

# The Sons of Ishmael

## A Prophetic Clash of Cultures

*“The angel of the  
LORD said to her, I  
will greatly multiply  
your descendants so  
that they shall be  
too many to count. .*

*. . Behold, you are  
with child. And you  
shall bear a son;  
And you shall call  
his name Ishmael,  
. . . And he will be a  
wild donkey of a  
man, His hand will  
be against everyone,  
And everyone’s hand  
will be against him;  
And he will live to  
the east of all his  
brothers.”*

*—Genesis 16:10-12,  
New American  
Standard Version*

### **THIS SCRIPTURAL RECORD**

describes the events surrounding God’s promise to Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian servant girl, that she would give birth to Abraham’s firstborn son whose name would be called Ishmael. In a more important and much broader sense, however, this event becomes a prophecy that portends to Ishmael and his offspring, which were foretold to become a very great nation. These Ishmaelite tribesmen were to be characterized by their difficult and uncouth behavior and, as the prophecy indicates, they would act like wild men of the desert. Further to

this concerns the fact that their hand would be contemptuously and continually set against their neighbors, and that their neighbors' hand, in turn, would also be set against them.

## **A MARK OF CHARACTER**

It was but a few years later that Isaac, who had been born to Abraham by Sarah, became the real child of promise, and when it came time for him to be weaned, his father prepared a great feast for him to mark the special occasion. Ishmael, who was a young lad and the older half brother at the time, acted true to the prophecy regarding him in our featured text, "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking." (Gen. 21:8,9) This expression 'to mock' [to laugh; poke fun at; to make sport of] indicates Ishmael's character even as a young lad. It also suggests a more serious trait that cannot be simply or easily passed off as an insignificant incident in an innocent child's behavior.

## **ISHMAEL AND HAGAR SENT AWAY**

No doubt this taunting of Isaac included the question of heirship, and a degree of envy that perhaps involved Ishmael's rights as the firstborn son of Abraham. This position is made more clear in the next verse, "Wherefore she [Sarah] said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac." (vs. 10) Thus it was that Ishmael's demonstration of mocking and scorn toward Isaac contributed to the dismissal of him and his mother Hagar from Abraham's household.

## **PAUL CONFIRMS GENESIS ACCOUNT**

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the brethren at Galatia, confirms Ishmael's boyhood behavior, saying, "We, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh [Ishmael] persecuted him that was born after the Spirit [Isaac], even so it is now. Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman [Hagar], but of the free [Sarah]." (Gal. 4:28-31) Sarah had but one son, Isaac, and by his birth he represented the entire spiritual seed of promise—our Lord Jesus and his faithful bride class. These will, in the future day of Christ's kingdom, bless all the families of the earth as promised in the Abrahamic Covenant. Ishmael, on the other hand, typified the Israelites who were in bondage under the Law Covenant.

## **A NOMADIC PEOPLE**

Much like Isaac's son Jacob, who had twelve sons and whose name was later changed to Israel (Gen. 32:28), Abraham's son Ishmael in turn married an Egyptian woman and also had twelve sons. (chap. 25:13-16) The Ishmaelites were, therefore, from the very beginning partly Semitic and partly Hamitic.

Instead of settling down in one permanent place, these people preferred the nomadic life, and built few cities. True to form, Ishmael was a restless man of the desert, and roamed wherever and whenever he wanted. It is not certain where these people made

their usual abode, but it is generally thought that their habitat ranged from Havilah, which was in the northwest corner of the Arabian peninsula—which would suggest one possible limit of their territory—to the other limit of this vast wilderness region of Shur which was in the Sinai peninsula.—Gen. 25:18

## **HANDS AGAINST THEIR NEIGHBORS**

From early Bible times, and throughout the many centuries since, these Arabian Bedouin have made their presence known by making a habitual nuisance of themselves wherever they happened to roam, and they were well known for their adventurous and lawless nature. They were marked by their infamous repeated and violent acts of theft, robbery, pillage and murder against whomever they came into contact. Therefore, they were a common concern among their neighbors to root out these men of the desert, mostly at great cost and with little success. They were a plague to the other peoples, and thus earned for themselves a reputation for being a fierce, warlike people, hard to get along with, even as the prophecy states—that his hand would be against everyone, and the hand of everyone would be against him. For nearly four thousand years, this prophecy pertaining to Ishmael and his descendants has been fulfilled in a most remarkable way.

## **ISHMAEL'S DESCENDANTS**

The descendants of Ishmael were divided into tribes, in much the same way as the families of Jacob. Each tribe differed to some extent in disposition, habits, and mode of governing themselves. Some made great advancements in civilization and

learning, which came about through contact with other cultures. Others ceased to be nomads and took up a more settled and orderly lifestyle, and many intermarried with other peoples which also modified their characteristics of living.

