Dear brothers and sisters in Christ Yeshua:

Most of us probably know the story of Abraham and Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian maidservant. She became Abraham’s second wife and bore his first son, Ishmael (Figure 1). Conflict and jealousy arose within the family, which led to Ishmael’s banishment, not only from Abraham’s household but also from his father’s inheritance.

And yet, the Lord said, “And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 17:20, NKJV). Here we see Ishmael receiving a blessing in Abraham, which would also include a portion of the land promised as an eternal inheritance to Abraham’s descendants. Therefore, Ishmael was circumcised on the same day with Abraham, because without the sign of the covenant, Ishmael would have been entirely cut off from his father’s promised blessings.

However, Ishmael’s prodigy were not the recipients of the full promise (the covenants and the future Messiah) that would only come through the natural lineage of Isaac and later Jacob. Like Isaac, Jacob (renamed Israel), also had an older brother, Esau. These two families would later intermarry through Mahalath, the daughter of Ishmael. “So Esau went to Ishmael and took Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, the sister of Nebajoth, to be his wife in addition to the wives he had” (Genesis 28:9).

And so, we see that the blessing of Abraham would also come to the family of Esau, who would also receive a portion of the land promised to Abraham. Therefore, the children of Israel were instructed, “Do not meddle with them [the descendants of Esau], for I will not give you any of their
Mount Seir is situated in modern-day Jordan about an hour drive south of Petra. The beautiful rugged mountains flank the eastern side of the Jordan Valley. Interestingly, our family just returned from visiting this region. I felt an incredible peace over this land. The blessing of Abraham is still present to this very day.

There is another blessing in scripture for the Jewish and Arab people, the blessing of Shem, one of the three sons of Noah. It is written, "May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem... (Genesis 9:27). Here, the Lord promised to enlarge the kingdoms of Japheth, commonly believed to be those in Asia and Europe. The Aramaic root of the name Japheth means to extend, and the Hebrew root means beauty. It is interesting to see how both the Asian and European nations have expanded over the centuries, with an emphasis on creating beautiful cities and architecture.

However, the greater blessing to the Arab people is that the kingdoms of Japheth would ultimately come to dwell in the tents of Shem. As such, the blessing of Japheth would also be extended to Jacob and Ishmael. "Therefore your gates shall be open continually; They shall not be shut day or night, That men may bring to you the wealth of the Gentiles, And their kings in procession" (Isaiah 60:11).

Given the limited historical narrative in scripture and the fact that most Arab tribes living throughout the Middle East have produced no written account of their genealogy, it is almost impossible to know exactly where the descendants of both Ishmael and Esau dwell today. However, it is commonly accepted that the Arab people (407-420 million worldwide), including Abraham’s children born through his third wife, Keturah, are by in large, their direct descendants. Given that many Arab families became nomadic or followed ancient trade routes, we also see Arab populations spread throughout Northern Africa, Asia, and Anatolia (Asia Minor), including for example Egypt (17%) Turkey (1.1-2.4%), and Iran (2%).

That leaves the largest single concentration of Arabs living in what is traditionally called the Middle East (Figure 2), which encompasses Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen. Included within this dispersed Arab population are those who identify as Palestinian, most of whom are presently living in Lebanon, Jordan, and cities around Judea and Samaria, which include well-known cities such as Jericho, Nazareth, Bethlehem, Nablus, Ramallah, and East Jerusalem.

While Ishmael and Esau were blessed in Abraham, they were also cursed. Regarding Ishmael, the Lord said, “He shall be a wild man; His hand shall be against every man, And every man’s hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren” (Genesis 16:12). And Regarding Esau, the Lord said, “But Esau I have hated, And laid waste his mountains and his heritage For the jackals of the wilderness” (Malachi 1:3), specifically because Esau sought to kill his brother, Jacob.
Sadly, we see much of that violence manifest today as warring Arab factions fight and kill each other over religious and other tribal differences. Israel also continues to suffer at the hands of those who continually seek her destruction—a family rift that sadly goes back to Sarah and Hagar.

At the core of these conflicts is a deep animosity that seeks and strives to justify and establish a fatherly identity—one that stems from an orphaned spirit. Attached to fatherly identity is inheritance and attached to inheritance is land. In truth, all humanity suffers from this same identity issue, and most wars fought throughout history have been about the conquest of land and its subjugated populations. But in Christ, every curse is broken.

