THE ISHMAEL PROMISES AND CONTEXTUALIZATION AMONG MUSLIMS

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(Summary: Some critics of Muslim contextualization assert that Islam does not provide an acceptable cultural-religious form for an incarnated gospel. In contrast to Judaism, which God himself established through his covenants with Abraham and Moses, Islam, they say, is essentially a human religion energized by Satan. Thus, a contextual movement such as Jews for Jesus is acceptable because its origins and forms derive from God himself. However, a parallel “Muslims for Isa” movement must be rejected because Islamic religious elements would compromise the purity of the gospel. In this article, Jon Culver examines the issue of Islamic origins from the perspective of the Ishmael promise in Genesis. While Culver does not believe that the promise validate Islam as a religion, he argues that it does contain implications for contextualization among Muslims.

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THE PURPOSE

During the past few years I have held discussions with various Christian leaders from different countries on the issue of radical Muslim contextualization. By “radical” I mean the use of Islamic religious forms and terminologies in Christian worship and witness. Most of those whom I talked to could accept a Jews for Jesus movement but many had great difficulty with a parallel concept of “Muslims for Isa.” The point of departure between the two usually came down to one fundamental difference in the mind of my partners in dialogue, namely: that God himself established Judaism through his covenants with Abraham and Moses, whereas Islam, they asserted, was essentially a human religion energized by Satan. Thus, a contextual movement such as Jews for Jesus was acceptable, but a parallel “Muslims for Isa” movement must be rejected because its foundations and religious elements are not of divine origin and thus compromise the purity of the gospel. The main point of objection, therefore, to a “Muslims for Isa” concept revolves around the issues of religious forms and ultimate origins that are supposedly foreign to the Gospel.

Dr. J. Dudley Woodberry has written a seminal article relating to the issue of religious forms entitled, “Contextualization in Islam: Reusing Common Pillars” (1989). Woodberry points out that many of the Muslim rites of prayer, recitation, ablutions, and other distinctly “Islamic” practices actually derive from ancient Judaism and Christianity. Woodberry goes on to argue that reusing these “common pillars” is permissible if they are redefined and given distinctly Christian meanings. I would like to complement Woodberry’s historical perspective on Islamic forms by providing a biblical perspective on Islam’s remote origins through Ishmael. Here I believe that the biblical Ishmael promises provides a valuable but neglected starting point to engage Islam contextually. God conveyed these promises on four occasions, twice to Hagar and twice also to Abraham (Gen. 16:10-12; 17:20; 21:13; 21:17-20). The culmination of these promises, however, appears in Genesis 17:20, in answer to Abraham’s prayer in 17:18: “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” Isaiah 60:6-7 and Matthew 2:1-12 also shed light on this subject in ways that most evangelicals are not used to hearing. Indeed, for evangelicals, Ishmael is the forgotten or the disdained son of Abraham. Donald Sutherland points out that the Christian faith has suffered a lack of definition concerning the theological role of Ishmael. As a consequence, the popular conception of Ishmael has been one of “ill fated misinformation and ignorance” which has led to connotations of Ishmael as evil (Sutherland 1977:3-4). The Lutheran scholar, George C. Fry, believes that this ignorance is very dangerous, for Ishmael, he asserts, is prominent in the plans of God (1977:14).

THE THESIS

My thesis is that there is a significant element of divine involvement in the remote origins of Islam. Genesis 17:20, along with Genesis 21:20 characterize this involvement as a special kind of common grace–divine providence–granted to the other seed of Abraham (Gen. 21:13). It is divine providence which has sustained the rise of Ishmael’s descendants, culminating in the world-wide Muslim community. God graciously blessed Ishmael out of respect for Abraham’s concerns for his first-born; through this blessing he will glorify his name in this age and in
the eschatological age to come. Isaiah 60:6-7 lends support to this point by showing how God intends to redeem Ishmaelite culture for his praise and glory. Matthew 2:1-12 reiterates this Isaianic theme in the account of the Magi’s worship of the Christ child. The significance of this point is enhanced by the fact that the Magi are most likely Ishmaelite Arabs. Taken together, Genesis 17, Isaiah 60 and Matthew 2 contain important data to justify a Muslims for Isa contextual approach.

