such messianic visions

seem absurd to most people, wishful thinking at best. But the future depends on us, on what we do, and on how we understand what is truly holy, based on our respective faith traditions.²⁹ Jews, Muslims, and Christians all need to broaden their sense of the sacred to affirm that life is holier than land, that God's love and blessing are bestowed upon all equally without hierarchical favoritism, and that inclusive justice and compassion are both the essential attributes of the Divine and the central imperatives to guide our behavior. Once we do this, we will have the capacity to change our "victim and vindication" scripts, using our scriptures as justification. We will then stop sacrificing our children on the idolatrous "altars" of nationalism and territorialism.³⁰ With more pluralistic and compassionate faith orientations, we can come to see the Holy Land as a laboratory for collective consecration, not a battleground between peoples and theologies. If we choose this path of devotion, ready to sacrifice land rather than human lives, then the reconciliation which Ishmael and Isaac experienced in their lifetime can serve as an example for us, their faithful descendants – *insha'Allah, im yirtzeh Hashem*, if God wills it, and if we do, too.

²⁹ For a practical resource detailing how religious traditions, including Judaism, can help promote peacemaking in Israel/Palestine by transforming our narratives of injury and incrimination to stories of blessing and reconciliation, see Marc Gopin's book *Holy War, Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East*.

³⁰ Several years ago, a group of Israeli Jewish women, faithfully committed to their religious tradition, held a peace vigil near the military checkpoint between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Referring to a possible peace agreement that would establish Palestinian sovereignty over Rachel's Tomb nearby and the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Hebron/Al-Khalil, where Ishmael and Isaac together buried Abraham, they carried signs that read, "Better to cry over the graves of our ancestors from a distance than to cry over the graves of our children up close."

Prophets Ishmael and Isaac in Islamic Theology

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“Indeed, We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], as
We revealed to Noah and the prophets after him. And we
revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, the Descen-
dants, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to
David, We gave the book [of Psalms].”

(The Holy Qur’an, 4:163)

The Qur’anic story of Abraham and his sons, Isma’il (Ishmael) and Ishaq (Isaac) (Peace be upon them all), is a story of revelation and prophethood, and of faith and complete submission to the will of God. The Holy Qur’an addresses Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) and brings to his attention a perpetual theological link with Prophet Abraham, of belonging to the same revealed universal creed. Islam, qua submission to God, is the religion of all his predecessors who were part of a linear history of revelation that culminated in the Seal of the Prophets. Both ancestral lineage and the spiritual link are acknowledged. The fatherly relationship with Abraham, in this case, alludes to both:

“And strive for God with the striving due to Him. He has chosen you and has not placed upon you in the religion any difficulty. [It is] the religion of your *father*, Abraham. He named you “Muslims” before and in this [revelation] that the Messenger may be a witness over you and you may be witnesses over the people. So establish prayer and give zakah and hold fast to Allah. He is your protector, and excellent is the protector, and excellent is the helper.”

(The Holy Qur’an, 22:78)

Prophet Muhammad himself has said about his honorable ancestry:

“Verily, God, Most Sublime and High, chose [the tribe of] Kinanah from the children of Ishmael, and chose [the tribe of] Quraysh from Kinanah, and chose [the family] of Banu Hashim from Quraysh, and chose me from Banu Hashim.”

(Narrated by Muslim).

There is no doubt in the Islamic worldview about the Prophet’s lineage to Ishmael, the exact genealogy of the Prophet is verified until Adnan, about twenty generations, then the names between Adnan and Ishmael could not be confirmed.

In another hadith, the Prophet said: “I am [the result of] the supplication of Abraham my father, and [the fulfillment of] the glad tidings of Jesus...” Narrated by Al-Hakim.

There are Muslims who are connected to this noble genealogy until today, as is the case of the Hashemites, the Royal House of Jordan, who belong to Aal Al-Bayt. Such a lineage entails a great honor,

but also a great responsibility, an example of which is that the Jordanian Hashemite King is the Custodian of the holy places in Jerusalem, including Al-Aqsa Mosque.

The primary relationship of Muslims with all prophets remains spiritual. God created us different peoples and tribes so that we may know each other, except that it is *piety* that counts (The Holy Qur'an, 49:13).

The Qur'an celebrates the creation of different "languages and colors (i.e., ethnicity and "race")" (The Holy Qur'an, 30:22) as positive signs from God. This means that humanity should go beyond tolerance into appreciation of diversity. Yet, it is always about faith and belief, worship and spirituality, ethics and morality, and advocating the good and prohibiting evil. The prophets' role is to guide us through revelation, to all that. Revelation is a roadmap for humanity to paradise. This is the true everlasting *return*, for all else is temporary. It is in this light that the Qur'anic invitation to a "common word" (The Holy Qur'an, 3:64) to devote one to the worship God and to translate that into the Prophetic love of neighbor, are of the utmost importance for peace in both worlds.

However, returning to one's home after forced exile and displacement is a matter of justice, and God is the Just, and He loves justice. To give up on this basic human right is sacrilegious.

Prophets and messengers in the Islamic worldview were chosen by God to convey His message to humanity. The details of their stories varied according to the context in which they existed, but the focal point remains the message they received through revelation and brought to their respective people. When humanity was ready for one last revelation, the message became universal. The essen-

tial message throughout the history of revelation was a theology of pure monotheism (i.e., *Tawhid*), combined with performing good deeds, while also tending to the social ills and injustices of the day. All defined and interpreted within the framework of revelation, making sure that it is neither changed in letter nor bypassed in spirit. Such changes, especially when revelation suffered from the vagaries of transmission, warranted sending a new prophet to revive the original message. The essence and attributes of God do not change. "...Nothing is like unto Him..." (The Holy Qur'an, 42:11). Any religion or religious sect or theologian that likens God to any of His creation (i.e., limited by time and space), including ascribing real physical anthropomorphic attributes to Him, is the outcome of human post-revelation theological constructs. They are historical developments. Suffice it to ask within a specific tradition whether a prophet was orthodox or conservative or liberal, to realize the changes that took place over millennia, at the hands of members of that particular faith, especially in modern times. The Qur'an recognizes previous differences in law, but not in theology. Sabbath, as an example, was required of the Jews before Islam, with severe punishment for those who violated the sanctity of the Sabbath. For Muslims, it is the duration of the actual Friday prayer, beginning with the call for prayer, when conducting business transactions becomes prohibited.

Many prophets of Islam are referred to as patriarchs and kings in the Bible, attributing to them, in many cases, behavior that is unbecoming of persons that God chose to receive revelation, to convey the divine message, and be role models whose behavior can be emulated. "Patriarch" might highlight a genealogical link, while "prophet" is organically tied to a revealed divine message to which people subscribe by choice, is ultimately universal, and open to hu-

manity at large. The latter falls within an essential article of faith, believing in all prophets and messengers:

“The Messenger has believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord, and [so have] the believers. All of them have believed in Allah and His angels and His books and His messengers, [saying], “We make no distinction between any of His messengers.” And they say, “We hear and we obey. [We seek] Your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the [final] destination.”

(The Holy Qur’an, 2:285)

As Muslims, we have internalized this egalitarian relationship with the prophets of God qua prophets, being at home with all of them. This is also possible because of the chronology of events, coming at the culmination of the history of revelation, where Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) is the “Seal of the Prophets”. There are twenty-five prophets that are mentioned in the Holy Qur’an, but they are not the only ones, for there were others who were not mentioned:

“Of some messengers We have narrated their story; of others, We have not, and God addressed Moses in speech!”

(The Holy Qur’an, 4:164)

Prophet Muhammad explained the fraternal relationship between all prophets, being unified by the same belief and revelation, while having differences in law, he said:

“Among people, I am most entitled to Jesus son of Mary, in this world and the hereafter, and the prophets are

brothers of different backgrounds; their mothers are diverse but their religion is one.”

Narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim.

This is not surprising considering the reverent and inclusive narrative of previous revelations:

“And We sent, following in their (i.e., previous prophets) footsteps, Jesus, the son of Mary, confirming that which came before him in the Torah; and We gave him the Gospel, in which was guidance and light and confirming that which preceded it of the Torah as guidance and instruction for the righteous.”

(The Holy Qur’an, 5:46)

On the other hand, the latter verse shows that God does have a hierarchy for all prophets:

“Those messengers – some of them We caused to exceed others. Among them were those to whom Allah spoke, and He raised some of them in degree. And We gave Jesus, the Son of Mary, clear proofs, and We supported him with the Spirit of the Holy...”

(The Holy Qur’an, 2:253)

The ranking, in this context, is not something that could be done by human beings. There is also a direct prohibition in authentic prophetic traditions against Muslims ranking prophets, except that Muslim scholars attempt to understand and express those whom God has elevated. An example would be the five messengers who strove most (i.e., *ulu al-‘azm*):

“So be patient, [O Muhammad], as were those of determination among the messengers...”

