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ISAAC & ISHMAEL  
EXPLORING GOD'S BIG MISSION PLAN

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# ISAAC & ISHMAEL

## EXPLORING GOD'S BIG MISSION PLAN

*Rev Alex Jacob*

Welcome to the Olive Press Research Paper – an occasional paper featuring articles that cover a wide spectrum of issues which relate to the ministry of CMJ.

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Articles do not necessarily portray CMJ's standpoint on a particular issue but may be published on the premise that they allow a pertinent understanding to be added to any particular debate.

## Isaac and Ishmael in Context

We first meet Isaac and Ishmael within the book of Genesis. The book of Genesis is all about beginnings. These beginnings are all rooted within relationships, for example God and the natural world, God and people and then a range of interwoven relationships involving individuals and family groupings are explored.

Within these relationships, God is shown to be the focus of the narrative. The text begins with the affirmation; “*In the beginning, God*” (Genesis 1:1). The term “God” appears 35 times within the opening chapter of Genesis and the way God is revealed shapes a monotheistic understanding of God which rules out developing pantheistic or polytheistic concepts. God is indeed shown to be sovereign and faithful as time begins to unfold, with the consequences of the fall (Genesis 3), judgement and redemption (Genesis 6, 7 and 8), the covenant with Noah (Genesis 9), the table of the Nations (Genesis 10) and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11).

From Genesis 11:27 a new beginning is marked as we enter into ‘Patriarchal history’. Here history is shaped by the chosen family (Genesis 12-50). The chosen family includes the family of **Abraham** with a focus on covenant and promises, the family of **Isaac** with a focus on the testing of faith, the family of **Jacob** with a focus on the emergence of Israel, and the family of **Joseph** with a focus on ‘life in exile’ in Egypt. Throughout these events, the redemptive purposes of God begin to be established and the hope of what will one day be attained is glimpsed. This redemptive purpose is to bless all peoples through the blessing of Abraham (Genesis 12:3). Ultimately, Christians see the ‘fulfilment’ of this promised blessing in the person and work of Jesus Christ, He who is the Son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1). This ‘fulfilment’ occurs in such a way that it makes the book of Genesis the ‘book of beginnings’, fundamental to the correct understanding of the entire unfolding of Biblical revelation. Without a proper beginning, it is hard to complete the journey!

## Genesis 21 – A Fault-Line Within Monotheistic Religion

It is in the context of the unfolding of revelation that we meet Isaac and Ishmael. This takes place in Genesis 21. Genesis 21 is understood as a key foundational passage in the Bible, both for Jewish and Christian commentators. The birth of Isaac and the ‘removal/rejection’ of Ishmael have huge ramifications. The ‘shock waves’ from this event are still felt today, within the complex world of Middle Eastern political, spiritual and religious life.

In both Jewish and Christian heritage, Isaac is celebrated as the child of blessing, the child of promise. Isaac is the second of the three great Patriarchs of Israel. In Pauline theology, Isaac is seen as the key to tracing God’s sovereign plan (Romans 9:6-10). Paul argues here in Romans 9 that the election of Israel was never meant to be understood simply in terms of physical descent, but rather election is rooted in Israel’s responses to God’s promise and mercy. From Paul’s understanding, the covenant promises are not the

same as natural descent (although natural descent is important for Paul. For example, in Romans 9, Paul affirms the traditional Jewish path of exegesis<sup>1</sup> taking the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as the line of promised inheritance), for if inheritance simply depended on natural descent, then Ishmael would be within the covenant as a circumcised son of Abraham. For Paul, there is a necessary redefining or an enlarging of the understanding of Israel and this takes place in Romans 9, through a correct focus on the promise of Isaac within the context of God's wider election.

