



Ishmael and Islam in the Bible

**For a Better Communication Between Abrahamic Brothers
and Sisters**

Kai Frederic Mester

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Introduction

It all started on a visit to a Muslim country in 2005 when from the lips of a local person I heard the story of Hagar and Ishmael (pbuh) told in a new way. Both characters have been familiar to me from my Christian upbringing. However, I had been taught that the blessing was exclusively for Isaac and Jacob. This is why Hagar and Ishmael as ancestors of the Arabs had always been negative characters in my mind, and consequently Muslims as their spiritual descendants. Yet when I heard the story from my friend's perspective, I saw it in a new light as everything fell into place. God's mercy and love toward Hagar and Ishmael gripped me; I started to study the traces of this love in the Bible and could not stop being astonished with what I found.

The fact that struck me most was that God's promises to Abraham and Hagar (pbuh), along with other biblical prophecies for the future of Ishmael, reach down to our day. Struggling with this thought I understood that Muhammad (pbuh) was the link between Ishmael of old and Ishmael of today. With new eyes I read the Qur'an and came to surprising conclusions. I discovered more and more connections between the Qur'an and the Bible and my love for Islam has steadily increased ever since.

At the same time my conviction has deepened that communication between Abraham's children does not need to be judgemental or violent; rather, it can take place in a spirit of love and understanding, to the mutual benefit of all. So whether you are reading this as a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim, or a follower of another religion or philosophy, it is my sincere hope that you will come to share this same conclusion.

The good news is that there is a way to read each Holy Book by setting aside prejudices and looking through the glasses of its forerunners, the Holy Books of former times. There is also a way to read each Holy Book through the glasses of its sequels, the Holy Books of later times, which continued the message of their forerunners. The result will be increased faith and peace for all and a deeper appreciation of one another's beliefs.

Come and delve with me into the stories of Ishmael and his descendants. Let us feel the close bonds that have been created over time between all those who regard Abraham (pbuh) as the father of their faith in God. I invite you to listen attentively to the response this might create in your heart.

If you are ready for this adventure you will be surprised how this will change your ability to communicate and relate with your Abrahamic brothers and sisters.

Kai Frederic Mester

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1

FROM SLAVERY TO LIBERTY

The Story of Hagar and Ishmael

This chapter will tell the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael (pbuh) as it is reported in the Bible. It restores two sometimes despised and forgotten personages back into the centre of interest, the record of their lives being a great illustration of the merciful character of God. This story is therefore a valuable key opening the door to a new level of communication between Abrahamic brothers and sisters of today.

Hagar is the first slave whose story is told in Scripture. The only slave mentioned before her is Canaan, a grandson of Noah (pbuh), referred to in a context of prophecy where the story of his slavery itself is not told. Hagar's story, however, shows how much the God of Abraham (pbuh) hates slavery, how He wants man to be free, and how the journey to freedom is under His care and protection.

A gift from Pharaoh

Hagar is depicted as a defenceless woman, an Egyptian slave of Abram's wife Sarai (pbuh) (Genesis 16:3). Because they were called Abraham and Sarah later, I will refer to them by these more familiar names except when quoting Bible verses that use their former names. But why would a godly couple like Sarah and Abraham have a slave? Scripture provides the answer (Genesis 12:10-20).

Abraham (pbuh) went to Egypt because there was a terrible famine in the land of Canaan, where he lived. Fearing that the Egyptians might kill him to get hold of his extremely beautiful wife once he entered their country, he introduced her as his sister instead. This was not completely false as Sarah was indeed his half-sister. But this half-truth got her into trouble. Pharaoh took her into his harem and showered Abraham with gifts: "Then Pharaoh gave Abram many gifts because of her—sheep, oxen, donkeys, men and women slaves, and camels" (Genesis 12:16 TLB).

Listing slaves with animals shows how slaves were regarded – like animals, creatures without a will of their own, part of the slave-owner's wealth. It is true, Abraham had already left Haran with lots of "persons that they had gotten" there (Genesis 12:5 NLV), but these persons are clearly distinguished from his "possessions that they had gathered" (NKJV). They must have been disciples and other volunteers who joined his household. In Egypt, however, he

received slaves.

Now there was also trouble for Pharaoh. Because of the moral injustice of paying for the forbidden fruit of adultery with human lives, Pharaoh had to suffer painful calamities. When Abraham eventually admitted the truth, Pharaoh immediately banished him and Sarah, although they were allowed to take along all the gifts he had received: "Then Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and *all that he had* ... to the South" (Genesis 13:1).

So when we hear of Hagar, the Egyptian slave, a few chapters later (Genesis 16:3), we can easily reconstruct the story. Obviously, she was one of Pharaoh's royal gifts – surely a beautiful one – which Abraham received on his only reported visit to Egypt.

A lesson on slavery

God, who has created free human beings, surely did not approve of the fact that His "friend" Abraham, as he is called in the Bible and in the Qur'an, had become a slave holder. This is why He decided to teach mankind a lesson from this misuse of human lives. So He prophesied:

"Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterwards they shall come out with great possessions" (Genesis 15:13,14).

The unfolding history showed that Abraham's family did indeed become strangers in Egypt and slaves to the Pharaoh. Decades had passed by; the Pharaoh who had given Abraham his first slaves had died and another Pharaoh now enslaved his descendants. What a powerful lesson!

Voluntary slaves or slave holders?

This helps us discover an eternal, Scriptural principle: enslaving, killing, or any other abuse inflicted on others will eventually come back to the abuser: "He who leads into captivity shall go into captivity; he who kills with the sword must be killed with the sword" (Revelation 13:10). "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed" (Genesis 9:6). "As you have done, it shall be done to you" (Obadiah 1:15). Scripture says the same about stealing and lying: "Woe to you who plunder, though you have not been plundered; and you who deal treacherously, though they have not dealt treacherously with you! When you cease plundering, you will be plundered; when you make an end of dealing treacherously, they will deal treacherously with you" (Isaiah 33:1).

True believers will therefore heed the following counsels of Jesus the Messiah

(pbuh). "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant" (Mark 10:42-43). Therefore true believers will never kill and never enslave anyone, nor will they steal or lie. Imagine how positively this would affect human relationships if everyone cherished this principle.

If all of us obeyed these commands, there would be no more slaves on planet earth nor would any man kill his fellow man. There would be fewer misunderstandings created by fear and suspicion, fewer prejudices resulting from loss and resentment; people would be more open and more trusting with each other. Would not that be a wonderful world?

The Qur'an, also, admonishes us to heed those counsels: "When Jesus came with the signs, he said: 'I have come to you with authority, and to explain something about which you are at variance. So fear God, and follow me. Verily God is my Lord and your Lord; so worship Him. This is the straight path'" (az-Zukhruf 43:63-64 Ahmed Ali).

It is true that God gave laws to Moses (pbuh) on how to treat slaves, how to conduct war, how kings should reign, when to inflict capital punishment, how to divorce one's wife and so on. It is true that King David (pbuh) killed thousands of men and still God called him "a man after his own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). But all of this does not justify slavery or killing. Thankfully God was willing to work with His people even though they had reached a quite low level of morality. From there He tried to help them step by step to rise to higher standards.

At the same time God teaches us in His Holy Books about His true character and invites us to come up higher by being a servant to all rather than harshly ruling over others. With this attitude, the relationship between Abraham's children of today will become much more positive and productive.

Hagar, the forbidden fruit

Unfortunately Hagar (pbuh) is often seen by readers of the Bible in a negative way. After all, wasn't she at the heart of Abraham's (pbuh) sin against God? Wasn't she the symbol of his little faith? God had promised to make out of him a great nation (Genesis 12:2) and to multiply his descendants so much that they would be countless like the stars (15:5). However, the Patriarch was already 86 years old at the time and his not much younger wife Sarah (pbuh) had never conceived. They were childless, and so Sarah felt the need to find a human way to fulfil God's promise, which she did with Abraham's agreement.

A closer look at Genesis takes Hagar out of the dark corner in which the Western world has trapped her, and reveals that Hagar was the victim while Sarah and Abraham were responsible for the mistake:

"So Sarai said to Abram, 'See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram **heeded the voice of Sarai**. Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and **gave her to her husband** Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan" (Genesis 16:2-3).

Abraham and Sarah lived at a time when using female slaves this way was common practice. However, it is interesting to note that the book of Genesis itself uses here exactly the same language as where it reports the first crime in Eden, the cardinal crime so to speak:

"'Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?' Then the man said, 'The woman whom You gave to be with me, she **gave me of the tree**, and I ate' ... Then to Adam He said, 'Because you have **heeded the voice of your wife**, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, You shall not eat of it: cursed is the ground for your sake ...'" (Genesis 3:12,17).

We may therefore use the word "crime" for what happened between Hagar and Abraham. Can you see how history repeated itself? Hagar was the forbidden, attractive, fragrant and delicious fruit created by God. She was the victim not the perpetrator. As a slave, she had no say in this matter. As an Egyptian of pagan background, she was not familiar with God's moral standards and His character. The whole scheme to obtain the promised heir was presented to her by her masters Abraham and Sarah – the most spiritual and pious persons she knew. They made her believe that it was an important measure to fulfil God's promise and to help Him achieve His ends.

This is how Hagar became a symbol for all situations in which we attempt to realise God's promises by human effort. She became an illustration of impatience and lack of faith in God when human beings try to take short cuts to avoid the pain of ridicule, unaware that bypassing the plan of God only brings humiliation, pain, and shame to others:

"But he [Ishmael] who was of the bondwoman [Hagar] was born according to the flesh, and he [Isaac] of the free woman [Sarah] 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" (Galatians 4:23-25).

It would be a great misunderstanding to conclude from these Bible verses that the almighty God values Ishmael, Hagar, Mount Sinai and Arabia less than Isaac, Sarah, Jerusalem and Israel. Instead, God chose them to teach us some vital lessons about faith and mercy.

"But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are that no flesh should glory in His presence" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

Hagar, the humiliated

As soon as Hagar conceived, Sarah felt that Hagar had lost her humble and serving spirit. She complained to Abraham, probably with tears in her eyes, and the husband allowed his wife to humiliate the maid. Maybe Sarah wanted to ensure that Hagar would be reminded that she was still only a slave; after all, she was only the vessel of the promised heir, nothing more. "'Your slave is in your hands,' Abram said. 'Do with her whatever you think best.' Then Sarai **mistreated** Hagar; so she fled from her" (Genesis 16:6 NIV).

With Abraham's permission, Sarah humbled Hagar, she oppressed and afflicted her. All this is included in the Hebrew verb *'ana* used here in the Scriptures. It is exactly the same word God used when prophesying to Abraham that his descendants, the children of Israel, would soon be mistreated in Egypt until the end of 400 years (Genesis 15:13). It is exactly the same word used to describe what the Egyptians later really did to them: "They put slave masters over them **to oppress** them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. But the more they were **oppressed**, the more they multiplied and spread" (Exodus 1:11 NIV).

Did you know that the name "Sarai," which Sarah still bore, means "mistress" and stems from the word *sar* meaning master or prince? That is exactly the same word used in Exodus 1:11 for the slave masters. Moreover, the Hebrew spelling in this verse is identical: Sarai is spelled *sry* and masters of slave work (*sarey missim*) is spelled *sry msym*. Thus Sarah is put on the same level as the Egyptian masters of the wicked Pharaoh.

Poor pregnant Hagar was humiliated so much that she eventually fled into the desert. This is also what the Israelites did later on: they fled from their slave masters (Exodus 14:5).

It's a fascinating parallel! From slavery to liberty ... This is a common theme of

the biblical books of Genesis and Exodus: being humiliated and liberated, being victimised and finding refuge in God's mercy, being oppressed and escaping from the oppressor. Noah (pbuh) found refuge in the ark from the frightening flood, Abraham (pbuh) heard God's voice and left his home country to venture into liberty, Moses (pbuh) crossed the Red Sea toward the promised land. It is all about liberty and the invitation to accept God's freedom and to pass it on to others. Yet the story of Hagar takes the theme a step further. It turns into a unique blessing as the story continues:

Hagar, the blessed

Out there in the desert, at a refreshing spring of water Hagar was found by the "angel of the LORD" (Genesis 16:7). This is the first time that "the angel of God" is mentioned in the Bible. What an honour for Hagar to be the first person reported to have such a rare encounter!

Scripture records how, in ancient times, the angel of the LORD was involved whenever God revealed Himself to human beings in a special way. One example is the encounter between God and Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:2-6). From this we can assume that "the" God who walked in the garden and spoke to Adam and Eve was also represented by the angel of the LORD (Genesis 3:8). In the experiences of Cain and Noah, the Bible only reports that God spoke to them. They might only have heard His voice. If Enoch literally walked with God, it must have been with the angel of the LORD as well (5:22-24).

Being invisible to human eyes, God Himself "who alone has immortality dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see," spoke to man through this representative (1 Timothy 6:16).

It is only after Hagar's first encounter with the angel of the LORD that this same being appeared visibly in the guise of a man to Abraham also. It happened by the oaks of Mamre (18:1) and he was accompanied by two more angels or messengers (18:22; 19:1).

As we will see, Hagar's encounter with the angel of the LORD was not her last. The first time, the angel asked about her situation in a very friendly and caring way; but when she explained that she was fleeing from her mistress, he told her firmly: "You must go back to your mistress and submit to her mistreatment." (Verse 9 HCSB) Other translations say: "and humble thyself under her hands" (YLT).

The Hebrew word used here is exactly the same word as used for Sarah's oppressing, afflicting, and humbling of Hagar. So Hagar is asked to afflict herself to Sarah, to allow her to oppress and humble her. This may sound strange at first. If God really cared about her, why not direct her to a better

refuge? And if He did not care for her, and her son really was the product of a human idea, why not leave her in the desert to die instead of saving her? But this is not as strange as it may at first appear. Through His angel God taught Hagar the principle of non-violence that shines brightly amid all the violence reported in Scripture.

Prophet Jeremiah (pbuh) preached this principle: "Let him offer his cheek to the one who would strike him; let him be filled with shame" (Lamentations 3:30 HCSB); Jesus the Messiah (pbuh) preached it: "Love your enemies, do what is good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone hits you on the cheek, offer the other also. And if anyone takes away your coat, don't hold back your shirt either" (Luke 6:27-29); and Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) proclaimed it: "Good and evil are not alike. Repel evil with what is good. Then you will find your erstwhile enemy like a close, affectionate friend" (Qur'an, Fussilat 41:34 Ahmed Ali).

The challenge to endure violence stands at the beginning of Ishmael's history in connection with the angel's blessing of his mother Hagar: "I will greatly multiply your offspring, and they will be too many to count" (Genesis 16:10 HCSB). Never before or since has a woman received such a blessing! This absolutely unique fact deserves all our attention. Indeed, if we consider Hagar's encounter in the desert as a significant event, its message becomes the key to a new understanding between Abrahamic brothers and sisters.

Your son will be born free

The angel of the LORD continued speaking. For the first time in history a person was told by a divine messenger how to name her child; and this messenger did so in poetic form, suddenly speaking in rhymed poetry. In its original language, the poetic form is very clear. A transliteration (with accents for metrical emphasis) reveals how the three lines in the first verse end with bright-vowel syllables and those in the second verse end with dark-vowel syllables:

Hinakh hará wyoladet bén
We qarat shmó Yishemaél
Ki shama JHWH el anyéch.
We hu yihyé pere adám
Yado ba-kól we yad kol bó
We al pney kól ekhaw yishkón.

"Behold, you are with child,
And you shall bear a son.

You shall call his name Ishmael ['God hears'],
Because the LORD has heard your affliction" (Verse 11).
"He will be a wild donkey of a man,
His hand will be against everyone,
And everyone's hand will be against him;
And he will live to the east of all his brothers" (Verse 12 NASB).