(The Holy Qur’an, 46:35)

In exegesis literature, they are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad, peace be upon them. They rank above all other messengers and prophets. There is a unique status of Prophet Muhammad in the Islamic worldview, but this did not translate into the Holy Qur’an becoming a self-centered book. He is mentioned four times by name, while Prophet Moses is mentioned by name about 140 times! The story of the Children of Israel is the main story in the Holy Qur’an. One of the most important stories that links Muslims theologically to the Holy Land, “The Night Journey” (*Al-Isra’*), has another name; “The Children of Israel” (*Banu Israel*). Only the first verse addresses the night journey in which the Prophet from the Noble Sanctuary in Mecca to Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. The narrative then shifts to Prophet Moses and the Children of Israel for the rest of this rather lengthy chapter of the Holy Qur’an. This story ensures that the future connection of both communities to the Holy Land, and the nature of their presence, is tied to whether they submit to God’s Will. It is laden with eschatological scenarios. And it has nothing to do with the genealogical link to Ishmael or Isaac.

Theologically, Ishmael and Isaac are on the same level. None of them is superior or inferior to the other, and the narrative about them was and remains egalitarian. The Holy Qur’an does narrate very few differences in character, such as Ishmael being “forbearing” and Isaac being “knowledgeable”, but none of these differences lead to ranking. Muslims do not highlight ancestral relations with prophets as the epicenter of the Islamic worldview. It is more

about the message, with all the belief and love accorded to the messenger.

The Qur'anic story, however, reflects a more active role of Ishmael. There is no marginalization of either prophet, and there is no competition between them of any sort. In the universal message of Islam, both of them are Muslims, like all prophets and messengers, true submitters to the will of God, and not as followers of Prophet Muhammad. In what follows, Abraham and Ishmael supplicate and ask Allah SWT¹ to accept their effort in building the Ka'bah:

“And [mention] when Abraham was raising the foundations of the House and [with him] Ishmael, [saying], “Our Lord, accept [this] from us. Indeed, You are the Hearing, the Knowing. Our Lord, and make us Muslims [in submission] to You and from our descendants a Muslim nation [in submission] to You. And show us our rites and accept our repentance. Indeed, You are the Accepting of repentance, the Merciful”.”

(The Holy Qur'an, 2:127-128)

Not only Ishmael provided a helping hand to his father in building the first House of God, all rituals that Muslims perform in Mecca and surrounding areas, during pilgrimage/Hajj, are related to Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael, with the story of sacrifice being commemorated annually by all Muslim pilgrims offering a sacrifice. Literally, all Muslim pilgrims offer a sacrifice which, for most pilgrims today, is performed on their behalf after they pay the cost.

¹ When writing the name of God (Allah), Muslims often follow it with the abbreviation "SWT," which stands for the Arabic words "Subhanahu wa ta'ala," meaning "Glorious and exalted is he."

One could imagine the practical challenges of a few million people making the offerings, even with the help of governmental institutionalized services.

There were two major stories of affliction and sacrifice in Abraham's life that each was followed by granting him a child. After mocking the idols of his native country and destroying them, Abraham became the archetypal iconoclast who of course faced the wrath of his own people. They wanted to execute him by incineration on a pyre, and they threw him to the fire. God decreed that the fire would not burn him, miraculously saving him, and paved his path and Lot to the Holy Land: "And We delivered him and Lot to the land which We had blessed for the worlds" (The Holy Qur'an, 21:71).

This is where his supplication for offspring was answered, only to, later on, face the hard decision of leaving his newly born in a remote land, in the Holy Sanctuary, "in a valley without vegetation" (The Holy Qur'an, 14:37), in what yet to become Mecca:

"My Lord, grant me [a child] from among the righteous."

So We gave him good tidings of a forbearing boy.

And when he reached with him [the age of] exertion, he said, "O my son, indeed I have seen in a vision that I [must] sacrifice you, so see what you think." He said, "O my father, do as you are commanded. You will find me, if Allah wills, of the steadfast."

And when they had both submitted and he put him down upon his forehead,

We called to him, "O Abraham,

You have fulfilled the vision.” Indeed, We thus reward the doers of good.

Indeed, this was the clear trial.

And We ransomed him with a great sacrifice,

And We left for him [favorable mention] among later generations:

“Peace upon Abraham.”

(The Holy Qur’an, 37:100-109)

“[I]n a valley without vegetation” in the scorching heat of the desert? Didn’t Abraham know where the rivers and the lakes, and the green meadows and the mild weather were, as is the case only at a day or two ride to the northern parts of the Holy Land, rather than a month or two to the Arabian Peninsula? Leaving Ishmael in Mecca, according to the Holy Qur’an, was not the result of sending him and his mother far away at Sarah’s request, as in the biblical narrative! In Genesis (21:10), it was about inheritance. Sarah dictated:

“Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

And more problematic within the same context (Genesis, 21:12-13) is the Biblical divine order to Abraham to obey Sarah:

“God said to him: Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the slave into a nation also because he is your offspring.”

This is not about a man obeying a woman! This is about a prophet obeying one of his followers in all that she requests!

In the Holy Qur'an, it is about growing spirituality, where one could not grow plants:

“Our Lord, I have settled some of my descendants in a valley without vegetation near Your Sacred House, our Lord, that they may establish prayer. So make hearts among the people incline toward them and provide for them from the fruits that they might be grateful.”

(The Holy Qur'an, 14:37)

None of us would do that to his or her family if we have a choice! We do not know what is it like to be a prophet, being directed by God, every step of the way. Abraham, the epitome of submission, complied with the will of God, time and again, and fulfilled divine revelation. It is the holiness of the space and a future moment when a distant offspring would emerge to change the history of humanity forever. All of this was in the plan of God for Abraham's family. Abraham had no choice but to submit.

Ishmael, the forbearing son, also survived the test. His reaction “O my father, do as you are commanded” reflects a deep understanding of what was going on. Abraham spoke of a “vision”, yet Ishmael realized it was a divine commandment. He knew that his father was a prophet.

For comparison, the narrative in Genesis (21, 8-18) has Hagar wandering the desert of Beersheba until she ran out of water. She puts the “child” under a bush and stayed at a distance because she could not watch him die! Then God hears his cry, and she is asked

to lift him up by the hand! The whole act does not match the chronology of Genesis. Ishmael was about sixteen years old at the time because his brother Isaac was already weaned! He should have been able to lift up his mother!

The Islamic story has it that Hagar's anxious search for water for the sake of Ishmael when he was a baby, and her haste pacing between the Safa and Marwa, two hills that are now situated inside the massive Mosque in Mecca, is commemorated by every Muslim Pilgrim, who walk seven times between them:

Indeed, as-Safa and al-Marwah are among the symbols of Allah. So whoever makes Hajj to the House or performs 'umrah – there is no blame upon him for walking between them. And whoever volunteers good – then indeed, Allah is appreciative and Knowing. (The Holy Qur'an, 2:158)

Abraham survived the second test which was with Ishmael, a test that could also be understood as a message to end human sacrifices offered on the altar of false idols and false causes. Humanity needs to submit to the will of God, for it is the cornerstone of piety that matters most. This is when Abraham was granted a second child, with a divine promise that there will also be a grandchild:

“And his Wife was standing, and she laughed. Then We gave her good tidings of Isaac and after Isaac, Jacob.

She said, “Woe to me! Shall I give birth while I am an old woman and this, my husband, is an old man? Indeed, this is an amazing thing!”

They said, “Are you amazed at the decree of Allah? May the mercy of Allah and His blessings be upon you, people of the house. Indeed, He is Praiseworthy and Honorable.”

(The Holy Qur’an, 11:71-73)

“After Isaac, Jacob” is the reason why Abraham’s son, who was about to be sacrificed, could not be Isaac! For how could such a test take place when God already promised, indeed decreed that Isaac, before he was born, will grow old enough to get married and have a child of his own? The problem with the biblical narrative, which does include a reference to Isaac being the one to be sacrificed, qualifies him as being Abraham’s “only” son. In Genesis, Ishmael was born when Abraham was eighty-six years old, and Isaac was born when Abraham was one hundred years old. Ishmael was the only son for fourteen years. Thereafter, none of them was the only son.

The attempt to solve the contradiction between “only” and “Isaac” by resorting to the notion that Isaac is the only beloved one, complicates things further. A prophet that loves one son and not the other, when none of them committed anything wrong!

Neither Isaac and Ishmael nor their mothers Sarah and Hagar, who are not mentioned by name, have a conflict in the Holy Qur’an. The stories of the Bible do have conflicts at the center of the patriarchs’ life. “Birthright”, as described in commentaries, is at the center of family members pitched against each other, where younger sons, with the help of their mothers, manage at times to deprive the elder brother of his privileges.

There is no such conflict in the Holy Qur'an within Abraham's family, nor is inheritance among the children of prophets an issue, for they could not inherit. Prophet Muhammad said in a hadith narrated by Abu Hurayrah in Musnad Al-Hamidiyy: "We, the prophets, are not to be inherited. What we leave behind is charity".

The biblical narrative paves the way for exclusive land inheritance, already beginning with the story of Noah's children, where it is hard to rationalize the various levels of discrimination against two of the three brothers so that Sam will become a favored child. Again, the deception in the story of Jacob and his mother deceiving Isaac, so that his elder brother Esau will not inherit.