This affirmation of Isaac in both Jewish and Christian theologies is often promoted alongside a denigration of Ishmael. The Biblical text itself speaks of Ishmael as, "... *a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility towards all his brothers*" (Genesis 16:12). In some Rabbinical literature, Ishmael is presented in a very unfavourable light<sup>2</sup> and this along with other factors, has led some Jews and Christians to develop an antagonism towards, and a crude stereotyping of, Arabic and Islamic people. However, in Islamic theology it is Ishmael who is affirmed and celebrated. Ishmael is declared to be the ancestor of the Arab peoples<sup>3</sup> and Ishmael is acknowledged as the ancestor of Mohammad. Clearly there is a 'dividing of the ways' between Islam and Jewish/Christian interpretations of Isaac and Ishmael. There is a clear theological and historical fault-line at this point. Such a fault-line is shown, for example, in the fact that in the Koran (Sura 37), it is Ishmael, not Isaac, who was bound on the altar. Such a view gained from the Koran is not reconcilable with the account in Genesis 22. While in scholarly and popular thinking there is much emphasis on the shared values and shared heritage of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (the three great Monotheistic religions), it must also be acknowledged that this shared heritage rooted in Abraham takes a sharply divergent path when one compares the Islamic understanding of Isaac and Ishmael with that understood by the shared interpretations contained within both Judaism and Christianity.

## Genesis 21 – Exploring the Text

The birth of Isaac is a gift of grace. It is all about grace, as verse 1 states; "...*the Lord was gracious to Sarah.*" Within this outpouring of grace, there is a fulfilling of a promise; this fulfilling is within the perfect timing of God (v2). The result of this grace is joyful surprise (v6-7) marked by laughter.<sup>4</sup> This joyful laughter can be contrasted with the mocking laughter of Hagar (v9).

The grace of God is at work in the birth of Isaac and a great feast was held (v8). However, within this sense of celebration there is conflict. The conflict begins with Hagar, who mocks the birth of Isaac, which Sarah adds to, by ordering Abraham to, "*Get rid of that slave women and her son*" (v10). It is worth noting that Sarah, in her anger, is unable to refer to Hagar by her name and chooses also to refer to Ishmael as "her son" rather than "your son" while speaking to Abraham. Sarah is determined that Isaac will face no rivals

for Abraham's inheritance within the household. The great and sad irony of this is that it was indeed Sarah who had suggested (Genesis 16:1-2) that God may well bless Abraham through the birth of her maidservant's (Hagar) child. Now Isaac has been born, Sarah simply wants Hagar and Ishmael out of the household.

The removal of Hagar and Ishmael clearly troubled Abraham (v11). Ishmael was Abraham's son, the Lord had named him (Genesis 16:4) and Abraham had circumcised him (Genesis 17:25-26). Abraham also knew that God had promised to bless Ishmael (Genesis 17:20) and Ishmael had been brought up as his son. As Abraham prepares to send away Hagar and Ishmael (v14) the sadness and confusion in Abraham's heart must have been great. I think it is probable that Abraham remembered such feelings when he later (Genesis 22) walked alone with Isaac to the mountains of Moriah, in order to carry out the ultimate test of his faith.

To send Ishmael away smacked of gross injustice, yet within this conflict and subsequent injustice, God acts. God hears the cry of Ishmael (v17, this has echoes with God finding the runaway Hagar in Genesis 16:7 and with the beginning of the Exodus event, where God hears the cries of the enslaved Israelites, as recorded in Exodus 6:4) and intervenes to protect Ishmael and Hagar. God then remains with Ishmael as he grows up into adulthood.

## **Genesis 21 – Reflecting Upon and Applying the Text**

Within Genesis 21 there is, rightly, the celebration of the birth of Isaac and the wonderful outworking of God's grace to Abraham and Sarah, despite this, God does not abandon His promises to Ishmael. God is faithful! Yet there is conflict and sadness, for example, Isaac never had the opportunity to know his older half-brother; equally Ishmael never had the opportunity to know his younger half-brother and Ishmael lost his significant relationship with Abraham. Isaac and Ishmael are only reunited at Abraham's funeral (Genesis 25:9). Such reunions at funerals seem to be the norm within this 'dysfunctional family heritage' for the twins Jacob and Esau are only reunited many years later at their father's (Isaac) death (Genesis 35:29).