THE PROBLEMS

The premise that Islamic origins somehow relates to the Ishmael promises raises a number of problems. I think it would be best to address these issues immediately so that readers can follow my biblical exposition undistracted by nagging doubts.

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 encompassing Judaism, Christianity and Islam. 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 the seed of Abraham that emerged from the line of Ishmael (Gen. 17:20; 21:20; 25:12-18). I also affirm that these promises also contain lasting spiritual implications. I make this assertion based on the nature of the One who promised, and because Ishmael was born to the man of promise. Ishmael and his lineal and spiritual descendants stand as a unique community that have arisen to historical greatness because of God’s answer to Abraham’s prayer when he said: “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” (Gen. 17:18).

Problem 2: Exegetical-Historical Issues:

What does Ishmael have to do with Islam? The promises concerning Ishmael are beautiful, some critics have told me, but they are time bound, basically fulfilled in Genesis 25:12-18, and thus have no ongoing force as a source of blessing for Ishmael’s descendants, whoever they might be. The fact that the promises are not repeated throughout Scriptures seems to strengthen this conclusion. These are some of the issues that Colin Chapman raises in a thought provoking article entitled “Revisiting the Ishmael Theme” (1989). This short, meaty article is essential reading. Chapman avers that 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 refutation of Chapman’s assertions but my exegetical comments below will address some of his concerns. As for the difficult historical-critical issues relating to Arabian descent from Ishmael, I refer the reader to an appendix at the end of this article.

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

The central point of the promise to Ishmael 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). Interestingly, Jeremiah refers to Babylon as a “great nation” from the “north land” (6:22). Elsewhere Jeremiah also notes that Babylon is a multi-ethnic entity by referring to it as, “all the families of the north,” and “all the kings of the north” (25:9, 26). Thus “great nation” can be understood as an inclusive ethnic term and not simply one people group. Accordingly, I understand the Ishmael promise of great nationhood in Genesis as applying first of all, to the lineal descendants of Ishmael, namely, Muhammad and some of the North Arabian tribes (see the appendix), 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 Merauke (in Irian Jaya).

It is also important to note how non-Arabs identify themselves with Ishmael. Bambang Noorsena, an Indonesian Muslim convert to Christianity who holds an M. A. in Islamic jurisprudence, explains the relationship as follows:
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, rather 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). Generally, Christians have understood this as a curse or at least a divine rebuke against Ishmael and his descendants. There are a number of factors, however, which should give pause to a ready assent of this interpretation. First, there is the matter of Ishmael’s name. His name means, “God will hear.” It is a name that came down from heaven. The name originated in the councils of divine perfection. It was the angel of Yahweh, the covenant angel, who 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 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, it would be better to understand the wild donkey metaphor in light of a passages such as 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 who were free from the yoke of domination. This would have been good news for Hagar, the 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 justify the view that Muslims are under a divine curse. Yet, we must ask who it was that Paul wished to cast out. If we read carefully, Paul was calling on the Galatians to cast out the Judaizers—not Ishmael’s descendants—who were bringing the Galatians into bondage under the law. Paul finds that Hagar and Ishmael serve as useful allegorical symbols to mount an attack on the Judaizers (Gal. 4:24). Allegory makes use of the names of people 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 for Paul, the point of similitude between Hagar-Ishmael and the Judaizers is slavery. Hagar was a slave-wife; the Judaizers were slaves of the Law. That is the extent of the similarity. Thus we cannot say that this is a theological condemnation of Hagar and Ishmael. Paul merely alludes to them in allegorical fashion in order to curse the Judaizers.