Whether acknowledged or not, all people question who they are and what is our purpose for existing? Only sentient beings are self-aware, and humanity created in the image of God is sentient. Ishmael suffered a double fate, having already lost his heavenly identity from mankind’s original sin, he now lost his earthly identity as well. And yet, Abraham was promised to become the father of many nations, ultimately restoring what was lost to all humanity.\(^v\)

Ishmael’s loss of his father’s identity and the land attached to his father’s inheritance continues to drive the Arab people to fight and restore the land they gave up when Israel became a nation in 1948. To further complicate matters, under Islamic theory, a Muslim state is responsible for supervising land that ultimately belongs to God. If the land belonged to Allah, then it cannot revert to any other God, including the God of Israel.\(^vi\)

Israel and much of the Middle East was under control of the Ottoman-Turkish Empire (Caliphate) up until 1922. The Ottoman Turks entered World War I in 1914 on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary and were defeated in 1918. Under a war treaty agreement, the empire gave up most of its territories to Britain, France, Greece, and Russia.\(^vii\)
Britain retained control of the region surrounding Israel, which they named Palestine in 1870 when the first post office was established in the region. Arabs from Palestine now refer to themselves as Palestinians, and since Islam, as a religion, does not make distinctions between ethnicities, the title of Palestinian primarily has a geographic association to land previously owned by Muslims who lived under the Caliphate of the Ottoman Empire.

Muslims have allegiance first to Allah and his geopolitical kingdom, regardless of their ethnicity, and secondarily, if any, allegiance to national boundaries established in the Middle East under Western rule, which they view as Judeo-Christian. Most Muslims in the world are not Arab, and presently, only about 18-percent of Muslims live in the Middle East.

Maps of early Christianity (figure 3) show how the Messianic faith spread from Jerusalem, northward and westward through Syria and Turkey into Asia Minor and Europe, Southward into Egypt and across Northern Africa along the Mediterranean, and eastward into small parts of modern-day Jordan and Iraq. Notice these regions also held sizeable Jewish populations. Christianity peaked in the Middle East around 630 A.D., shortly after Islam began to spread. Therefore, much of the Middle East has never come under Christian influence, especially the central and southern areas of Arabia, suggesting that the Arab people have yet to encounter the gospel and the revelation of Christ.

Scholars date the creation of Islam to the 7th century, starting in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, by a man called Muhammad; a Quraysh from the clan of Hashim. At about the age of forty, while alone in a cave on Mount Hira, he encountered an angelic being that spoke to him. These conversations continued for 23-years and would later be written down as chapters (Suras) of the Qur’an.

Interestingly, the Qur’an references narratives in the Old Testament that include those of Joseph, Jacob, Abraham, and Moses, and New Testament narratives of Mary, Zachariah, and Jesus. These stories are told, not because they communicate a message to a chosen people group, but because they present the eternal moral choices faced by all people, from Adam to each one of us today.

Muhammad began to build a movement of devout spiritualists from many religious backgrounds, including some Jews and Christians, although most were likely pagan tribes from war-torn Arabia. Muhammad never intended to create a new religion. And yet, Muslims are the
second largest population group in the world, behind Christianity, comprising one-fourth of the world’s population. As of 2017, Islam has become the fastest growing religion in the world, largely due to faster birth rates.\textsuperscript{xii}

A century after his death, Muhammad’s community of believers launched the great Islamic conquest, defining their beliefs as part of a distinct religious group called Islam. A series of leaders, Caliphs, became their successors. This system of leadership was called a caliphate, eventually leading to the formation of the Ottoman-Turkish Empire, the last of the great Islamic Caliphates.

So, now we have come full circle to understand both God’s plans to expand the gospel to the sons of Ishmael and the enemies plans to squelch it. God established the nation of Israel and His governing and spiritual authority in Jerusalem, so that Yeshua, the Messiah and rightful King of Israel, would command His disciples to go forth from Jerusalem, share the good news of the Kingdom and make disciples of all nations.

When the Lord commissioned Paul and Barnabas (figure 4), Christianity spreads from Jerusalem into Asia Minor and partly into Arabia, but it never fully enveloped the Middle East. Six-hundred years later, Islam would evolve as a new religion in Saudi Arabia and captivate the Arab people, so that today, the majority follow Islam and not Christianity.

The conflict between the Muslim and Christian worlds, eventually led to the division of the Middle East, primarily between France and England. This division included the eventual reservation and formation of the nation of Israel. Today, the battle over the inheritance promised to the descendants of Abraham surrounds primarily one city, Jerusalem, and within that, one rectangular plot of land in its center—the Temple Mount.

Make no mistake about this. The conflict between the Jews and Palestinians started at the time of Abraham when Ishmael lost his fatherly identity, and seemingly also his father’s inheritance, which included the land of Israel, formerly called Canaan during biblical times. And, this conflict will not end until the enmity between the descendants of Jacob and Ishmael is removed.

