

Ishmael is Not the Father of the Arabs

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March 6, 2019

<https://www.meforum.org/57936/ishmael-father-arabs>

The commonly held view that Ishmael was the father of the Arab nations is not supported by the Bible, nor by other historical evidence.

For centuries, many Muslims, Christians and Jews have taken it for granted that the Arabs descended from Abraham through Ishmael. As Gerald Hawting put it:

"The idea that the Arabs are the physical descendants of Abraham through Ishmael is indeed taken by many, non-Muslims as well as Muslims, as a genealogical and historical fact."



From the 1820 painting "Hagar and Ismael in the Desert" by François-Joseph Navez, Royal

Authors and teachers often treat the word *Ishmael* as a kind of code for Islam or Muslims. Examples of book titles which reflect this are Faisal Malick's *Here Comes Ishmael*, a call to Christians to reach out to Muslims, Martin Gilbert's *In Ishmael's House*, a history of the Jews under Islam, and *Israel and Ishmael: Studies in Muslim-Jewish Relations*, edited by Tudor Parfitt. In the same vein, and over a thousand years ago, John of Damascus, writing after the conquest of Syria by Muslim armies, wrote a treatise on Islam called *The Heresy of the Ishmaelites*.

Many Christian teachers have looked to Genesis for prophetic anticipations of the trajectory of the Arabs and of Islam. On the one hand there is the blessing for Ishmael in Genesis 17:20:

"And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation."

This is in line with God's promise to Hagar that her son's descendants will be too numerous to count (Genesis 16:10). They have also looked to Genesis 16:12, in which an angel prophesies to Hagar, Ishmael's mother, that her son will be "a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him". Then later, Genesis 25:18 reports that the Ishmael's descendants "lived in hostility towards all their brothers." Preachers have also traced the spiritual roots of the conflict between Muslims and Jews back to the rejection of Hagar and her son by Abraham and Sarah. Some even trace the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back to the rivalry between Isaac and Ishmael and their competing blessings. Fact or fantasy?

How did this all begin? According to Sir Fergus Millar, Professor Emeritus of Ancient History at Oxford University, it was Josephus, a Jewish historian writing in the first century CE, who first advanced the idea that Ishmael was the ancestor of the Arabs. In *The Antiquities of the Jews* Josephus stated that Ishmael was "the founder" of the Arabian nation, and Abraham was "their father". From Josephus, this assumed connection between the Arabs and Abraham, through Ishmael, passed into the historical consciousness of Christians, and then made its way into early Islam.

The Qur'an does not speak of Ishmael or Abraham as ancestors of the Arabs – although it does have Abraham and Ishmael praying for Allah to make their descendants a Muslim people – but the link is established in the hadith literature,

in traditions about Muhammad's own genealogy. In this way Abraham and Ishmael came to be considered, in Islamic tradition, not only a **spiritual** antecedent of Muhammad as an Islamic prophet, but also the **physical** ancestor of (at least some of) the Arabs.

What does the Bible say? It speaks both of Ishmaelites, the descendants of Ishmael, and of Arabs, but does not join them together. I. Eph'al has pointed out that the references to Ishmaelites are earlier in the Bible, and the references to Arabs later. Both refer to non-sedentary, nomadic peoples, but they are separated by centuries. Eph'al concludes that references to "Ishmaelites" cease by the mid 10th century BCE, and the references to "Arabs" only commence in the mid-8th century BCE, so "there is no historical basis to the tradition of associating Ishmaelites with the Arabs".

The Bible does link the Ishmaelites with the Midianites, using these names as synonyms in two places. Genesis describes Joseph as being sold to a caravan of camel-riding Ishmaelites who are also called Midianites (Genesis 37:25–28, 36; 39:1; see also Judges 8:22-24).

In Genesis, the identity of people groups is often traced back to an ancestor, and the group is then named after this ancestor. How do the Ishmaelites fit into this pattern? Genesis associates various descendants and relatives of Abraham with people groups. These include:

Abraham's sons:

- **Ishmael**, ancestor of the **Ishmaelites** (language unidentifiable).
- **Midian**, ancestor of the **Midianites** (language unidentifiable).
- Isaac, father of Jacob (**Israel**), ancestor of the **Israelites** (language family: **Canaanite**); & father of **Esau**, ancestor of the **Edomites** (language family: **Canaanite**).

Lot's sons (Lot was the son of Abraham's cousin Haran):

- **Moab**, ancestor of the **Moabites** (language family: **Canaanite**).
- **Ben-Amm**, ancestor of the **Ammonites** (language family: **Canaanite**).

Note that the identifiable languages associated with groups descended from Abraham and his nephew Lot are members of a closely related family known in Semitic linguistics as "Canaanite" languages. These were very similar and could

have been mutually comprehensible. The Moabite and Ammonite languages, associated with the descendants of Lot through his two sons, are in the same group as Edomite, associated with Esau, and Hebrew, associated with Jacob or Israel. This suggests that the Ishmaelites would have been speakers of a Canaanite dialect as well, like all the other branches of Abraham's family. Although Arabic is related to Canaanite languages, the connection is more distant. Canaanite languages are grouped together with Aramaic and Amorite to form a higher level Semitic subfamily known as Northwest Semitic. Then, further back in time, this grouping in its turn was connected to Arabic in a subfamily known as Central Semitic.

Historical linguists have dated the separation of Arabic from Northwest Semitic around a thousand years earlier than the period when the Canaanite languages diverged from each other. This is not consistent with Ishmael being the father of the Arabs, for Arabic goes back to a much earlier branch of the Semitic family than the divisions between the members of Abraham's family.

Over time, Arabic speakers displaced some of earlier Canaanite nations, including the Moabites and the Edomites, who had dwelled around Arabah rift valley and the Dead Sea. The Edomites were pushed to the north, into the southern edge of Judea, which became known known in Greek as Idumea. It seems that the Ishmaelites had been displaced centuries earlier.

There is a moral in this story for the unwary, who might seek to find keys to the present in Genesis. It is this: the dysfunctional travails of Abraham's family are not the place to seek out the spiritual roots of present-day Middle East conflicts.

To answer the question "Is Ishmael (or Abraham) the father of the Arabs", a Muslim might well turn to and be satisfied with Islamic authorities such as the hadith. But a Christian or a Jew might well ask whether they want Josephus to be their master and guide on this point.

The evidence indicates that Ishmael was not the father of the Arabs, and neither was Abraham. The Ishmaelites were probably Canaanites, speaking, not an early form of Arabic, but a dialect similar to Hebrew. In time they disappeared or were absorbed into other groups, like so many other ancient peoples. Much later Josephus invoked Ishmael's name to conjure up a genealogy for the Arabs. He has a lot to answer for. The rest, as they say, is history.

Some of the sources used in this article:

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