However, the tribes that remained in the desert, the Bedouins and others, remained largely unmixed with the outside world and its influences. True to the Old Testament prophecy, they were characterized by their wild behavior, and even now do they tend to continue in their uninterrupted state of hostility, submitting to no law but their own self-will, and without acknowledging rights of others.

## **ISLAM BECOMES A POWER**

During the seventh century, Mohammed set himself up as the leader of these Bedouin Arabs, and, for political reasons, claimed himself to be a descendant of Ishmael, and therefore of Abraham. This greatly strengthened and extended their power. Under his as well as his successor's influence, these tribes, having been filled with their new religion and hereditary thirst for blood and pillage, developed into a ferocious horde. Thus armed, they carried the banner of Islam throughout Asia, Africa, and even into parts of Western Europe, including Spain. Throughout history, these desert people have not hesitated to ransack, pillage, and slay even those of their own brotherhood in religion.

Such has ever been, and still is, the character and motivation of these Arab Bedouin which has proven true to the words of the prophecy concerning them. No power, great or small, has ever been able to control or subdue their movements, tame them as a

people, nor to induce them to respect the law and order of civilized society. Today they continue to dwell as they have done for centuries in the presence of their brethren, and no man is safe who enters their domain.

## **CONFLICTING CULTURES**

Some historical writers have suggested that one of the main obstacles to peace at the present time stems from the centuries-old misunderstanding of two of the world's oldest cultures. It is noted that this is true especially in connection with the misunderstanding and misuse of the two divergent terms 'crusade' and 'jihad.' This matter has entered the debate as possible long-term circumstances that continue to effect the present struggle between Islam and the West. Mary Lee Settle, in a book review, "A Great Divide and How It Began," reviews Andrew Wheatcroft's recent book, *Infidels: A History of the Conflict Between Christendom and Islam*, in which he points out that each of these terms conjures up opposite images to both Christians and Muslims.

## **TWO POINTS OF VIEW**

Wheatcroft explains the historical significance of these two opposing points of view and the widely differing cultures that exist in our day. He points out that the word crusade was first used by Europeans to describe the invasion of the Holy Land during the early period of the Crusades. He explains the image that the word creates among Christians as that of a noble knight riding on his well-groomed horse while attired in shining armor. To the Muslim, however, the image is that of a brutish invader,

heavily armed, bearing a cross on his chest and a broadsword in hand, intent on rape and robbery, and from whom his ancestors had to hide underground to escape for their lives.

It is the same with the word jihad, which, to the Muslim, suggests a bold warrior defending the ancient culture of Islam with his life; whereas to the Christian (and to the politician who seeks to influence his subjects by arousing fear), they see nothing but a fanatic terrorist falsely representing his religion.

## **MID-EAST POLICIES**

To illustrate the seriousness that exists between these two conflicting cultures, we note the comments that were made by Condoleeza Rice while visiting the United States troops in Kabul, Afghanistan, soon after her appointment as Secretary of State. "Washington will build a different kind of Middle East. A different kind of broader Middle East that's going to be stable and democratic, and where our children will one day not have to worry about the kind of ideologies of hatred that led those people to fly those airplanes into those buildings on September 11th."

As a reflection on these remarks, we note a news commentary with a critique of Rice's statement under the title: "America's Dangerous Mideast Assumptions: The View From Damascus," *Los Angeles Times* (March 25, 2005). Bouthaina Shaaban, commenting on Rice's remarks, said, "This absurd generalization embodies the fallacy that underlies the entire United States war on terrorism, which has severely damaged America's reputation and credibility

around the world and which has led to the disastrous policies that will harm relations between the United States and the Arab world for decades to come. To suggest that a group of extremists is representative of the people of the Middle East is outrageous. It's as if someone were to suggest that the criminals of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo are representative of American people and American values.

"The other dangerous idea in Rice's remarks is that the attacks of September 11 are a reasonable justification for the wrong-headed United States policy in the Middle East. That's ridiculous. Americans should be aware by now—but I don't think they are—that the events of September 11 have weighed heavily on Arabs and Muslims just as they have on the people of the United States. The terrorists of Al Qaeda have targeted Arabs and Muslims repeatedly. They are, therefore, our enemies just as they are your enemies. So why should we be punished for their crimes?"

## **VIEW FROM DAMASCUS**

From another perspective, Bouthaina Shaaban, Syria's current Minister for Emigrant Affairs, comments upon the relationship between his country and other Middle East nations, with the United States. Continuing in the aforementioned news item, he said, "I'm afraid that Americans don't know what's really going on in the Middle East today. Apparently, it doesn't come through from your embedded journalism. What is happening today is that Palestinian groups are being dismembered, the Lebanese resistance is being disarmed, and the Syrian

government is being demonized—all while Israel continues to occupy the Arab lands it has held since 1967 in violation of all United Nations resolutions calling for its withdrawal. Israeli extremists are seizing Arab neighborhoods in Jerusalem. An apartheid wall is being constructed that will separate tens of thousands of Palestinians from their cities and villages.” We note with interest Shaaban’s remarks directed against the nation of Israel as being a major source of the current Middle East problem.