Such biblical narratives belong to a body of literature called "Israeliyyat", which denotes Jewish and Christian ideas. Some of the biblical stories could be true, but others are more of legends, some of which found their way to the books of exegesis of the Holy Qur'an! It should be known that this genre of Islamic literature is not a source of Islamic law similar to the Holy Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet, and that typically the books of tafsir do include controversial issues. There are modern scholars who tried to de-Israelize some books of exegesis, but this body of literature is vast in terms of its size. The best approach remains full knowledge of the Islamic worldview and what could be acceptable or not among the Israeliyyat. Where there are Israeliyyat differences that negate the Qur'anic narrative in clear terms, the last word is for the Holy Qur'an. Nevertheless, Muslims were permitted in principle to narrate the Israeliyyat as mentioned in the Prophetic hadith narrated in Al-Bukhari: "...and narrate on behalf of the Children of Israel without worry...".

Muslim scholars understood that this invitation is to narrate stories that do not contradict Islamic tenets or narrative, especially post-revelational theological constructs that are detrimental to the notion of *tawhid*, or pure oneness of Allah, but also stories that undermine the impeccable and infallible nature of the prophetic character. This is why, as an example, it will never be accepted from a Qur'anic point of view that Prophet Lot had incest with his daughters, as mentioned in the Old Testament! His daughters were saved because of their piety! Sodom and Gomorrah, because of their grievous unprecedented sin, were banished by divine punishment!

The Prophets and Messengers (i.e., Prophets with revealed books) played ideal roles in their respective societies. None of them committed grave sins in the Holy Qur'an. They could, though, commit judgmental mistakes, a human trait, but also for their followers to learn how to behave when faced with the same scenarios. This infallibility is essential to the full delivery of revelation verbatim as received.

It was within the plan of Allah to choose Adam, Noah, the family of Abraham and the family 'Imran (i.e., Mary's family) above all humanity. It is worth noting that the first two were individuals, and the other two were families. Adam constitutes literally the physical beginning of humanity, yet he did receive "words" from his Lord (The Holy Qur'an, 2:37), while Noah's ark represents a second physical "beginning" after the flood, except that those who survived the flood were a community of believers. The family with which we are concerned here, similar to all prophets, are true submitters to the will of God:

“Or do you say that Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the Descendants were Jews or Christians?”

Say, "Are you more knowing or is Allah?" And who is more unjust than one who conceals a testimony he has from Allah? And Allah is not unaware of what you do."

(The Holy Qur'an, 2:140)

Ishmael was also praised for commanding his household to perform acts of worship:

And mention in the Book, Ishmael. Indeed, he was true to his promise, and he was a messenger and a prophet. And he used to enjoin on his family prayer and almsgiving and was to his Lord pleasing. (The Holy Qur'an, 19:54-55)

Prophets Ishmael and Isaac are the only known children of Prophet Abraham in the Holy Qur'an. Yet, I chose to highlight "Prophets" in this paper as a juxtaposition to the use of "patriarchs" in Jewish and Christian narratives, though the Qur'an uses "fathers" in reference to Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac, as "fathers" of Jacob:

"Were you witnesses when death visited Jacob? He asked his children, "Whom will you worship after I die?" They said, "We will worship your God, the God of your fathers Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, One God, and to Him we all surrender as Muslims"

(The Holy Qur'an, 2:133)

Prophet Jacob, who is also known in the Holy Qur'an as Israel, was worried about the most important matter in the life of his children, their faith. He, like all other prophets, wanted to make sure that he delivered the trust, the message of pure monotheism, belief in the oneness of God, without partners or associations, no

literal anthropomorphic attributions or resemblance to His creation. This is the true inheritance of all prophets.

To construct a polity around a perceived genealogical link risks creating a tribal nationhood, with an elevated status of members of this construct at the expense of fellow human beings, who happen to share the same space, considering them outsiders! This is social Darwinism that will inevitably lead to apartheid. Differences in race or ethnicity in the Holy Qur'an are praised as signs (*ayat*) from God, much like languages. Yet, if the ethnicity and culture of those in power are given preferential legal status, this will inevitably lead to grave injustice. When a state targets the language of a minority, downgrades its legal status, and limits or prohibits its use, this reflects deep insecurity on the part of the majority. It is failing the test of the interplay of power and justice, where the latter should be genealogy blind. References to biblical texts show that religion is translated into an archaic mechanism that creates problems rather than solving them. The Islamic worldview stresses justice as the core value of a polity, regardless whether it is Islamic or not.

The spiritual (*ummah*), in the Islamic worldview, is a community of believers who are bonded together by believing in God, advocating good and prohibiting evil (The Holy Qur'an, 3:110). The English word "nation" cannot convey this notion. The very same verse does end with opening the door for the People of the Book to be part of this unifying belief system. The importance of the polity is measured against its readiness to be subservient to this end. The covenant of Medina reflects the egalitarian ethos for all by stating "and the Jews of [the tribe] of Banu 'Awf form one *ummah* with the Muslims", and then it lists all the other Jewish tribes.

This inclusive language, though formative, is lost! Not all Muslim scholars are quick to revisit this beautiful historical moment. And the reason for this seems to be the Zionist project and the ongoing protracted Israeli occupation. Rather, the modern topography of “nation”-states and ensuing narratives that feed xenophobia do not allow much room for otherness.

Lineage, in itself, is important for many reasons, but without submission to Divine Will, is lacking. The story of the flood provides a good example, with a sad end. Knowing that the flood would not spare anyone outside the ark, Prophet Noah pleaded with his heedless son to join him:

“And it sailed with them through waves like mountains, and Noah called to his son who was apart [from them], “O my son, come aboard with us and be not with the disbelievers.” [But] he said, “I will take refuge on a mountain to protect me from the water.” [Noah] said, “There is no protector today from the decree of Allah, except for whom He gives mercy.” And the waves came between them, and he was among the drowned.

(The Holy Qur’an, 11:43)

It is a very sad scene where the son rejected all that his father stood for. He thought that resorting to a mountain would save him from the wrath of the Creator. Alas! The son of a prophet missed the point; there is no plan B! His genealogy did not benefit him.

The reference was to a real mountain, yet it could be interpreted as a reference to the material universe at large, which neither saves nor protects. It could also be extended metaphorically to all human

institutions, for those who protect you at the Security Council, as an example, cannot protect you in the court of God.

God blessed Abraham and all his family, and we Muslims mention them in our prayers a minimum of five times a day, towards the end of each prayer. We ask God to bless Muhammad and his family, the way He blessed Abraham and his family.

The family of a prophet is something special. The Holy Qur'an expects sublime behavior from the household of Prophet Muhammad, promising an extra reward for good deeds, but warns that there will be double the punishment for grave sins. We are required to hold the family of the Prophet (i.e., Aal al Bayt) in high esteem, as a matter of religiosity. Not all members of previous prophets' family members were pious believers. One of the two children of Adam killed his brother. One of Noah's children refused to be on the ark as stated earlier. And the wife of Lot sided with the wrongdoers before the wrath of God befell the pervert sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah. As for the descendants of Abraham and Isaac:

“And We blessed him and Isaac. But among their descendants is the doer of good and the clearly unjust to himself.”

(The Holy Qur'an, 37:113)

The following verse mentions other prophets including Jacob:

“Those were the ones upon whom Allah bestowed favor from among the prophets of the descendants of Adam and of those We carried [in the ship] with Noah, and of the descendants of Abraham and Israel, and of those whom We guided and chose. When the verses of the

Most Merciful were recited to them, they fell in prostration and weeping.”

(The Holy Qur'an, 19:58)

The title of this paper might call into the foreground the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where Palestinians are subjected to live under Israeli occupation for decades. I would like to say that this is not about the Jewish presence in Palestine. It is about the way this presence was established and maintained at the expense of the indigenous Palestinians before, during and after the Nakba, until today. The Zionist justification either speaks about a historical relationship to the land, an exclusive right to inherit it qua children of Isaac, or in light of the Holocaust. The settler worldview has a specific reading of the Bible; Jews are the rightful inheritors of the land, for Abraham is their real exclusive father, and the promised land is theirs. This is despite the fact that there is an inclusive language in the bible that does not dismiss Ishmael as the seed of Abraham, nor Abraham owned the land! When Abraham needed a place of burial for his wife, he paid for it!

As for the historical relationship, history of the Holy Land did not begin with Judaism. Jericho is the oldest agricultural settlement in the world and dates back 12,000 years ago. The Zionist claim that Jerusalem has been the capital of Israel for 3,000 years is all flawed. There was no one “nation”-state that was called Israel for all this period. For almost the entire last 1,400 years Jerusalem was under Muslim rule, except for the time of the Crusades. Before that it was the Byzantines, the Romans and the Persians...and the Canaanites... and God knows who! There was a time when all the Children of Israel lived in Egypt for many generations.

The Holy Qur'an refers to the life of the family of Jacob, when they joined Joseph in Egypt because there was draught in Palestine, as being nomads, "Bedouin" (The Holy Qur'an, 12:100). Being Bedouin is not derogatory. It is a state in which people do not settle down and, therefore, do not build fixed structures beyond their tents.

Had the narrative stressed a spiritual longing to the Holy Land, then maybe it would pass, without translating this into a right to occupy, confiscate and ethnically cleanse any part of the land of historical Palestine. The Palestinians need not appropriate every single phase of the 5,000 years of the complex history of Jerusalem under the banner of nationalism. Both sides are theologically mistaken when they speak about Jerusalem being the *eternal* capital, respectively.

