

Seeds of Discord

“As for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.”
—**Genesis 17:20**

IN THIS SCRIPTURE, GOD has promised to multiply the seed of Ishmael abundantly, and that he would make him and his offspring a great nation. Ishmael was the firstborn son of Abraham by Sarah’s bondmaid Hagar, and his name means “God will hear.” Abraham’s true wife Sarah would not give birth to Isaac, who was the long-awaited seed of promise, for several more years. It is recorded, “In Isaac shall thy seed be called.”—Gen. 21:12

Later, after Isaac had been born, and when the two young boys were growing up, Ishmael began to manifest seeds of envy and scorn toward his younger brother Isaac. Because of Ishmael’s unruly behavior, both he and his mother Hagar were dismissed from Abraham’s household. From the scriptural account, we read, “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she 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.”—vss. 9,10

HAGAR’S CHILD

In the scriptural record, we are given information concerning Sarah’s handmaid Hagar and her son Ishmael. We read, “He [God’s angel] said, Hagar, Sarai’s maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands.”—chap. 16:8,9

The Word of God also provides important details concerning the child’s innermost and distinguishing characteristics. It is written, “The angel of the LORD said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Behold, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the LORD hath heard thy affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.”—vss. 10-12

These natural features would prove to be an important prophecy in connection with Ishmael and his future offspring. The Ishmaelites would be recognized for their uncouth and unruly behavior and they would act like wild nomadic men of the desert. The Bible record indicates that their hands would be set continuously and contemptuously against their neighbors and, in turn, their neighbors’ hands would be set against them.

SARAH'S CHILD

Before the birth of Isaac, Abraham continued to cling to the belief that his son Ishmael was the seed of promise and that, through him, God's gracious purposes were to be ultimately accomplished. "Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee!"—Gen. 17:18

However, this was not God's intention concerning the long-awaited seed of promise. "God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him." (vs. 19) A few years later, and in spite of their advanced ages, Isaac was miraculously born to Abraham by his wife Sarah as the true child of promise. This long-awaited event was the fulfillment of Abraham and Sarah's fondest hopes.

TWO COVENANTS

Centuries later, in his letter to the brethren at Galatia, the Apostle Paul explained that God had arranged that there was a typical, and far grander, significance in connection with Abraham's two wives, Sarah and Hagar, and the birth of their two sons, Isaac and Ishmael. He wrote, "It is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar."—Gal. 4:22-24

The apostle's further explanation provides an important perspective regarding the Heavenly Father's ultimate purpose in connection with the future work of reconciliation for the sin-sick world of mankind. "This Agar [Hagar] is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, 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, but of the free."—vss. 25-31

The Apostle Paul was pointing to the significance of Sarah and her son Isaac. She represented the Covenant of Grace, and Isaac illustrated our Lord Jesus. The Master would be the true seed of promise who would bless all mankind many centuries later under the administration of his future kingdom of life and peace.

Hagar, on the other hand, served to illustrate the old Law Covenant that was given to Moses. The children of Israel could not keep the Law, nor could they obtain life rights under its divine principles, or under its mediator Moses. Israel thus represented the whole sin-sick world of mankind who are yet in bondage to sin and condemned to death.

Ishmael served to illustrate the Jewish nation to whom God gave his Law. They needed a Savior, the true seed of promise who was willing to die for their sins and to provide them with a new and superior covenant. Under the administration of Christ's future kingdom, a better mediator would be provided who would have the power and authority to carry out our loving Heavenly Father's ultimate purpose for the eradication of sin and death, and to grant life to all who willingly obey the divine law.

ENVY AND HATE

To Hagar, the unexpected birth of Isaac meant the end of her long cherished hopes and ambitions. Ishmael, as the firstborn son, had been regarded by all in the encampment as the heir of Abraham's wealth and the inheritor of the blessings promised to his descendants. Now he was suddenly set aside, and in their disappointment both Hagar and Ishmael began to envy Sarah and her child. This was made manifest when it came time for Isaac to be weaned, because Abraham had prepared a sumptuous feast to mark the very special occasion.

At that time, Ishmael was a young lad, slightly more than a dozen years older than his half-brother Isaac. The scriptural record suggests that the widespread rejoicing had only served to increase his jealousy. Eventually, Ishmael dared to openly mock the heir of God's promise. "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking."

The expression "to mock" means to taunt, laugh, or to make sport of someone. This revealed Ishmael's true nature even as a young lad, and gave a strong

indication of the truth of the prophecy written many years before concerning him. It suggested a very serious trait that could not easily be passed off as an insignificant incident in an otherwise innocent child's behavior. Sarah saw in Ishmael's turbulent disposition a perpetual source of discord, and she appealed to Abraham, urging that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away from the encampment.

Ishmael's taunting of Isaac included an element of envy, no doubt, in connection with his rights as the firstborn son and heir of his father Abraham. This position is made clear in the scriptural record, where we read, "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." Ishmael's demonstration of his true nature of scorn toward his younger brother Isaac was a significant factor in his dismissal, and that of his mother Hagar, from Abraham's household.

