

# ***Blood Brothers***

## ***What the Ancient Story of Ishmael and Isaac Teaches Us Today About the Troubled Relationship between Jews, Christians, and Muslims***

**A Message Offered by  
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*Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. 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. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

*Genesis 12:1-3 NRSV*

Do you ever wonder why Christians, Muslims, and Jews find it so hard to get along? Today is Holocaust Remembrance Day, or *Yom Hashoah*, as our Jewish neighbors call it. It reminds us of the scandalous treatment of Jews, largely by Christians, during World War II. And ever since September 11, we've been painfully aware of the deep-seated hatred toward Christians in certain radical Muslim circles. Newspapers contain heart-wrenching headlines reflecting the animosity between Jews and Muslims being played out daily in the part of the world known, ironically, as the Holy Land. The Gospels themselves describe some of this bloody tension. In the days after the Easter resurrection Jewish authorities systematically hunted down the Jews who became known as "Christ-ians."

I'd like to take some time today, before our Easter glow completely fades, to look at the Biblical roots of the troubled relationship between Jews, Christians, and Muslims with the goal of finding cause for hope. I think that if we can understand the complicated relationship between two sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, we may be able to appreciate the enormous challenge that Jews, Christians, and Muslims face today in trying to get

along as one big happy chosen family. And we may also find opportunities for peace and reconciliation.

It all began with Abraham. Abraham lived in the time after Noah and the Tower of Babel, at least a thousand years before Moses, two thousand years before David, and perhaps three thousand years before Jesus. Abraham was not Jewish. There would be no such thing as the Jewish religion for more than a thousand years (when God gave the Law and the Commandments to Moses). Abraham lived in a time when most everyone worshipped *many* gods. Abraham probably did, too.

In our lesson from Genesis we heard the deal that this new god, who became known as “Yahweh,” offered Abraham: if Abraham would abandon the land of his ancestors, his financial security, and even his religion; this god would give him a new and better land, many children, and a new faith. (Genesis 12:2) Taking an enormous risk on this unknown god, Abraham rented a U-Haul and moved a few hundred miles from his village in modern-day Iraq to the land of Canaan, which is modern-day “Israel” (if you are Jewish) or “Palestine” (if you are Muslim).

Abraham prospered in Canaan, but after ten years there he and his wife Sarah still had no kids. So God reassured Abraham that he would indeed have an heir -- a child of his own (Genesis 15)—and God promised that all the land of Canaan would someday belong to his descendants. (Genesis 15:18). Remember that promise; almost 5000 years of Middle Eastern history turns on that promise.

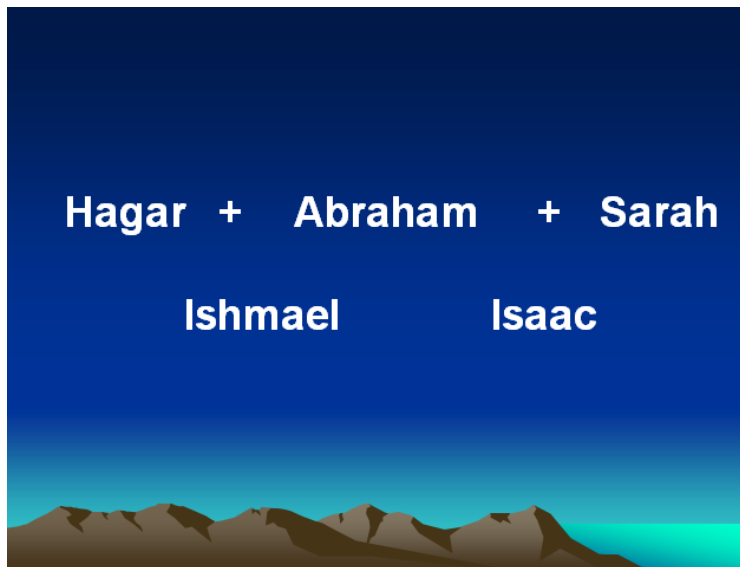
As Abraham and Sarah got older and heard their biological clocks ticking, they panicked and took matters into their own hands. Sarah suggested that Abraham use Sarah’s Egyptian slave, named Hagar, as a kind of surrogate mother (Genesis 16:2). Such an arrangement was common at the time; any child born of that union would be Abraham and Sarah’s legal offspring, descendant, and heir. Problem solved, or so they thought.