**GENESIS 17: THE ISHMAEL PROMISE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT**

Having addressed the above issues, we are now ready to examine the Ishmael promises. We will confine our attention to the most important one in Genesis 17:20. The promise arises during the cycle of covenant discourse. Genesis 17 culminates the earlier covenant promises of Gen.12:1-3, 15:4-18. It also clarifies for Abraham the identity of the covenant heir; not Ishmael as Abraham apparently supposed, but rather Isaac. It contains the clearest statement of how much God is willing to bless Abraham; it also contains the clearest statement of how much God is willing to bless Ishmael, even if he rejects him as the covenant successor. The key verse regarding Ishmael is 17:20. Here Ishmael receives an Abrahamic style blessing, with its attendant promises of national greatness and numerous descendants. On the other hand, the text carefully points out that the covenant is with Isaac and not Ishmael (17:19,21). Yet, the Ishmaelite blessing of national greatness in 17:20 closely parallels the Abrahamic covenant promise of a multitude of nations in 17:6. This suggests that the promise is efficacious. It also suggest that it is a lasting promise even if the content is considerably less meaningful compared to the covenant. It is important, therefore, that we examine the structural features of this chapter.

**The 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 in 17:18 and God’s answer in 17:19-21. The first two speeches (vss. 2-8) deal with numerous descendants, while the last two (vss. 15-21) deal with the individual heir though 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 (vs. 23, 25, 26). The overall pattern of Genesis 17 emerges clearly in the following table:

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

Basically what we have here is a parallel promise-response structure arranged in four, interlocking sets. The important point to note is the parallelism and interlocking of sets two and four, which contain the crucial verses, 17:6 and 17:20, respectively. The former establishes the fact that nations will come forth from Abraham; the parallel wording of 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 tripled word sets create small chiastic structures that interlock and correspond with each other. The most significant one lies in God’s fifth speech, or 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)

Interestingly, it 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 speeches. Verses 1-8 speak of the covenant in general terms, whereas verses 15-21 speak of the covenant in specific terms. As McEvenue notes: “Thus the chapter 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 Ishmael and his descendants derive a specific blessing from a corresponding portion of the more general covenant promise of 17:6: “And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you.” Note how the wording here 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.”
Ordinarily commentators understand the “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. The covenant promise branches out to bless and preserve a non-covenant Abrahamic line apart from the faith community (see Kidner 1967:149). We see this clearly in God’s explanation to Abraham in Genesis 21:12-13. Here 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” (New KJV). 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 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. Thus one significant way to understand the rise of Islam is that it stands as a corollary expression of God’s faithfulness to Abraham!

**GENESIS 17:20**

Let us now turn to the actual promise of Genesis 17:20. It stands as a distinct improvement over 16:10-12. Genesis 17:19-21 is God’s answer to the prayer of Abraham in Genesis 17:18: “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” I wonder if God would have blessed Ishmael if Abraham had not asked? What an example for us of fervent missionary prayer!

Essentially God’s response is, “Abraham, if you are asking that Ishmael replace Isaac as the covenant heir, my answer is no; but if you are asking that I bless Ishmael my answer is yes, and this is how I will bless him.” In the Hebrew text God makes four promissory “I wills”: God first of all says that “I will bless him.” This is a lesser blessing than what Isaac receives but it is nonetheless a divine blessing. As such it conveys the energy and authority of the One who gives it. This is followed in the Hebrew text 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 that God will guarantee that Ishmael succeeds in this endeavor to produce a progeny. The following phrase is the logical outcome of these divine guarantees: “he will become the father of 12 princes and I will make him a great nation.”

There are many parallels between this Ishmaelite blessing and the greater Abrahamic blessing. Ishmael obtains princes and a nation (17:20) whereas 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 as expressed in Genesis 17. Although not a covenant in the technical and “messianic” sense, the promise guarantees the proliferation of Ishmael’s descendants and their attainment of historical greatness. Genesis 21:20 adds that God was “with” Ishmael in achieving this appointed destiny.

In short, Ishmael receives the promise of a blessing, but not the blessing of the covenant. Yet, what Ishmael does receive is noteworthy and honorable. How then is it somehow dishonorable if we adopt some of “Ishmael’s” religious forms for worship and witness? Here we need to take a cue from the divine perspective towards Ishmaelite culture as seen in Isaiah 60.