Through the lineage of his mother Hagar, Ishmael was half Egyptian (Gen. 16:1), and also he later married an Egyptian woman. (Gen. 25:13-16). From the very beginning, therefore, the Ishmaelites were partly Semitic and partly Hamitic, which resulted in the establishment of idolatry in his family. Thus separated from his father, and embittered by the strife and contention of a home lacking the love and fear of God, Ishmael was driven to choose the wild marauding life of a desert chief. The powerful nation that descended from him produced a turbulent, heathen people, who were ever an annoyance and affliction to the descendants of Isaac.

A CLASH OF CULTURES

Throughout their history, the nations that arose from Ishmael worshipped other gods rather than our Heavenly Father. This put them in direct conflict with the Israelites who continued faithful to the God of Abraham. The adoption of Islam by the progeny of Ishmael added yet another facet to the marked clash of cultures which has been the historical fact existing between the sons of Abraham's two wives. This conflict continues to manifest itself in the current violent struggle between the regathered people of Israel and the overwhelming majority of their Muslim neighbors, who seek their annihilation.

A VAST EMPIRE

Islam is a militant religion, enjoining its adherents to go out and conquer in the name of Allah. Three centuries after the death of the Islamic prophet Muhammad (High Middle Ages), the Arab Caliphates extended from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to Central Asia in the east. In the later Middle Ages, the traditional center of the Islamic world, from Persia to Egypt, was greatly weakened by Mongol invasions from the east and the Black Death in the west. As a result, a horde of Turkic people from Central Asia under Osman I, was able to conquer most Arabic speaking areas. The resulting Ottoman Empire established Islamic rule over the territories in southeastern Europe, southwestern Asia and North Africa from 1299 to 1923 AD.

The empire began as a small principality in Anatolia which was also known as Asia Minor. It was ruled by the Imperial House of Osman, the name of

the administrative structure of the powerful Ottoman Dynasty. Its territory was later expanded to include all of the district of Anatolia. During the last four hundred years of its existence, the “Caliphate” was claimed by the Turkish Sultans of the Ottoman Empire, and was generally accepted as the de facto leader and representative of the entire Islamic world.

In the mid 14th and 15th centuries the growing empire spread into southeastern Europe, and eventually conquered the capital city Constantinople in 1453, which the Ottomans renamed Istanbul. This important Islamic victory established the status of the empire as the preeminent power in southeastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean. They continued their conquest of Europe into the 16th century, and about 1514 turned their attention to conquering the Near East, Arabia, and North Africa.

At the height of its power in the mid 17th century, the vast Ottoman Empire had spread across North Africa to include modern-day Algeria and southeastern Europe as far as Vienna. They had also taken control of Greece and much of the Slavic-speaking regions. As they continued their quest for power, the Ottomans also conquered the Caucasus region, the Crimea, and all of the Levant. Furthermore, they took control of the Fertile Crescent region which encompasses modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, and Israel. Its eastern territory extended to the present border between Iraq and Iran, and it also included the southern region of Yemen encompassing both sides of the Red Sea.

COLLAPSE OF THE EMPIRE

Although there are many important causes that lead to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, it suffered final defeat as a result of World War I (1914-1918), which also marked the end of the prophetic Gentile rule over Israel. The Treaty was signed at Sevres, France, on August 10, 1920. It was dictated by the Allied Powers (The Entente) and the Associated Powers of the Ottoman Empire. The same approach was used as in the dismembering of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed on June 28, 1919.

The plan was to create several new states which would divide the vast Ottoman Empire into ethnically based nation states. Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Palestine would be assigned to Great Britain. Lebanon and Syria would come under French rule. The Dodecanese Islands, Rhodes, and southern Anatolia were to become Italian territory. Thrace and western Anatolia including Izmir/Smyrna would be given to Greece. The Bosphorus, Dardanelles, and the Sea of Marmara which connected the vital waterways between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean were to be demilitarized and internationalized. Saudi Arabia and Armenia would become independent countries.

FOUR PHASES OF RULE

Historians have pointed out that there have been four distinct phases of Middle Eastern rule since the beginning of the 20th century. First was the Ottoman rule, that ended in 1920. It was then succeeded by Britain and France assuming leading roles. This phase lasted from the end of World War I

until the Suez crisis in 1956. Colonial rule was then followed by the rise of independent local states which were largely influenced by the United States and the Soviet Union. This phase lasted until 1991, when the Soviet Union disintegrated into fifteen separate countries. Since the end of the Cold War, America has been the predominant power in the Middle East.

RISE OF NATIONALISM

With the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and the focus on the special problems relating to Palestine, there was an accompanying rise of Arab nationalism. The British had promised to open this largely Arab-populated territory as a national homeland for the Jewish people. The immigration of Jews into Palestine began to take place especially after the Nazis took power in Germany in the 1930's. This raised the proportion of the Jewish population from about 10% to 30%, which caused a repeated clash of cultures between the Arabs and Jews. The British had assumed that Palestinians and Jews could live peaceably together in a single state. However, Britain's obligation to the Jews could only be met at the expense of the Arab majority. Palestinian Arabs were united in their refusal to recognize the legality or authority of the British mandate and by their fear of Zionist nationalism and intrusion. Their struggle was largely concerned with self-preservation and self-determination.