Abraham got Hagar pregnant, but then the whole surrogate parenting thing went bad. Once she was pregnant with Abraham’s child, Hagar started to give Sarah a hard time, and Sarah kicked her pregnant servant out of the house. While Hagar was trying to sort out what had just happened to her, an angel comforted her saying, “adjust your attitude and go home. You are going to become the mother of a huge family. But right now you are going

to start with a son, named Ishmael, he will be strong and untamed, and he will have many enemies, including his own brother.” (Genesis 16:12). Can you see trouble brewing? Hagar went back to live with Abraham and Sarah and soon she gave birth to Ishmael, just as God had told her.

When Ishmael was thirteen years old God renewed His covenant with Abraham and promised him another son, but this time by Sarah. God explained to Abraham that *both* sons would be blessed: Ishmael would father a great nation (see Genesis 21:13 and 18, and, ultimately, 25:12); and his second son, Isaac, would be the heir to the land of Canaan and the family name. You may remember that Sarah laughed at the news (Genesis 18:12)—she was way too old to have kids. But a year later, when she was changing diapers for a bouncing baby boy, the laugh was on her.

Let’s review:



One dad, two moms, and two brothers living in the same household is a recipe for either a situation comedy or a day-time drama, and the drama plot won out. Sarah didn’t like Ishmael playing with Isaac—I’m not making this up—it’s really in the Bible (Genesis 21:9-10) --and she insisted to Abraham that Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, had to go; Sarah didn’t want Ishmael to inherit one inch of the land that God had promised to Abraham and his children. (Genesis 21:10)

Abraham was torn. He really loved his first-born, Ishmael, but he trusted God’s assurances that Ishmael would be taken care of. So Abraham sent Ishmael and Hagar away to an area we know today as the Sinai

Peninsula, in modern Egypt (i.e., to the wilderness of Paran, the strip of land between Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel; Genesis 21:21). This is the site of Mount Sinai, where God would eventually give the commandments to Moses. A few years later, Ishmael married an Egyptian woman (just like his momma, Hagar!).

So far we know:

- Abraham loved Ishmael wholeheartedly.
- God cared about Hagar and promised her that through Ishmael she would become the mother of a great nation.
- Hagar taunted Sarah and in her insecurity Sarah ensured that Ishmael would not inherit one bit of the land that would one-day be called “Israel.” Sharing the land was out of the question. Remember this when you hear news reports about Jewish objections to a proposed two-state solution in the Middle East.

Soon after God told Abraham to send Ishmael away, God tested Abraham with his only remaining son. God asked Abraham to make Isaac a burnt offering. It shocks us now to think about it; it was shocking then, too; child sacrifice was not common at the time. But nevertheless Abraham traveled to Mt. Moriah--in the center of modern day Jerusalem--and prepared Isaac for the fire. But God stopped Abraham in the nick of time and Isaac was spared. (Genesis 22)

On account of Abraham’s great faithfulness, God once again promised him the land of Canaan and said that he would be the father of a great nation (Genesis 22:17). After this, Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac settled in Beer-Sheeba, in the southern portion of modern Israel, maybe one hundred miles from Hagar and Ishmael, who settled in modern Egypt.