As for the Holocaust, and while the memory of all its victims, Jews and Roma gypsies and others, should be respected, it was not the starting point of the Zionist project. The decision to create a national home for the Jews in Palestine took place at the end of the 19th century in Basel, Switzerland, at the first Zionist Congress. The Jewish rabbis in Germany overwhelmingly opposed holding the Zionist Congress in Munich. Herzl spoke of "fully independent state" when he thought he could buy Palestine from the Sultan in Istanbul, with a 10% down payment, pledging to pay the debt of the Ottoman Empire with the rest. He spoke of his totally rational thinking, allowing room for the use of the "[Jewish] legend" about Palestine, while being fully aware that there were European anti-Semites that will help fulfill his project. The following in his diaries shows his way of thinking, under the June 12, 1985, p. 92 entry, though he was still speaking about Argentina as an option:

“When we occupy the land, we shall bring immediate benefits to the state that receives us. We must expropriate gently the private property on the estates assigned to us. We shall try to spirit the penniless population across the border by procuring employment for it in the transit countries while denying it any employment in our country. The property owners will come over to our side. Both the process of expropriation and the removal of the poor must be carried out discretely and circumspectly”

(The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl, Vol. 1, p. 88)

While not all Christians and Jews are Zionists, there are large numbers of both that are, but not for the same reasons. For the Christian Zionists, the creation of Israel is a prelude to the second coming of Jesus Christ. This would be an eschatologically end of time scenario, where not much good is promised to the Jews at the hands of the very people who are supporting them at this historical juncture. For the Jews, the European experience per se was catalyst in motivating primarily secular Jews to advocate and plan the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. Europe sinned against the Jews and later on sinned against the Palestinians among many other peoples on earth, but it is the Palestinians who continue to suffer and pay for these sins. Beginning with the Balfour Declaration a century ago, the Palestinians were reduced into a “non-Jewish” category, where they became devoid of a name, of culture and of historical roots. They became invisible!

The story of Abraham and his sons should bring hope to the Abrahamic family, for neither his genealogy nor that of Ishmael or Isaac is responsible for creating the conflict. We witness systematic discrimination against cultural components and basic human rights; discrimination against use of Arabic, continued residency/ID revoca-

tion, especially in Jerusalem, house demolitions, lack of adequate water supplies in primarily West Bank and Gaza communities compared to the settlers, lack of freedom of movement for the Palestinians from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the siege of Gaza, land confiscation, and a Jewish Museum of Tolerance built on top of the Mamilla (Ma'man-illah) Muslim cemetery in Jerusalem, after exhuming hundreds of boxes of bones!

By stating the obvious ongoing wrongs that befell the Palestinians, though the above list is symbolic and the complete list continues to grow by the day, I am neither belittling the Jewish tragedy in Europe, for they had tremendous suffering especially during the Holocaust, nor it is to score points against Israel. The question is Israel capable of seeing and recognizing the humanity the Palestinians? The most recent Israel Nation-State Law that was passed by the Israeli Knesset on July 19, 2018, sends a chilling answer to still hopefuls: No!

Nine years ago, Henry Siegman, former executive director of American Jewish Congress, said:

“Israel’s relentless drive to establish “facts on the ground” in the occupied West Bank, a drive that continues in violation of even the limited settlement freeze to which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu committed himself, seems finally to have succeeded in locking in the irreversibility of its colonial project. As a result of that “achievement,” one that successive Israeli governments have long sought in order to preclude the possibility of a two-state solution, Israel has crossed the threshold from “the only democracy in the Middle East” to the only apartheid regime in the Western world...”

(Adam Horowitz, *Mondoweiss*, January 8, 2010).

Ishmael and Isaac, in the Biblical story came together to bury their father. A new coming together is needed. It will take strides by honest Israelis and Palestinians, by Jews, Christians, Muslims, and others, to come together for a new paradigm where structured mechanisms for discrimination are eliminated. Israel needs to admit the historical injustice that it has done to the Palestinians, apologize and address the chutzpa it has created, and stop thinking about solving the problem by denying the Palestinians their right to return to their homes.

Even if we Palestinians didn't have any adjective to qualify us other than simply being human beings, our humanity should not be compromised, not for this long!

Ishmael in the Christian Tradition

Father Rafiq Khoury

Latin Patriarchate, Jerusalem

In the midst of the Municipality Garden in Nazareth you can see a large and striking statue entitled “The Tent of Hagar”. It represents Hagar raising her son Ishmael in her hands, up towards heaven, shouting with pride and anger before God and the world. She is protesting her destiny and the destiny of her son, having been expelled from the house of Abraham to wander aimlessly in the desert, Hagar looks as if she is saying to God: Why, O Lord? And to the world: Why are you rejecting this boy? The first drop of tears mentioned in the Bible are precisely the tears of Hagar: “And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went, and sat down over against him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot¹; for she said: “Let me not

¹ Here we can refer to the similarity of expressions in this text and the texts which talks about the prayer of Jesus in the Olive Garden and his agony of death. The text here says: “about the distance of a bowshot”, and in the

look upon the death of the child.” And as she sat over against him, she lifted her voice and wept” (Genesis 21:14-16).

It is believed in the prevailing tradition, based on the Book of Genesis, that the Arab people belong to the lineage of Hagar and Ishmael. The Arabs, and foremost among them the Palestinians, are still aching under the pressure of terrible injustices, which have peaked in recent years. The second letter of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East describes this state in *A Human Being who suffers*:

“In our region, the human being is a being who suffers. In our contemporary history, he is beset by trials on all sides, learning from suffering and following an endless way of the cross. He suffers internally because of the many psychological and social hazards to which he can find no solution. He suffers in the material conditions of life, since he struggles to improve them, he suffers severe restrictions. He suffers in his human, political and cultural aspirations when he sees others denying him his right to progress, seeking to subdue him, break him in, because he wishes to have a place at the table of nations, and to contribute to the process of change and progress. He suffers because of the internal chains, because of what is imposed on him by the interference of others in his affairs, by the instruments of repression to which he is subjected every day by his own people and by others. He observes his glorious past, his difficult present, and his uncertain future, and he suffers. On the midst of all this, he aspires to the freedom which will enable him to fulfill his humanity and enable him to play his role in the modern

Olive Garden, the text says: “And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw” (Luke 22:41).

world. He anxiously seeks, therefore, his being, his authenticity, his personality and his mission. Overcome by anger and fear, he occasionally expresses himself through violence, extremism, hostility and fanaticism. All these negative manifestations are but an expression of his interior fear, anxiety and instability.”²

Therefore, this study is not neutral. Rather, it takes a position of solidarity with these people and their aspirations, and it moves between their distant past and their disturbed present. So this study asks, is it not time to lift the burden from the descendants of Hagar and Ishmael, to wipe away this immense injustice so that they can take their rightful place, and proper status, amongst the peoples of the earth?

What we are attempting to present in this brief work is the role of Ishmael in the Christian tradition. It is natural that this presentation be based on the Bible, primarily in the Old Testament, in the Book of Genesis, and also in the New Testament, with the help of commentaries and interpretations of the texts. After this survey of the Bible, we note some theological observations related to the topic. Here it is important to highlight that this presentation is governed by a Christian vision, that is the interpretation of the Bible, and what is related to Ishmael in it, comes in the light of Christ and His teachings. This may cast new lights on what was mentioned in the Bible and might open the door for new and creative thinking about Ishmael and his descendants.³

² *The Christian Presence in the Middle East: witness and mission*, n. 53.

³ In addition to the Bible and its interpretations, we were inspired by two important studies by Father Michel Hayek, the Lebanese Maronite priest, who studied the personality of Ishmael based specially on what is mentioned in the Holy Quran, in two books in the French language: *Le Mystère d' Ismaël*

ISHMAEL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Ishmael as an individual, in the Old and New Testament, is not the focus of an extensive and pointed interest. For it seems that his story ends in a void without apparently leading us to any place. In reality, with the death of Ishmael the Bible stops talking about him. Thus, we find that the interpretations of the Bible in the Christian tradition do not focus on Ishmael, except accidentally and briefly, where there is not absolute interested in him; in this sense, they mirror the Bible itself. The events which are related to his life and his destiny are not registered except as functional events in the margins of the God's plan for humanity and they are narrated in order to make the role of Isaac and his descendants more prominent. Rather the focus is on Isaac the youngest son of Abraham and his progeny as being the recipients of the promises of salvation, subsequently it is he who preoccupies the thinking of the Old Testament.⁴ Nevertheless, in the narrative of the Old Testament itself there is a collection of signs which are rich in their implications and which deserve a special interest, justifying questions about this figure, his features and his status in the history of salvation.

The Narrative of Ishmael

The Bible deals with the story of Ishmael in the Book of Genesis, specifically, in chapters 16, 17, 21, 25, all within the several stages

(1964) (*The Mystery of Ishmael*, 1964) and *Les Arabes ou le Baptême des Larmes* (1972) (*The Arabs or the Baptism of Tears*, 1972).