**ISAIAH 60:1-7**

A few years ago an Indonesian professor in a theological school asked me: “If the Ishmael promises in Genesis impact Muslims today, why is it that they are not repeated in the rest of the Scriptures?” This is a perceptive question. It would seem that any important plan of God would be reaffirmed in the successive waves of scriptural revelation to the people of God. Actually, there is no direct restatement of the Ishmael promises after Genesis 25. This is not surprising because after Genesis 25:18 the entire Bible is an Isaac story and not an Ishmael story.

At the same time, however, I would like to suggest that there are some interconnected, thematic allusions to these promises in other biblical passages. One of them is in Isaiah 60:1-7. By alluding to the sons of Keturah and the sons of Ishmael in verses 6-7, the passage recalls the genealogies of Keturah and Ishmael in Genesis 25. Here we need to remember that Genesis 25 serves as a fulfillment notice for the promise to Abraham concerning his progeny.
in Genesis 17 (Kidner 1967:149). Thus Isaiah 60:6-7 harks back to the Abrahamic covenant and the Ishmael promise of Genesis 17:20.

**The Ishmaelites and the New Jerusalem**

Isaiah 60 is a prophetic promise of God’s restoration of Israel’s diminished fortunes. It mainly centers around the theme of the wealth of the nations which pours into Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its temple with the result that it radiates the glory of God. In the previous chapters of Isaiah much of the focus was upon Israel as an exile nation under divine discipline for its disobedience and for its failure to trust in God. In that scenario the nations had come to Jerusalem to carry away the people and seize their wealth. Now Isaiah 60 describes a great reversal of fortunes. Here the nations return the scattered remnant to their land and bring cargoes of immense wealth and abundance to Jerusalem for the purpose of building “My glorious house” (60:7,13). Isaiah envisions a “wondrous capitulation of the nations” who had been superior to Israel in exploitative ways (Brueggemann 1998:206). Thus their submission is a total one, political, economic and theological, for they come with sacrificial offerings for the God of Israel.

The prophecy lends itself to a double fulfillment. Certain aspects of fulfillment can be seen during the rebuilding of the temple in the Persian era. Here Ezra 6 and Haggai provide the background for this historic fulfillment in the Old Testament period. King Darius decreed that the lambs and rams of his western provinces would be provided for acceptable burnt offerings to the God of heaven (Ezra 6:10). This corresponds with Isaiah 60:7, which speaks of the flocks and rams of Kedar and Nebaioth which are offered up as acceptable sacrifices on the temple altar.

On the other hand, the lofty language and imagery of this passage also presupposes a future eschatological fulfillment (Delitzsch 1980:416; Ridderbos 1984:536-537). Indeed, certain verses such as 60:19 recall the imagery of the Heavenly Jerusalem of 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” (cf. Rev. 21:23). Also, the Isaianic picture of the nations who bring 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 (emphasis mine) than is usually acknowledged in discussions of the afterlife.” (1983:6-7). Let us now observe how the cultural patterns of the non-covenant Abrahamic nations—the sons of Keturah (Abraham’s concubine in Gen. 25:1-6) and Ishmael (Gen. 25:12-15)—are 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 flock 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 [NASB].

Isaiah tells us that the praises and gifts of the descendants of Keturah will one day be offered up in the Holy City. Midian and Ephah represent North Arabia, whereas Sheba represents South Arabia. He also reports that the sacrificial offerings of the Ishmaelites find acceptance on God’s altar. In Isaiah and the other major prophets “Kedar” stands as a representative name for the North Arabian tribes (Ridderbos 1985:185; cf. Isa.21:16; 42:11; Jer. 48:28-33; Ezk. 27:21). So even though the tribe of Kedar is no longer extant today, the North Arabians certainly are. We must not forget that their presence in the eschatological Holy City presupposes that conversions have taken place among all the Abrahamic peoples of Arabia during the age of the Church! Samuel Zwemer makes this same point when he says that Isaiah 60:6-7, “the gem of missionary prophecy” in the Old Testament, “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”
The Transformation of Ishmaelite Culture

In short Isaiah pictures the entire wealth of Arabia pouring into Jerusalem. The camels of Sheba and the gold and frankincense of Midian and Ephah, as well as the flocks and rams of the Ishmaelites are the cultural and economic expressions of what these peoples were known for 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).

