

# The Ishmael Promise and Contextualization Among Muslims

*Does Islam provide an acceptable cultural-religious form for an incarnated gospel? Some believe that a contextual movement such as “Jews for Jesus” is acceptable in Judaism but that a similar “Muslims for Isa” movement must be rejected because it would compromise the purity of the gospel. This article examines Islamic origins from the perspective of the Ishmael factor in Genesis which has strong implications for incarnational contextualization of the Gospel among Muslims.*

by Jonathan Culver

**D**uring the past few years I have spoken with various Christian leaders from different countries about Muslim contextualization, the use of Islamic religious forms and terminologies in Christian worship and witness. Most could accept a “Jews for Jesus” movement, but had great difficulty with “Muslims for Isa (Jesus).” They all cited one fundamental difference: God himself established Judaism through his covenants with Abraham and Moses, whereas Islam is essentially a human religion energized by Satan. Thus, while a contextual movement like Jews for Jesus is acceptable, a “Muslims for Isa” movement must be rejected because its foundations and religious forms are not of divine origin and therefore compromise the purity of the gospel.

In his seminal article, “Contextualization in Islam: Reusing Common Pillars” (1989, 1996), Dr. J. Dudley Woodberry has shown how many Muslim forms for prayer, recitation, ablutions, and other distinctly “Islamic” practices actually derive from ancient Jewish and Christian origins. Woodberry concludes that reusing these “common pillars” is permissible if redefined and given distinctly Christian meanings.

This article seeks to complement Woodberry’s insights by showing how a biblical perspective on the remote origins of Islam through Ishmael is an extremely valuable starting point to engage Islam contextually. For many Christians, Ishmael is the forgotten or the disdained son of Abraham. Sutherland points out that the Christian faith has suffered a lack of definition concerning the theological role of Ishmael. The popular conception of Ishmael has therefore been based on “ill-fated misinformation and ignorance,” leading to connotations of Ishmael as evil (Sutherland 1977:3-4). The Lutheran scholar, George C. Fry, believes this ignorance is very dangerous, for Ishmael, he asserts, is prominent in the plans of God (1977:14).

Various non-Muslim writers have argued that the origins of Islam are based on such things as the human genius of its founder or pagan elements, or a combination of these. I propose that there is also a significant element of divine involvement in the remote origins of Islam, beginning with Hagar and Ishmael. Genesis 17:20 and 21:20 characterize this involvement as divine providence, a special kind of common grace granted to the other seed of Abraham (Gen. 21:13). I believe it is this divine providence which has sustained the rise of Ishmael’s descendants, culminating in the

worldwide Muslim community. God graciously blessed Ishmael because of Abraham’s great concern for his first-born. Through this blessing God also intends to redeem Ishmaelite culture to glorify His name in this age and in the eschatological age to come (g. 60:6-7). Matthew 2:1-12 reiterates this Isaianic theme in his account of the Magi (most likely Ishmaelite Arabs) who worshipped the Christ child. Taken together, Genesis 17, Isaiah 60 and Matthew 2 reveal important data to support a “Muslims for Isa” contextual approach.

## The Problems Involved

The premise that Islamic origins somehow relate to the Ishmael promises raises a number of problems.

### *Problem 1: Does it Validate Islam?*

I do not believe that a constructive or positive interpretation of the Hagar-Ishmael narratives validates Islam as a religion, as some have argued (Scudder 1986; Kuschel 1995:135-136). More specifically, I reject the argument that the Ishmael promises serve as a basis to include Islam in a triple covenant concept along with Judaism and Christianity. Instead, I affirm that the Ishmael promises are better understood as God’s loving concern and

providential care to insure the survival and historical greatness of Abraham's seed in Ishmael's line (Gen. 17:20; 21:20; 25:12-18). Based on the nature of the One who promised, and because Ishmael was born to the man of promise, I also affirm that these promises contain lasting spiritual implications. Ishmael and his lineal and spiritual descendants stand as a unique community that have risen to historical greatness as a direct answer to Abraham's prayer: "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" (Gen. 17:18).