⁴ In this brief work, we use the two names "Abraham" and "Sarah" knowing that they are called "Abram" and "Sarai" in the first part of the narrative until God changes their two names into "Abraham" and "Sarah" (see Genesis 17: 5, 15) except in the texts which are quoted from the Bible itself whereby the names are mentioned as they came in the original text.

of Abraham's life. These chapters are collections of different narratives and various oral traditions which developed between the tenth and the sixth century BC. Each has a unique theological vision, refined in the first part of the millennium preceding Christ, and was compiled by an editor into its final formulation which we know today.⁵ Of course, our study cannot deal with the issues pertaining to the historicity of the text, its structure, its meaning, the cultural framework in which it came to be, the milieus which conveyed it and the specifics of its historical, social, mythical and oral backgrounds. Nonetheless, these considerations do not constitute a real necessity for our research because the Bible is not a history book, in the modern sense, nor a work of sociology, a manual of human genealogy nor any other such thing. Rather it is a religious and theological book in which the theological vision might vary given the array of the different traditions.

Derived from the summary of these traditions, the text narrates the major events of Ishmael's life and the main features of his character. The birth of Ishmael was the result of an initiative from Sarah, the first wife of Abraham. She was infertile, an already distressing situation, only to be exacerbated by God's promise of numerous descendants to her and her Husband. So, she gave up hopes of bearing children: "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (Genesis 12:1), this being the promise in the story of Abraham

⁵ We can notice that the narrative of Ishmael in the Book of Genesis forms a complete and integrated march of life, from the cradle to the tomb, and this indicates its importance. We can also notice that the literary structure which is used in the narrative of Ismail is quite parallel to the structure of the narrative of Isaac and is similar to it, for it uses nearly the same expressions (the birth, circumcision, the covenant, the promises, the blessing, the progeny, the death...) which allows us to compare between the two of them easily.

so regularly evoked. Sarah had “an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar.” So she asked Abraham to bear a son for her from Hagar:

“Now, Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar; and Sarai said to Abram, ‘Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarah” (Genesis 16:1-2).

This was not a strange matter in that historical period. The laws of the peoples of Mesopotamia legislated such practices. They allowed the husband of an infertile woman to take a slave woman as his wife in order to bear children from her. These laws recognized their legitimacy and their right to inheritance. Thus, Abraham bore Ishmael from her. He was called Ishmael, and it means “God hears”: “Behold, you are with a child, and shall bear a son; you shall call his name Ishmael; because the Lord has given heed to your affliction” (Genesis 16:11).

“And Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abraham was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram” (Genesis 16:15-16). However, as soon as Hagar was pregnant, she became haughty and felt superior over her mistress, and she behaved as if she was the mistress of the house. This aroused the sensitivity of Sarah, who began to torment Hagar to the extent that Hagar was forced to flee. However, the angel of the Lord appeared to her (exactly as he had appeared to Abraham at different stages of his life) and he ordered her to return to her mistress.

Here a new narrative, from another tradition begins in chapter seventeen. It traces the sign of the covenant between Abraham and God, which is circumcision:

“This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised...and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (Genesis 17:10-11).

Then, God promised him that he would have a son from Sarah whose name is Isaac: “I shall establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him” (Genesis 17:19). Ishmael was not concerned by this. Following the wish of Abraham,

“O that Ishmael might live in thy sight!”, God said “As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly ...and I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 17:20).

Thus, Abraham and his entire household, including Ishmael, were circumcised: “That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; and all the men of his house were circumcised” (Genesis 17:22-26).

In chapter twenty-one, the Book of Genesis describes the birth of Isaac: “And Abraham circumcised Isaac when he was eight days old... And the child grew and was weaned” (Genesis 21: 4, 8). Here, the jealousy of Sarah takes its course again, when she had seen her son playing with Ishmael, she was afraid that he would inherit with her son:

“But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be here with my son Isaac’” (Genesis 21:9-10).

Abraham was displeased with this discussion because he was attached to Ishmael and considered him his son. But God reassured him saying, “As for the son of the maid, I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman because he is your offspring” (Genesis 21:14). This is what happened. On this account, “Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba,” (Genesis 21:14) where the angel of the Lord appeared to her (the angel being God Himself), and asked her to take care of the boy. The Book of Genesis adds by saying:

“And God was with the lad, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt” (Genesis 21:20-21).

The Book of Genesis returns anew to Ishmael in chapter twenty-five to enumerate the genealogy of Ishmael. It seems that the names of Arabian clans and tribes draws reference to the tradition that sees Ishmael as the father of the Arabs (see Genesis 25:12-18). The Book of Genesis concludes the narrative of Ishmael by the news of his death: “These are the years of the life of Ishmael, a hundred and thirty-seven years; he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his kindred” (Genesis 25:17-18). With this the narrative of Ishmael ends, he disappears to leave the place

for his brother Isaac who, with his descendants, are the focus of the succeeding chapters. The two brothers did not meet except when they buried their father: “Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him” (Genesis 25:9). There is perhaps in this last meeting a certain sign and a prophecy.

Ishmael between Sarah, Abraham, Hagar and God

Since the beginning of, and throughout his life, Ishmael was in the midst of several divine and human interactions, namely those among Sarah, Abraham, Hagar and God. The understandings of these might help to elucidate Ishmael’s character and his role in the history of salvation.

- 1) *Sarah*: We begin with Sarah, who is preoccupied with two obsessions; the obsession of having offspring on the one hand, and on the other hand, God’s promise to her husband Abraham that he will be a father of “a great nation” (Genesis 12:2). But this cannot be, for she is infertile and “did not beget children for him, for the Lord has prevented [her] from begetting children” (Genesis 16:1-2). So she resorted to that custom which was recognized in the laws and traditions of her time, by resorting to the Egyptian slave woman, Hagar, in order that she might bear a son for her: “It may be that I shall obtain children by her” (Genesis 16:2). Abraham adopted his wife’s idea, and Hagar bore for him his son Ishmael: “And Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram” (Genesis 16:15). However, Hagar behaved in a manner only to be expected of a person in this situation. She felt superior to Sarah and “she looked with contempt on her mistress” (Genesis 16:4). Sarah felt insulted and humili-

liated, and she began to think of how to get rid of her. She complained to Abraham, telling him “may the wrong done to me be on you!” and asked him to stand by her. She began to humiliate Hagar who felt that she had no place beside Sarah, “so she fled from her” (Genesis 16:7). She wandered aimlessly in the wilderness. However, the Lord appeared to her and asked her to return to her mistress and humble herself before her and she did as the angel of the Lord commanded her to do.

When Isaac was born of Sarah by God’s planning, and he grew up, “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac” (Genesis 21:8). The feelings of jealousy and competition returned to act in her heart. She asked Abraham to expel Hagar and her son “for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac” (Genesis 21:10). Abraham reluctantly accepted. After the Lord had reassured Abraham concerning his son Ishmael, he provided Hagar with bread and water and sent her away: “So she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba” (Genesis 21:14).

Regarding the behavior of Sarah, one might ask about her difficult human circumstances – and there are many in the Bible – which produce these unbecoming emotional responses. This should lead us to conclude that God has his own plan concerning human beings, but this plan takes its course through human complications with all the crookedness, sins, emotions and behaviors in them, because God deals with real human beings, not imaginary ones. The Portuguese proverb says, “God writes straight with crooked lines.” The straight writing is His divine plan, leading towards salvation, and the crooked lines are human conduct and emotions, which do not deactivate

the divine scheme. God goes beyond human contradictions, and He proceeds with His divine scheme towards completion.

- 2) *Abraham*: Abraham considered Ishmael his son both before the birth of Isaac and after it. He did not forsake him at any time. However, he yielded to the pleas and demands of his wife Sarah, even if reluctantly, and he left Hagar with her: “Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please” (Genesis 16:6). The Book of Genesis insists on calling Ishmael “his son” (Genesis 16:15, 17:23, 26) and mentions that Abraham was the one who called Ishmael by this name, after God had called him by this name. Giving the name indicates that he considers him a real son of his. Similarly, as Isaac was circumcised, albeit later in the story, so Ishmael was circumcised too: “That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised” (Genesis 17:26). After the birth of Isaac, Abraham did not forsake his son Ishmael. So when Sarah asked him to expel Hagar and her son “the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son” (Genesis 21:11). However, he yielded here to Sarah’s instinctive demands, and this time at the request of God, who emphasized to Abraham that he would not forsake the boy, “because he is your progeny” (Genesis 21:13).
- 3) *Hagar*: As for Hagar, she is between three people: Sarah, who is jealous of her, Abraham, who considers Ishmael his son, and God, who takes care of the boy and his mother. She considers Ishmael her son and Abraham her husband. In all cases, she stayed beside the boy and took care of him. God Himself also intervenes and reassures Hagar that He too would not forsake the boy. Here we access God’s position towards Ishmael and his mother.

- 4) *God*: God has His own rulings and His plans for salvation which are not dependent on human beings. He chooses whom He wishes to implement in His divine plan despite all of the human complications which accompany its implementation. He had chosen Isaac “for through Isaac shall your descendants be named” (Genesis 21:12). From that time on, the Book of Genesis begins to focus on Isaac because he is the son of the promise, through whom God’s divine plan will be achieved. For this time, Ishmael is absent from the narrative, and it is left to Isaac and his progeny, where God’s divine plan unfolds through them.

