

The Rising of Ishmael

Genesis 21:8-21

The bloodshed of this past week in Iraq has certainly opened some old wounds. Just when we thought this increasingly unsupported war was over and another chapter of our military history was complete, the Iraqi army of the U.S.-backed government of Nouri al-Maliki has been crumbling under the onslaught of largely Sunni militias fighting alongside the notoriously brutal insurgents of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.¹ This amalgam of Sunni extremists, al-Qaeda operatives, and Syrian rebels has taken over large sectors of Iraqi soil, including the cities of Mosul and Tikrit, as well as the country's largest oil refinery, among its victor's spoils. Over the last week, ISIS has marshaled its forces toward the capital, Baghdad. With al-Maliki seeking support from both neighboring Iran and the U.S. to defend the capital, it's shaping up to be a very bloody battle royal in the city where Saddam Hussein made his last stand.

Honestly, I'm not sure Americans have the collective will or stomach to take this on, in spite of the political calls for aggressive military action. The President has committed up to 300 military advisers and special operations forces, but is holding firm that no ground troops will be deployed. I think that's a wise decision, mainly because Iraq continues to be a nightmarish "Pandora's Box" of radical militancy, brutal bloodshed, and combustible ethnic and religious rivalry that will not be easily quelled.

Besides, U.S. interests in Iraq have always been hard to articulate and quantify aside from controlling the oil fields. From

¹ An alternative name is Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

what I've read, it hasn't been a breeding ground for terrorism directed against the U.S., as some proponents claim. Even the current civil strife in Iraq is a fight mainly between rival Muslim populations over justice, revenge, and dignity for those who have been marginalized due to the al-Maliki government, which is Shi'ite, deliberately and systematically excluding Sunnis, Kurds, and other minorities from power. Though the U.S. and its allies hope it would be a democratically-elected and representative government, there is little to suggest it wasn't doomed to failure from the start. Our non-Muslim ears may only hear threats of terrorism emanating from this region, yet the realities of Iraq are more complicated than that, reflective of the dynamics and differences within Islam as a whole in regard to history, religious identity and legal interpretation, and cultural heritage which expose many of the underlying tensions that currently exist in the Muslim world.

The truth is, most Americans are relatively uninformed about the diversity within Islam. With ignorance comes the overdone stereotype that all Muslims are closet terrorists and hostile to Americans, if not all Jews and Christians. We take the media sound bytes and the rhetoric and actions of a militant minority as being indicative of the Muslim worldview in the 21st century. Nothing could be further from the truth, anymore than you and I are related to the most offensive Christian fundamentalists in this country simply because our church shares the name, Baptist. As we find so often, stereotypes don't work to anyone's advantage other than to those who want to obscure the truth.

So what do we need to know? Many things, I've come to discover in my own study. The first thing to recognize is that Islam isn't a monolithic religion; there are two main branches of Islam: Sunni (87% of Muslims) and Shi'a (13%). A third term we often hear, Sufism, is more of a mystical and philosophical approach within Islam than a separate religious or political identity, as Sufis are found among both Sunnis and Shi'ites.

Historically, the Sunni and Shi'a branches formed in the first generation following the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE, specifically around who would legitimately succeed him—the majority following the first four caliphs in Islam, a line of authority established when the Prophet's close companion, Abu Bakr, was chosen to be the ruler of the newly formed Islamic community and compiled the writings of the Prophet upon his death ("Sunni" coming from *Sunnah*, meaning "way" or "path" in Arabic).² Shi'ites, on the other hand, originate from supporters of another close confidant of Muhammad, his son-in-law 'Ali, who was viewed by them as the legitimate spiritual heir to the Prophet (*Shi'a*, meaning "follower" or "sect" in Arabic). Those are the main historical distinctions in Islam, which is not unlike the early divergence of the two earliest branches of Christianity: Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

How Sunnis and Shi'ites view authority also differs, particularly for how Islam would be protected and advanced in the world.

According to Muslim scholar, Seyyed Hossein Nasr:

For Sunnism, the function of the caliph [or supreme leader] was to protect the borders of Islam, keep security and peace, appoint judges, and so forth.

² As a side note, it's interesting that the leader of ISIS is literally or figuratively named Abu Bakr al Baghdadi.

For the Shi'ites, such a person also had to have the deepest knowledge of Islamic Law as well as esoteric knowledge of the Quran and Prophetic teachings. He could therefore not be elected, but had to be chosen by the Prophet through Divine command...