### *Problem 2: Exegetical-Historical Dimensions*

Some critics believe that the Ishmael promises are time-bound, basically fulfilled in Genesis 25:12-18. They therefore contain no ongoing force of blessing for Ishmael's descendants— whoever they might be. The fact that the promises are not repeated throughout Scripture seems to strengthen this conclusion. Colin Chapman raises these issues in his thought-provoking article, "Revisiting the Ishmael Theme" (1989). Chapman avers there is almost no exegetical or historical warrant to link the Ishmael promises with Islam and Muslims today. I do not intend to make a point-by-point

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*The truth cannot  
be denied that Ishmael  
and his descendants  
derive a specific  
blessing from a  
corresponding portion  
of the covenant promise  
to  
Abraham.*

refutation of Chapman's assertions, but my exegetical comments below will address some of his concerns. As for the difficult historical-critical issues of Arabian descent from Ishmael, I refer the reader to the appendix below.

### *Problem 3: How does Ishmael Relate to Non-Arab Muslims?*

The central point of the Ishmael promises is the divine guarantee that Ishmael would become "a great nation" (Gen. 17:20; 21:13,18; 25:12-18). We need to note here that the biblical term "nation" (Heb. *goy*) is not restricted to a single ethnic entity; it also contains political overtones with multi-ethnic implications. D. Block, for example, points out that the term is used for bedouin-type desert tribes and multi-ethnic imperial states like Babylon (1986:492). Accordingly, I understand the Ishmael promise of great nationhood as applying first of all, to the lineal descendants of Ishmael, namely, Muhammad and some of the North Arabian tribes (see appendix below), and then to the waves of Muslim converts from the various nations who have come under the "Ishmaelite" cultural-religious umbrella. Thus Ishmael's lineal and spiritual descendants have indeed become a great nation extending from Morocco to Irian Jaya.

It is important to note how non-Arab Muslims identify themselves with Ishmael. An Indonesian Muslim convert to Christianity with an M.A. in Islamic jurisprudence explains: "Indonesian Muslims regard Ishmael as an enduring symbol of what it means to be a true Muslim because of his submission to God's command to become the sacrificial son (Qur'an 37:102). This concept is perpetuated in their consciousness when they perform the *Hajj* or the annual Festival of Sacrifice" (Noorsena 1994). Thus the non-Arab Muslim relationship to Ishmael is not racial; it is spiritual and theological. In a spiritual sense, they are heirs to the Ishmael promise. Indeed, Indonesian Muslims love to cite the promises in Genesis concerning the multitude of Ishmael's descendants. Ahmad Asnawi, for example, cites the prophecy concerning Kedar in Isaiah 42:10-12 in an attempt to prove that divine prophecy foretells the spread of Islam to the islands of the world, including Indonesia (1994:42). We do not need to fully agree with Asnawi's interpretation, but we can affirm his understanding that the divine blessing for Ishmael and his descendants extends to Indonesian Muslims.

### *Problem 4: Is Ishmael Under a Divine Curse?*

Throughout the centuries Christians have expressed a fondness for quoting Genesis 16:12:

*He will be a wild donkey of a man and his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand will be against him, and he will dwell in hostility toward all his brothers (NIV).*

Christians have generally understood this as a curse, or at least a divine rebuke against Ishmael and his descendants. However, numerous factors should give pause before accepting such an interpretation. First, Ishmael's name, given by the angel of Yahweh in the previous verse, means, "God will hear." It is a name that came down from heaven, originating in the councils of divine perfection (Gen. 16:11). The covenant angel conveyed this name to Hagar before Ishmael was born. As such it is a beautiful name that contains an element of promise. Secondly, Genesis 16:12 is

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given in the context of a promise to Hagar. It would be strange indeed for the covenant angel to try and motivate Hagar to return to Abraham's tent by pronouncing a curse on her child! Accordingly, the wild donkey metaphor is better understood in light of passages like Job 39:5-8. Here God describes the wild donkey as a freedom-loving creature and a wilderness wanderer. This is an apt image of what Ishmael and his descendants were later to become—Bedouin nomads, free from the yoke of domination. This would have been good news for Hagar, a slave woman, as she trembled at the thought of facing Sara's wrath.