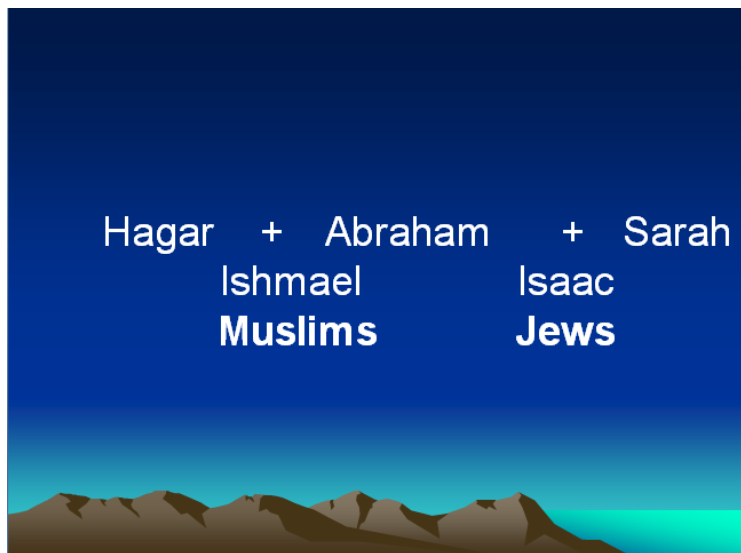
Ishmael and Isaac were two beloved sons, each promised a fabulous inheritance by God, living practically next door to each other. It turned out to be a recipe for disaster. And to make things more interesting, you may recall that Isaac grew up and married a woman named Rebekah. They had twin sons, Esau and Jacob, who didn’t get along any better than Isaac and Ishmael. Jacob was the favored one; Jacob went on to father the twelve tribes of Israel (rivaling the twelve nations of Ishmael). Esau left home and married his cousin, Ishmael’s daughter! Thousands of years later one of

*Esau's* descendants, Herod the Great, would do his best to snuff out the newborn king of the Jews, Jesus of Nazareth.

So what does all this have to do with us today?

Jews trace their spiritual ancestry through Isaac to Abraham. Muslims trace their spiritual ancestry through Ishmael to Abraham. Mohammed, the founder of Islam, is said to have been a direct descendent of Ishmael. Both faiths claim that *they* are the true heirs of Abraham's covenant. Both claim that the Holy Land is theirs. When Jews say that God promised the land to *them*, Muslims counter that the Jewish scriptures were corrupted; they got the story backward; Muslims say that it was *Ishmael* who was promised the land of Canaan and *Ishmael* whom Abraham nearly sacrificed on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem; on the same exact spot from which Mohammed is said to have ascended to Heaven thousands of years later. Now you can see why both Jews and Palestinians want their capital to be in Jerusalem and why neither is willing to allow the other one permanent control of that holy city.

So where do Christians fit into the family tree?

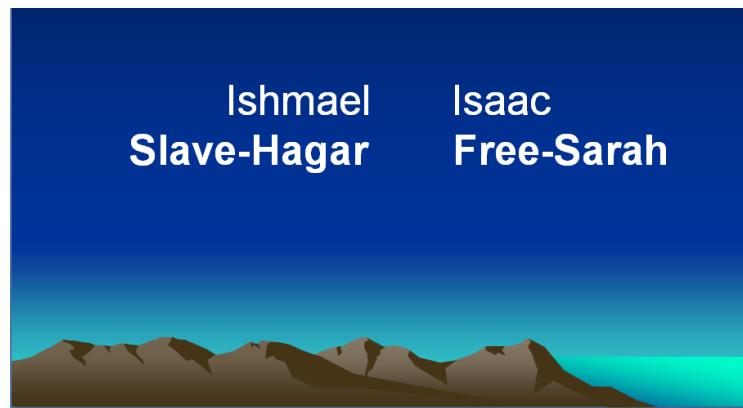


We trace our roots through Isaac's side because that's the side that Jesus traced his earthly ancestry through (from Joseph to David to Benjamin to Jacob and Isaac).