In Sunni Islam the term [imam] has many uses, but it is never used in the mystical and esoteric sense given to it in Shi'ism. In Shi'ism, the Imam, like the prophets, is inerrant...and protected from sin by God. He possesses perfect knowledge of both the Law and the Way, both the outer and inner meaning of the Quran.³

This helps to explain why in Shi'ite-dominated Iran, the supreme authority is the spiritual leader, the Imam Khomeini; whereas in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other Sunni-dominated states, the ruler of the country (king, Prime Minister, or President) is the one who protects the interests of Islam. It's the difference between religious and civil authorities as to where ultimate power rests. This factors into how Muslim societies perceive themselves even today and why I surmise many Sunni militants don't view faithfulness to Islam as meaning reflecting the spiritual or moral character of Islam (e.g., tolerance and mercy for others), for they "protect" the interests of their faith through the use (and even abuse) of power, akin to Sunni political culture.

Another factor to consider is that there are significant differences in the legal interpretation and application of Shari'ah law, or Islamic orthodoxy. The general perception is that all Muslims interpret and apply Islamic law in the same way, which is not the case. The Sunni tradition, for instance, has four main schools of interpretation, named after the early imams whose interpretive approach they continue to subscribe to.

³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, 2002, pg. 66, 67.

Hanafi, the oldest, is the most common, which takes the traditional laws literally, but then through the lens of analogical reasoning and comparative experience, interprets and applies them suitably to the setting or occasion. It's similar to what many of us do when we interpret the Bible or Constitutional law; we attempt to understand it within its original context and then apply its moral logic through analogy to current situations. If a law doesn't fit the current context, then it is interpreted and applied in ways that do make sense. Most Muslims interpret the teachings of their faith in this way, which tends to foster debate among them more than militancy.

However, the other schools of interpreting law in Sunni Islam (Maliki, Shafi, Hanbali (esp. Wahabi)) are far more strict, conservative, and literal in interpretation of Shari'ah law and have found appeal among religious radicals who seek to reform Islam. Much of the religious radicalism in the Muslim world has to do with conservative imams trying to purge their societies of the corrupting influence of Western ideas and culture. The real target for them is not democracy or freedom, but secularism, which has gained ground in Islam societies, amplified by the openness and licentious freedoms in Europe and North America. Again, Dr. Nasr:

Today, even while some Muslims hold "infidels" responsible for the onslaught of a secularist culture from the West, they also use the same characterization for those within the Islamic world itself who, while still formally Muslim, accept and preach secularist ideas that negate the very foundations of the Islamic revelation. ⁴

This confirms an opinion I hear among my Muslims friends, i.e., that the radical religious extremists within Islam mainly target the West for its wanton hegemony in Muslim countries and thus seek to purge

⁴ Ibid. pp. 45-46.

their own societies of secularism and the darker and lewd elements of Western culture that might offend us as well.

On a much broader level, however, there also exists a widespread sense within Islam of being religiously and culturally marginalized in modern society, if not disrespected, caricatured, and even parodied by the rest of the world.⁵ This is found even among Muslims who embrace modernization. This isn't entirely new, germane only to a post 9-11 world, since from the origins of Islam, its Abrahamic cousins (Christians and Jews) have largely favored and protected the interests of the "children of Isaac" over the "offspring of Ishmael." At least metaphorically, we might acknowledge this based on the stories we inherit in our faith tradition.

Muslims, you may know, claim their spiritual roots in Ishmael, Abraham's first child. The story we just read is one of two within our Bible (cf. Gen. 16) which reveal the rivalry⁶ between Sarah and Hagar—Sarah who gave birth to Isaac and Hagar who birthed Ishmael. As stories it might seem this shouldn't matter, but when religious and spiritual identities and political meanings arise out of a text, it does.

The biblical stories we inherit come from a Hebraic context and bias. That shapes not only our view of "the other child," but also how Muslims believe they are perceived by Christians and Jews.

In Genesis 16, Hagar (an Egyptian slave girl) is given by Sarah to Abraham to provide him offspring. Once Hagar conceives, the

⁵ A good explanation of this is found in the Pew Research Global Attitudes Project, "The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other," June 22, 2006.