Here we draw the attention to the fact that God is free in His Choices, and does not submit to the calculations of human beings, to their ideas or criteria. From the text it seems that Ishmael surpasses Isaac in many aspects. For Isaac seems to be weak and Ishmael strong: “He was an expert with the bow” (Genesis 21:20). Ishmael is the firstborn and Isaac is the younger brother. Ishmael seems to be resilient and is able-bodied in contrast with Isaac who is weaker, making Isaac the recipient of mockery from his brother. Despite this, God chooses Isaac and not Ishmael. For God’s decisions are totally free and do not submit to the achievements of human beings or their characteristics, rather they contradict human logic in many instances. God chooses human beings who do not expect to be chosen. He chose Isaac instead of Ishmael, Jacob instead of Esau and Joseph instead of all of his brothers, the youngest of them in age. He chose David from all of his brothers, although he too was the youngest among them. This is the wisdom of God which is beyond comprehension and its mysteries are unknown. However, it is of note that that God’s election is not a reason for pride or boasting. For election is not a privilege, rather it is a sending-out. The election does not mean that the

chosen one has a higher status than others or better character. God does not complete His divine plan in this form, like in this case of Isaac against Ishmael. Each of the two has his own course, no matter how divergent the courses are. God chooses freely and He does not discriminate, rather it is human beings who turn election into a privilege, and cause divisions.

God chose Isaac but He did not cast off Ishmael. When we read the Book of Genesis, we notice that God accompanies Ishmael with His care and His love at every important junction of his life. So when Hagar fled from Sarah, we see that God is manifest to her in the form of an angel, and He asks about her “because the Lord had given heed to [her] affliction” (Genesis 16:11). He named the child which she would give birth to, Ishmael. Here too, having been named by God, we know that God will look after Ishmael in a special way and that God would not forsake him. God sought her and asked her to return to her house. When Ishmael was born and became exposed to Sarah’s persecution, we see that he remained the object of God’s care. This is what appears in this dialogue with Abraham (Genesis 21:12-13) and again, when Hagar wandered aimlessly in the desert and God manifested Himself to her anew and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand” (Genesis 21:17-18). He guided her to a water well, “so she went and filled the skin with water and gave water to the lad to drink.” The Book of Genesis adds: “And God was with the lad, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow” (Genesis 21:20-21). God not only took care of, protected and looked after him, but he was from God the object of a covenant, a promise and a blessing.

A Covenant, a Promise and a Blessing

As we will notice, Ishmael did not remain outside the circle of the covenant, promise or blessing. Here we will explore what we can interpret from this.

- 1) *The Covenant:* Historically, the custom of circumcision had been practiced among the peoples of Abraham's geographic region, for both cultural and religious purposes. Circumcision was a rite of passage, denoting integration into the community and belonging to it. Boys approaching a certain age were circumcised, acting as a social function it would express belonging to that certain religious or ethnic community. It took the person out from the narrow circle of himself so that his personality could be realized in the community. This practice was transferred to the Old Testament, and it acquired, in the priestly tradition, religious significance. This rite began at the time of Abraham (Genesis 17:9-14), and in the Book of Leviticus it became a religious law: "And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised" (Leviticus 12:3). God concluded the covenant with Abraham, "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you" (Genesis 17:7). As for circumcision, it is a perceptible and bodily sign of this covenant: "This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you...so shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant" (Genesis 17:9-11, 13).

On this basis, Isaac was circumcised eight days after his birth (Genesis 21:4). However, what interests us here is the earlier circumcision of Ishmael: “Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all the slaves born in his house or bought with money, every male among the men of Abraham’s house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised” (Genesis 17:23-27). This very circumcision is the reflection of the covenant, it means that Ishmael is not remote from or out of the covenant, but rather he is within it and in its core. It is clear that the Book of Genesis uses the same expressions in the circumcision of Abraham and Ishmael, and they are the same expressions which will be used later upon the circumcision of Isaac. There is no difference here between Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael. For all of them are the children of the covenant of which circumcision represents an eternal sign.

- 2) *The Promise:* The Book of Genesis is the book of promises and Abraham and his descendants are the subjects of them (see Genesis 15; 4-6, 17:16, 26:24). The promises mean that the covenant has continuity and a future. Here we seek to look at the relationship between Ishmael and these promises. Most notably, Ishmael was not deprived of these divine promises. It is suitable that we draw attention to them in order to understand their meaning. When Hagar fled for the first time from Sarah “The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness” and he told her, “I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude” (Genesis 16:10). He adds, “Behold, you are with a child, and shall

bear a son; you shall call his name Ishmael...” (Genesis 16:11). He continues saying, “He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen” (Genesis 16:12), and this is a sign of the wars and raids between him and his kinsmen throughout the events of the Old Testament. An interpreter of this verse in the Jesuit edition of the Bible points out, “The grandsons of Ishmael are the Arabs of the desert, and their life is a nomadic life and a life of independence: and this reminds us of the Jahili (period before Islam) era and its poetry.”⁶

After the birth of Isaac, Hagar and her son Ishmael were expelled to the wilderness. So God said to Abraham, “And I will make a nation of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring” (Genesis 21:13). In the wilderness, the angel of the Lord caught up with Hagar once again asking, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 21:17-18). It is true that the implementation of divine promises will be done through Isaac, but these promises do not make Ishmael alien or excluded from them, particularly because the expressions which are used by the Bible are the same in the two cases of Isaac and Ishmael.

- 3) *The Blessing*: We come to the blessing, another constant throughout the manifestation of God’s divine plan for humankind. In the Book of Genesis, this blessing is directed to our first parents (Adam and Eve), whereby the writer says, “And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and

⁶ Footnote number 4, p.1.

multiply, and fill the earth...” (Genesis 1:28), in addition to blessing the animals which God had created (Genesis 1:22), and the seventh day (Genesis 2:2-3). This blessing was repeated for all of creation with Noah: “And God blessed Noah and his sons” (Genesis 9:1). Then the blessing of God for His creation continued through Abraham: “And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2), and then with his descendants, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. But also Ishmael, where God says in The Book of Genesis, “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” (Genesis 17:20).

What is the meaning of the blessing? The blessing is a gift from God, the giver of life; it expresses His generosity, His love and His care. He grants it to whom He chooses and according to His divine plan for humanity. For God is the source of the blessing, which is both dynamic and effective, and foundational for salvation, whilst asking of no requital. As for the nature of this blessing, it is connected with life, and it takes various forms; prosperity, strength, life and salvation. It includes earthly bounties, offspring, numerous descendants, and the land with its bounties, but also includes the fruits of salvation. Before everything, the blessing indicates a special relationship between God, the giver of blessings, and the human being, the one who is blessed. This is what makes the blessed human being an object of radiation, that is, the one who is blessed becomes a source of blessing for the others: “All the tribes of the earth shall be blessed by you” God tells Abraham. Concerning the human being or the community, the subject of the blessing, they respond to this blessing with gratitude and

thanking God. From here comes the expression of the prayers of blessing in the Bible, especially in the Psalms (see for example Psalm 103). And, since Ishmael was the subject of a blessing from God, all these meanings apply to him.

In summary, Ishmael appears to us in the Book of Genesis as the son of the covenant, the focus of the promises and the subject of blessing. The relationship of God with Ishmael, through all of this, is a prophetic sign which heralds upcoming times, which makes for Ishmael and his descendants a certain future. Nobody knows the thoughts of God, nonetheless these signs indicate that Ishmael has a future in God's salvific plan for humanity, only we do not know how nor where nor when:

“O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” (Romans 11: 33-35).

For God is the Lord of history and a God of oneness.

ISHMAEL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament does not mention Ishmael except implicitly as we shall see; as the New testament is a continuation of the Old Testament, and the writers of the New Testaments accept the narratives of the Old Testament, this goes without discussion. Accordingly, the New Testament follows the footsteps of the Old Testament, and sees Abraham and his descendants, in Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, as the focus of God's promises (see Hebrews 11:8-22).

Nevertheless, we can find a handful of texts which refer, in one way or another, to Ishmael.

The Children of Abraham:

A reoccurring theme throughout the New Testament and in arguments amongst the religious groups, such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees, asks ‘Who are the children of Abraham?’. The Jews used to declare loudly that they are the children of Abraham. Subsequently, salvation is guaranteed to them by merely belonging to Abraham by birth. John the Baptist, during his preaching, encountered this mentality, which expressed itself by the declaration, “We are the children of Abraham.” So he answered, “and do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:9-10). By this he means that the descendants of Abraham are those who follow in the footsteps of Abraham, and not those who boast of belonging to Abraham by birth.

This argument returns with all its intensity between Jesus and a group of Jews, who confront him by saying that they are the descendants of Abraham, subsequently, they are not slaves and they do not need anybody to liberate them (John 8:31-33). Jesus answered them,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ...I know that you are descendants of Abraham... if you were Abraham’s children, you would do what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man

who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this not what Abraham did” (John 8:34-41).