Others have cited Galatians 4:30, "Cast out the bondwoman and her son," to argue Muslims are under a divine curse. Yet, we must ask who Paul really wanted cast out. A careful reading reveals Paul was calling on the Galatians to cast out the *Judaizers*, not Ishmael's descendants, because they were enslaving Galatians into bondage under the law. Hagar and Ishmael served as useful allegorical symbols for Paul to illustrate this theological truth (Gal. 4:24). Allegory makes use of names and places without respect to literal and historical contexts. The Judaizers were under a curse because they were slaves to the law (Gal. 3:10). Thus, Paul's point of similitude between the two is slavery. Hagar was a slave-wife; Judaizers were slaves of the Law. We therefore cannot say Paul condemned Hagar and Ishmael, he merely alluded to them as allegorical symbols to curse the Judaizers.

## **The Ishmael Promise in the Context of the Abrahamic Covenant**

Having addressed the above problems, we are now ready to examine the Ishmael promises. We will confine our attention to the most important promise which arises during the covenant discourse. Genesis 17 culminates the earlier covenant promises (Gen. 12:1-3, 15:4-18), and contains the clearest statement of how much God is willing to bless Abraham and Ishmael, even though He rejects the latter as the covenant successor. The key verse regarding Ishmael is 17:20, where he receives a blessing similar to Abraham's, with its attendant promises of national greatness and numerous descendants. On the other hand, the text carefully points out that the covenant heir would not be Ishmael, as Abraham apparently supposed, but Isaac (17:19, 21). Still, the Ishmaelite blessing of national greatness (17:20) closely parallels God's promise to bring forth from Abraham a multitude of nations (17:6). This suggests the promise is not only efficacious, but also lasting, even if the content is considerably less meaningful than the covenant. It is important, therefore, that we examine the structural features of this chapter.

### *Structural Components of Genesis 17*

Sean McEvenue (1971) convincingly argues that Genesis 17 forms a very tightly structured unit. He points out that it is composed of five divine speeches introduced by the phrase, "and God said." These five speeches and a concluding epilogue are arranged to produce a unified framework of balanced themes. There is no dialogue except for Abraham's prayer for Ishmael (vs. 18) and God's answer (vss. 19-21). The first two speeches (vss. 2-8) deal with numerous descendants, while the last two (vss. 15-21) deal with the individual heir through whom these descendants will originate.

The third and central speech (vss. 9-14), which unifies the entire chapter, focuses on circumcision, the obligatory sign for all covenant participants. The epilogue (vss. 22-27) reports how Abraham carries out the divine injunction to circumcise himself and all the males in his household, particularly Ishmael, whose circumcision is mentioned three times (vss. 23, 25, 26). The overall pattern of Genesis 17 clearly emerges as a parallel promise-response structure arranged in four, interlocking sets (*see Table 1 below*).

It is important to note the parallelism and interlocking of sets two and four, which contain the crucial verses, 17:6 and 17:20 respectively. The former establishes that nations will come forth from Abraham; the latter strongly suggests that Ishmael, in some sense, is one of these promised nations.

Verbal repetitions abound to an amazing extent in Genesis 17. The word “covenant” appears thirteen times, while “circumcision” is mentioned eleven times. It is the grouping of the words, however, that arrests our attention. Six sets of paired words appear in the passage. For example, “multitude of nations” (4b, 5b), “your name” (5a, 5b), and “eternal” (7a, 8a). Moreover, the phrase, “Sarah will bear you a son,” which appears three times (vss. 16, 19, 21) finds a contrasting echo in the thrice-repeated phrase, “Ishmael his son” (vss. 23, 25, 26).

In several instances these paired and triple word sets create small chiasmic structures that interlock and correspond with each other. The most significant lies in God’s fifth speech (17:19-21), which develops an Isaac-Ishmael-Isaac chiasm:

- A. Sarah will bear you a son (19a)  
 B. I will establish my covenant with Isaac (19b)  
 C. I will bless Ishmael and make him a great nation (20)  
 B1. I will establish my covenant with Isaac (21a)  
 A1. Sarah will bear you a son (21b)

*When love and respect  
 for Muslims as “a  
 people with a promise”  
 floods our souls, we  
 will be better able to  
 process the  
 complexities and wonders  
 of contextualizing the  
 Gospel among  
 them.*

	1	2	3	4
<b>God</b>	The Lord said (1a) covenant promise (2)	God said, As for Me (4a) cov. explanation (4-8)	then God said (15a) promise to Sarah (15-16)	But God said (19a) cov. recipient (19b-21)
<b>Abr.</b>	fell on his face (3a) worship (3a)	God said, As for you (9a) circumcision (10-14)	fell on his face (17a) doubt/Ishmael (17-18)	Then Abraham (23a) circumcision (23-27)