Today's second scripture lesson (*Galatians 4:22-26, 28-31, 5:1* see below, in the text) brings it all together. Paul is talking to the first Christians about how they should live. Jews lived according to the law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai; but what about Christians, especially Christians who weren't born Jewish (a/k/a, "Gentiles"), what did they have to do to receive their spiritual inheritance from God? Did they have to follow the Jewish law, too? Paul says to the Galatians, "No way; if merely following the law didn't save the Jews, it won't do anything for Gentiles; it's just another form of slavery."

He uses the story of Ishmael and Isaac to make his point.

*{22} [I]t is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman.*



*{23} One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise.*



{24} *Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants.*

Ishmael	Isaac
Slave-Hagar	Free-Sarah
Flesh	Promise
Human Effort	Divine Gift
Law (Mt. Sinai)	Grace
Earthly Jerusalem	Spiritual Jerusalem
Old Covenant	New Covenant
Slavery	Freedom

*One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. {25} Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. {26} But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother.*

*{28} Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. {29} But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.*

Ishmael	<b>Persecuted -&gt;</b>	Isaac
Slave-Hagar		Free-Sarah
Flesh		Promise
Human Effort		Divine Gift
Law (Mt. Sinai)		Grace
Earthly Jerusalem		Spiritual Jerusalem
Old Covenant		New Covenant
Slavery		Freedom

*{30} But what does the scripture say? "Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman."*

<b>Ishmael</b>	Persecuted →	<b>Isaac</b>
Slave-Hagar	← <b>Drove Out</b>	Free-Sarah

*{31} So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*



Paul is saying that we need to be on the side of Christ, the side of grace, gift, and freedom. He is saying that if Gentile Christians have to follow the Jewish law in order to be heirs of the covenant, then Jesus the Messiah might as well not have come along at all. Jesus came to give us a way to salvation that didn't depend on us and our obedience, but on God and God's grace.

In Paul's day, Christians' relations with Jews were the issue. Today, the tension is primarily between Christians and Muslims. But Paul's message is still relevant. Islamic law is much like the Jewish law of Jesus' day. Islam teaches that the way to salvation is through doing five things: praying, fasting, having faith, giving alms and making a pilgrimage. One must do them in order to be saved. Christianity teaches that we don't need to do anything -- except trust Jesus -- for our salvation, because Jesus, the Savior, has already *done* what we could never do. "Do vs. Done" is the fundamental difference between Islam and Christianity and Judaism and

Christianity. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we are free from any kind of law—Jewish, Islamic, or otherwise—except the law of love.

There are fundamental differences among the three religions when it comes to how a person is saved. And these theological differences can't be ignored. But we also can't ignore the fact that the Bible tells us that the divisions that gave rise to these different faiths were the result of human sin – petty squabbles between wives and between brothers; they weren't part of God's plan.

Will there ever be peace in Abraham's family? I think so, if we can remember that as children of *Abraham*, Jews, Christians, and Muslims are *all* God's beloved children. When people say something bigoted or ignorant about Jews or Muslims, they are talking about *our* sisters and brothers; we ought to defend them like we would our own family, because they *are* our family. We need to stop fighting each other and start supporting each other against extremists who would let one side of the family destroy the rest.

The Bible gives us reason for hope. When Abraham died, Isaac and Ishmael were able to come together to bury their father; this tells me that modern Jews and Muslims might also be able to bury their ancient hurts and honor their Father God in the process (Genesis 25:9). And Jesus himself hinted at the possibility that Christians, Jews, and Muslims might one day be united. The same Jesus who said, "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except by me," also said,

*"I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd."*

*John 10:16 NRSV*

When Jesus said this, he was speaking at the time to Jews of Gentiles, non-Jews. Could he also have been speaking of the children of Ishmael? Modern day Muslims? Was Jesus saying that somehow by *his* grace they will be part of the fold one day, too?

Until the day comes when Jesus' hope is realized and there is one flock and one shepherd, don't give up a bit of what you know to be the truth, don't give up on your family, and don't stop working for peace. Amen.

*Dear Friend,*

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