The Apostle Paul said this enmity would be removed when both the Jews and Gentiles become one people of God in Christ:
“Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity” (Ephesians 2:11-16).

This enmity was provoked by Israel’s promise to receive an inheritance, whose ultimate fulfillment would be found in Christ, and the rest of the nations, including the sons of Ishmael, would be excluded from the Lord’s inheritance because they were not part of the covenant God made with Abraham. As it is written, “Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him” (Genesis 17:19).

Many see Paul’s writing in Ephesians as a reference to the Mosaic Law and how the Law set Israel apart from her surrounding nations. That is true, in part. However, we must look at the entire context of this paragraph where it says that the Gentiles were effectively cut off from the commonwealth of Israel, and therefore, cut off from Israel’s identity and promise to become children of God and inheritors of His Kingdom.

Therefore, the New Covenant is more than just a better promise. It is the only promise by which we can receive eternal salvation in Christ, and through which we now receive the Father’s indwelling presence and the nations of the earth as an eternal inheritance. Paul used this analogy to compare the bondage which comes from trying to earn our salvation through the works of the Law, and the freedom we now have in Christ:

“For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all” (Galatians 4:22-26).

Islam reflects many of the same principles as Judaism and Catholicism, including the belief that eternal salvation is predicated on faith in God and good deeds. The latter implies an obligation to labor and earn our salvation—an endless pursuit of unattainable perfection that continues to enslave the Arab and Jewish people. Paul said, “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness,
and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:3).

Once the natural sons of Abraham are freed from humanism by coming to true faith in Christ, this being that through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men,iv these two families will become one in Christ, and will equally receive the identity as God’s children and descendants of Abraham’s covenant promises.v

I believe that many of the sons of Ishmael will come to the knowledge of Christ before the Jewish people. Many are already receiving dreams and visions of Yeshua. They might very well be the ones to provoke Israel to jealousy. Moses warned the Israelites, because of their idolatry, that God would, “provoke them to jealousy by those who are not a nation; I move them to anger by a foolish nation” (Deuteronomy 32:21).vi

Could this be the same nation the Lord promised to Ishmael when He said, “Behold, I have blessed him [Ishmael], and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 17:20)? Would this not also demonstrate the hidden wisdom of God to bring salvation to Israel’s greatest enemies first, and then commission them to provoke Israel to jealousy?vii Yeshua said, “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (Matthew 19:30). Was He referring to the Jewish people, the first nation conceived of God’s covenant now becoming the last to enter the Kingdom?

God wants to bring His redemption and salvation to all mankind, ultimately restoring the earth to the peace and wholeness (Shalom) that existed in the Garden of Eden. The Lord has promised, “In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria... In that day Israel will be one of three with Egypt and Assyria” (Isaiah 19:22-24).

This highway, therefore, represents more than just three nations. It symbolically pictures the restoration of the three sons of Noah, which is the whole earth (figure 5). To the north, this highway opens a gateway for the descendants of Japheth, who populated the Asian and European nations, to come and dwell in the tents of Shem. And, to the south, it opens a gateway for the descendants of Ham who populated the continent of Africa, to come and serve in the tents of Shem, a hidden blessing. As it is written, “Whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant...” (Matthew 20:26).
In the middle of this highway is the land of Israel and Jerusalem, the heart and center of God’s Kingdom. This land was promised to the descendants of Jacob, but portions were also promised to Abraham’s other natural sons, Ishmael and Esau.

It is not surprising that some of Ishmael’s descendants still live in tents. This is a prophetic picture of their eternal destiny. And oh, the hospitality they display when they invite us to join them for dinner. And now, we have come full circle once again, that the blessing of Ishmael, fulfilled in Christ, restores an inheritance and blessing that dates to Noah.

Yes, this is the blessing of Ishmael—to complete the restoration of God’s Kingdom by provoking Israel to jealousy, but even more so, to be a blessing to all the nations by setting a royal banquet for our King. “May God enlarge Japheth, And may he dwell in the tents of Shem; And may Canaan be his servant” (Genesis 9:27). And, may all the sons of Noah become one family of God in Christ.

Amen!

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1 All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Bible (NKJV) unless otherwise noted, Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982.
3 Wikipedia.
4 Ibid.
5 Genesis 17:4.
8 Ibid. Wikipedia.
9 Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani. Understanding Islamic Law. The Islamic Supreme Council of America.
12 Qur’an 2:82. Mosnad Ahmad, #2515, and Saheeh Muslim, #131.
14 Romans 5:18.
16 Romans 10:19.
17 1 Corinthians 1:25.