Unfortunately the description of Ishmael in the second verse sounds strangely negative. However, this verse has been partly misunderstood. The wild donkey does not necessarily place Ishmael (pbuh) in a negative light. The metaphor rather is a symbol of his freedom. God Himself refers Job (pbuh) to the wild donkey as an example for those who are free from the rule of others yet under the guidance of God. "Who set the wild donkey free? Who loosed the bonds of the onager, Whose home I have made the wilderness, And the barren land his dwelling? He scorns the tumult of the city; He does not heed the shouts of the driver" (Job 39:5-7). So the wild donkey is not a common donkey (for which a complete different word would have been used) but rather a symbol for freedom.

Similarly, the prophecy that Ishmael's hand would be against everyone and everyone's hand would be against him portrays him as an aggressive individual, but the word *against* actually is not there in the original text. Instead, the Hebrew neutral commodity preposition *be* is used, which means *with, at, for*, it all depends on the context. For example in Exodus 4:6, where the same word *be* is used, Moses is asked to put his hand *inside* his cloak. Nobody would ever come up with the idea of translating the preposition *be* here with *against* his cloak. In reference to the spirit of the wild donkey the best translation would probably be: "In his interactions with others he will be on an equal footing with them and they with him." In other words: "Neither in business nor in conflicts can he be oppressed. He will not lose his independence and freedom."

This is a beautiful promise! If you, dear reader, see yourself as the product of an immoral, unfaithful, or faithless act on the part of others, take courage! God loves to create great blessings from bad beginnings: "So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen" (Matthew 20:16). "If you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name" (Nehemiah 1:9). Because God turns everything upside down, I do not need to boost my self-confidence by outdoing my neighbour; I do not need to look down on others or humiliate them. Since my self-esteem is rooted in God's love, I am able to love my neighbour – and even my enemy – as myself.

God hears and sees

Let us go back to Hagar's story. God told her to name her son Ishmael, which means "God hears". As a reaction she called God "El-Roeë, the God who sees me" (Genesis 16:13).

God hears and sees those who are unjustly afflicted. This story is a beautiful illustration of what we find in the Qur'an. Two of the 99 most beautiful names of God are *as-Samee'*, *the All Hearing*, and *al-Baseer*, *the All Seeing* (*As-Samee'*: al-Baqara 2:127,256; an-Nisa' 4:58; al-Anfal 8:17; al-Hujurat 49:1; *as-Samee'* and *al-Baseer*: an-Nisa' 4:58; al-Isra' 17:1; ash-Shura 42:1; *al-Baseer*: ash-Shura 42:27). So we have seen that both names are actually in the Bible too.

Hagar returned to her mistress, Ishmael was born, and all went well for 13 years. Abraham brought up Ishmael in the fear of God, as the heir of all the promises received since he had left his home country. He educated his son accordingly, and loved him as the son of the promise. But then the unexpected happened:

God appeared to Abraham, still called Abram, and gave him a new name: "Abraham, father of many." He explained that Abraham would be father of many nations, and all his descendants needed to be circumcised as a sign of their special destiny. The new name was not particularly surprising because there was the potential for fulfilment in his son Ishmael. But then God also proclaimed a new name for Sarah, still called Sarai: she should be called Sarah and would become mother of many nations, too. A son from her own womb would be the only one having a special covenant relationship with God (Genesis 17:1-19), and Ishmael would be at least temporarily excluded from that special relationship.

However, we read in the Bible that Ishmael was the first boy who was circumcised by Abraham (Verses 23-27). One year later his brother Isaac was born. Still everything seemed to go well. But when Isaac was weaned, the seed of jealousy had already grown in Ishmael's heart, and he treated his brother in such a way that Sarah finally asked Abraham to send him and his mother away. Abraham was obviously upset about this suggestion. Yet God asked him to meet Sarah's wish, but promised that He would take care of the lad.

It must have been a very emotional farewell for Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael. What bigger sacrifice can God require of a father than to separate from his first-born son? He had invested all his hope in this son and had given him all his spiritual knowledge. Now the beloved son must leave with no more than a loaf of bread and a skin of water as he heads south (21:1-14)!

Second encounter with the angel

Hagar and Ishmael did not know where to go. Did she still remember God's promise that her son would live to the east of his brothers? At least this was what the angel had told her in the last line of his poetry. Soon the water was gone and both were so weakened by the thirst that they had no more strength to keep on going. Hagar decided then to leave Ishmael in the shade of a bush while she sat down a good way off; "for she said to herself, 'Let me not see the death of the boy.' So she sat opposite him, and lifted her voice and wept" (Verse 16). Obviously, she did not believe in God's promise any more; understandably, she had given up hope.

But God had neither forgotten her, – nor was He upset about her lack of faith. The angel of God spoke to her a second time: "What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation" (Verses 17,18). Then she suddenly spotted a well of water. She stood up with new hope, filled the skin with water and gave Ishmael a drink (Verse 19).

God was with Ishmael

"So God was with the lad" (Verse 20). This next statement is often overlooked and its meaning underestimated: Ishmael is the first man about whom this is said. The same statement is made about Abraham in the next verse, about Isaac, and Jacob much later. Joseph, Joshua, Samuel, David, Hezekiah, and others (pbut) follow. Therefore Ishmael cannot be seen as a 'second class' character of Scripture. God had far-reaching plans for him also, as we will see.

Free at last

"He grew and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. He dwelt in the Wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt" (Verses 20,21).

While Ishmael (pbuh) would have always been free as Abraham's son, his mother (pbuh) would have remained a slave in her master's household. However, when Abraham disinherited Ishmael, Hagar automatically became a free woman according to the law of that time. Yes, God is in the business of liberating slaves. He said to the people of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2). This was true of Hagar as well. She had been a slave in Egypt; God brought her out of Egypt; she stayed in the house of bondage as a slave of Abraham; and she was liberated by the providence of God.

Notice again how the language used here stands in parallel to the language of the exodus of the children of Israel: "**Drive out** this slave with her son, for the son of this slave will not be a coheir with my son Isaac!" (Genesis 21:10 HCSB). "I will bring one more plague on Pharaoh and on Egypt. After that, he

will let you go from here. When he lets you go, he will **drive you out** of here" (Exodus 11:1 HCSB).

There is an important message here: both Hagar and Israel (pbut) were led into the desert where the angel of the LORD provided for them as much water as they needed. "Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared" (Exodus 23:20 ESV).

When Hagar fled for the first time with Ishmael still in her womb, she fled in the direction of the Wilderness of Shur (Genesis 16:6-7). This is the same destination the Israelites headed towards later (Exodus 15:22). And Ishmael later dwelt in the Wilderness of Paran where the Israelites also sojourned after they left Mount Sinai (Numbers 10:12). (You will read more about these locations in chapter three of this present book.)

God did all this to show how much he cared for victimised Hagar and Ishmael (pbut). Those who identify culturally or spiritually with the heritage of Isaac, Israel, and the Messiah (pbut), need to recognise God's love for their Ishmaelite brothers. Accepting this message will significantly change the way they deal with "Ishmael's heritage." Likewise, those who culturally or spiritually identify with Ishmael need to recognise the non-violent and self-abasing attitude that Hagar and Ishmael showed towards Sarah and Isaac. This will create positive change in their relation with the descendants of Israel.

Understandably, Hagar and Ishmael sometimes resented the way they had been treated. Ishmael can be forgiven for mistreating his brother, and for harbouring a grudge in his heart. Eventually, however, both became reconciled to their situations. Hagar returned to her mistress as the angel commanded, and much later also Ishmael returned to his brother shortly before their father died – probably when Abraham felt that his death drew near.

We are told that the two brothers buried their father together (Genesis 25:9). In ancient times there was no cooling system to preserve a dead body, and embalming was an Egyptian treatment that only kings would deserve. It is true, Scripture reports Jacob's and Josef's embalming, yet they received that honour due to their connections to the court of the Pharaoh (Genesis 50:2,26). In Abraham's case we have no reason to believe that he was embalmed. Therefore Isaac could not wait to bury his father until a message got to Ishmael's home in Arabia and Ishmael would arrive from there. He must have been already present when their father died.

Could this reconciliation of Isaac and Ishmael over the death of their father contain an important message for our time? Is it not time for brothers to be reconciled now before hatred between religions costs more and more innocent

lives on this planet? Should we not follow the example of the two estranged brothers finding a way to unite around Father Abraham?

Conclusion 1

This chapter has shown how God was with Abraham and Sarah and with Hagar and Ishmael at the same time. He accepted and blessed both the perpetrators and the victims, without condoning the wrong-doing of either. What a powerful lesson for us to learn! No matter on which side you may be, God is ready to turn evil into good, so your readiness for reconciliation will turn pain and grief into blessing and peace. Ishmael and Isaac made God's way their way before it was too late. Let us follow their example!

The next chapter will shed light on the question: to which extent were God's promises to Abraham also meant for Ishmael? Most Jews and Christians answer with a resounding "to no extent", while some might admit that a few crumbs were destined to fall from God's table for him. In the next chapter, I offer my answer with a resounding "to a vast extent" while explaining that some aspects of the blessing would apply to Ishmael only much later in history. Keep on reading to find out how Islam becomes a vital part of this remarkable story.

2

GOD'S PROMISES TO ABRAHAM AND ISHMAEL

God Is Faithful

This chapter deals with God's promises to Abraham and how Ishmael is remarkably and extensively included in them. God has kept his promises until today, and He will keep them until the final Day of Judgement and beyond.

The story of Abraham (pbuh) has moved the hearts of millions of people. Why? Was it his exodus from Mesopotamia into the unknown? Was it his wild nomadic life in the less civilised regions of the Middle East? Surely his experience has been a source of inspiration for pioneers of every kind who, like Abraham, have ventured forward trusting God! Or was it his willingness to sacrifice his only son – the focus of all his hopes and dreams – that has impressed so many people?

Surely the answer lies in Abraham's trust in the challenging promises of God. His unswerving faith was behind the seemingly "reckless" decisions that have made Abraham so famous. The way the Patriarch trusted in those promises against all odds, and how his faith seemed to grow with each challenge, has moved the hearts of millions.

Much has been written on the application of these Abrahamic promises to Israel and the Messiah, and to both Jews and Christians. In this chapter, however, we will consider the extent to which Ishmael, and beyond him Muhammad (pbut) and Islam, are also included in these promises.

That Ishmael might live before you

It is true that Ishmael was the product of Abraham's failure to trust in God. If Abraham had put his full confidence in God's promises, he would not have given in to Sarah's tempting voice nor taken her exotic slave Hagar as a second wife. In spite of this lack of trust, God nevertheless heard Abraham's prayer to include Ishmael into the promises: "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" (Genesis 17:18). For thirteen years Abraham had educated his son to faithfully trust in God's promises! Had he not taught him to apply those promises to his own life and to see in them his holy vocation? Yes, he had, and therefore he did not pray, "Oh, that Ishmael might also live a good life," but rather he begged, "that Ishmael might **live before You!**" "If only Yishma'el could **live in your presence!**" (CJB). What did he mean by this? What does "living in God's presence" mean?

Several centuries later Prophet Hosea explains: "Come, let us return to the LORD. For He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, That we may **live before Him/in His presence**" (Hosea 6:1,2 NASB/HCSB). This means that those who return to God in spite of pain and anguish are able to live in His presence.

Abraham was worried, as any godly father would be, that Ishmael would lose his faith, and all the fatherly love he had poured upon him would have been in vain. When Ishmael realised that he was not the promised heir, he would, naturally, feel betrayed. Abraham therefore prayed that his son might have the experience that Hosea described many centuries later: he prayed that he would endure the heart-wrenching sense of loss from the hand of God; that he would seek God's presence in a spirit of true repentance; and that he would live a righteous life before Him by following "the straight and narrow path" (Sirat al-Mustaqim; al-Fatiha 1:6; Matthew 7:14).

The Apostle Paul explains: "Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified **before God**, because the righteous will **live** by faith" (Galatians 3:11 NIV). In other words: only those who trust in God can live a righteous life before Him, a life of justice and morality. Indeed Abraham prayed that his son might experience God's merciful righteousness in a special way.

Abraham asked God to preserve Ishmael's faith by helping him to remain submitted. His prayer was: "Please, LORD let my son not break under the disappointment. Let him not sink into hopelessness." And God answered his prayer: "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you" (Genesis 17:20). Yes, Ishmael would be saved. And should his faith decrease, God would give him repentance and help him trust again. This is the promise that Ishmael would remain within God's promises to Abraham.

Now, let us skip some centuries and turn to Muhammad (pbuh). The prophet of Islam is said to have been able to trace his ancestry back to Ishmael. Through Muhammad all Muslims today identify with this spiritual heritage. Thinking of Muhammad makes them remember Hagar's desperate search for life-giving water when Ishmael was almost dying from thirst. Actually, Muslims re-enact this search whenever they visit Mecca and drink from the Zamzam source. Then they drink in faith from that same well and claim the promise: "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. [He will live in my presence!]"

This means that this promise is still valid today: indeed, God has promised to pour out the spirit of repentance on modern Ishmael. Once again Ishmael will accept pain and loss, submit to God's will, return to Him – not only through outward prostration, but through inward surrender. Ishmael will find salvation and live a righteous life in God's presence. While there have always been truly

God-fearing Muslims, this promise leads us to expect a great revival of true godliness within Islam as soon as these promises are rediscovered on a large scale. This definitely will revolutionise the relationship and communication between both sides of Abraham's family.

Great nation

Let us look now at the first promise given to Abraham when he was called to leave his home and family: "Now the LORD had said to Abram: 'Get out of your country, from your family, and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation'" (Genesis 12:1-2).

Although Abraham did not become a father before he reached the impressive age of 86 years, he indeed would beautifully grow into a great nation. At least four of his eight sons – Isaac, Ishmael, Jokshan, and Midian, are known to have been fathers of the well-known nations: Israel, Edom, Nebaioth, Kedar, Sheba, and Midian. The next chapters will familiarise you with some significant aspects of fascinating biblical records about them.

You might argue that the promise says *I will make you a great nation* and not *nations*. But consider that already during his childless lifetime Abraham had "318 trained men, born in his household" (Genesis 14:14). What an impressive figure! It means that by the time Abraham died, his community must already have been quite a Bedouin nation. On one occasion the King of Elam waged war against the city nations of the plain of Jordan, among them the notorious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. When Abraham heard that among the captives of the king were also his relatives, he raced with his 318 men and delivered them all. Clearly, Abraham was already a nation of great importance during his childless lifetime.

Yet Abraham still spawned many nations through his real sons and these nations are at the forefront today when it comes to geopolitics; they are the Jew and Arab peoples who are genetically and culturally closely related to Abraham. Of course other individuals, and even whole groups from other nations, have joined both Jews and Arabs for various reasons. Yet, language, customs, and other factors have firmly shaped their Jewish or Arab identity. Until today they have formed various geographical and political entities. But Abraham has also become the spiritual father of many more nations, as I will now show.

Great name

First let us go to the next part of the promise: "I will bless you, and make your name great" (Genesis 12:2). When we look at today's world, Abraham's name is made great through three major world faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In Judaism he is considered to be the founding father of the covenant. Until today Jewish boys are circumcised on the eighth day after their birth.

Circumcision sometimes creates headlines and heated discussions: some say it is mutilation. And if it should be allowed at all, then each one should be able to decide for himself if he wants it or not. This of course moves Abraham into the limelight because when asked why they are circumcising their baby boys, Jews refer to Abraham. Yet there are millions of non-Jewish men who have been circumcised, some as babies without being asked, others as adults on their own decision. Abraham's name, however, is circulated by the faithfulness of Jewish fathers and mothers.