⁶ Rivalry between two leading characters is a common literary pattern of Genesis (Cain v. Abel; Abraham v. Lot; Isaac v. Ishmael; Jacob v. Esau, Rachel v. Leah; et. al.).

rivalry begins. Sarah perceived that Hagar held contempt for her and went to Abraham to complain about it. But in this version of the story, Abraham chose to stay out of it and allowed Sarah to deal with the situation in her own way. Not a good idea. Sarah then treats Hagar harshly throughout her pregnancy to the point where Hagar runs away. While in the wilderness, God hears Hagar's complaint and heeds her affliction and thus names her son, Ishmael, since God heard and heeded her cry for help.

Now the second version of the story here in chapter 21 reads differently, as it takes place after Sarah has given birth to Isaac. Sarah takes issue with Ishmael playing with her prized and promised boy and forces the issue upon Abraham to deal with Hagar. Here Abraham acts, but not necessarily in a kind way, for he then sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness with barely enough water and bread to survive. Both stories result in Hagar and Ishmael being rejected, dismissed, and unprotected—a serious moral flaw in ancient times (i.e., the sin being upon Sarah and Abraham). However, in spite of the father's cruelty, God intervenes and saves Hagar and Ishmael. Remember, these are the *Hebrew* versions of the story!

The Muslim version puts an additional spin on it, namely, Abraham is not cruel to Hagar and the redemption from God is more significant than their survival and safety. Let me read for you a selection from the Hadith:

When Abraham had differences with his wife (because of her jealousy of Hajar, Ishmael's mother), he took Ishmael and his mother and went away. They had a water-skin with them containing some water; Ishmael's mother used to drink water from the water-skin so that her milk would increase for her child. When Abraham reached Mecca, he made her sit under a tree and afterwards returned home. Ishmael's mother followed him, and when they reached Kadá, she called him from behind, "Oh

Abraham! To whom are you leaving us?” He replied, “I am leaving you to Allah’s care.” She said, “I am satisfied to be with Allah.” ⁷

The story emphasizes Abraham bringing Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca, and then it presents this journey as the founding story of Islam, explaining the meaning behind many of the central pillars and rituals of the faith, particularly the pilgrimage to Mecca, or Hajj, which poignantly echoes the name, Hajar.

What this version of the story tells us is that central to Muslim theology is a belief that the mercy of God, or Allah, makes up for human failure, jealousy, and cruelty and takes care of those who are desperate and afflicted, like their mother, Hajar. In their story, Muslims learned to depend on Allah, not Abraham, to build a home in Mecca and to grow into many generations and nations. Islamic faith, then, is rooted in a belief in divine providence that lifts up the marginalized, the enslaved, the poor, and the suffering—a mercy and protection that one submits to—in my view, not unlike what the central tenets of the teachings of Moses and Jesus emphasize as well.

What this might suggest to us is an awareness and appreciation that Muslims do not view themselves as our religious enemies, but rather as spiritual cousins to both Jews and Christians—even when the relationships are difficult and cruel—that we have much more in common than not. This is important for us to grasp, both as Christians and as Americans. If we are able to appreciate the longstanding sense in the Muslim world of Islam being disrespected as a way of life and undervalued as a moral authority, we will be able to understand the harm that ridiculing Muslims creates. Likewise, we

⁷ Hadith, Vol. 4, Book 55, Number 583.

can challenge the chronically negative stereotypes perpetuated by those who do not understand the sensitivities or dynamics ongoing in the Muslim world today.

Overcoming our ignorance of Islam and challenging stereotypes has a practicality that goes far beyond interfaith dialogue. For one thing, none of us want to see more Americans lose their lives in yet another war in Iraq. Nor do we want to get embroiled in a civil war between Sunnis and Shi'ites in the wilderness and cities of this region. Sometimes we have to recognize, the battle isn't ours to fight. So we must test our resolve and our wisdom: can we live with a restive Islamic region struggling to balance its own interests without U.S. intervention? For it's far too complicated for anyone to reduce it to being a war on terrorism!

The rising of Ishmael in our generation is, at its heart, for a sense of justice, dignity, and a lasting presence for Muslims in the modern world. The realities they wrestle with are not unlike what challenge and confound us as Christians: how is our faith relevant in a secular climate that basically undermines and devalues it? It's a struggle for Muslims, even more than it is for us. Collectively, we will witness how this will unfold and what it will mean, in both the best and worst ways.

As we struggle to come to terms with this question ourselves, may we, too, be wise not to do harm in this world to ourselves or to others out of hatred or fear or ignorance.

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