The British were caught between the growing forces of Jewish and Arab nationalism, and they tried in vain to placate both sides of the conflict. The seeds were thus sown for the very serious

Israeli/Palestine problems that continue to plague the entire region. On the eve of World War II, therefore, Great Britain began to restrict Jewish immigration into Palestine as well as to curb Jewish purchases of Arab lands in the mandate. Although the United States played only a peripheral role in the formation of the state of Israel, the Arabs see America as Israel's co-sponsor. This perception is the source of deep hostility and mistrust.

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

A clash of cultures has often been associated with Muslim traditions and culture, including the Muslim Brotherhood which is an Islamist fraternity founded in Egypt in 1928. One of its goals is to establish a new Islamic Caliphate in the region. The Caliphate refers to the first system of government that was established in Islam, and which has represented the political unity of the Muslim world for generations. The concern among many is that although it may publicly condemn violence, it is believed to have supported terrorism and other acts of violence to achieve its goals.

As an example, some of our readers may recall the recent federal case that was brought against the "Holy Land Foundation," the largest Islamic charity organization in the United States, with headquarters in Texas. It was originally known as the "Occupied Land Fund" whose primary area of focus was with the Palestinian refugees.

In 2007, federal prosecutors brought charges against the organization because they were suspected of funding various Islamic terrorist groups. Its assets were frozen by the United States as well

as the European Union, and the charity fund was shut down by the United States government following the discovery that it had funded \$12 million to Hamas. Hamas was formed in 1987, at the beginning of the first Palestinian Intifada, and it has roots in the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The group's charter calls for establishing an Islamic Palestinian state in place of Israel.

END OF GOSPEL AGE

As we enter the final years of this present Gospel Age, there is fear that the clash of cultures will end in further violence and turmoil in the Middle East. Of increasing concern is the security of the Jewish people who are being surrounded by hostile neighbors that are intent on the destruction of Israel. In connection with this growing anxiety, the Prophet Zechariah wrote, "Behold, I will make Jerusalem a cup of trembling unto all the people round about, when they shall be in the siege both against Judah and against Jerusalem. And in that day will I make Jerusalem a burdensome stone for all people: all that burden themselves with it shall be cut in pieces, though all the people of the earth be gathered together against it."—Zech. 12:2,3

Israel's leaders foresee the possibility of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood pressing for closer ties and cooperation with the Palestinians and its branch Hamas. The Israeli-Palestinian issue has not been solved and will no doubt complicate relations between the newly emerging Arab governments and their people on one side, and the Western nations' hope for stability on the other. We put our trust in

the Heavenly Father who will manifest his mighty power against any and all hostile neighbors who seek to destroy the Israelite nation.

ABRAHAM'S TWO SONS

We learned from the Scriptures that the two brothers, Isaac and Ishmael, and their offspring have taken separate directions. However, when their father Abraham died at the age of 175 years, they met to pay their respects and bury him. From the scriptural record, we read, "These are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, an hundred threescore and fifteen years. Then Abraham gave up the ghost [spirit], and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre; The field which Abraham purchased of the sons of Heth: there was Abraham buried, and Sarah his wife."—Gen. 25:7-10

Later, when Abraham's son Isaac died at the age of 180 years, his two estranged sons Jacob and Esau also met to lay their father to rest. "The days of Isaac were an hundred and fourscore years. And Isaac gave up the ghost [spirit], and died, and was gathered unto his people, being old and full of days: and his sons Esau and Jacob buried him."—chap. 35:28,29

RECONCILIATION

Previous to this time, Jacob had been thinking about his brother Esau who he had not seen in several years, and was hoping for a reconciliation of their differences. We read, "Jacob went on his way,

and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them, he said, This is God's host: and he called the name of that place Mahanaim. And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother unto the land of Seir, the country of Edom."—chap. 32:1-3

Jacob instructed his messengers to entreat Esau as his Lord or superior, while referring to himself as Esau's inferior. He did this to avoid his brother's recall that he had bought the firstborn rights of their father Isaac. He also desired to give rich presents to his older brother. The messengers returned with the news that Esau would come to meet him, but that he would bring four hundred men with him which troubled Jacob greatly.

From the account, we read, "Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau came, and with him four hundred men. And he divided the children unto Leah, and unto Rachel, and unto the two handmaids. And he put the handmaids and their children foremost, and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and Joseph hindermost. And he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept."—chap. 33:1-4

NO MORE DISCORD

This wonderful scene of reconciliation between the two brothers suggests the future reality of God's purpose in blessing all the families of the earth during Christ's kingdom of righteousness and peace for all men.

“I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.”—Rev. 21:1-5 ■