Also when the Torah is read on the Sabbaths in Jewish synagogues the story of Abraham is part of the curriculum; it is a requirement. And Jews pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In short, Judaism cannot be separated from Abraham. Both will always go hand in hand.

Christians like to pray to the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" as well. They consider Abraham "the father of us all" (Romans 4:16). The apostle Paul proclaimed: "Those who are of faith are sons of Abraham ... And if you are the Messiah's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:7,29). In this way Christians spiritually identify with Israel, and the promises God gave to Abraham are claimed also by them through the link of the Messiah and Israel. The story of Abraham is among the favourites of Christian children. And even if a Christian grows up completely secular or atheist – as it is often the case today – he will sooner or later hear about Abraham.

Islam focuses even more on Abraham than Judaism and Christianity do. The Qur'an says that Abraham lived long before any Jew or Christian existed, and it is true that the followers of the Messiah Jesus were for the first time called "Christians" in the first century AD. But what about Jews? Abraham was not a Jew. Even though the name "Jew" stems from Abraham's great grandson Judah, Israelites have never been referred to as "Jews" before the ten northern tribes were deported to Assyria and the two remaining southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin) were exiled to Babylonia, which took place about a thousand years after Abraham. Even their original name Israelites stemmed from Abraham's grandson Jacob, who was renamed Israel in his later years. Since seven sons of Abraham were never considered to be part of this nation or even its religion, the Qur'an is correct in stating that Abraham was not a Jew. According to the Qur'an, Abraham's exemplary faith shows that you can become saved without being a Jew or a Christian.

Eid al-Adha, the most important feast in Islam commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. The pilgrimage rites in Mecca also relate to the Abraham story, especially how he conquered his Satanic doubts before he was ready to sacrifice his son, and how God sent a sheep to ransom him. As we

have seen previously, Hagar's search for water, to quench the thirst of her son Ishmael, is re-enacted by every pilgrim at the source of Zamzam. There is no doubt that Islam has a high regard for Abraham.

While Abraham occupies an important position in all three "Abrahamic religions," let us not underestimate Ishmael, the spiritual father of all Muslims, and his role in biblical prophecy. Abraham's friendship with God has changed the world in many regards, yet lessons from Ishmael will be the communication changer today.

Blessing for all the families of the earth

Let us go back to God's promises to Abraham. What else do we read?

"And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:2-3).

Again, we skip several centuries. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe slowly but surely slipped into the Dark Ages, characterised by the dominance of the papacy. Culture and economy suffered under the censorship of the Western Roman church. Even the political fate of Europe was in the hand of the church. Yet with the rise of Islam, the influence of Rome was contained and the free spirit of Islam helped Europeans in their endeavour to be free from human authorities that had abused their power. The foundation of the medieval mentality was the idea that the church stood between God and each human being; and mainly thanks to Islam, this misrepresentation began to lose its influence.

Reformation, enlightenment, scientific progress, and political reform all entered Europe, inspired by the Islamic Golden Age and the translation of Arabic literature into Latin. The world of today owes its prosperity and relative peacefulness to the illumination received from the scientific method, the progress in medicine, healthcare and education, the freedom of expression and arts, free trading and business, and a spirit of tolerance and coexistence, all of which were witnessed during the Islamic Golden Age.

Today we see an Islamic fulfilment of Ecclesiastes 11:1: "Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return" (NIV).

Firstly, the Islamic Golden Age brought Europe out of the Dark Ages into the light of the Renaissance and into the prosperity that Western countries enjoy today. In spite of several negative developments in the West, no one can deny that the benefits of this light have spread to the whole world, including Islamic countries which are slowly rediscovering what they had generously shared

during the Dark Ages: freedom of expression, tolerance and coexistence, as well as economic progress.

A second blessing to all families of the earth are the huge energy reserves of the Arab countries. We might associate this black gold with all sorts of ecological problems, yet we have to admit that petroleum is supplying 90 percent of the fuel used on our planet. It is also the basic raw material for synthetics. Fuel and synthetics have changed the world. Modern transportation, media, and cutting edge devices would not exist without them. Even freedom of movement and the spread of information have increased through petroleum.

Clearly, Abraham's blessing to mankind has been manifold. Ishmael, his Arab descendants, and those who spiritually identify with Ishmael's Islamic heritage certainly enter into the equation. Of course, we know that modern Islam is associated with several negative aspects Ishmael would never have condoned, and the same can be said of Judaism. Christianity also includes abuses that were never intended by Jesus and the Apostles. Religions seem to have deviated from their original *raison d'être*. Yet we should recognise that negative elements in each of these faiths do not cancel out the much larger good which continues to flow from their Abrahamic source.

Before we deal with some sensitive issues of our time, let us move on to the scope of the blessings received and to the hope we can glean from God's promises to Ishmael.

As the dust and the stars

The next promise given to Abraham must have been among the most breathtaking of all. Abraham's imagination was stretched to its limits by God's intervention. The promise came after the Patriarch had been kindly chased out of Egypt for concealing his wife's true identity, and shortly after having asked his nephew Lot (pbuh) in a spirit of true self-denial to freely choose where he would like to have his territory. We may imagine how awe-struck Abraham must have been when God told him: "And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered" (Genesis 13:16).

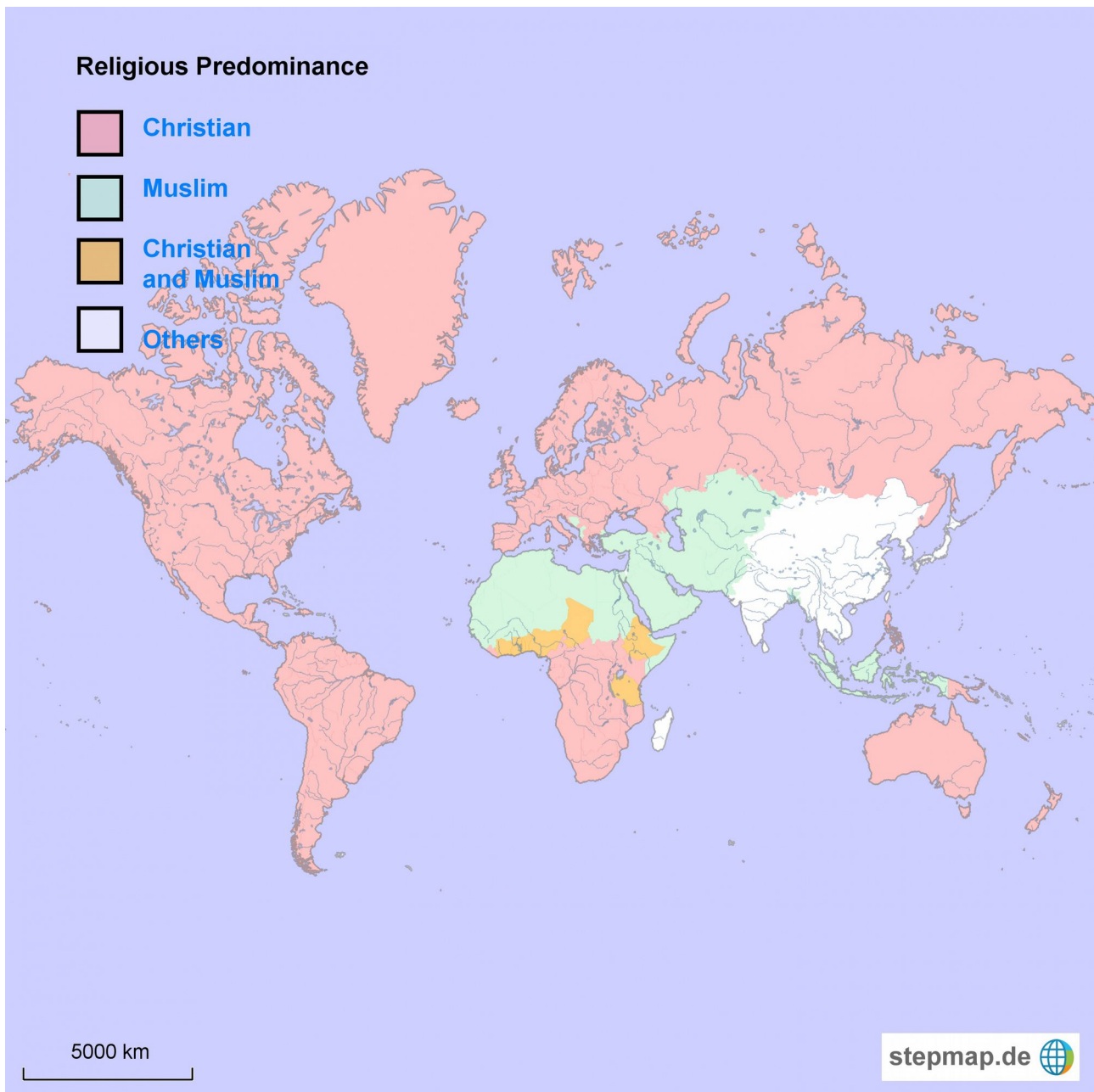
This promise is similar to another one given him after two acts of great love and gratitude: first Abraham had delivered his nephew from the captivity of a foreign king; then he gave tithe from the stolen goods he had recovered. It was shortly after that when God said to him: "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them ... So shall your descendants be" (15:5). What a message! First dust! Now stars, with all their beauty! From dust to stars, from humility to glory, this is the message. Modern high-resolution photos of the universe would have had Abraham faint in anticipation

of what this promise meant.

The question we may ask is: do these divine words only apply to Israel through Isaac? Definitely not, because the angel of God repeated the promise, but this time applying it to Hagar and to Ishmael: "I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude" (16:10).

If we try to number all those who culturally or spiritually identify today with Abraham as their forefather, we discover that they make up 56% of the world's population – Jews (0.2%), Christians (33%), and Muslims (23%) – which is 4 of 7 billion people as of 2014. This is a figure Abraham could never have believed in his time. While at least one of these three religions is present in every country, their global influence can be felt by almost every nation worldwide. We may not have reached the total fulfilment of this prophecy yet, but we are surely close to it. The following map shows the predominantly Christian and Muslim countries:

MAP A: Abrahamic religions



Do you remember that Scripture said, Abraham's descendants would be countless? Of course the numbers above remain an approximation, since neither ethnic nor religious affiliation can be exactly verified for so many people. It is therefore true that neither his literal nor his spiritual descendants can be counted.

Unfortunately, these multitudes of Abrahamic children are often full of mistrust and even hatred toward each other. Sometimes these feelings are thinly veiled, sometimes they break out into terror and violence. Other times they are disguised as attitudes of supremacy or indifference. Some statesmen try to manage and contain this emotional tension.

From Nile to Euphrates

Let us look into the territorial promises given to Abraham: "Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever ... Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you" (Genesis 13:14-15,17).

God said this when Abraham lived in the land of Canaan. How far could he have seen from where he stood in the Judean mountains near Bethel? Or from the mountains of Samaria, Judea, and the Negev desert that he had crossed on his nomadic journeys? In ancient times these mountains were heavily forested, which only added to the beauty of the panorama. Even so Abraham certainly could see the Mediterranean Sea in the west and the Jordan valley and mountains in the east, God assigned the territory in another promise in a specific way to Abraham: "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates" (15:18).

According to this description parts of Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and maybe Egypt, would belong to Abraham's descendants. Indeed today this is exactly the region where Jews and Arabs live. Non-Jewish Persian and Kurdish influences would only be felt east of the Euphrates and non-Jewish Berber influences only west of the Nile.

God also named the ten tribes who lived on that territory at the time: "The Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites" (15:19-21).

Interestingly enough, only seven of these ten tribes are mentioned when God asked Joshua (pbuh) later on to drive them out of the land he had destined for the Israelites (Joshua 3:10). Probably only the seven last tribes mentioned lived west (and north) of the Jordan river. The Kenites, Kenizzites, and Kadmonites must have lived east (and south) of it. This assumption is confirmed by the fact that the word Kadmonites itself means Easterners. And the other two peoples? Joshua's companion Caleb (pbuh) is said to be a Kenizzite (Numbers 32:12). He must have joined Israel during their wanderings in the Eastern wilderness. And Moses' father-in-law (pbuh), who is said to be a Kenite (Judges 1:16), also lived in the East.

Had these Canaanite tribes accepted the God of Abraham while Israel sojourned in Egypt so that they joined the Eastern Abrahamic tribes? Or had Abrahamic tribes already driven them out and appropriated their territory and names? Both options are possible.

Either way, this territory seems to be one of the few remaining playgrounds for world conflicts today. Let me comment on one of those conflicts, maybe the one including the biggest lack of communication between Abrahamic brothers and sisters.

Sharing the promised land

Everyone knows that the territorial conflict in the Middle East is one of the most difficult conflicts to solve. Many Jews claim the right to the whole territory west of the Jordan – and maybe even more – while Muslim Arabs claim the right to the same territory. Many Jews consider Muslims as modern Canaanites or Philistines that need to be driven out and many Muslims regard the Jews as an immoral and imperial outpost of the West to be expelled. The separation of Jews and Muslims through the notorious West Bank barrier has become a symbol of what some call “Israeli apartheid,” while others just see it as an attempt to contain the dangers of a terrorism that is rebelling against a lack of basic freedoms.

In the Torah, however, there is a law speaking about the root of this problem. Although this law was intended for the Jewish people as a whole, I have inserted in brackets the main characters in our Abrahamic story:

“If a man [Abraham] has two wives, one loved [Sarah] and the other unloved [Hagar], and they have borne him children, both the loved and the unloved, and if the firstborn son [Ishmael] is of her who is unloved, then it shall be, on the day he [Abraham] bequeaths his possessions to his sons, that he must not bestow firstborn status on the son [Isaac] of the loved wife [Sarah] in preference to the son of the unloved, the true firstborn [Ishmael]. But he shall acknowledge the son [Ishmael] of the unloved wife [Hagar] as the firstborn by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his [Ishmael's]” (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).

Please notice that Abraham following once again his wife's counsel, disinherited Ishmael. This time it even seems that God encouraged him to do so, but obviously God Himself wanted to show that He would make up for man's failure. Ishmael actually received a double portion of the territorial promise. Granted, their lands consist of more uninhabitable deserts than the lands of Israel, but Arabs have inherited far more than a double portion of the territory between the Euphrates and the Nile – and in addition the petroleum reserves of the Middle East.

Apart from this consideration, there is no logical or Scriptural reason to deny the Palestinians their home. Jews and Arabs should regard each other as brothers and sisters with whom they are supposed to share the promised lands. As Prophet David (pbuh) wrote:

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the LORD commanded the blessing—life forevermore" (Psalms 133:1-3).

Some will ask: And what about Arab Jews and Christian Arabs? Good question! They surely could play an important role by being a special catalyst in the process of reconciliation.

Deep mutual respect and the willingness to suffer is the first step necessary for all parties involved. This is the only way to make communication non-violent and efficient. To increase the respect towards Muslims, consider the following fact.

Twelve princes

Here we have come to the last promise God gave Abraham for Ishmael according to the Bible:

"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).

Many have heard about the twelve tribes of Israel. Also the Qur'an mentions them several times. Many have heard about the twelve apostles. But who has heard about the twelve princes of Ishmael? Indeed, they were prophesied to Abraham as a special blessing, and this happened long before Ishmael's nephew Jacob would also beget twelve sons. We even have their names:

"These are the names of the sons of Ishmael, named in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael; and Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, Dumah, Massa, Hadad, Tema, Jetur, Naphish, and Kedemah [pbut]" (25:13-15 ESV).