Table 1: The Parallel and Interlocking Structure of Genesis 17

Interestingly, this chiasm broadly corresponds with God’s second speech (17:4-8), which projects a covenant-nations-covenant pattern. Thus “nations” and “Ishmael” lie at the center of these two interlocking speeches. Verses 1-8 speak of the covenant in general terms, whereas verses 15-21 speak in specific terms. McEvenue notes that Genesis 17 “always moves from intention to fact, and from vague to specific... from progeny (1-8) to a son of Sarah (15-21)” (1971:156).

The inescapable conclusion is that even as Isaac stands as a specific expression of the covenant promise of 17:4-5, 7-8, Ishmael in some sense stands as a specific fulfillment of 17:6: “And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you” (17:6). Note how this wording parallels Ishmael’s promise in 17:20: “I will bless him, and I will make him fruitful and I will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.”

Commentators ordinarily understand “nations” in 17:6 as Abraham’s spiritual descendants, those who possess the faith of Abraham who come from all the nations (Rom. 4:13-16). This spiritual emphasis is certainly the primary meaning of the verse. However, we also need to see that there is a genealogical corollary to this promise which branches out to bless and preserve a non-covenant Abrahamic line apart from the faith community (Kidner 1967:149). We see this clearly in Genesis 21:12-13, where God informs Abraham that his “seed” (i.e., covenant descendants) would be named through Isaac. But then God adds, “Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed” (NKJV). Interestingly, most commentaries pass over 21:13 without much comment, but the corresponding parallelism to the Isaac promise in 21:12 is astonishing. Although this genealogical corollary may not appear important to us, it definitely was important to Abraham, and God chose to honor it for his sake. Abraham was concerned about his physical descendants, *all of them*, especially Isaac and Ishmael. I suggest we rejoice in God’s intention to honor Abraham’s concern, understanding that the rise of the Muslim world stands as a corollary expression of God’s faithfulness to Abraham.

#### Genesis 17:20: Because Abraham Prayed

Genesis 17:19-21 is God’s answer to the prayer of Abraham, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” (Gen. 17:18). God essentially responded, “Abraham, if you are asking that Ishmael replace Isaac as the covenant heir, My answer is no (vs.19). But if you are asking Me to bless Ishmael, My answer is yes, and this is how I will bless him... (vs.20).” In the Hebrew text of 17:20 God makes four promissory “I wills.” First God says, “I will bless him.” This blessing is less than Isaac’s, but is nonetheless divine. As such it conveys the energy and authority of the One who gives it. This is followed in the Hebrew by two hiphil causatives: “I will cause him to be fruitful, I will cause him to multiply.” Qualitatively, these words carry far more weight than the qal imperatives given to Adam and Noah: “be fruitful and multiply.” As hiphil causatives, they suggest God will guarantee that Ishmael succeeds in this endeavor to produce progeny. The final phrase of 17:20 provides fur-

ther evidence of these divine guarantees, “he will become the father of twelve princes and I will make him a great nation.” We should not overlook the Hebrew wording for “I will make him a great nation,” i.e., *untattiw legoy gadol*. Based on its use in other contexts (Gen 17:6; 41:41; Ex. 7:1; Jer. 1:5; Ez. 3:17), the phrase, “I will make” or “I will establish” could easily be understood as a formula for investing one with a high office or commission (McEvenue 1971:166).

There are many parallels between this Ishmaelite blessing and the greater Abrahamic blessing. Ishmael is promised princes and a nation (17:20); Abraham is promised kings and many nations (17:6). Both receive divine guarantees of numerous descendants. Thus the Ishmael promise of Genesis 17:20 *forms a corollary to the Abrahamic covenant* in Genesis 17. Although not a covenant in the “messianic” sense, the promise guarantees the proliferation of Ishmael’s descendants and their attainment of historical greatness. Ishmael received the promise of a blessing, but not the blessing of the covenant. Genesis 21:20 adds that God was “with” Ishmael in achieving this appointed destiny. This is clearly the language of divine providence. It appears to endow the line of Ishmael with a particular sense of potential that is not fully spelled out in Genesis (Scudder 1986:288-289).