What Mouw refers to here is the redeeming and transforming of cultural patterns for the praise and glory of God in Christ Jesus. The fact that Isaiah emphasizes Arabian and Ishmaelite cultural patterns is of special interest to our study of contextualization among Muslims. The passage suggests that conversions will take place among the descendants of Ishmael before the eschaton. Furthermore, if God himself is willing to transform aspects of Ishmaelite culture for his praise and glory during the eschaton, why are we now so reluctant to do the same with the cultures of Ishmael’s lineal and spiritual descendants?

MATTHEW 2:1-12

How does the story of the Magi relate to this study? It would not relate at all if we adhere to the traditional view that the Magi were Persians or Babylonians. However, it is possible that the Magi were in fact Ishmaelite Arabs. 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. Matthew 2:1-2,11 provide the necessary context for our study:

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.

The Relationship to Isaiah 60:6-7

It is easy to see that the Magi’s gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh are reminiscent of the gift offerings of the non-covenant Abrahamic nations in Isaiah 60:6-7. Is this merely a casual reference to Isaiah on the part of Matthew or did he see the worship and gifts of the magi as a fulfillment of the Isaianic passage? It would be difficult to argue that Matthew 2:11 is merely a casual allusion to Isaiah 60:6-7. The language is too specific for that; the structural arrangement of Matthew 2 is too sophisticated to allow it. Rather, it appears to be a deliberate, contextualized reiteration of Isaiah 60:6-7 and perhaps a similar passage in Ps. 72:9-11 (“The desert tribes will bow before him [i.e. Solomon] ... the kings of Sheba and Seba will bring gifts ... all kings will bow down to him”). 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). Brueggemann is most emphatic about this point in his comments on Isaiah 60:6-7: “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 in our poem” (1998:205-206).

Hengel and Merkel arrive at the same general conclusion as Brueggemann but they 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 II Samuel 5:2 and centers in Bethlehem; the worship of the Magi (2:7-12) implicitly fulfills Psalm 72:10 and Isaiah 60:6 and refers to South Arabia (1973:155); the flight of the holy family to Egypt fulfills Hosea 11:1; the killing of the children in Ramah (2:16-18) fulfills Jeremiah 31:15; while the immigration of the holy family from Egypt to Nazareth (2:19-23) fulfills the enigmatic prophecy, “He shall be called a Nazarene.” Hengel and Merkel then 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 would be strange if Matthew inserted an incidental allusion here in 2:11 without conscious reference to some Old Testament passage such as Psalm 72:9-11 or Isaiah 60:6-7.

One cannot fail to notice that Psalms 72:9-11, and Isaiah 60:6-7 contain parallels to Matthew 2:11 in terms of the gifts offered and in terms of the submission of the nations to a “King.” What we must further notice, however, is that in both of these Old Testament references it is Arabian nations who render this submission. In keeping with the other parallels, could it be that Matthew also understands the Magi to be ethnic Arabs?

**Concerning the Arabian Origins of the Magi**

Matthew does not identify the ethnic origins of his Magi. He tells us that they were “Magi” and that they came “from the east” but neither of those identifications are conclusive. Tony Maalouf (1998:202-247) has written a very comprehensive study arguing for the Arabian origins of the Magi. His arguments are persuasive, but for the sake of brevity and clarity I will follow the outline of evidence prepared by Davies and Allison (1988:228). They point out that “from the east” could mean:

1. **Arabia** (so Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Epiphanius, the Dialogue of Athanasius and Zacchaeus). This coincides with the Old Testament designation of “east” ( qedem) as a reference to Arabia or Arabian tribes (Gen. 10:30; 25:6; 29:1; Jud. 6:3; Isa. 11:14; Jer. 49:28; Ez. 25:4). Furthermore, “east” is a common patristic term to denote the dwelling place of Abraham’s descendants through Keturah (Maalouf 1998:217,n.71), while gold and frankincense are the products of Arabia (Isa. 60:6; I Clem. 25:1-2). Of course, these products were also available in other lands as well.