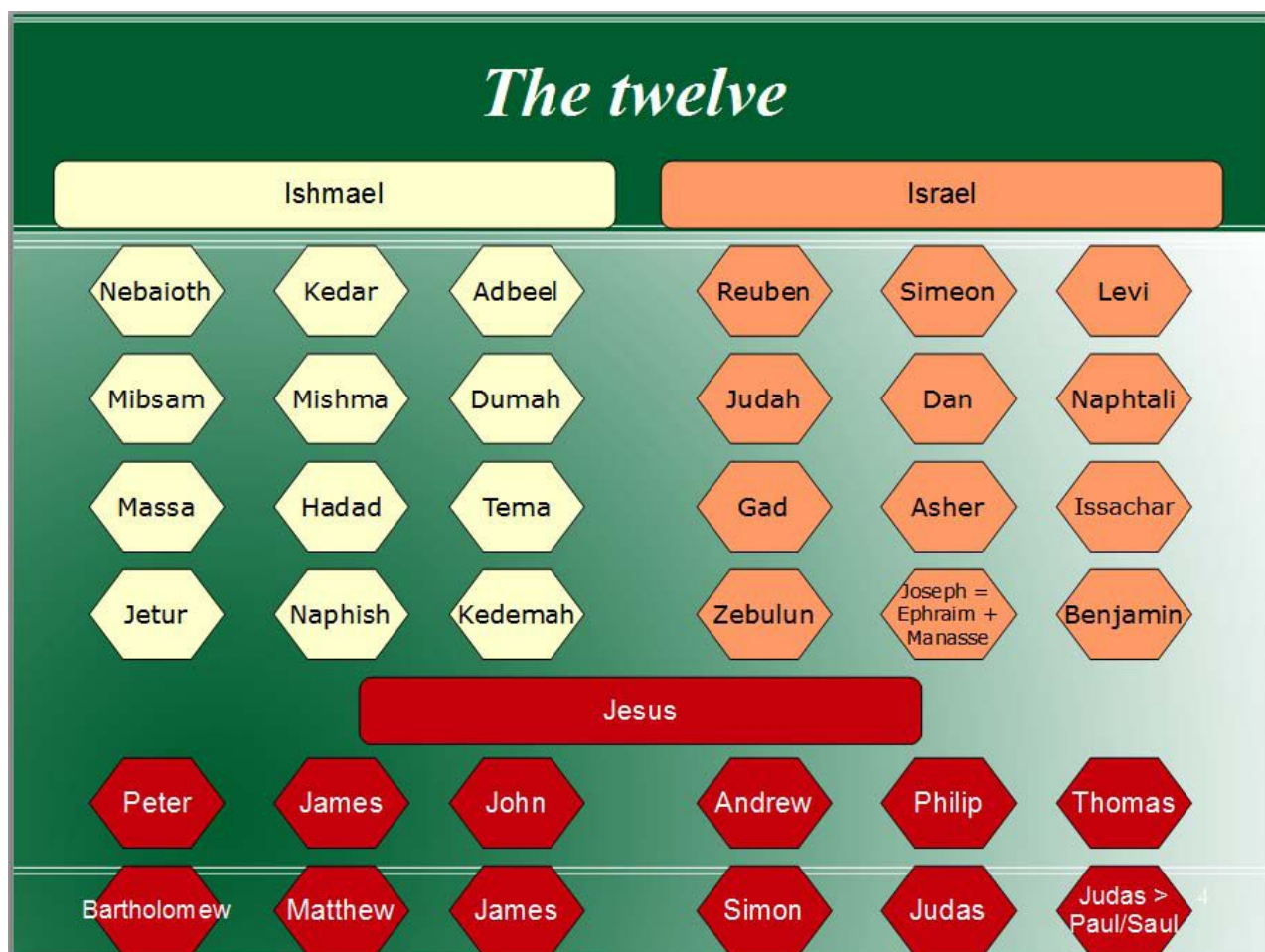
Let me give you the meaning of the names: "fruitfulnesses," "dark-skinned," "disciplined by God," "fragrant," "heard (of God)," "silence," "burden," "innermost chamber," "desert," "enclosed," "refreshed," and "Eastern precedence." Notice how these names reflect the Middle Eastern atmosphere with its blessed sensuousness, spirituality, remoteness, privacy, and relaxed approach to life.

And let us compare them to the names and their meanings of the twelve sons of Abraham's grandson Jacob who later was called Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin (pbut). The meanings are: "Behold a son," "heard (by God)," "attached," "thanksgiving," "judge," "my wrestling," "soldier," "happy," "price," "dwell exaltedly," "(God may) add," and "son of right hand." Notice the difference, how these names express the intensity of interpersonal relationships and the hope of happiness through a Messiah.

Now let us, just for the joy of it, add the names of the twelve apostles: Peter, James, John, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, Bartholomew, Matthew, James, Simon, Judas, and Judas (pbut). The meanings are: "Loose stone," "supplanter," "Allah gave graciously," "manly," "lover of horses," "twin," "son of the accumulator," "gift of Allah," "supplanter," "heard of (God)," "thanksgiving," and "thanksgiving." The one who betrayed the Messiah indeed carried the name of "thanksgiving." However, he was replaced later by Matthias ("gift of Allah") and probably in God's higher wisdom by the Apostle Paul (meaning "small": and his original name was Saul meaning "desired").

Just as twelve months form a year, the twelve princes, tribes and apostles each form a divinely ordained world of their own. Ishmael created the world of the East with its search for Salam. Jacob created the world of the Center with its search for Shalom, and Jesus created the world of the West with its search for Happiness. Ishmael and his world were first, and strongly influenced the other two worlds. We mentioned the Golden Age of Islam and its impact on Christianity. In the next chapters, however, we will learn more of the Age of the Ishmaelite Patriarchs and their impact on Moses and therefore Judaism.

CHART I: The twelve



A special blessing for Isaac

Now let us study the special blessing for Isaac and its implications for Islam. Isaac definitely is the privileged son of Abraham because through him God showed Abraham that He was able to fulfil His promises – in His own way, and against all odds:

“To thy seed I give this land” (Genesis 12:6,7 YLT). This verse mentions Abraham's seed for the very first time. Is this the first promise about the seed in Scripture? No, because right after the fall of Adam and Eve God promised: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (3:15). This promise has always been understood to be an announcement of the coming of the Messiah.

However, when God promised Abraham to bless his seed, it was more than a foretelling of the Messiah. He declared that his seed would be as numerous as the dust of the earth and like the stars in the sky (13:16; 15:5). As we have seen previously, all descendants of Abraham are included in his territorial promises (15:18). But why then does God say: “And I will establish my

covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee" (17:7 ASV), and then suddenly adds: "But My covenant I will establish with **Isaac**" (17:21)?

It gives the impression that Ishmael and Abraham's six youngest sons (of whom we will talk more in this book too) were somehow excluded!

Let us come back to the bloody and painful rite of circumcision, given as a sign of the covenant between God and those who received the promise: "My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant" (17:13). Why then was Ishmael also circumcised "as God had said to him" (17:23)? On the one hand the verse says: "In Isaac your seed shall be called" (21:12), and on the other hand it affirms: "Yet I will also make a nation of [Ishmael] the son of the bondwoman, **because he** is your seed" (21:13).

The only way to solve this riddle is to trace God's promise through Scripture: the same promise given to Isaac (26:4,24) and Jacob (48:4) is repeated to King David (Psalm 89:4,29; Jeremiah 33:22) and fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah through the line of Isaac, Jacob, and David.

However, we should not forget that Jesus the Messiah started to impact the line of Ishmael too once the Qur'an was preached in Arabia. As the Ishmaelite Patriarchs preserved and taught the truth during Israel's time in Egyptian slavery, so the faithful followers of the Messiah Jesus preserved and taught the truth while the Arabs fell into deep idolatry. As the Abrahamic heritage was re-introduced by Ishmaelite influence into Israel right after their Egyptian slavery, so Muhammad re-introduced the original Abrahamic faith to the Arabs and enriched it with the presentation of a Messiah coming from the Jewish line.

Mercy and love for all

Let us close this chapter with one of the most beautiful promises in Scripture couched in a song of prophet Micah:

"Who is a God like You, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, and will subdue our iniquities. You will give **truth to Jacob** and **mercy to Abraham**, which You have sworn to our fathers from days of old" (Micah 7:18-20).

This wonderful Scripture clearly defines God's relationship with Jacob's seed, based on truth, or loyalty and faithfulness (as it can be translated). And what characterised God's relationship with all of Abraham's seed – Ishmael included? Mercy, kindness, and steadfast love. Isn't it amazing?

God is faithful and merciful. Let us be the same. Let us be truthful, loyal, and faithful; kind, merciful, and loving in our relationship and interaction with our Abrahamic brothers and sisters whether we are Jews, Christians, or Muslims.

Conclusion 2

This chapter has shown that God is so mighty that he can write straight on crooked lines. He has managed to keep up all Abrahamic promises for Ishmael using Muhammad and Islam. And He chose Isaac and Jacob for a separate Messianic history and blessing. Both lines were called to give mankind a spiritual, cultural, and even economical blessing. Both lines were destined to bless each other as well.

Viewing this familiar story through Ishmael's eyes has left me amazed and has changed my perspective towards Muslims because Ishmael and Islam are intertwined. Hopefully, Jews and Christians who take this perspective will take more interest in Islam, and Muslims will get more interested in the Bible. What a mind-transforming, delightful experience this could prove to be for all of us.

The next chapter will show how through his descendants Ishmael integrated his six younger brothers and their descendants plus other Abrahamic tribes into their territory, thus creating the greater Arabian brotherhood.

3

THE CHILDREN OF THE EAST

Their Identity and Territory

In this chapter we want to establish the connection between Ishmael [pbuh] and the Children of the East. We will see that Ishmael was joined by various other Abrahamic tribes creating a mixed nation called "the Children of the East."

This chapter focuses on a world of its own: the ancient world of the Children of the East. Have you heard about the mysterious mountains of Seir, Shur, Sinai, Paran, and Teman? They are all in today's Arabia, thus making the Arabian Peninsula the cradle of the Jewish nation. We will also explore the claim that the Exodus route went through Arabia.

The sons of Keturah included into Abraham's spirituality

Many think Ishmael was Isaac's only brother; but the Bible records that after Sarah's death Abraham [pbuh] married another woman called Keturah [pbuh]. At an age that nobody reaches today he fathered six more sons!

"She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah [pbut]" (Genesis 25:2).

Since these were Abraham's youngest children, we may assume that they received the best education, and enjoyed the counsel of a father whose wisdom and faith had matured through the experiences of many years.

Someone may ask: Was Abraham not very old and therefore unqualified to bring up young sons who surely brought a lot of energy into the house? Scripture indeed tells us that Abraham was 137 years old when Sarah died. But given the fact that he was 175 years old when he died, he lived more than 35 fruitful years with his new family depending on when exactly he married after Sarah's death. His youngest son could very well have been 20 years old when Abraham died.

The names he chose for his sons have interesting meanings and have to be interpreted in the context of Abraham's monumental faith: **Zimran** means "musical"; therefore Abraham must have brought him up as a musician for the

LORD. **Jokshan** means snarer. Here Abraham surely had the same graphic thought as Jesus the Messiah when he told his disciples that he would teach them how to be "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19). What does it mean to fish men? It means to show enough selfless love to attract others to surrender to the only, merciful, and almighty God.

The names of Abraham's next two sons **Medan** and **Midian** both mean strife. This can only be the spiritual fight called "jihad" in the Qur'an and referred to by the Apostle Paul when he challenges us: "Fight the good fight of faith" (1 Timothy 6:12). This is exactly what Abraham's life was all about: not the way "jihad" is sometimes interpreted as violence with detonators and beheadings we hear about, but a jihad characterised by an inner struggle to remain surrendered to God's will.

The next son's name is **Ishbak**, "to leave behind, to let go." This must be an allusion to Abraham's own exodus from his family and to his separation from idolatry. This is a crucial part in true surrender, which is expressed in the original meaning of the word "Islam." "To let it go" could also be an allusion to Abraham's willingness to forgive his wife Sarah for requiring the departure of Hagar and Ishmael and let his precious first-born son go. The last son was named **Shuah**, "to bow down in true humility." The spirit of prayer and hospitality is expressed in this name.

All of these names show great wisdom at the end of Abraham's life, a wisdom that can facilitate relationships with others!

Their territory: the Land of the East

But why take such an interest in Keturah's six sons in a book that talks about Ishmael and Islam? The reason is, that Abraham sent them away as he did their brother Ishmael. Abraham prevented them from staying in Canaan by sending them into the same direction Ishmael had taken.

"Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac" (Genesis 25:5) and "gave gifts to the sons of his concubines [Hagar and Keturah], but while he was still alive he sent them eastward, away from his son Isaac, **to the land of the East**" (Genesis 25:6 HCSB).

It is important to notice that Ishmael and his six younger brothers were sent into the same land, the land of the East; and this is why all those seven brothers are called the "Children of the East," literally the "Sons of the East," or we could also say the "people of the (Middle) East."

Something is developing here – a new nation. Ishmael's younger brothers must have been more or less the age of his own twelve sons. For sure these

sons of Keturah were followers and promoters of their father's faith. For sure their influence could be felt within the Eastern society. It is therefore likely that this fledgling community of nations would continue to preserve the religion of Abraham as it developed.

Some years later, when Abraham's grandson Jacob (pbuh) had to flee from his twin brother Esau, he is said to have found refuge in "the land of the children of the east" (Genesis 29:1 ASV). Clearly, by this time the Children of the East also have a land associated with them! Surprisingly the area where Jacob escaped to was the region around Haran, which is much more to the north than to the east of Canaan. Why then call it "the land of the Children of the East?" However, it should be noted that Assyria with its capital Nineveh, which is even farther east, was also considered to be in the north (Zephaniah 2:13). And later still, the armies of Babylonia, which is even further to the east, were considered to come from the north (Jeremiah 50:3; Ezekiel 26:7). Then, should the area where Abraham once left his brother Nahor behind be called "the land of the Children of the East?"

When we compare this verse with other texts mentioning the East and the Children of the East, we discover that only a few centuries after Abraham, Ishmael's territory already stretched from the Euphrates region in the north to the Southern tip of Saudi Arabia, and from the Gulf of Aqaba in the west to the Persian Gulf in the east. When Moses later on incorporated the story of Abraham and his sons in his writings, he knew about this huge geographical area, and he knew that the region of Haran, the very north-western tip of this impressive territory, now belonged to "the land of the Children of the East." Therefore, by leaving Canaan, Jacob had entered "the East."

Moses might also have emphasised this fact in order to draw attention to an important reality: when prophets faced persecution from their own brothers, the Children of the East often provided shelter for them, just as they did when Jacob fled from his brother Esau. I will deal with this in more detail in the next chapter.

We will see that Scripture does not only identify Ishmael, the sons of Keturah, and the descendants of Nahor as "The Children of the East," but also other members of Abraham's family. Thus a new identity called "The Children of the East" was obviously born, a new sphere of influence!

The Desert of Shur

Let us start with Ishmael: he was the first who moved eastwards. The holy text says that when Hagar was pregnant with him, she fled from Sarah towards the desert of Shur. There she had an encounter with the angel of the LORD for the first time. The question is: where is the desert of Shur?

After Abraham moved from Canaanite Hebron, the Scripture says that he went **south** into the desert and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur (Genesis 20:1). This is an important geographical clue indicating that Shur was in a southern desert place.

Another verse tells us that the first place Moses led Israel to after they had crossed the Red Sea was exactly that place, "the wilderness of Shur" (Exodus 15:22), mentioned in the story of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael.

As the reader will already have recognised, this book does not speculate that history might have been different from what the Bible says, as many scholars do, who consider Mosaic literature as a rough approximation of actual facts or as an exaggeration of history. Some go as far as discarding the stories of Genesis as myths. Agreeing to such an approach, would open the door for all sorts of new speculation. This is why I prefer to accept the Biblical records as real events that show us the actual Abrahamic roots.