Jesus goes as far as describing them as being the children of Satan: “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44). The interpretation of the Jesuit edition of the Bible adds by saying, “The progeny of Abraham is not merely an inherited or a social truth, but rather it also requires harmonization between their position and the position of Abraham in lifetime. It is inevitable that this harmonization be accompanied by action. For the attempts to kill Jesus are the evidence which does not accept argument that those who attempt to kill Jesus are not Abraham’s children except in a pure human way”.⁷ From here came the expression in the New Testament that Abraham is “the father of believers.”

Here it is possible also to mention Jesus’ parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). In this parable we see poor Lazarus in the lap of Abraham while the rich man, who is the son of Abraham in the ancestral sense, went to “the place of torture,” whereby he is separated from Abraham by a great abyss.

Sarah and Hagar in the Epistle to the Galatians:

There is a text which we find in the epistle of Saint Paul to the Galatians, whereby Saint Paul, in the context of his letter, mentions Hagar and Sarah and subsequently Isaac and Ishmael, only the references to Ishmael and Isaac are implicit:

⁷ The Bible, The Jesuit edition in Arabic, footnote 22, p. 316

“Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not hear the law? For it is written in the book that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. Now this is an allegory; these two women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem slave is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: “Rejoice, O barren one that dost not bear...”. So, brethren, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.””

Biblical scholars acknowledge that this text is the most ambiguous text in the letter to the Galatians. Sufficient for us is to mention the general context of this extract and its meaning, without entering into unending details which do not interest us in a brief work of this kind. In order to understand this text, we must go back to the context in which this letter was written. Saint Paul writes to Christian communities in Galatia (in the middle of Turkey today). Most of their members are from converted pagans, and they are a group whose members did not remain faithful to the Gospel which Paul shared with them. It seems that other evangelists came to this community after him, and taught that believing in Jesus Christ is not sufficient to attain salvation, rather they have to, and they are converted pagans, follow the Law of Moses if they want full salvation. Paul breaks out in anger at these “fools” and sees that the attempt to impose the Law of Moses is treason for the Gospel.⁸

⁸ See Father David Neuhaus, *Get to Know Saint Paul and his Epistles*, The Door of Faith Series, Jerusalem, 2016, pp.44-46.

In this context, Saint Paul searches for a symbol in the Old Testament which helps him to clarify his idea and utilizes the story of Sarah and Hagar in the Old Testament. He views in “Sarah and her children” an image or a symbol of the freedom which the Gospel offers, and in “Hagar and her children” an image or a symbol of the slavery of the law. The word symbol clearly indicates the aim of Paul’s interpretation; it is not logical evidence, rather it is an example. If the human being is Abraham’s son according by genealogy, as the example of Hagar’s son, he remains in slavery which the Old Testament is characterized by. And if he is Abraham’s son according to the spirit, on the example of Isaac, he is liberated and able to enter Jerusalem symbolic of the promised kingdom of Heaven.⁹ In this analogy, Saint Paul remains faithful to what was described in the Old Testament. For he is in keeping with the Christian tradition which views the Old Testament as inspired by God, he is enlightened by the Old Testament which clarifies his idea. It is noticeable that this epistle sits within the context of pagans converts to Christianity. Saint Paul wants to emphasize that their entry into Christianity is part of God’s divine plan. Father Michel Hayek adds, “If the doors of salvation are open for the pagans, the more so they are open to Hagar’s children, and that is within a comprehensive vision of salvation.”

The Woman in the Book of Revelation:

There is a noteworthy excerpt in the Book of Revelation which does not directly point to Hagar and her son, but includes allusions to them:

⁹ The Bible, the Jesuit edition, footnote number 16, p. 580.

“And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon ... And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth. She brought forth a male child... but her child was caught up to God and to His throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished... And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished... in security from the serpent. The serpent poured water like a river out of its mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon had poured from his mouth...” (Revelation 12:1-18).

Firstly, we must mention that this text belongs to the special ‘apocalyptic’ Biblical genre. It is considered metaphorical by the writer, and recipient of the revelation, and it is not a description of events which take place. So, as previously mentioned, the excerpt does not explicitly point to Hagar and her son, but it includes several signs which justify such an approach. One possible interpretation is that the text came, in its literary formulation, on the background of the story of Hagar and her son. Hagar wandered aimlessly “in the wilderness” (Genesis 16:7), “and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba” (Genesis 21:14). The

woman who is mentioned in the Book of Revelation also “fled into the wilderness” (Revelation 12:6) and “she was given the two wings of the great eagle to fly by them into the wilderness” (Revelation 12:14). In the same way that God took care of Hagar in the wilderness, He also takes care of the woman in the wilderness, and saves the two of them from the ordeal in which they found themselves. If we move to the son, we see that the son of Hagar is exposed to perdition due to the persecution by Sarah, and also the woman’s child is exposed to perdition due to the dragon who wants to devour him. However, both of them were the object of care from the Lord, for God saved Ishmael from death, and also God provided for the woman’s child too, saving him from the dragon. But it is possible to go further with this analogy.

The text does not specify the identity of the woman in the text, providing the opportunity for the interpreters to specify her identity. Some of them see in her Eve, others see Zion or the people of the Old Testament and others see the Church¹⁰. However, the most common and continuous interpretation in the history of the Church, by the Church Fathers, the ecclesiastic tradition and in iconography is that the woman who is mentioned in this text is the Virgin Mary, and this is what we too believe in. From this starting point, we can make a comparison between Hagar and the Virgin Mary to end up saying that Hagar is an image for the Virgin Mary. Father Michel Hayek develops aspects of similarity between the two of them. Hagar is a “slave woman” and Mary says about herself that “I am the slave woman of God,” and as is said “God looked at his humble slave woman”; both were visited by a divine messenger. The messenger promised Hagar the birth of a son, who would be a father of

¹⁰ See Father David Neuhaus, *Get to Know the Book of Revelation*, The Door of Faith Series, Jerusalem, 2014, pp.50-53.

a great nation, and Mary with a son "...who will reign over the house of David forever" (Luke 1:33). Mary stands by the cross to see her son dying from thirst before her eyes, and Hagar too watches her son dying from thirst in the desert, the son of Hagar is exposed to the ordeal, so she fled with him into the wilderness, and Jesus, the son of Mary, is exposed to persecution, so she fled with him to Egypt across the wilderness¹¹. I believe that all of this justifies that we see in Hagar an image of the Virgin Mary.

THEOLOGICAL NOTES

After this overview related to the individuals of Hagar and her son Ishmael and their destiny throughout the Bible, in the Old and the New Testament, we would like, in this last section, to highlight some general concepts, connected, in one way or another, with the topic that we are dealing with. Our dealing with these concepts sets out from a collective and comprehensive vision which might restore to the marginalized and the wronged persons, across all the history, their place and their role in the unfolding of God's divine plan. This approach from a Christian viewpoint might shed some light on some aspects of the salvific nature of God's plan which could be misunderstood and lead to negative results.

Election and Exclusion:

The unfolding of God's plan for humanity throughout the Bible, is permeated by a successive series of personalities all called by God to a certain message. It is most likely that we will not understand anything about the intentions of God if we do not take this fact into

¹¹ See Michel Hayek, *The Arabs or the Baptism of Tears*, Paris, 1972, pp. 212-213.

consideration. This raises questions about the election of certain people; does choosing a certain person mean casting off another person and excluding them? Unfortunately, human thought by its nature is contradictory, meaning it considers the choosing of a certain person as the exclusion of another. This has negative consequences which are quite different from the intentions of God. For sinful human beings will reject God's election of the other, as they consider it as belittling them. This leads to jealousy with all of its consequences, as was the case with Cain versus Abel where the matter ends with Cain killing his brother (Genesis 4). When a person is the object of God's election, they are exposed to the experience of considering this election as their right, a privilege and a reward. This leads to them feeling superior over others, with the negative consequences aimed towards those who are not afforded election. Unfortunately, the Bible has been often understood from this angle. So Cain was understood as being against Abel, Isaac against Ishmael, Jacob against Esau and Joseph against his brothers. All of this led to injustice, fighting, competition, the desire to exclude and even killing.

Unfortunately, this is the thinking which the followers of the different religions have fallen into. So the Jews consider themselves "God's chosen people," the Muslims "the best nation among all human beings," and the Christians "God's new people." This has led them to despise each other, exclude each other, creating distance between themselves, becoming tyrannical over the other, and feeling superior and haughty over them, all of these being detrimental results of this wrong understanding of God's election. In reality, election is not a privilege, and it is not the result of human achievements or personal characteristics or traits (see Deuteronomy 5-11), rather it is a free and unconditional election by God. For it is a favor from God, His grace and an expression of His ge-

nerosity towards human beings. It is a commitment and requirement for the believer to endeavor to be deserving of the grace of God and of His election. This is seldom achieved in any of the religions. Rather in all of them the human being remains weak, without the divine election for which God calls him. For election is a message which the called person is entrusted with. This election is a service, does not lead to controlling others nor being boastful (see Mark 10:41-45). Election is a divine initiative which does not subscribe to human measures, specifications or criteria. Thus, very often election came contradictory to these measures, criteria and specifications. So God chose the youngest and the weakest instead of the strongest or the one who has pedigree and lineage (see 1 Corinthians: 1:26-31).