## When Abraham’s Other Children Come Marching In

An Indonesian theology professor once asked, “If the Ishmael promises in Genesis impact Muslims today, why are they not repeated elsewhere in Scripture?” It would seem that any important plan of God would be reaffirmed in successive waves of biblical revelation. The absence of any direct restatement of the Ishmael promises after Genesis 25 is not surprising because the entire Bible follows the account of Isaac, not Ishmael. However, there are interconnected, thematic allusions to the Ishmael promises in other biblical passages, such as Isaiah 60:1-7. By mentioning the sons of Keturah (Abraham’s concubine) and the sons of Ishmael, Isaiah 60:6-7 certainly recalls their genealogies in Genesis 25. And given the fact that Genesis 25 serves as an initial fulfillment notice of the Genesis 17 promise to multiply Abraham’s progeny (Kidner 1967:149), it is reasonable to conclude that Isaiah 60:6-7 clearly alludes to the Abrahamic covenant and the Ishmael promise.

### *Ishmaelites in the New Jerusalem*

Isaiah 60 is a prophetic promise that God will restore Israel’s diminished fortunes. Much of the focus in previous chapters of Isaiah was upon Israel’s exile under divine discipline for failing to obey and trust in God. The nations had come to carry away the wealth and people of Jerusalem. Isaiah 60, however, describes a great reversal of fortunes. The nations return the scattered remnant to their land, bringing cargoes of immense wealth and abundance to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple until it radiates God’s glory (60:7, 13). Isaiah envisions a “wondrous capitulation of the nations” who had been superior to Israel in exploitative ways (Brueggemann 1998:206). The submission of the nations is total—political, economic and *theological*, for they come with sacrificial offerings for the God of Israel.

Isaiah’s prophecy lends itself to a double fulfillment, beginning with the rebuilding of the temple in the Persian era. At that time King Darius decreed that the lambs and rams of his western provinces be provided for acceptable burnt offerings to the God

of heaven (Ezra 6:10). This could be understood as a partial fulfillment of Isaiah 60:7, which foresaw the flocks and rams of Kedar and Nebaioth (Ishmael’s first two sons) offered as acceptable sacrifices on the temple altar.

Yet, the lofty language and imagery of Isaiah 60 also presupposes a future eschatological fulfillment (Delitzsch 1980:416; Ridderbos 1984:536-537). Indeed, certain verses resemble the imagery of the Heavenly Jerusalem in Revelation 21, which comes down out of heaven from God:

*“The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory” (Isa. 60:19; cf. Rev. 21:23).*

Also, this Isaianic picture of the nations bringing their wealth to Jerusalem corresponds to the glory and honor of the nations that will be brought into the Heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21:26).

Yet, as Richard Mouw points out, the Holy City of Isaiah 60 is not entirely discontinuous with earthly conditions. The contents of the City, Mouw argues, “will be more akin to our present cultural patterns than is usually acknowledged in discussions of the afterlife” (1983:6-7). So let us now take a look at the *cultural patterns* of

the non-covenant Abrahamic nations preserved in the Holy City:

*A multitude of camels will cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, and will bear good news of the praises of the Lord.*

*All the flocks of Kedar will be gathered to you; the rams of Nebaioth will minister to you; They will go up with acceptance on My altar, and I shall glorify My glorious house. (Is, 60:6-7, NASB)*

Clearly Isaiah tells us that Abraham's descendants through Keturah (Gen. 25:1-6) will one day offer up their praises and gifts in the Holy City. Midian and Ephah (Abraham's sons from Keturah) represent North Arabia, whereas Sheba (Abraham's grandson from Keturah) represents South Arabia.

Furthermore, Isaiah 60:7 prophesies that the sacrificial offerings of the Ishmaelites will find acceptance on God's altar. Isaiah and the other major prophets use "Kedar" to represent the North Arabian tribes (Ridderbos 1985:185; cf. Isa. 21:16; 42:11; Jer. 48:28-33; Ez. 27:21).

*A proper understanding of God's dealings with Hagar and Ishmael will help tear down the walls of prejudice toward Arabs and Muslims that have hindered mission efforts to them for centuries.*

So while the tribe of Kedar is no longer extant today, North Arabians certainly are. We must not overlook the fact that Ishmaelite presence in the eschatological Holy City indicates that many conversions will have taken place among all Abrahamic peoples of Arabia during the Church age! Samuel Zwemer makes this same point when he says of Isaiah 60:6-7, "this gem of missionary prophecy leaves no room for doubt that the sons of Ishmael have a large place in this coming glory of the Lord and the brightness of His rising" (Zwemer 1950:35).