According to this approach, we now have two possibilities for locating the mysterious wilderness of Shur. Remember that I noted in the first chapter that there are parallels between Hagar and the people of Israel? Both were slaves, both were led out of Egypt, both were humiliated by their slave masters, both fled to the desert of Shur, both found living water and an angel to guide them.

Most Christians believe that the Children of Israel wandered in the Sinai Peninsula after they left Egypt. In this case, the desert of Shur would be situated there. However, Jewish and Arab traditions place Mount Sinai itself in the Arabian Peninsula.

As you can see on the map provided below, the Red Sea is divided at its northern end into two gulfs. The western gulf is called the Gulf of Suez and separates the mainland of Egypt from the Sinai Peninsula. From its Northern end Ferdinand de Lesseps later built the Suez Canal to connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. The north-eastern arm of the Red Sea is called the Gulf of Aqaba and separates the Sinai Peninsula from the Arabian Peninsula. At its end are the two seaside resorts Aqaba belonging to the country of Jordan, and Eilat to the modern and controversial state of Israel.

Most scholars argue that Shur must be somewhere on the Sinai Peninsula because they actually do not believe in a miracle that would have literally parted the Red Sea. In this case, the Israelites would have crossed some marshlands north of the Gulf of Suez. Remember that before the opening of the Suez Canal, the mainland of Egypt was still connected with the Sinai Peninsula. But let us look at some evidence placing the more likely route between Egypt and Canaan in the Arabian Peninsula.

The Wilderness of Shur literally means "the desert of the **turning wall**." In fact there is a mountain range looking like a wall extending from the southern tip of the Dead Sea to the hot desert along the Gulf of Aqaba, i. e. along the Arabian coast. After reaching the main body of the Red Sea, the wall makes **a turn** south-eastwards paralleling the desert coast and passing Medina and Mecca until it reaches Yemen. Could it be that this turning point in the mountain range is the origin of the name "Shur", "desert of the turning wall?" I have indicated the wall through black markers on map B (next page) until Medina and on map D until Yemen/Teman (refer to the table of contents after you have bookmarked this page or wait to check towards the end of this chapter).

Interestingly, the two summits of this mountain range are located close to the turning point. One bears the name of Jabal Shar. "Jabal" is the Arabic word for "mountain"; so we may call it "Mount Shar." Semantically "Shar" could be easily related to "Shur," which means that it might be translated "The Mount of Shur."

Let's have a look at the following map.

MAP B: The Arabian Desert I



An alternative location for Mount Sinai

Just before the mountain range makes a turn, you can see the second summit: Jabal al Lawz. Could it be that this mountain is the biblical Mount Sinai? Consider the following observations:

1. Shur was the first place the Israelites came to after crossing the Red Sea (Exodus 15:22). Therefore the location of Shur determines the location of Mount Sinai, which they only reached after crossing Shur (15:27; 16:1; 19:1).

Scripture says that Ishmael lived in Shur, which was “facing Egypt”

(Genesis 25:18). But what does the Hebrew word for "facing" (*al pney*) mean?

It is used first in this context when the angel of God appeared to Hagar and prophesied that Ishmael would live in front of his brothers (*al pney kol ekhaw*). The New American Standard Bible translation needs to be praised for rendering that phrase correctly as "to the east of all his brothers" (Genesis 16:12 NASB).

So when Ishmael and Hagar left Abraham they took the same direction (to the east) which Hagar had taken when fleeing from Sarah in her pregnancy (to Shur). They lived in the East, of which Shur was a part.

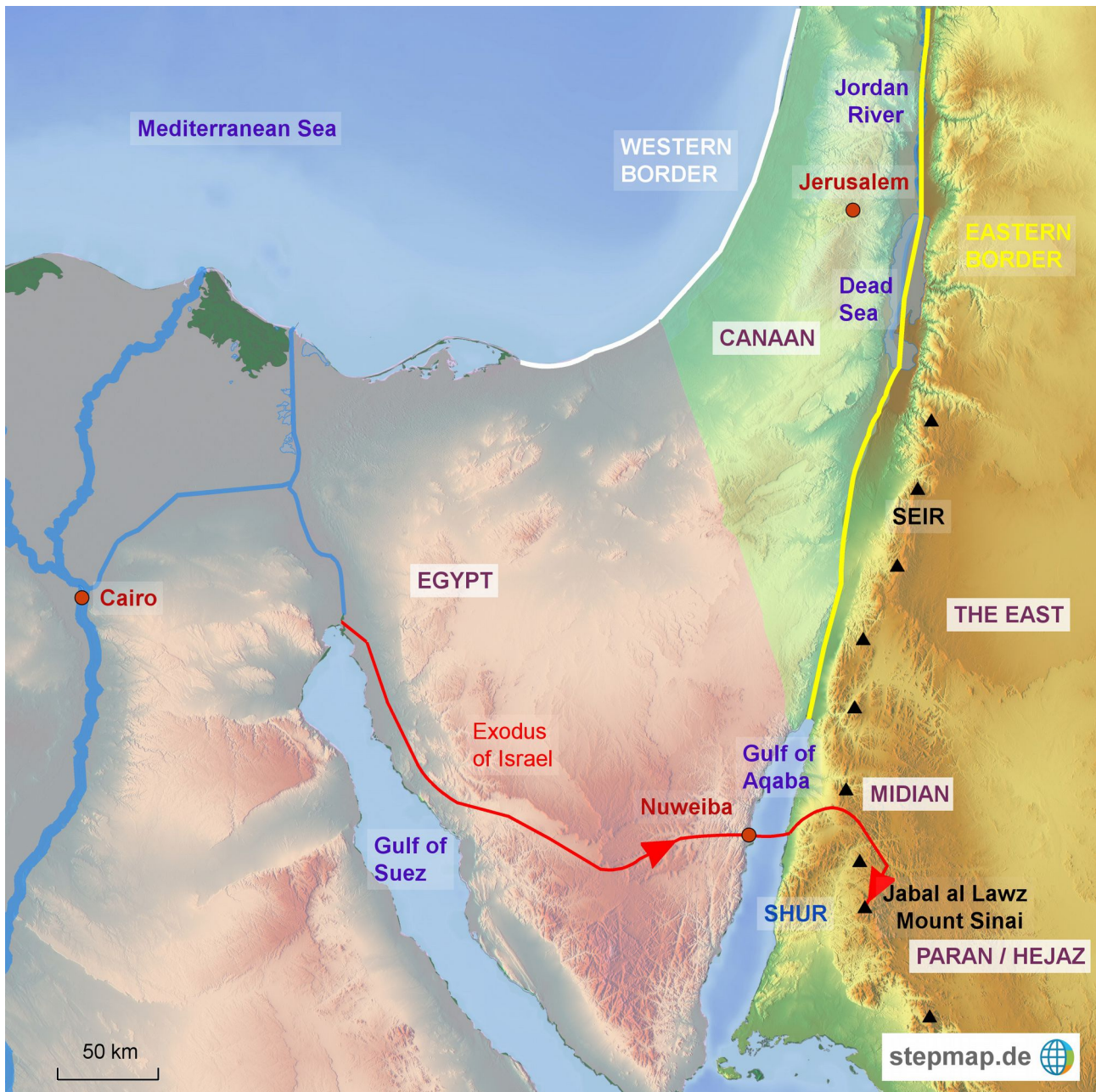
Unfortunately most Bible translations have the tendency to render "facing" as "at odds" or "in conflict with his brothers," as though Muslims were destined to be always in conflict with Jews and Christians. Some translations render it less confrontationally as "in the presence of his brothers." But literally it means "in front of" or "before the face of his brothers."

A comparison with other Bible verses, however, establishes the meaning of "east of" for contexts where *al pney* is used geographically (1 Kings 17:3,5; Zechariah 14:4). If Shur is said to be opposite or **east of Egypt and east of the place where Abraham had lived** it is highly probable that it was located on the Arabian Peninsula i. e. on the eastern side of the Gulf of Aqaba (Genesis 25:18; 1 Samuel 15:7). The question is: where was the Eastern border of Egypt? Was the Sinai Peninsula part of Egypt or not? We will answer this question in #7 below.

2. God told Moses that the Red Sea which Israel crossed should later be one of the borders of Israel. The opposite border he defined as the "Sea of the Philistines," which definitely is the Mediterranean Sea (Exodus 23:31). This makes the Red Sea an **eastern border of Israel**, which only its Gulf of Aqaba qualifies for. It would not have made any sense to describe the Mediterranean Sea as opposite of the Gulf of Suez as can easily be seen on map C (after point no. 10 below).
3. At over 2,580 m/8,465 ft Jabal al Lawz in Saudi Arabia is considerably **higher** than the so called Jabal Musa or "Mount Sinai" (2,285 m/7,497 ft) in the Sinai Peninsula of today.
4. Unlike the small plain near Jabal Musa, the **plain** near Jabal al Lawz can easily accommodate a gathering of several millions of people.
5. Apostle Paul said that Mount Sinai was **in Arabia**. And he should know because he said so after he himself went there (Galatians 1:17; 4:24).

6. The place where the Israelites crossed the Red Sea is called Pi ha-Hiroth meaning **mouth of the gorges** (Exodus 14:2), which would be a good description of the place where modern day Nuweiba on the western shore of the Gulf of Aqaba is located. Here you find a vast floodplain for the people of Israel to gather before crossing over to the Arabian Peninsula with its Jabal al Lawz. In times of heavy rains several torrents disgorge their waters, the largest of which is called Wadi Watir. No one has ever identified a similar place on the African coast of the Gulf of Suez or close to the marshlands north of it. Therefore, the best place to situate the crossing site is Nuweiba, which supports the claim that Mount Sinai was on the Arabian Peninsula.
7. All old and new maps available confirm that from the time long before Moses until today the **Sinai Peninsula** has belonged to **Egypt**, and its border with Palestine has been a creek called "The Egyptian Creek." An exodus from Egypt would not have been complete before the Israelites had left the official territory of Egypt. If Mount Sinai was still in Egypt, it would make no sense to read several times: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:1).
8. Usually the crossing of the Red Sea is considered to be the event of **final deliverance** from Israel's Egyptian oppressors.
9. The **only undisputed location** mentioned in the Bible on the shore of the Red Sea (Yam Suph) is Eilat at the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba (1 Kings 9:26). Yam Suph is mostly translated "Sea of Reeds", but it could be also translated "Sea of End" referring to the end of the Egyptian captivity and the Egyptian army.
10. If both of the following statements are taken together – Ishmael lived "east of his brothers" and "east of Egypt" – the map clearly shows that what lies **east of Canaan AND Egypt** definitely cannot be the Sinai Peninsula. This should settle the argument once and for all. Shur could not have been west of the line that runs through the Gulf of Aqaba and the Dead Sea.

MAP C: The borders of Canaan



So where is Shur? It probably must have been Ishmael's first destination and the westernmost place of his future Eastern territory. This is where he travelled on his sad, yet hopeful exodus from Canaan together with his mother. Later on, the Israelites came to the very same place, this time with probably more than two million people. Hagar and Ishmael were just two, and they did not have a pillar of cloud guiding them by day and a pillar of fire by night. They did not undergo the wonderful experience of the Red Sea that opened its waters to rescue them. On their exodus into the desert, Hagar and Ishmael had to struggle in faith and submission to stick to God's promises. Should we not admire their faith?

The scope of the territory

Ishmael and his sons "dwelt from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt

as you go toward Assyria" (Genesis 25:18). This was the scope of the territory. Havilah must have been at the opposite side either far in the east, somewhere close to the Persian Gulf or down in the south close to the Horn of Africa. Therefore, "the land of the East" is another name for the whole Arabian Peninsula, including parts of Syria and Mesopotamia.

Ishmael's faith indeed bore fruit. He believed in God's promises and inherited vast areas. The promise given to his father Abraham was fulfilled in him, as his descendants are now as countless as the sand. We may imagine his astonishment if Ishmael had known about the petroleum and gas reserves lying beneath the sand and what riches and possibilities it would provide for his descendants one day. What a hidden blessing!

The Arabian Desert became the cradle of the Jewish people during their exodus from Egypt. God had sent Ishmael there to prepare the way for them. This is where Moses and then the whole people of Israel came to receive the ten commandments and their spiritual formation.

The Desert of Paran

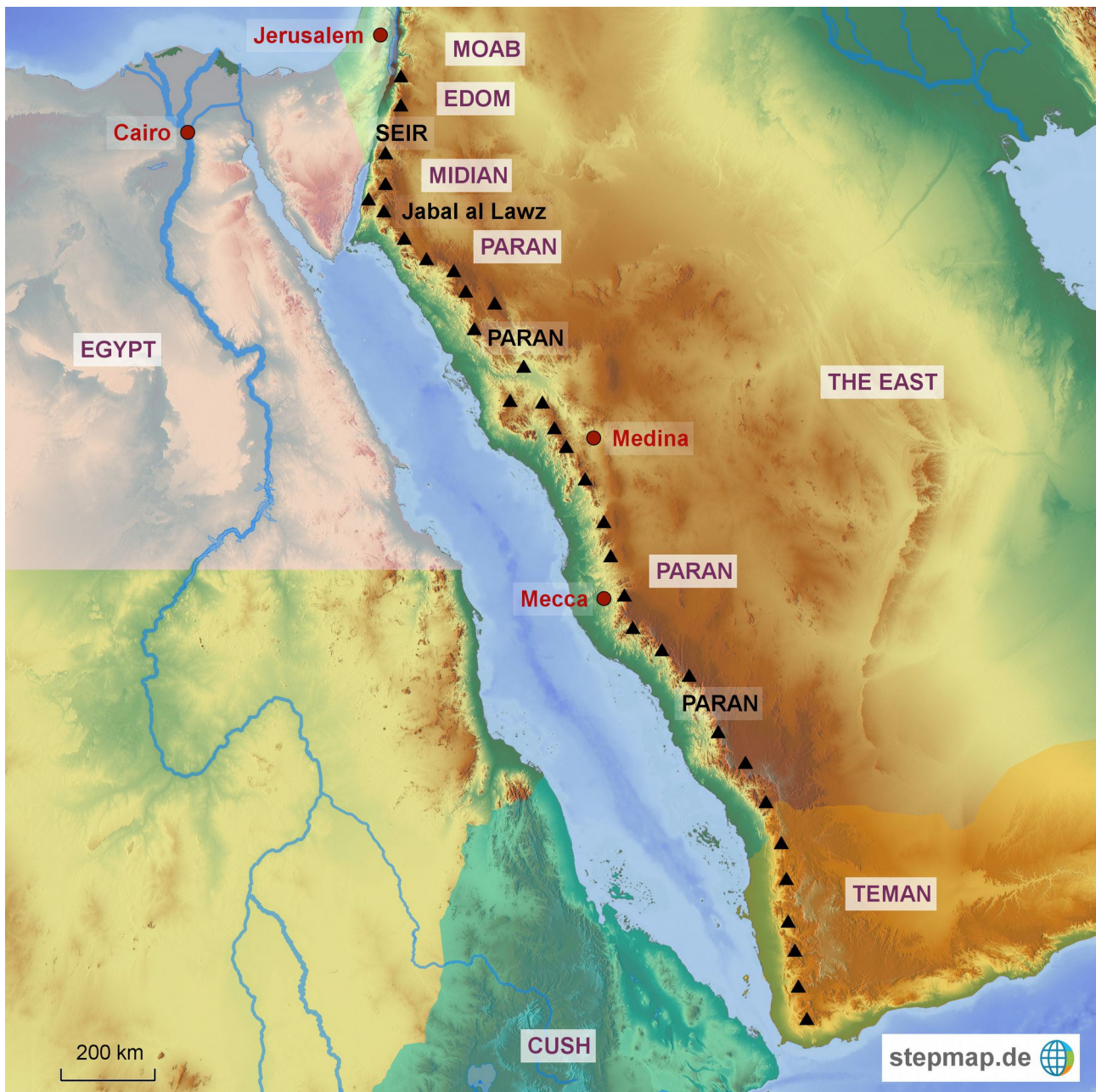
Scripture says that Ishmael first settled in the "Wilderness of Paran" (Genesis 21:21) – another mysterious name; and if we are interested in Ishmael's spiritual significance in the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham, the name of Paran will be as important to us as the places we have identified so far. Since Paran became Ishmael's first home in the East, those who have some place in their heart for Ishmael will be interested in the home of their new friend.