Many today know all too well the pain and consequences of sibling rivalry and dysfunctional family life. Often fathers and sons are separated in the breakdown of family life and siblings are divided. We live in what has been called 'a fatherless generation.' In the light of this we long to see the outworking of the Day of the Lord as spoken by the Prophet Malachi; *"He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the children to their fathers..."* (Malachi 4:6).

What is intriguing within the Patriarchal history, particularly within the outworking of the life of the chosen family (Genesis 12-50), is that interwoven within the call and blessing of God, is this pain and division of 'family dysfunction'. In Genesis 21, the focus

of this pain and division is on Isaac and Ishmael, yet it is repeated within the story of Jacob and Esau, (especially in Genesis 27, where Jacob flees for his life away from Esau) and subsequently in the story of Joseph, who is sold into slavery by his brothers (Genesis 37).

It is worthwhile to reflect upon this ‘dysfunction’ and to ask why there is this strange interweaving of blessing and conflict. At one level, it is argued that such dysfunction is simply the outworking of sin. Sin has consequences both in the immediate present, and into future generations. It is argued that both Abraham and Sarah sinned. For example, Abraham sinned by planning for his servant Eliezer to inherit his estate<sup>5</sup> (Genesis 15:2-3). Sarah sinned by encouraging Abraham to seek his heir through her maidservant Hagar (Genesis 16:1-2). Abraham also sinned in his desire for Ishmael to become his heir (Genesis 17:18).

Abraham and Sarah’s sinful actions flowed from their lack of trust in God’s promise and a misguided attempt to ‘try to make things happen’ outside God’s will and perfect timing. No wonder such acts resulted in the pain and division, as recorded in Genesis 21 and throughout the narrative of the chosen family. However, this perhaps oversimplistic and negative view of Abraham’s and Sarah’s actions is challenged by a number of commentators; for example, Jonathan Allen<sup>6</sup> explores how the promise of land and family inheritance, given by God to Abraham, could well be seen to imply that Abraham needed to participate in the process. Abraham needed to take action in order to secure the promise. Allen refers to James 2:24 and Philippians 2:12-13 to suggest there is a joint partnership at work between the gift and intentionality of God and the obedience and actions of His covenant people. The challenge, argues Allen, is to co-operate with God in order to ‘actualise’ God’s plans for us. Perhaps the action of Abraham and Sarah, in Genesis 15 – 17 and 21 should not, therefore, simply be seen as sinful,<sup>7</sup> implying a lack of trust, but rather should be seen as a faithful attempt to ‘keep in step’ with God’s promise of blessing and to ‘actualise’ God’s plans?

I think the above questioning and reflection is at the heart of much Christian discipleship and decision-making. Clearly we need, as Christians, to find the right balance between dependence and trust in God and the willingness to take our own responsibility and effective action. I am reminded of the old Arabic proverb; *“Trust God, but don’t forget to tie up your camel.”* Maybe it is only with the benefit of hindsight and the full discernment of the Holy Spirit we can ever fully know if we have allowed God’s promise to us to be misused and spoilt by sin, which is reflected in either a passive inaction or in erroneous action.

In a wider context, we see throughout the Bible and within the outworking of history God’s intention to bless and His call, are often interwoven with pain and division. We know of the struggle in our own lives between yielding to the purposes of the Holy Spirit and our own sinful default positions. Paul explores this in Romans 7 and 8, as he contrasts, on the one side struggling with sin and on the other side, life through the Spirit. The

tensions and struggles of Romans 7 and 8 are powerfully explored by the contemporary song-writer Bruce Cockburn. He beautifully sums up his own inner struggles in relation to holiness and sin, passivity and action in two songs. Firstly, in the song “*Burden of the Angel Beast*”<sup>8</sup> the chorus states: “*I could be the famine, could be the feast, could be the pusher, could be the priest, always ourselves we love the least, that’s the burden of the angel beast.*” Secondly in the song “*Southlands of the Heart*”<sup>9</sup> the opening verse states: “*When the wild eyed dogs of day to day, come snapping at your feet, and there’s so much coming at you that you don’t know how to feel. When they have taken all your money and come back for your clothes – when your hands are full of thorns but you can’t quit groping for the rose.*”