This is what we attempted to explain when we read the story of Isaac and Ishmael. Choosing the one does not mean casting off or excluding the other. Election is a message and a service before everything. For God chooses Abraham, not to enjoy the blessing for himself, but so that all the tribes of the earth are to be blessed by him. In the Gospels, the verb “called” is always followed by the verb “sent”, because the election is for the mission of spreading that message. When we look at election from this angle, we consider it a gift which we share for the sake of others, a blessing by which others are blessed, generously given from God, so that we can overwhelm others.

The image which is adopted by the New Testament is the image of the body (see Corinthians 12:12-30). For the head, despite all its importance, is in the service of all of the body. And so are the smallest and humblest organs. For the hand cannot say: I am not a head, so I am not from the body, and neither the hand: I am not an eye, so I am not from the body. Rather, all the organs are in the

service of each other for the sake of the common structure and the whole's welfare. In the Gospel of Luke there is a parable which was mentioned by Christ and which indicates this truth, the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The father went out to meet his son who returned home after a time of ungratefulness and recklessness. So his elder brother became angry and envied him. However, the father went out to meet his elder son too, to tell him that "you are my son too, like your younger brother," and to tell him, "this is my son, and you are my son, this is your brother and you are his brother." God chooses all human beings and manifests to them His grace, each according to his position and his situation, and He does not exclude anyone.

The Injustice:

Father Michel Hayek sees in Hagar and her son a beginning of a wide series of injustices, to which human beings and human groups were exposed throughout history as understood in the Bible and Qur'an and throughout general history (including the injustice done to Al-Hasan and Al-Husain). After Father Hayek had seen the tear of Hagar, the first tear in the Bible, he sees the same tear in the first Arabic verse of poetry known in Al-Jahiliyyeh (the period before Islam) (Umrū' Al-Qays: "O You two, stand and weep..."). He continues his search to see in the contemporary Arabic poetry a continuation of this pain and injustice. He cites the symbolism of the cross in modern Arabic poetry (Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab, Salah Abdul-Sabour, Mahmoud Darwish)¹². This brings us back to the statue of "Hagar's tent" in the Garden of the Municipality of Naza-

¹² See Michel Hayek, *The Arabs or the Baptism of Tears*, Paris, 1972, pp.235-236. See also: Sahar Sami, "The Religious Intertextuality in the Poetry of Mahmoud Darwish," in *The Poets Journal* (Ramallah), spring and summer of 1999, pp. 84-89.

reth which tragically and expressively depicts all the injustices of history, against the marginalized, rejected, cast off and deprived individuals and groups.

When we open the Gospel, we are faced by a wide group of those wronged, marginalized and rejected, including women, children, lepers, handicapped, the poor, the sick, and those having low-income professions. What Jesus does is that He takes out these people from ambiguity, marginality and injustice in order to put them at the forefront and to direct to them His message of salvation. It should draw attention that the first blessing in the Gospel of Luke is directed to the poor: “Blessed are you poor” (Luke 6:20). Jesus puts them at the forefront of his message in order to integrate them into God’s plan for humanity through salvation, which the formal religious institutions deprived them of. Among the examples which draw our attention is His behavior with the children. When the children came around Jesus, the disciples scolded them. However, Jesus was displeased with the conduct of His disciples, and told them, “let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Mark 10: 13-16). The deprived, the wronged, the marginalized and the cast off have become an inseparable part of the march towards salvation. The matter did not stop at this limit, rather Jesus Himself became the deprived, the wronged, the marginalized and the outcast when He was crucified, “he had no form or comeliness... a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief... Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isaiah 53:2-8). In His resurrection, He transformed these pains and griefs into a resurrection, whereby He overcame the forces of evil, marginalization and rejection, as if He were saying to all of those, “Get out of the grave” (John 11:43-45).

If we look at the modern age, we see that the Palestinian people have been exposed to the greatest injustice known to contemporary history after the Second World War, whereby the Palestinians were expelled from their land to wander aimlessly in the wildernesses of the land of human beings. The tragedy is that this injustice came on the background of the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We also see that the Arab peoples are also exposed to a great injustice in recent years, whereby they have been removed from the theater of history, as if the world is telling them: either you become slaves or you disappear from existence. These peoples are the image for all the injustices in modern ages and all ages, in all the continents from Africa to Asia to America and Europe.

Is it not time for their resurrection?

A Comprehensive Vision:

In Jesus Christ, all of the promises of the Old Testament are gathered. In Him they take a new direction which is more comprehensive and spiritual. Christ is the “Yes” of God for all His promises: “‘For all the promises of God find their yes in him.’ That is why we utter the Amen through Him, to the glory of God” (2 Corinthians 1:20). With Christ, a new reign begins which goes beyond all the ethnic, physical and geographical barriers to build a comprehensive vision, the harbingers of which appear in the Old Testament, and were completed and were firmly fulfilled in the New Testament. For Christians, the promises are the gifts of the spirit symbolized by fully inclusive promises and material gifts. With Christ, the marriage of the land and the people became an image for the union of God with all humanity and with all the land of human beings. Accordingly, the progeny of Abraham is no longer the product of flesh and blood, rather it has become a spiri-

tual progeny which gathers the circumcised and the uncircumcised, in faith, those who were aliens from the covenants and the promises, that is the pagans, became participants in the promise and that inheritance. They participate in the promises of Abraham, who became a father to all of us (see Romans 4:9-16). Christ destroyed the barrier which separates between the two groups to make one group out of the two of them (see Ephesians 2:1-18). By this, He opened the horizons for a comprehensive reconciliation, in which there is no chosen one, no rejected one, no outcast, neither a Jew nor a pagan, neither a slave nor free, rather all, with no exception or exclusion become the progeny of Abraham and inheritors according to the Covenant (see Galatians 3:28-29), so God becomes “the Lord of all” (Romans 10:12). In this case, the earth becomes a symbol for the spiritual Christian bounties, and points out to a more sublime reality, where the kingdom forms “a new earth” (Revelation 21: 1), a new Jerusalem and new Temple (see John 4: 19-24). On this basis, there is no place for possession or exclusion, because all human beings are called to form in faith the great progeny of Abraham. And this is what opens the door for the comprehensive reconciliation in the last times.¹³

Ishmael and Islam:

We are not here dealing with the presentation of the view of Islam about Abraham and Ishmael. This is dealt with by another specialist in this booklet. What we would like to draw the attention to here is the theological vision of some Middle Eastern theologians about Islam in the history of salvation. And here, we point out to three of them who approached the topic in a new and exciting way which

¹³ See Father Michel Hayek, *The Arabs or the Baptism of Tears*, Paris, 1972, pp. 76-78.

calls for thought, and they are Father Youakim Moubarac, Father Michel Hayek and Father Fadi Daw. The three of them posit this question: From a Christian point of view, does Islam have a status in the unfolding of God's divine plan? In order to answer this question, Father Youakim Moubarac sets out from Abraham¹⁴. He views that Abraham integrates the Muslims in the peoples of the Bible more than he separates them. As for Father Michel Hayek¹⁵, he sets out from Ishmael, to emphasize that Islam has a function in the implementation of God's plan. Finally, Father Fadi Daw¹⁶ goes further than this to emphasize that "in the tree of salvation, Islam represents a special branch which grows on the Abrahamic graft, like Judaism and Christianity."¹⁷

All of this is not but a mere reference to a theological lineage which takes its course in Eastern and Western theology. It is a lineage which deserves contemplation and development. Islam posits a theological question to us Arabs. We have no right to neglect it under the pressures of the disturbed current situations. In the historical relations between the Muslims and the Christians in the Middle East throughout the generations, we were used to polemical writings, setting out from the mentality of mutual accusation and defense, and which did not lead to any result, rather it kept our hearts and minds far away. It is time that Christians and Muslims in the Middle East take a new theological orientation which works on inclusion, not on exclusion. This is a task which in the first place is shouldered on the Arab theologians. The aforementioned

¹⁴ See *A Quintuple in Christianity and Islam*, volume 2, The Quran and Western Criticism, Beirut, 2011, pages 1-125.

¹⁵ See the two books which are mentioned in footnote number 3.

¹⁶ Fadi Daw and Naila Tabbara, *The Divine Magnanimity: The Theology of the Other in Christianity and Islam*, Beirut, 2011, specially pages 91-121.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

attitudes developed by these thinkers have set us on course. What we hope is to continue going into depth in this furrow so that we reach a wider vision for Islam in the history of salvation. The Second Vatican Council opened the door in this domain, and what we have to do is to build on it.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

The Christian vision for the end of times focuses on the reconciliation between God and human beings and among all human beings. If the tears were the share of Ishmael's progeny, the Book of Revelation emphasizes that the last of times are times of peace and life, whereby "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4). In these new times God will be all-consuming, everywhere and everything. This bright vision of the end of days are transformed, among the believers in it, in this earthly life, into a message, which is working on reuniting all human beings. This applies to the followers of the three monotheistic religions, and it also applies to all human categories "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9). Working on bringing closer the followers of the different religions and the different human contexts is an urgent necessity so that humanity can become an embodiment of the future bounties and the final reconciliation, which will be enjoyed by all.

¹⁸ Here, we can mention what was said by Pope Francis in the press interview in the airplane which took him to the Holy Land, whereby he talked about "the common roots" among the religions and "the common among our origins", and this is what makes dialogue inevitable.

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