Paran was the desert location where the Israelites camped after they left Mount Sinai (Numbers 10:12). Paran has been considered by some historians and scientists to be the western region of Saudi Arabia, the so called Hejaz with its cities Mecca and Medina. While the Wilderness of Shur became the country of his brother Midian and other Eastern relatives like Moab and Edom, Paran is where Ishmael settled.

Paran is more mysterious than Shur because, according to the Bible, this is where God came from when He met the people of Israel. Moses said: "The LORD came from Sinai, and dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, and He came with ten thousands of saints; from His right hand came a fiery law for them" (Deuteronomy 33:2). These three mountainous regions must be somehow connected. Please take time to study the following map: "Seir" is the mountainous region of Edom stretching from the Dead Sea to the south east of the Araba Desert, maybe until Jabal al Lawz (Mount Sinai), where the mountain range makes a turn. When Moses recorded the above statement, Israel had already passed the mountains of Seir and camped north of them in the plains of Moab (Deuteronomy 34:1). So Paran probably included

the whole second arm of the mountain range that continues on until Mecca and Yemen and the desert land surrounding it. This is the historic region of the Hejaz.

MAP D: The Arabian Desert II



There is another interesting verse concerning Paran: "God comes from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran ... His splendour covers the sky, and his praise fills the earth" (Habakkuk 3:3 CJB). Teman means "south" and has been connected to Edom and Saudi Arabia. In post-biblical Hebrew Teman has even become the name for Yemen. This implies a southern location for Paran. If this is true, it means that God set off from southern Arabia to meet His people like a bridegroom to pick up His bride from Egypt and lead it into the Arabian Desert. As Prophet Hosea said, He did it to speak to her in a special way. There on Mount Sinai He made His covenant with her.

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her. I will give her her vineyards from there ... she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt. 'And it shall be, in that day,' says the LORD, 'that you will call Me "My Husband," and no longer call Me "My Master," ... I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in loving-kindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, and you shall know the LORD'" (Hosea 2:14-16.19).

Even more convincing for a southern location of Paran is this verse: "Then they arose from Midian and came to Paran; and they took men with them from Paran and came to Egypt" (1. Kings 11:18). Once Hadad, Prince of Edom, had to flee from King David who had entered Edom with his army. Hadad fled to Midian (i. e. Shur, Mount Sinai). From there he continued on to Paran. It would not have made sense for a fugitive to turn around and head back towards his pursuer. Therefore Paran must have stretched further down south.

The text says that from there they took men with them and then came to Egypt, which means that they headed directly across the Red Sea, probably on a ship of the Pharaoh. The map of the Arabian Desert repeated below, shows their likely route.

The Arabian Desert I (Repeat of MAP B)



Having found the mountains of Seir, Shur, Sinai, Paran, and Teman in Arabia we might start to understand why there is a sense of awe in the Arabian soul when the Hejaz is mentioned. This sense of awe goes farther back than the Muslim appreciation for the region around Mecca and Medina; it therefore seems reasonable to suggest that this admiration should be shared by Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike. All those who share feelings of fascination and homeliness for this region covering the whole western shoreline of Arabia will find it much easier to interact as brothers should.

Conclusion 3

This chapter has shown that Ishmael and the sons of Keturah were both sent to the land of the east. Also the descendants of Abraham's brothers are said to have lived in the lands of the Children of the East. "The East" started east of a

line that went through the Jordan River, the Dead Sea and the Red Sea's Gulf of Aqaba. It stretched all the way across the Arabian Peninsula into Mesopotamia, to the Persian Gulf, and to the coast opposite of the Horn of Africa. Here lies a world of mystery and fascination. This is where God came from to lead Israel out of Egypt, and this is where He proclaimed the Ten Commandments. Here was the cradle of the Children of Israel, and from here the Children of the East have influenced the course of world history until today.

The next chapter will show how the Children of the East are identified in Scripture as the Arabs, and how Arab identity was never a matter of genetic or racial purity, but rather consisted of a mix of various Abrahamic families. Later on, they intermingled with other peoples of the Arabian peninsula to form the Middle Eastern culture. We will see how they saved their Messianic brothers twice, and how God taught them to love their enemies, i. e. to love each other.

THE ARABS

Helpers of Their Messianic Brothers

The aim of the following chapter is to show that the Children of the East are the Arabs living in Arabia, the "Land of the East." Therefore Ishmael's blessings are for all of them. One example is the Queen of Sheba; we will look into her Arabian origins. Another example is red-haired Esau who wanted to kill his brother Jacob. We will see how his hatred towards his brother turned into an Arabian blessing. The last example in this chapter are the ravens who fed Prophet Elijah. Here we will ask the question whether these were really ravens or not ...

The Children of Arabia

Knowing much more now about the territory of Abraham's non-Messianic relatives, let us look at how Scripture applies the term, "Children of the East." The first verse we want to study appears in the context of God's judgement. Here we will just pay attention to the wording.

"Arise ye, go up to Kedar, and destroy the Children of the East" (Jeremiah 49:28 ASV).

Kedar is Ishmael's second son and therefore a child of the East: yet this verse puts him in a special position. It does not exclude him from the Children of the East, nor does it say that all Children of the East live in his territory; but it emphasises one of their ethnic elements. The same can be found in other texts of the Bible. The first two sons of Ishmael are mentioned in Scripture much more often than the other ten. One of them is indeed Kedar – which gives him a privileged status among the Arabs. In the following text, for example, Kedar is highlighted again:

"Arabia and all the princes of Kedar were your regular merchants" (Ezekiel 27:21).

This verse is part of an elegy on the city of Tyrus. It seems that Arabia and the princes of Kedar are synonymous in Scripture – as well as the land and the Children of the East.

The Holy Scriptures speak of "all the kings of Arabia, and ... all the kings of the

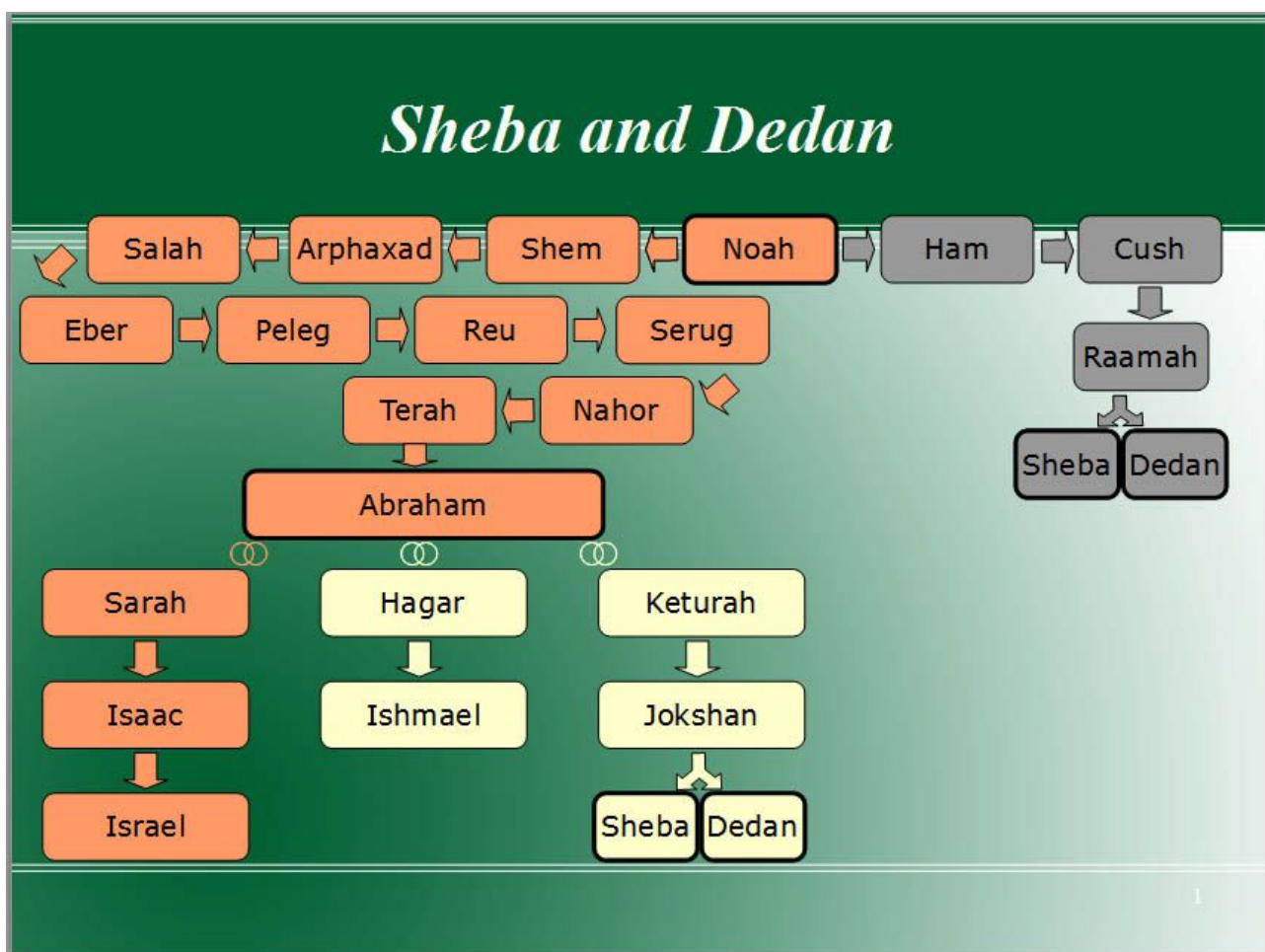
mingled peoples, the Arabia that dwells in the desert” (Jeremiah 25:24 JUB). The Hebrew word Arab actually means “to mingle.” This is its definition.

The desert of Arabia is the homeland of a mixed people made up of the Children of the East. Moreover there are also other people who belong to the mixed multitude of Arabia beside the descendants of Ishmael and his brothers, the sons of Keturah. Who are they? Before we answer this question let us return to Keturah's sons whose story and names were analysed in the previous chapter.

Sheba and Dedan: heirs to Cush

To avoid confusion with the personages introduced in this chapter and their relationships with each other and the wider family refer to the diagrams showing the family trees included in this chapter. I have tried to insert them close to the places in the text where they are needed: but they are also accessible through the table of contents.

CHART II: Sheba and Dedan



Surely you have heard of the Queen of Sheba who visited famous King

Solomon and brought him delicious fragrance made of various spices, jewels, and an enormous amount of gold. Later on we will discover more about her. Yet we may already say something about the myth-enshrouded origin of her ancestor Sheba and his brother Dedan. Why myth-enshrouded? Are they not two of Abraham's and Keturah's grandsons (Genesis 25:3), the sons of Jokshan, Abraham's fourth son?

Strangely enough, they were not the first ones called "Sheba" and "Dedan" in the Bible. About nine generations before, we read in Genesis that Noah's grandson Cush had had two grandsons with the same names (Genesis 10:7). After the confusion of tongues at the tower of Babel the descendants of Noah's son Ham, to which Cush belonged, migrated to the south into the Arabian Peninsula, and from there they later crossed over to the Horn of Africa. This is how Cush came to be the Hebrew name for Ethiopia, which is located exactly where their crossing took place, in East Africa, as you can see on the following map.

MAP E: Migration of Cush



Therefore Cush's grandson Sheba must have been the founder of the famous kingdom of Sheba on both sides of the Red Sea – the Arabian Peninsula and Yemen on its eastern shore, and Ethiopia on its western shore.

Yet when Abraham's grandsons were born, their father Jokshan named them after these two Cushite brothers, as we might call them if we refer to their grandfather Cush. We might also call them Hamite brothers if we refer to their great grandfather Ham. Why did Jokshan name his sons after the Sheba and Dedan of old? Were those Hamite brothers an example worth imitating? Would a father who felt himself to be a spiritual heir of Abraham call his sons after two Hamite heroes? Not likely, unless he had a good reason for doing so. And the good reason seems to be that the new Sheba and Dedan should repopulate the South Arabian regions once populated by Sheba and Dedan of old.

Almost certainly, East Africa was much more attractive as a place to live than the hostile desert of Arabia, which is probably why the descendants of the old Sheba and Dedan had migrated into Africa. Only in this way can we explain the quite distinct ethnic difference between Arabs on the Arabian Peninsula and Africans on the adjacent continent.

Yet, the existence of two different "Shebas," one Cushite and the other Abrahamic, may be the reason why, until today, we have two traditions about the origin of the Queen of Sheba: some suggest that she came from Ethiopia, others say from Yemen. In the first case she would have been an African, in the second one an Arab.

Whatever the answer might be, this famous queen appeared at a point in history when peace was the overall characteristic of the kingdom of Israel. Never before or after King Solomon's reign, whose name itself meant peace (the name is derived from the Hebrew word *shalom*), has Israel enjoyed such a time of peace!

Midian: intermarriage between Abraham's and Ham's descendants

Another important factor which contributed to the mixed ethnicity of the Children of the East is that there seems to have been some intermarriage between the descendants of Noah's sons Ham and Shem (Abraham's ancestor). One example is Moses' wife, called a Cushite or Ethiopian in Scripture (Numbers 12:1).

Did Moses marry an African woman like Joseph and Ishmael did? Was she not a daughter of a priest in Midian, the land named after Abraham's sixth son? In this case, she would be a real daughter of Abraham, and calling her a Cushite would not have been a nice way to treat her. The answer could be that "Cushite" was an epithet given to her by Aaron and Miriam because she belonged to a people who had intermarried with the original Cushite inhabitants of Arabia.

We know that her family members were Kenites, the descendants of one of the ten nations who had inhabited the land promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:19-21). On the other hand, the Kenites were one of three nations that should not be driven out of Canaan (Joshua 3:10). The Kenites had probably joined the people of Midian and embraced the faith of Abraham, even though they were descendants of Ham through Cush, and not from the line of Shem.

Another option would be that some Midianites were called "Kenites" because they lived in the land of the old Kenites after they had left for Africa. This would be a similar situation as with Sheba and Dedan. Where is the truth?

Probably somewhere in between. As we know, Moses' father-in-law was a highly honoured priest in Midian. He might have had some Cushite blood running in his veins, yet we would rather expect this office to be filled by a descendant of Abraham.

Let us come back to Ishmael. Both his mother and his wife were Egyptians. Mizraim, the forefather of the Egyptians was Cush's younger and Canaan's older brother. All three were sons of Noah's son Ham (Genesis 10:6). However, about the family background of Keturah, Midian's mother, we do not know anything.