## **God’s Big Plan for the Sons of Isaac and the Sons of Ishmael, and Some Reflections upon the Crossroads Conference**

The plan God has to bless all through Abraham is not a plan that will fail, despite what we may see in the places of brokenness and violence within today’s world. We can celebrate, that in and through Jesus Christ, all of God’s promises made through the Patriarchs have been, or will be wonderfully confirmed (Romans 15:8). God has a plan to restore Isaac and Ishmael. The conflict rooted in Genesis 21 will be resolved. God will save the Sons of Isaac and the Sons of Ishmael; both will be fully blessed and brought into the household of faith.

The plan is the only plan, namely the faithful preaching of and the radical living out of the Gospel of His Son (Romans 1:9). Within the ministry of CMJ and in many other contexts, we see glimpses of God’s plan being worked out. One good example of this was in May 2012, when CMJ Israel hosted the “*At The Crossroads Conference*” in Christ Church, Jerusalem. This was a ground breaking conference which enabled believers in Jesus from all around the Middle East and beyond to pray, study and worship together as they sought God’s big mission perspective. I was greatly privileged to attend and was encouraged by so much of what took place at the Conference. Many participants were from Muslim backgrounds and, as they shared their courageous testimonies, it was deeply moving to hear how the grace of God has enabled true reconciliation to take place between these Muslim background believers and Messianic Jewish believers in Jesus (Yeshua).

As I reflected upon these testimonies, there seemed to be four ‘common threads of God’s grace’ running through them. Within these testimonies there were references to: 1) a ‘supernatural’ revelation of Jesus (often through a dream or vision), 2) a meaningful engagement with the teaching of the New Testament, 3) a sense of God’s miraculous care and protection (within times of danger and within times of suffering/persecution) and 4) the outworking of a significant relationship with a Christian they had learned to trust/respect. These four ‘threads of grace’ holding together testimonies from Muslim background believers, I know can also be identified within the testimonies of many Jewish Believers in Jesus.



Messianic Jewish believers also shared how they have been challenged and renewed by God's Spirit to love, serve and witness to the Arab/Muslim world. Together, all participants explored God's big mission plan which connects with our longings for true reconciliation, justice and peace. We declared that within the maze of problems within the Middle East, Israel was not the core problem but part of God's solution. Again and again, participants were drawn to focus on Isaiah 19. Here in this prophetic Scripture we encountered God's promise of blessing upon the Arab and Jewish world. The Sons of Ishmael and the Sons of Isaac will be united within God's blessing; *"Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria<sup>10</sup> the work of my hands and Israel my inheritance"* (Isaiah 19:25).

Clearly the precise timetable of God's blessing and the specific methodology of the outworking of the Isaiah 19 promise is beyond our full understanding. There was a range of eschatological interpretations explored at the conference, yet within this diversity, there was a deep sense of unity in God's promises. This deep sense of unity was confirmed as the delegates resolved to:

1. Rise above ethnic, political and theological differences in the Body of Messiah, and to work together in expanding the Kingdom of God in our region.
2. Proclaim that *"Egypt my people, Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance"* will indeed become a blessing in the midst of the earth.
3. Commit to work and pray for the blessing and salvation of all the peoples of the Middle East.
4. Mobilise people to go and make disciples as a practical expression of the Kingdom of God, recognising we now have a window of opportunity that may not remain open in the future.
5. Advocate and allocate resources for justice, helping the poor and mitigating persecution of Christians.
6. Establish a network of communication and intercession throughout the region and to meet together on a regular basis as a means of expressing the *"one new man."* (Eph 2:15)