#### *Transformation of Ishmaelite Culture*

Isaiah pictures the entire wealth of Arabia pouring into Jerusalem. The camels of Sheba, the gold and frankincense of Midian and Ephah, and the flocks and rams of the Ishmaelites are the cultural and economic expressions for which these peoples were known in the ancient world. But as Mouw points out:

*They are no longer signs of pagan cultural strength or displays of alien power. Nor are they objects to be envied at a distance. Here in the transformed City these vessels and goods serve a very different purpose. Isaiah is very explicit about this new purpose, noting what function each creature and item now performs. Ephah's camels now "proclaim the praise of the Lord" (v. 6). Nebaioth's rams "shall minister to you" as acceptable sacrifices on the Lord's altars (v. 7)... Isaiah is, in contemporary jargon, interested in the future of "corporate structures" and "cultural patterns." And his vision leads him to what are for many of us very surprising observations about the future destiny of many items of "pagan culture." He sees these items as being gathered into the Holy City to be put to good use there (1983:8-9).*

Mouw refers here to the redemption and transformation of cultural patterns for the praise and glory of God in Christ Jesus. Of special interest to our study of contextualization among Muslims is the fact that Isaiah emphasizes *Arabian* and *Ishmaelite* cultural patterns. If God is willing to transform aspects of Ishmaelite culture for His praise and glory during the eschaton, why are many reluctant to do the same with the cultures of Ishmael's lineal and spiritual descendants?

#### **Arabian Magi Worship the Christ Child**

How does the episode of the Magi relate to this study? If we adhere to the traditional view that the Magi were Persians or Babylonians, it would not. However, there is a strong line of evidence suggesting that the Magi were Ishmaelitic Arabs (cf., Maa-louf 1998:202-246). The fact that Matthew understands the coming of the Magi as a fulfillment of Isaiah 60:6-7 supports this view, as we shall see below.

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." ... On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh. (Matthew 2:1-2, 11)*

*The Relationship to Isaiah 60:6-7*

The Magi's offering of gold, frankincense and myrrh is clearly reminiscent of the gifts offered by the non-covenant Abrahamic nations in Isaiah 60:6-7. In fact, given the specificity of the language and the structural arrangement of Matthew 2, it would be difficult to argue that this is mere coincidence, or that Matthew 2:11 is a casual allusion to Isaiah 60:6-7. Rather, it appears to be a deliberate fulfillment of that passage. A number of authorities have acknowledged this (cf. Brueggemann 1998:205-206; Gundry 1967:206-211; Davies and Allison 1988:250-251; Hengel and Merkel 1973:140-142; 154-155). Commenting on Isaiah 60:6-7, Brueggemann is most emphatic about this point, "Christian readers will not fail to notice the phrase 'gold and frankincense' and make a connection to Matthew 2:11. There can be no doubt that the Matthew narrative alludes not only to the specific commodities brought but to the dramatic theme of the submission of the nations..." (1998:205-206).

Hengel and Merkel arrive at the same general conclusion but buttress their argument with more sophisticated analysis. They point out that Matthew 2 is composed of five discreet sections, each of which fulfills an Old Testament prophecy in a specific geographical area (1973:140-142). Thus the appearance of the Magi in Jerusalem (2:1-6) fulfills Micah 5:1 and 2 Sam. 5:2 regarding Bethlehem; the worship of the Magi (2:7-12) implicitly fulfills Psalm 72:10 and Isaiah 60:6 regarding South Arabia (1973:155); Hosea 11:1 is fulfilled in the flight of the holy family to Egypt; Jeremiah 31:15 is fulfilled in the killing of the children in Ramah (2:16-18); and the immigration of the holy family from Egypt to Nazareth fulfills the enigmatic prophecy, "He shall be called a Nazarene" (2:19-23). Hengel and Merkel conclude: "The skill which Matthew displays in the overall layout of his Gospel—it is of all the Gospels the best arranged—he also shows here in the structuring of this dramatic story" (1973:142, translation mine). In light of this purposeful structuring for Matthew 2, it is highly improbable that Matthew would have inserted an incidental allusion in 2:11 without conscious reference to Isaiah 60:6-7.