2. **Babylon** (so Celsus, Jerome, Augustine). This is certainly possible because Daniel links Chaldaeans and Magi in 2:2, 10. Furthermore, the “land of the east” is Babylon in the Assumption of Moses 3:13.

3. **Persia** (so Clement of Alexandria, Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy). It should be noted here that Isaiah 41:2 depicts King Cyrus of Persia as coming “from the east,” but in 41:25 he comes “from the north” (see Maalouf [1998:218] on why “east” in Isa. 41:2 is not a geographical term).

Davies and Allison conclude by noting that a clear choice among the three—Arabia, Babylonia, Persia—is impossible, but they end the discussion with a most significant comment: “if [Matthew] 2:11 does allude to Isa. 60:6, one would be inclined to opt for Arabia, for that OT text speaks of Midian [i.e., North Arabia] and Sheba [i.e., South Arabia] (cf. also Ps. 72:10).”

The problem with an Arabian identity of the Magi is that it conflicts with the traditional understanding of magian origins. The Magi cult arose among the priestly caste of Medio-Persia and later spread to the Chaldaean-Babylonian realm (Hengel and Merkel 1973:143). What we must also note, however, is that the cult spread to other areas, including Arabia. Thus Morony has found evidence for the existence of magi in a few of the pre-Islamic tribes of East and North Arabia (1986:1110). That the ancient Arabs had the propensity and capacity to function as Magi is

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1 In his Dialogue With Trypho Justin 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 . . . . At the time when the Magi from Arabia came to King Herod and said . . . . Now these Magi from Arabia came to Bethlehem, worshiped the child, and presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh . . . . There the Arabian Magi found him . . . .” (Justin Martyr, Writings, 30-39, cited in Maalouf 1998:213).
established by the apocryphal Book of Baruch which notes that “The sons of Hagar . . . seek for wisdom upon the earth” (3:22; cf, I Kgs. 4:30). Furthermore, knowledge of the stars and movement of the planets, an essential aspect of the Magi cult, also flourished among the Arabs. Joseph Henninger, in his synthesis of pre-Islamic bedouin religion, points out that the worship of planets and fixed stars proliferated in South Arabia and to a lesser extent in Central and North Arabia (1981:11-12). This would easily allow for Arabs to follow “His star in the east” (2:2), which the Magi “had seen in the east” (2:9).

In short, we have no reason for rejecting the possibility that Matthew’s Magi were ethnic Arabs. Furthermore, we have compelling reasons for assuming that Matthew intentionally associates them with the descendants of Keturah and Ishmael in Isaiah 60:6-7. If so, Matthew’s Magi would most likely have been Nabataean Arabs, who were perhaps a sub-clan of Kedar (Knauf 1989b, see the appendix). Their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh reminds us of the Nabataean association with these products. Since the fourth century B. C. the Nabataeans had controlled the trade routes of North Arabia, the Sinai and the Negev, where the commerce in these valuable South Arabian products passed into their hands for distribution in Judea and other areas (Glueck 1965:4; Graf 1992:970). This point is further enhanced by the fact that the Jews of the first century A. D. regarded the Nabataeans as the descendants of Ishmael (Josephus 1957:109).

Thus it is reasonable to argue that Arabian Magi were the first among the gentile nations to worship the Christ child. This interpretation lines up nicely with what we already observed in Isaiah 60:6-7. In Isaiah the Ishmaelites and other Abrahamic nations bring the wealth of Arabia in order to worship in the Holy City. In Matthew Arabian Magi bring the wealth of Arabia for the purpose of worshiping the King of the Holy City. In both passages the cultural patterns of the Ishmaelites—their expression of praise to God, their treasures, and their sacrificial offerings—were transformed for the purpose of worshiping God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

The structural features which connect the Ishmael promise with the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17 signifies that God’s promises for Ishmael and his descendants are enduring. They extend beyond the confines of Genesis 25 to include Ishmael’s lineal and spiritual descendants, the Muslims. The thematic allusions to the promise in Isaiah 60:6-7, Matthew 2:1-12 lend support to this assertion. Taken together, these passages suggest that God has intended to make the Ishmaelites a great nation for the purpose of his praise and glory in Christ Jesus. It would be prudent, therefore, for Evangelicals to integrate this positive element into their generally negative theories of Islamic origins.