As I reflected on the conference, specifically upon the six action steps outlined above, I felt that there were two important and connected issues. Firstly, the schism of Isaac and Ishmael, in some way has echoes within the great schism between Jews and Gentiles. This is the schism which has had so many disastrous consequences for the mission and spirituality of the Church. Secondly, in terms of the Church's mission to the Jewish and Islamic world, there is the common ground for the need to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus as God's Son and Saviour, for both Islam and Rabbinical Judaism reject God's Son. In Islamic monotheism God has no Son. This central belief is stated boldly for example, in the inscriptions decorating the central part of the Dome of the Rock<sup>11</sup> in Jerusalem. Part of the inscription reads, *"...God is only one God, far be it from his glory that he should have a*



son.” An invitation to abandon belief in the Trinity and in the divinity of Jesus could not be put more starkly. Equally, within Rabbinical Jewish monotheism, the Rabbi’s declare God will not share His glory with another. Once again, there is an unequivocal rejection of the person and work of Jesus.

My understanding is that the Sons of Ishmael and the Sons of Isaac can only be restored when both freely and joyfully acknowledge the divine Sonship of Jesus. For it is the Son who unites us all in the Father’s call, love and blessing. In reflecting upon Islamic Theology, I think it is of significance that Islam ‘comes to terms’ with the Biblical account of Ishmael by denying it and then altering it. Maybe this is the way Islam deals with the pain and ‘injustice’ of Ishmael’s rejection. However, in our own lives, we know that pain and injustice cannot be dealt with by denying what has taken place. We have to face the reality (as far as is possible by the grace of God) of what took place. The ‘rejection’ of Ishmael is a spiritual reality and an open wound for many within the Islamic world. This wound needs healing by God’s grace. Healing cannot take place if one denies the reality of the ‘rejection’ and therefore, the subsequent wound.

### **God’s Big Plan for All People and Some Closing Reflections**

In addition to God’s big mission plan of restoring the Sons of Isaac and the Sons of Ishmael, and establishing of the highway of blessing from Egypt through to Assyria, there is an even greater hope namely, the saving of all Israel (Romans 11:26) and the full unity of all God’s People.

In terms of understanding this full unity, I would want to begin with an exploration of Romans 11:11-24. Within this key segment of Romans, I understand Paul teaches that God is working His purposes out through three different, yet mutually connected communities.<sup>12</sup> The first community identified, is ‘unbelieving Ethnic Israel.’ Ethnic Israel has not yet fully accepted the good news (Romans 10:16). This reality breaks Paul’s heart (Romans 9:2) and leads Paul to ask some key questions about the reliability of God’s Word and plans. This Israel has been broken off from the olive tree (Romans 11:17) yet this “breaking off” is not terminal, for God’s gifts and call are irrevocable (Romans 11:29). This Israel will, in the fullness of God’s purposes, be saved and grafted back into the olive tree.

The second community identified is ‘believing Ethnic Israel’. These believers are the natural branches which have not been broken from the olive tree. They make up the faithful remnant within Israel and they have the unique privilege of being fully part of Ethnic Israel and fully part of the third community, namely the Church. Sadly, over many centuries of Christian Theology, these Jewish believers in Jesus (Messianic Jews) have been marginalised and persecuted. One of many examples of such marginalisation is the teaching of the Church Father Jerome (he produced the first Latin edition of the Bible), who despised Jewish believers in Jesus rejecting them as, “*neither fish nor fowl.*”

This inability to welcome, learn from or support Jewish Believers in Jesus, distorts God's redemptive plan for all people.

The third community, as already mentioned, is the Church. The Church is the community of believing Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles) from all the nations, who have become followers of Jesus and have responded to the call of the Gospel. These Gentiles have been brought into the People of God, not by becoming believing Jews, but through faith in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, God's Son and Saviour of all.

This understanding of the threefold nature<sup>13</sup> of God's people is based upon the teaching in Romans 9-11 and elsewhere in the Bible. This teaching sees the essential difference between uniformity, which is often based on a reductionist<sup>14</sup> hermeneutic implicit in forms of Replacement Theology and true unity, which is based upon the creativity and diversity of the Holy Spirit which celebrates multi-dimensional richness expressed both in Jewish identity and in the rich and varied identities of Gentile believers from all the nations.