*Arabian Origins of the Magi*

One cannot fail to notice that Isaiah 60:6-7 and Psalms 72:9-11 contain parallels to Matthew 2:11 in terms of the gifts offered and the submission of the nations to a "King." We must further notice, however, that all these Old Testament references cite the submission of Arabian nations. Therefore, it would seem inconsistent for Matthew to have understood the Magi to be anything other than ethnic Arabs.

The problem with an Arabian identity of the Magi is that it conflicts with the traditional view that they were Persian or Babylonian. Matthew only tells us the Magi came "from the east." The Magi cult arose among the priestly caste of Medio-Persia and later spread to the Chaldaean-Babylonian realm (Hengel and Merkel 1973:143). However, the cult also spread to Arabia (Morony 1986:1110). That the ancient Arabs had the propensity and capacity to function as Magi is seen in the apocryphal Book of Baruch, "The sons of Hagar... seek for wisdom upon the earth" (3:22; cf. 1Kgs. 4:30). Furthermore, knowledge of the stars and movement of the planets, an essential aspect of the Magi cult, flourished among Arabs. Joseph Henninger, in his synthesis of pre-Islamic Bedouin religion, demonstrates that the worship of planets and fixed stars proliferated in Arabia (1981:11-12), easily allowing for Arabs to follow "His star in the east," which the Magi "had seen in the east" (Matt 2:2, 9).

This and other lines of evidence has enabled Tony Maalouf (1998:202-247) to argue persuasively for the Arabian origins of the Magi. In fact, "the traditional view" of Magi from Persia or Babylonia is not the view held by some of our earliest church fathers. Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue With Trypho*, emphasizes the Arabian origin of the Magi when he says: "For at the time of His birth, the Magi came from Arabia and worshiped Him" (cited in Maalouf 1998:213). Others attest to the fact that Tertullian and Epiphanius also understood that the Magi were Arabian (Davies and Allison 1988:228). If so, then the Magi that worshipped the Christ child were most likely Nabataean Arabs, for the Nabataeans controlled North Arabian trade of gold and spices (Glueck 1965:4; Graf 1992:970; see appendix on the Nabataean-Ishmaelite connection).

In short, we have no reason to reject the possibility that the Magi were ethnic Arabs. Furthermore, we have compelling reasons to assume that Matthew intentionally associates them with the descendants of Keturah and Ishmael in Isaiah 60:6-7. Thus, it is reasonable to argue that Arabian Magi were the *first* among the gentile nations to worship the Christ child, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy that other Abrahamic nations would bring the wealth of Arabia as offerings to worship the *King* in the Holy City. Both passages show the transformation of Ishmaelites cultural patterns—their expression of praise to God, their treasures, and their sacrificial offerings—for the purpose of worshipping God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Conclusion**

The structural features which connect the Ishmael promise with the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17 signify that

God's promises for Ishmael and his descendants is enduring. They extend beyond the confines of Genesis 25 to include Ishmael's lineal and spiritual descendants—the worldwide Muslim community. Thematic allusions to the Ishmael promise and the account of the Arabian Magi support this assertion (Isa. 60:6-7, Mt. 2:1-12).

These passages reveal God's intention to make the Ishmaelites a great nation for the purpose of His praise and glory in Christ Jesus. Their greatness is described in the wealth of their flocks, rams, gold and frankincense—all of which found acceptance, according to Scripture, as appropriate sacrifices for worship in the Holy City and of the Christ child. Furthermore, an eschatological fulfillment of Isaiah 60 indicates that there will be those among Ishmael's descendants who will also be accepted in the Heavenly Jerusalem of Revelation 21. We therefore need not be reluctant to transform and redeem Islamic cultural forms in ministries to Muslims. Moreover, it would be prudent for us to integrate this understanding into our theories of Islam's origin and the acceptability of a "Muslims for Isa" movement.

Samuel Zwemer, the modern "apostle to Islam," found that the Ishmael promises establish Muslims as a unique people with kinship ties to God's Covenant people (cf. Zwemer 1950). Zwemer understood this kinship as a motivational factor for the Church to evangelize Muslims. I also submit that a proper understanding of God's dealings with Hagar and Ishmael will help tear down the walls of prejudice toward Arabs and Muslims that have hindered mission efforts for centuries. When love and respect for Muslims as "a people with a promise" floods our soul, we will be better able to process the wonders and complexities of Muslim contextualization.