## **ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE**

Another attempt at understanding the situation of turmoil in the Middle East, and how to deal with it, was presented in a news commentary under the caption, “How to Win Friends in the Mideast.” Rami Khouri, writing for the *Los Angeles Times* (March 31, 2005), said, “The United States recently appointed Karen Hughes and Liz Cheney to re-vamp two persistently enigmatic and largely failed policies—global public diplomacy and the promotion of democracy throughout the Middle East.

“If these two able officials want to do a better job than their predecessors in grasping why this noble American mission to promote freedom is received with such skepticism, scorn, and even resistance around the world, and not just in Arab-Islamic lands, here’s what they should ponder. The United States track record has hurt, angered or offended most people in the Middle East. By primarily backing Arab dictators and autocrats or supporting the Israeli position on key issues of Arab-Israeli peace-making, credibility has been lost.

“There is no global consensus that the United States is mandated to promote freedom and democracy, or that this is the divinely ordained destiny of the United States. There is such a mandate, though, in the Security Council resolutions to end foreign occupations and international legal conventions—most of which the United States resists, ignores, or applies very selectively. No surprise then that virtually the whole world resists the United States.”

### **GOOD INTENTIONS FAIL**

Some news reports, regarding American Mid-East policy and Israel's role in the violence, tend to be biased and do not take into account the Bush administration's good intentions in extending democracy and freedom to the people of this region. The war on terror has been more correctly identified as a war against militant Islam, including some perhaps who may be Ishmaelites. Thus the efforts at attaining peaceful solutions are being attempted in light of the prophetic words concerning the sons of Ishmael.

### **ISHMAEL & ISRAEL**

The prophecy concerning Ishmael, foretold that, “He shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren” (Gen. 16:12); and may best be understood when this part of the prophecy is contrasted with the prophecy concerning the other branch of the Abrahamic tree, that which pertains to the Israelites. This prophecy says, “The LORD shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other; and there thou shalt serve other gods, which neither thou nor thy fathers have known, even wood and stone.”—Deut. 28:64

These two prophecies, one pertaining to the Ishmaelites, and the other to the children of Israel, have been fulfilled in a most remarkable way throughout the history of these two distinct houses of Abraham. For centuries, the Jews were wanderers, scattered throughout the earth, and with no place they could call home. We recognize, however, that through God's providence, we have been witnesses to the regathering of these people to their own land, which has occurred during the closing years of the present Gospel Age. (Jer. 16:15) The descendants of Ishmael, on the other hand, have remained largely secure and at home in their own native surroundings. They have remained there while being unmoved by repeated attempts of powerful nations to dislodge them without success.

Thus it is seen that the Lord has directly overruled in the affairs of both of these two distinct ancient cultures, and has set the bounds of both of these ancient people. Ishmael, the son of the bondwoman and his descendants, was permitted to dwell in the land of his birth. Isaac, the child of promise and his descendants, have suffered dispersion, not being permitted to dwell in the land of promise.

### **GOD'S OVERRULING PROVIDENCE**

These wonderful promises are a strong indication of our trust and faith in the inspired Word of God that, in due time, the Ishmaelites, and the children of Israel, will both come to know the true God. This blessing will be extended to all people, nations, and languages in Christ's future kingdom.—Dan. 7:14; Zeph. 3:9 ■

# Written Aforetime for our Admonition

**OF THOSE THINGS** written aforetime, none conveys a greater lesson than that of Kadesh Barnea. After hearing the report of the spies, the whole of the fighting men of the Hebrews refused to go forward and take the land that God had promised them, although he had led and fed them through the wilderness, guaranteed their victory, and brought them to the moment of attaining the land. The record of this unbelieving disobedience is given in Numbers, chapters thirteen and fourteen. This is referred to in Hebrews 3:8 as “the provocation.” When David was about to take Jerusalem, he reminded his followers of the sin of Kadesh Barnea. (Ps. 95:7-11) The apostle refers to these incidents, and admonishes us to hear the LORD’s instruction and not to harden our hearts.

Failure is due to lack of faith. Without faith we lose confidence in the power of our Heavenly Father. The disobedient Israelites appeared in their own sight as “grasshoppers” compared to their enemies (Num. 13:33), but to Joshua and Caleb those same enemies were “bread.” (Num. 14:9) This incident has been a lesson to the church throughout the Gospel Age, but we today are almost through the wilderness; the Millennial kingdom lies before us, and if faithful we shall soon reign with Christ.

It is inconceivable that we should let the Truth slip now, but the apostle warns that we are made partakers of Christ if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm unto the end.—Heb. 3:6 ■