Now, if this understanding of God working out His purposes today through these three different, yet mutually connected communities is true, then I suggest it has significant mission implications for the Church. I suggest the Church should, therefore, in its mission strategy and allocation of resources, offer appropriate support for God's purposes within Ethnic Israel, and within the Messianic Jewish community, as well as for her universal mission calling to all peoples and to the ends of the earth.

I believe that in our mission strategy and in our hope for the Church and the world, we need to glimpse and be inspired by God's big plan. I believe God's big plan will include within the complex mixture of 'end time events' the following four central realities, namely:

- the reconciliation of the Sons of Isaac and the Sons of Ishmael,
- the fulfilment of Isaiah 19,
- the saving of all Israel (Romans 11:26),
- the saving of the full number from the nations (Romans 11:25) which no-one can count (Revelation 7:9).

These four central realities will then culminate in the consummation of all things in and through Christ (Ephesians 1:22).

As one wrestles with the complexities of the world today, the hatred in the Middle East, the rise of totalitarian regimes and repressive religious structures, the reality of fallen humanity and the groaning of creation itself, one also glimpses the stirrings of revival and restoration within God's people. God is working out His purposes and the big mission plan is drawing closer to completion. For us within the mission life of the Church, it is good to affirm that our hope for the Church is also our hope for the world. As the Systematic Biblical theologian, Geerhardus Vos said so eloquently; *"...the best proof for the Church as an end in itself lies in the inclusion of the Church in the eschatological world, for that world is not the world of things aimed at, but of things attained unto."*<sup>15</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 This line of argument is in contrast to the line Paul uses in Galatians 3:16 to present Jesus as the single heir to the promise. However, the context and purpose of Paul's teaching in Galatians is very different to that within Romans 9-11.
- 2 Although in the Midrash traditions Ishmael eventually did repent of his evil actions.
- 3 The names of the Sons of Ishmael as recorded in Genesis 25:13-16 are regarded as Arab names. This understanding, it is argued gives support to the Arab and Islamic traditions that Ishmael is their ancestor. In the Middle Ages the term 'Ishmaelite' was often used to refer to both Arab people and the followers of Islam.
- 4 The name Isaac means "he laughs".
- 5 Ancient documentation proves that it was common practice for a childless man to adopt a trusted male servant to be his heir. Abraham clearly contemplates this and some commentators suggest he had already put this arrangement in place.
- 6 Allen Jonathan, *When You Lie Down and When You Rise Up*, Elisheva Publishing, 2011.
- 7 Maybe Paul's account of Abraham's faith and actions in Romans 5:19-21 gives us a helpful insight into this reflection?
- 8 From the album *Dart to the Heart* Columbia records, 1993.
- 9 From the album *Dart to the Heart* Columbia records, 1993.
- 10 It is worth noting that Assyria refers to the area of the Assyrian Empire which encompassed a huge block of today's Arab world including Turkey, Jordan, Azerbaijan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.
- 11 The Dome of the Rock was built in the 7th century by the Omayyad caliph Abd el-Malik upon the rock which tradition identifies as Mount Moriah (Genesis 22). The Dome was intended to proclaim the superiority of Islamic revelation over Judaism and Christianity and to provide an Islamic focal point within Jerusalem.
- 12 For a full analysis of these three communities within 'God's people' see my book, *The Case for Enlargement Theology*, especially chapters 11 and 12.
- 13 In my book *The Case for Enlargement Theology* I tentatively explore how this understanding of the threefold structure of God's people relates to the distinctive, yet complementary relationship within the Godhead (Trinity) see pp 188-189 (second edition).
- 14 There is a false unity which melts away all difference, so we merge into one somewhat bland and uniformed community.
- 15 Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology, The Banner of Truth Trust (British Edition)*, 1974, p402.

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