## Appendix: North Arabian Descent from Ishmael

According to the claims of Islam, Muhammad and some of the North Arabian tribes descend from Ishmael. For the most part, modern critical scholars have expressed a great deal of skepticism towards these claims.

Most Western scholars believe the idea of descent from Ishmael was never an indigenous Arabian concept from the pre-Islamic era. Rather, it was cleverly devised by Muhammad to advance the apostolic character of Islam (Guillaume 1966:61). The concept was later embellished by Muslims of the second and third Islamic centuries when they forged a patriarchal pedigree for Muhammad. Thus we find the ninth century compiler, al-Tabari, reporting earlier traditions which supposedly trace Muhammad's descent through either Nebaioth or Kedar (al-Tabari 1988:38-42).

Rene Dagorn (1982) wrote a devastating critique of these Islamic claims to Ishmael in *La geste d'Ismaël: d'après l'onomastique et la tradition arabe* (The Ishmael Legend: Concerning the Onomasticon and the Tradition of the Arabs). Yet, more recent evidence compiled by Irfan Shahid, a Christian Arab scholar, does not agree with Dagorn's conclusion (1989:332-360; 382-383). There are other ways to probe the subject of North Arabian descent from Ishmael outside the traditions of early Muslims, as I have done in, "An Inquiry Into the Historicity of Islam's Claims of North Arabian Descent From Ishmael" (Culver 1999a). While the hypotheses, methodology, and supporting data from my doctoral tutorial are too extensive to include here, I list some of its important points below.

### *Outline of Supporting Evidence for North Arabian Descent from Ishmael*

- A. Archaeological evidence shows that the Ishmaelite tribal federation of Kedar (the name of Ishmael's second son, Gen. 25:13) established a dynastic house just two hundred miles north of Medina in the fifth century B. C. This places a documented Ishmaelite presence close to the heartland of Islam (see Graf, 1990a:139-140).
- B. The Nabataean Arabs, "one of the most remarkable people that have ever crossed the stage of history" (Glueck 1970:243), are very arguably Ishmaelite. Chronologically, they appeared between the demise of the Ishmaelite tribe of Kedar (c. 350 B.C.) and the rise of Islam (622 A.D.). However, their precise origins are shrouded in mystery, resulting in conflicting theories. According to the German transjordanian scholar Ernst Knauf, the Nabataeans are possibly a sub-branch of the Kedar (1989a:96-112; 1989b). Edomite scholar John Bartlett associates them with the Nebaioth, descendants of Ishmael's firstborn son (1979). Nabataean scholar David Graf argues for a Syro-Mesopotamian homeland for the Nabataeans, without reference to Ishmaelite origins (1990b:45-75).
- C. It was from the Nabataeans that the earliest Muslims derived their script for the Qur'an (Healey 1990; Gruendler 1993). Thus, the script of the Qur'an, which has become a cultural heritage of Muslims throughout the world, derives from an Ishmaelite source. The significance of this is underscored by fact that the Qur'an has become an important vehicle for extending the religio-cultural heritage of Ishmael's descendants to non-Arab peoples.
- D. According to early Islamic sources, Qusayy b. Kilab, the ancestor of Muhammad from the fifth generation, claimed to be a descendant of Kedar (al-Tabari 1988:38).

Interestingly, early Islamic traditions establish that Qusayy may well have been a Nabataean (Abdul-Karim 1990:422; Fahd 1993:836). Furthermore, Qusayy is characteristically a Nabataean name, and rarely occurs outside the Nabataean and Safaitic Arab realms of transjordan (Della Vida 1986:520; Negev 1991:4,58).

E. The Christian Arab scholar, Irfan Shahid, has amassed a convincing body of evidence proving that at least some of the pre-Islamic Arabs maintained an independent, self-conscious awareness of their descent from Ishmael (1989:154-158; 167-180; 332-360; 382-383). Thus Qusayy's alleged claim of descent from Kedar has a historical context. Moreover, this data challenges one of the pillars of modern critical scholarship, namely, that North Arabian descent from Ishmael was essentially an early Islamic invention.

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