Accordingly, if there is a measure of divine blessing and divine providence that lie behind Islam’s cultural achievements, why the reluctance to employ Islamic cultural forms in ministries to Muslims? To be sure, these forms need to be transformed and reinterpreted in the light of the Gospel. We certainly have precedent for that, at least in principle, in Isaiah 60 and Matthew 2. There God accepts the Arabian language of praise and the material products of Arabia as fitting vehicles of worship in his glorious house and of his beloved Son. In light of these facts we have biblical grounds to consider the possibility of a Muslims for Isa contextualization approach.

Samuel Zwemer, the modern “apostle to Islam” believes that the Ishmael promises establish Muslims as a unique people having certain kinship ties with the people of the Covenant (cf. Zwemer 1950). Zwemer understood this kinship as a motivational factor for the Church to evangelize Islam. I would also suggest that if we read the account of God’s dealings with Hagar and Ishmael with an open mind, it will help to tear down the walls of prejudice towards Arabs and Muslims that have been built up in our Christian hearts. When love and respect for Muslims as “a people with a promise” flood our souls, it just might lower our resistance towards more radical forms of Muslim contextualization.

APPENDIX: SOME ISSUES RELATING TO 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.
The Views of Modern Scholarship

According to most western scholars, the idea of descent from Ishmael was never an indigenous Arabian concept that arose in the pre-Islamic era. Rather, it was a late idea that Muhammad cleverly devised 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. The ninth century historian and Qur’an commentator, Muhammad Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, compiled many of the early tradition which supposedly trace Muhammad’s descent through either Nebaioth or Qedar (al-Tabari 1988:38-42).

Rene Dagorn (1982) has written a devastating critique of these Islamic Ishmael claims 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). At first glance, it appears that Dagorn’s argumentation and evidence is overwhelming. Yet, recent evidence compiled by the Christian Arab scholar, Irfan Shahid (1989:332-360; 382-383), has seriously eroded Dagorn’s conclusion that the Arab Ishmael tradition is simply a myth. In short, there are other ways to probe the subject of North Arabian descent from Ishmael outside the traditions of the early Muslims. I have done this in a doctoral tutorial entitled, “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 that tutorial are too extensive to lay out here, I will list some of the important points of my research below. It is important to note here that the present state of knowledge does not allow for definitive proof of North Arabian descent from Ishmael. It is possible, however, to demonstrate the feasibility and probability of the matter.

An Outline of the Supporting Evidence for North Arabian Descent from Ishmael:

*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).

*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 speaking, they occupy the time gap between the demise of the Ishmaelite tribe of Qedar (c. 350 B. C.) and the rise of Islam (622 A. D.). However, their precise origins are shrouded in mystery, resulting in conflicting theories. Thus for the German transjordanian scholar Ernst Knauf, the Nabataeans are a sub-clan of the Kedar (1989a:96-112; 1989b). On the other hand, Edomite scholar, John Bartlett, associates them with the Nebaioth, Ishmael’s first-born son (1979). In his synthesis of this problem, Nabataean scholar, David Graf argues for a Syro-Mesopotamian homeland for the Nabataeans (1990b:45-75) without reference to Ishmaelite origins. Yet, Graf allows that the equation of the Nabataeans with the Assyrian ethnonym nebayat (=Nebaioth?) “is feasible” (1993:835).

*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. This is an important point because the Qur’an has become an important vehicle for extending the religio-cultural heritage of Ishmael’s lineal descendants to non-Arab peoples.

*According to early Islamic sources, Qusayy b. Kilab, the ancestor of Muhammad from the fifth generation, claimed to be a descendant of Qedar (al-Tabari 1988:38). Interestingly, Qusayy may very well have been a Nabataean. Some of the early Islamic traditions make this point (Abdul-Karim 1990:422; Fahd 1993:836). Furthermore, his name is characteristically Nabataean, and rarely occurs outside the Nabataean and Safaite Arab realms of transjordania (Della Vida 1986:520; Negev 1991:4,58).

*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 Qedar 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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