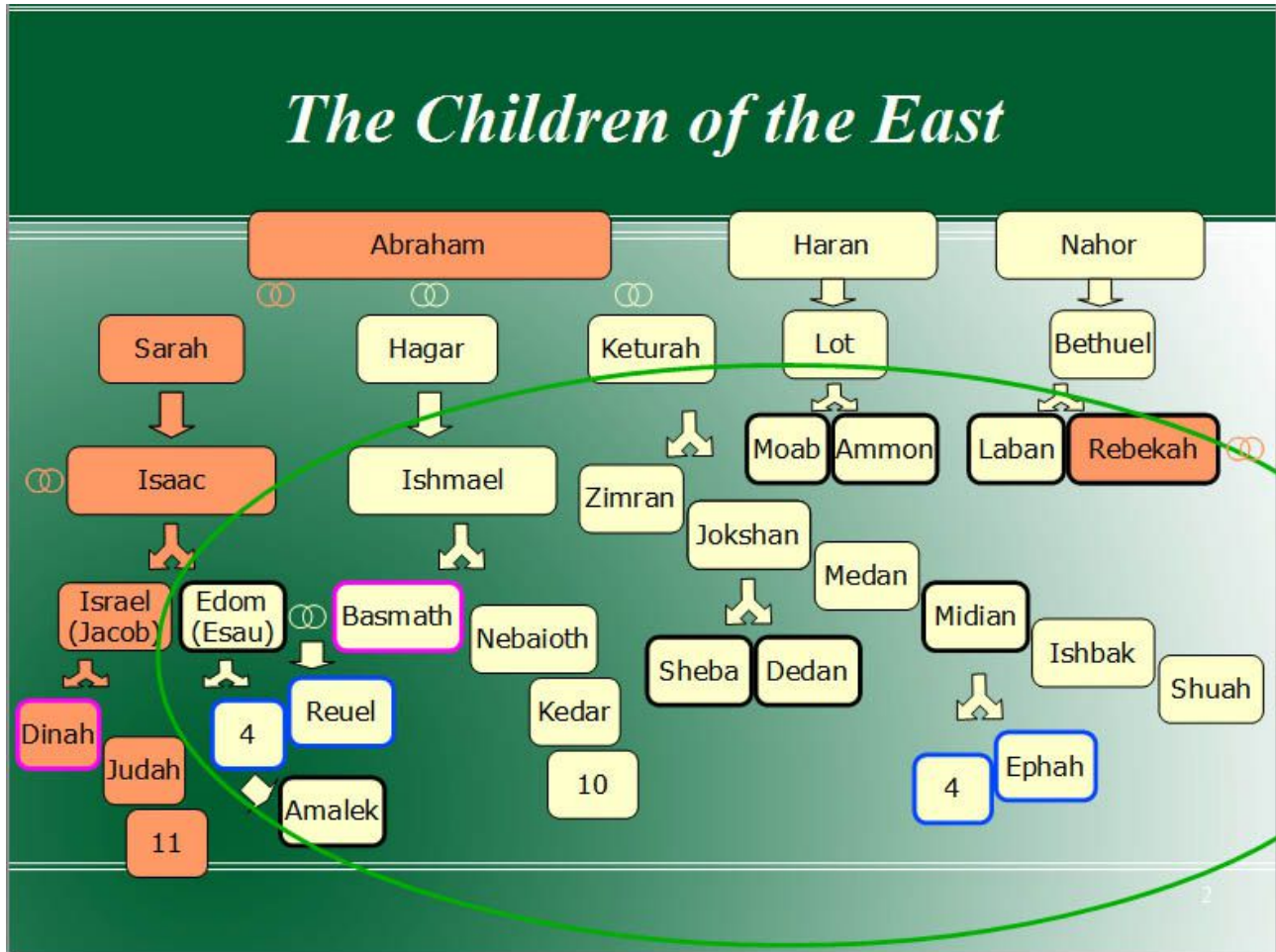
At that point, we may affirm from the examples of Sheba, Moses wife Zipporah, Ishmael's mother Hagar and Ishmael's wife that the Sons of the East were not a genetically pure Abrahamic race consisting of descendants from Hagar, Keturah, and Abraham's brother Nahor. Inter-marriage with the Hamites who had migrated through Arabia earlier, left its traces in this culture. A similar thing happened to the Jews when a lot of Egyptians and people of other nationalities joined them on their exodus from Egypt. But genetics and ethnics are not the topic of this book. Rather we are dealing with identity and culture; and it is clear that Ishmael had shaped an Arab culture, a melting pot for the Abrahamic family and all those who wanted to join it. Ishmael is the father of an identity that has influenced the world until today – through Islam.

God has always been willing to bless people irrespective of their ethnic background. He wanted to bless all people through Abraham. Anyone is invited to join one of those identities provided by Abraham, be it Ishmael or Israel. Anyone may choose to join these identities culturally or merely spiritually. But all may enjoy freedom through complete surrender to God and through accepting his gifts.

Edom went east

Now we come to a nation whose founder was a son of Abraham's second-born Isaac: he was neither a descendant of Ishmael nor of Keturah nor of Abraham's brother Nahor nor of Noah's son Ham. His name is Edom, just another name for Esau (pbuh). Esau was Isaac's eldest son and twin brother of Jacob (later called "Israel"). Since he was Abraham's grandson, he is part of the family tree that belongs to the Children of the East through Isaac.

CHART III: The Children of the East



Together with Midian, Esau is highlighted through his grandson Amalek as an ethnic part of the Children of the East: "Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude" (Judges 7:12). By mentioning Edom, the prophet Isaiah also emphasises Esau's name as part of the Children of the East – this time together with the sons of Lot – by referring to "Edom," Esau's other name:

"Together they shall plunder the people of the East; they shall lay their hand on Edom and Moab; and the people of Ammon shall obey them" (Isaiah 11:14).

Moab and Ammon were both Abraham's grandnephews. Their father Lot (pbuh) was a son of Abraham's brother Haran (see family tree again). This is one more confirmation that not only those among Abraham's descendants who lived east of the Jordan were children of the East, but also the descendants of his brothers who lived in the west. In this way Isaac's wife Rebekah (pbuh) was also a child of the East. She was Isaac's first cousin once removed since her grandfather Nahor also had been a brother of Abraham. I have included them in the tree, too.

What was the story of Esau? God chose his younger twin brother Jacob as heir to the promises. His choice was already revealed to his mother Rebekah, Isaac's wife, during her pregnancy. Like Sarah, though, she planned a scheme to accelerate the fulfilment of God's promise. While Sarah proposed a polygamous relation to her husband, Rebekah told her son to lie. We have come full circle because all the misery in Abraham's life started with his lie about his wife when they were in Egypt. Rebekah's lie now led to such bitter hatred on the part of Esau that Jacob needed to flee from him. However, as with Hagar's situation, God turned the problem into a blessing. Just as He blessed Ishmael and used his heritage to bless the descendants of Isaac, God also blessed Esau and used his heritage to bless the descendants of Jacob.

Immediately before Jacob met Esau again, he went through one of the most profound experiences of his life. Hearing that Esau was on his way to confront him with 400 soldiers, he feared for his life and decided to send abundant gifts ahead of him for Esau while he continued praying for the safety of his family.

In the middle of this mental state of anguish and unable to sleep, as he was reviewing all his past sins, he was suddenly attacked by the angel of the LORD. At that moment he understood what true jihad is: spiritual wrestling with God. After struggling with God's messenger all night, Jacob cried out: "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" (Genesis 32:26). This is how Jacob received his new name "Israel" from this angel (Verse 28): it means, "God is victorious." Consequently, the next day Esau and Jacob met and were reconciled immediately.

"But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (Genesis 33:4).

From there Esau moved to the mountains of Seir in the south-east to allow Jacob enough space west of the Jordan (Genesis 36:6-8).

God Himself confirmed in Scripture that He had "given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession" (Deuteronomy 2:5). Concerning Edom's territory, Seir, God said: "I turned his mountains into a wasteland, and gave his inheritance to the desert jackals" (Malachi 1:3 HCSB). This is why this land is also called "the desert of Edom" (2 Kings 3:8 CJB).

Therefore there is no doubt that the Land of Edom is also part of the Arabian desert.

With his move eastwards, Edom automatically entered the territory of the Children of the East; and this makes Edom so interesting to us. He is the only descendant of Isaac who was transferred from the Messianic to the Ishmaelite

line. This is why Scripture distinguishes between the Children of the East and the Children of *Israel*. It does not distinguish between the Children of the East and the Children of *Isaac* because out of Isaac, only Jacob remained the father of the Messianic line. This is why he was called later on "Israel." Isaac's other son Edom changed sides and was assimilated by the Children of the East.

It means that Jacob had first tried to fulfil God's promise by deception; but as he repented and sought to make peace with his brother, he surrendered to God, found peace in Him and lost all fear. What a lesson to learn! Just as in the time of the Patriarchs, there is no need for lies and fears between Jews, Christians, and Muslims today. As the Scripture says:

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love." (1 John 4:18 CEB).

Interestingly, Edom had been the reason for Jacob's flight to the Children of the East. Then, later on, Edom, as the elder brother, humbly repented and left the whole land of Canaan to Jacob. By doing so he settled down in the East and became himself a Son of the East connecting the East to the West. Another lesson for us to learn! There is indeed a need for affection and repentance, for love and brotherhood between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. There is still a need for a heartfelt and tearful embrace among the spiritual Children of Abraham.

"Reuel" = Friend of God

Much to the sorrow of his parents, Esau married two Canaanite women. In order to make his parents happy again he decided to marry a third woman named Basmath (meaning *fragrance* or *smile*). She was his cousin and the only daughter of Ishmael mentioned in the Bible (Genesis 28:9; 36:3). It is interesting that Ishmael had twelve sons and one daughter, exactly like his nephew Jacob did. Not Esau's move to the East, but rather his marriage with Basmath confirmed his desire to come under the blessings of Ishmael. After all, Jacob had managed to get the Messianic blessing that their father Isaac had intended to give to him, Esau, his first-born son.

This is where we need to mention the shocking story of Dinah (pbuh), Jacob's daughter. In harmony with the meaning of her name ("judgement") her brothers executed the man who had abused her. Once again the Messianic line had nothing to be proud of. While Dinah's story is most shameful, the Eastern line was filled with a blessing through Ishmael's daughter Basmath, who decided together with her husband to name her son "Reuel" (Verse 4), which means "friend of God."

For your convenience you will find the above family tree again here:

The Children of the East

This genealogical chart, titled "The Children of the East," illustrates the lineage of Abraham, Haran, and Nahor. Abraham is the central figure, with Sarah as his wife and Isaac as his son. Isaac's sons are Jacob (Israel) and Esau (Edom). Jacob's sons are Dinah, Judah, and Amalek. Esau's sons are Reuel and Amalek. Haran is Abraham's brother, with Lot as his son. Lot's sons are Moab and Ammon. Nahor is Abraham's nephew, with Bethuel as his son. Bethuel's sons are Laban and Rebekah. Rebekah is Isaac's wife. The chart also shows the descendants of Ishmael, Keturah, and Lot, including Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. A green line traces the lineage from Abraham through Isaac to Jacob and his sons. A blue line traces the lineage from Haran through Lot to Moab and Ammon. A red line traces the lineage from Nahor through Bethuel to Laban and Rebekah. The chart uses various symbols to indicate relationships: double circles for marriage, single circles for parentage, and arrows for descent. Numbers in boxes (4, 10, 11) likely represent the number of descendants or a specific count.

```
graph TD
    Abraham --> Sarah
    Abraham --> Isaac
    Isaac --> Jacob
    Jacob --> Dinah
    Jacob --> Judah
    Jacob --> Amalek
    Isaac --> Esau
    Esau --> Reuel
    Esau --> Amalek
    Haran --> Lot
    Lot --> Moab
    Lot --> Ammon
    Nahor --> Bethuel
    Bethuel --> Laban
    Bethuel --> Rebekah
    Rebekah --> Isaac
    Abraham --> Hagar
    Hagar --> Ishmael
    Ishmael --> Zimran
    Ishmael --> Jokshan
    Ishmael --> Medan
    Ishmael --> Midian
    Ishmael --> Ishbak
    Ishmael --> Shuah
    Abraham --> Keturah
    Keturah --> Zimran
    Keturah --> Jokshan
    Keturah --> Medan
    Keturah --> Midian
    Keturah --> Ishbak
    Keturah --> Shuah
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The special message of structural parallels

Behind all of this there is a special message for the children of Abraham: treat each other with loving kindness! God wants to bless the world through both

lines. He wants you to be neighbours for eternity. The Messianic line should not look down at the Eastern line. Ishmael had 12 princes and one princess long before Jacob did. Some of the parallels have started in the Eastern line and were only later reflected in the Messianic line, often, sadly, with a shameful twist.

Also the sons of Nahor, Abraham's brother, became part of the Eastern line, at least some of them. Interestingly, Nahor was also blessed with 12 sons even before Ishmael (Genesis 22:21), and without being under an Abrahamic blessing back then! We may assume that Nahor's abundance of sons was considered the epitome of divine blessing at that time.

Abraham had also another brother, Haran, about sixty years his senior (Genesis 11:26.32; 12:4). When Haran died, he left two children (Lot and Milka). Abraham took care of his nephew Lot while his brother Nahor married his niece Milka.

While Nahor fathered twelve sons – eight from Milka and four from Reuma – Abraham and Lot remained childless for many years. When Abraham was finally looking for a wife for his son Isaac, Nahor's eighth son had a daughter named Rebekah, who was old enough to marry him (Genesis 22:23).

So Nahor had already received the blessing that God had promised to Hagar when her son Ishmael fathered twelve sons.

Therefore, dear Children of the East, do not look on those of the Messianic line with arrogance! God has separated you from them to protect them and provide for them. He has blessed you whenever you selflessly have taken care of them, and he also used you to chastise them whenever it was necessary; but please always keep in mind God's glory and the well-being of your brothers. God often chooses the last, the small, the weak, the despised, the sick, the abandoned. He does this on purpose to make him first, great, strong, honoured, well, and accepted. The following texts confirm this truth:

"Listen, my beloved brethren: has God not chosen the **poor** of this world to be **rich** in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?" (James 2:5). "Out of the mouth of **babes** and nursing infants You have ordained **strength**, Because of Your enemies, That You may silence the enemy and the avenger" (Psalm 8:2). "Do not fear, **little** flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). "Did He not find you as an **orphan** and give you shelter? Did He not find you wandering about and give you guidance? And did He not find you in need and make you **rich**?" (adh-Dhuha 93:6-8 Muhammad Sarwar).

Our way of communicating is usually characterised by pride of status. It is time to learn to think in a godly manner, condescending to lift up those of low social status or different cultural background. Then our relationships will build faith and peace in the world that is desperately in need of selfless love.

Elijah and the Arabs

We have analysed some of the few verses in the Bible where the term "Arabs" is used; we have seen Hamitic influence leaving its traces in Arab culture and a whole tribe of Isaac joining the Sons of the East. Now let us fast-forward in history to the time when the kingdom of David and his son Solomon had split into a northern part (Israel) and a southern part (Judah). The northern kingdom became notorious for its Baal worship established through the marriage of King Ahab with the pagan princess Jezebel. A terrible drought was the consequence of their idolatrous worship, and Prophet Elijah, who had remained faithful to God and had prophesied the drought, was blamed for it.

Scripture reports that Prophet Elijah (pbuh) hid three years from King Ahab near the creek of Cherith. Hidden between the mountains of what is Jordan today, he drank the water of the stream and ate the food brought to him by ... all the translations say: "ravens" (1 Kings 17:3-6). It should be remembered, however, that ravens are unclean according to the Torah (Leviticus 11:15)! Would it not be highly unusual for God to choose such creatures to deliver bread and meat to the prophet whose name became symbolic for calling God's people back to the Torah (Malachi 4:4-5)?

Meat was only allowed as food for God's people when it was from clean animals, slaughtered in a way that ensured that all the blood was drained from the meat, because blood was forbidden in the diet (Leviticus 7:26). If God had made the miracle to send ravens with food for Elijah, would he not have had to create useful meat in the beaks of these ravens or let them steal it from the next settlement where animals would be slaughtered accordingly? Of course nothing is impossible to God!

But there is another way to understand the word translated as *ravens*. *Ravens* is 'orvim in Hebrew. With the change of one short vowel it would be 'arvim meaning Arabs. Yet short vowels were not written in Hebrew at that time. The vowel signs that we find in the holy texts were added more than a millennium later by the so called Masoretes. In fact in written form the words for Arabs and ravens looked absolutely alike. Here you see the word in Phoenician script, which provided the letters used back then in Elijah's time:

The image shows the word 'arvim in Phoenician script, which is a cursive style of writing. The characters are black on a white background. The word is written in a way that is very similar to the Hebrew word 'orvim, which is used for ravens in the Bible. This visual similarity is the point of the argument being made in the text.

We have already seen that Jacob found refuge among the Children of the East

when persecuted by his brother Edom. Now it is most likely that Arabs saved Elijah from starvation when he had to flee from King Ahab. In the next chapters we will see that the Children of the East played also a crucial role on several other occasions when a prophet of God was persecuted by his own people of Israel: they saved Joseph when he was persecuted by his brothers, they offered Moses sanctuary when he was persecuted by Pharaoh and they provided the money for the exile of Jesus when he was persecuted by King Herod. There is a message in all of that: Muslims, Jews, and Christians are brothers. In critical moments of history God inspired some of those who identified with Ishmael to help their persecuted brothers. In the medieval ages many Jews and dissident Christians who were persecuted by the Roman church indeed fled into the safe haven of Islamic countries where they were welcome and could settle.

Conclusion 4

It has been shown in this chapter that the Children of the East were identical with the Arabs. All of Abraham's descendants who did not belong to Israel were part of them. We should also add to the Children of the East several descendants of Abraham's brothers who lived east of the Jordan River and the Gulf of Aqaba. In the same way as Ishmael left Canaan, and left the Messianic blessing to his younger and weaker brother Isaac, Edom stepped out of Canaan and joined his cousins from the East.

Arabs by definition means "mixed people." They inherited the part of the world called Arabia from the Hamites who moved on to Africa, and the desert has become proverbial as their land. The Children of the East kept alive the consciousness of their Abrahamic heritage through names like "Reuel," which was the scriptural title of Abraham, meaning "friend of God." Therefore the Arabs are not primarily united in an ethnic identity, but a cultural one. They also sheltered persecuted prophets from their own brothers as we saw in the story of the ravens who fed Elijah. The following chapter will feature more events of that sort.

THE EGYPT-ISHMAEL CONNECTION

Joseph, Moses, Jethro, and Job

In this chapter we will analyse what Joseph and Moses (pbuh), who are famous for their career in Egypt, owe to the Ishmaelites: not only their safety in critical moments of their lives, but also many of their spiritual insights. The book of Job is one such Ishmaelite source of insight. We will also see to what extent the settling down of Jacob in Egypt as well as the exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt are closely linked to the Ishmaelites. All of this was part of a dynamic between Egypt and the East, which I call the Egypt-Ishmael connection.

But first things first:

The Joseph story

Joseph was Jacob's preferred son because he was his favourite wife Rachel's firstborn. This is why his half-brothers hated him. He was the only one among his brothers who got a special coat from his father as a sign of his particular position. On top of this, he was given prophetic dreams about his pre-eminence over his brothers and even parents (Genesis 37). One of these dreams is the key to understand a prophecy in the book of Revelation about Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). But this the topic for another book.

The moment came when Joseph's older brothers decided to get rid of him. They actually planned to kill him. It all happened at Dothan while they were taking care of their father Jacob's flock. The Bible says that many centuries later, at that very same place, Prophet Elisha (pbuh) was encircled by the Syrian army. The King of Syria wanted to get hold of the prophet with the same evil motives that Joseph's brothers had (2 Kings 6:13-15). Yet Elisha did not have any fear; he prayed that God would open the eyes of his servant for him to be able to see the horses and chariots of fire that God had put around them as a divine protection. In a similar way, God sent riders of a different kind to save Joseph from death.

When they met him, Joseph's brothers stripped him of his coat and cast him into a pit. His eldest brother Reuben convinced the other brothers not to kill him right away, intending to save him later from the pit. We do not know if he would have succeeded, but we know that God had another plan in mind.

There is a balm in Gilead

"There was a company of Ishmaelites, coming from Gilead with their camels, bearing spices, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry them down to Egypt" (Genesis 37:25). Notice who is coming to Joseph's rescue: the Ishmaelites! As traders of spices, balm, and myrrh, they had enough money to pay for Joseph's freedom. Do I really mean "freedom?" Was he not sold to them as a slave? Definitely! But in God's plan this slavery led to greater freedom than what Joseph's family would have ever imagined.

Just for the sake of increasing his value and eventually selling him for good money the Ishmaelites surely treated Joseph very well throughout the journey to Egypt. Since they were trading in the famous "balm of Gilead" with its healing properties, they might have used some of it to heal the bruises that Joseph got when he was thrown into the pit.

This information needs to be digested: Being persecuted by his own brothers, the Children of the East crossed Joseph's way with some Gilead balm for his wounds? What a beautiful example of Samaritan help.

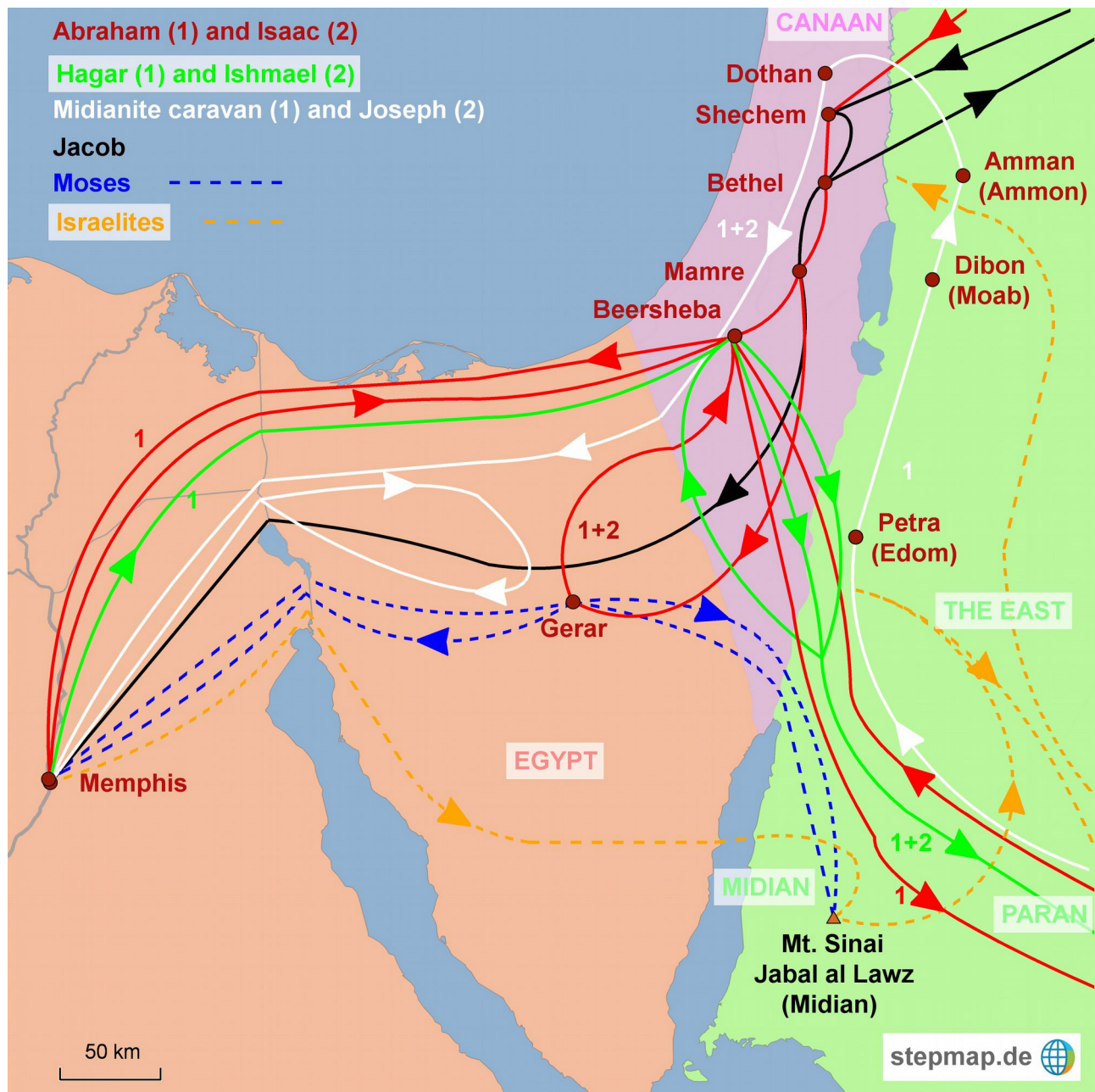
In an upcoming chapter we will study in more detail the Incense Road where the Ishmaelites traded in spices and myrrh; we will discover some important relations to the sanctuary service described in the Torah and see the role of incense in the end-time prophecy of the seven trumpets in the book of Revelation.

Living between two poles: Egypt and the land of the East

The story of Joseph being rescued by the Ishmaelites shows the Egypt-Ishmael connection, but actually it is not the first time when Scripture talks about it.

We know that Abraham's family came from the north and crossed the Euphrates after leaving the Fertile Crescent of Mesopotamia – this is why they were called "Hebrews," which means: "those who crossed over." In Canaan, Abraham settled down between two main civilizations: Egypt and the East (I have called them "poles" here). Due to the famine, he went to Egypt and returned to Canaan with Hagar, his wife's Egyptian servant, but due to strife and jealousy Abraham sent Hagar with her son Ishmael (pbut) to the East. Hagar chose a wife from Egypt for her son, and Abraham sent Keturah's sons also to the East to join Ishmael. The Qur'an even mentions a trip Abraham made to visit his son Ishmael in Mecca (al-Baqara 2:125-127).

MAP F: The Egypt-Ishmael connection I



In the story of Joseph, we hear of the Ishmaelites on their way to Egypt for trade. There might be a special reason for these trade relations with Egypt: their Egyptian grand-grandmother!

When Joseph was taken as a slave to Egypt, he ended up as prime minister of this great country and brought his father Jacob with all of his family to his adoptive nation. Later on they became slaves of the Egyptians. Indeed, God had told Abraham that his seed would become a slave, and this prediction was now fulfilled (Genesis 15:13).

A mixture of Abrahamic nations

The story continues: "So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt" (Genesis 37:28 NIV). Since they are interchangeably called "Midianites" and "Ishmaelites" (Verse 36), one might wonder who these traders were?

Ishmael was Abraham's first son and Midian his sixth. Therefore it should be impossible to be both Ishmaelite and Midianite at the same time. Yet the borders between them were even much more fluid than the borders between Israel and its neighbours. It seems that the Sons of the East have been a mixture of Abrahamic descendants from the beginning.

Another story found in the holy Scriptures identifies the Midianites with the Ishmaelites. When Judge Gideon conquered the Midianites, they brought a lot of earrings with them because, the text says, the Midianites "were Ishmaelites" (Judges 8:24). Obviously earrings were a form of trade mark for them. Ishmael, and not Midian, was the figure of identification for the Arabs.

Through this intermingling the blessing for Ishmael has been extended to all other Abrahamic tribes. It became part of Ishmael's culture of freedom. The term "Arabs" became an appellation for the mix of various relatives of Abraham with those who joined their culture through marriage or other forms of integration. However, even more than two millennia later, some Arabs are said to have been able to track their ancestry back to Ishmael, as it is the case for Prophet Muhammad.

Joseph in Egypt

Let us go back to the story of Joseph. When he arrived in Egypt, he was sold to a high-ranking officer of Pharaoh named Potiphar, who soon upgraded him to being the top manager of his household. But because Joseph refused to become intimate with Potiphar's wife, she got him into jail. There again, Joseph made it to the top, being upgraded to a leading position inside the prison. Later on, he miraculously became prime minister of Egypt, second to none other than Pharaoh himself.

When a famine wreaked havoc in Canaan, Joseph's brothers went down to Egypt to buy food. I warmly recommend anyone to read the whole story of Joseph in Scripture (Genesis 37 through 50). It is a heart-breaking story. I have cried almost each time I have read it through. No other story in Genesis is narrated with so many details. You may of course start in Genesis 12 with the story of Abraham's exodus, since reading the first chapters of this book might have aroused your curiosity; and if you have read it before, you will now surely read it with new eyes. Without going into further details, let us consider the happy end of the story: Joseph and his brothers at last became reconciled

when Joseph said to them:

“And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you” (Genesis 45:5 NIV).

This verse makes it clear: selling Joseph to Egypt turned out to eventually be their “salvation.” Beside the lives of many people in Egypt and other nations, the Sons of the East had saved Joseph's life, his brothers' lives, their father's life, and the lives of many people in Egypt and in other nations from starvation.

Now we understand why Joseph has sometimes been compared to Jesus the Messiah, who, being rejected by his own people, also went to Egypt and returned to his country to save them from spiritual starvation.

The way it started was really sad: his own people had no room for his mother Maryam to stay in Bethlehem; the Jewish leadership of those days was more interested in serving King Herod – the one who persecuted the newborn in Bethlehem – than in serving the Messiah. The only Jews who took an interest in him were a few poor shepherds and the two elderly prophets Anna and Simeon.

During his three-year prophetic ministry the Messiah experienced the same rejection as Joseph, and things turned out even worse. Yet God “caught up” Jesus to Himself and His throne (Revelation 12:5), where he is currently ministering before Him. From the start Jesus has been waiting for his people, the Jews, to come to him in search for spiritual food which can save them from starvation. But like Joseph he does not save only Jews, but also “Egyptians,” which means people from other “nations.”

Joseph invited his family to migrate to Egypt, which they did. There they lived in the most fertile region, the land of Goshen located in the Nile Delta. When his relatives arrived, Joseph went out to meet them. In a similar manner, the Messiah will return as king to this earth to meet us and take us to Paradise.

“Then we who are still alive will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so we will always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:17 HCSB).

The invitation has already been delivered to all of us in written form in Scripture: “My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and

prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (John 14:2-3 NIV).

Moses flees from Egypt to Ishmael

Long after Joseph's death, Jacob's family – the people of Israel – were enslaved by Pharaoh; and once again longed for a deliverer. A child was born, Moses, and again a fascinating story unfolded. Moses was persecuted by the Pharaoh as were all male Israelite newborn babies. In order to protect his life, his parents hid him on the Nile River, where he was found by the Egyptian princess and raised to become the crown prince at Pharaoh's court. At the age of 40, Moses took sides with his Hebrew compatriots and got involved in a dispute, in which he eventually killed an Egyptian. Fearing the death penalty he fled from Egypt and found refuge in the country of Midian, where the Desert of Shur is located. By reaching the land of the East, he entered the territory of Ishmael – Arabia.

Again we find the same pattern. Just as Abraham made the mistake of taking Hagar as a second wife, and as Jacob lied to his father by pretending to be Esau, and as Joseph behaved proudly before his brothers, so now Moses became a murderer! Always the intention of these sincere men was to "help" God to keep His promise; always the result was the same: persecution or expulsion; and always the solution came in form of a refuge provided by the Children of the East.

The priest of Midian: Reuel II

Soon after he arrived in Midian, Moses started working as a shepherd and eventually married Zipporah. His wife was the daughter of Reuel – the second Reuel reported in Scripture (Exodus 2:18; Numbers 10:29), who is better known by his honorific titles Jethro (meaning *excellence*) or Shuaib in the Qur'an. The sheep that Moses kept actually belonged to Reuel; and this is why many people think of Reuel as a rich shepherd. But the most important thing to remember is that he was called "the priest of Midian" (Exodus 2:16; 3:1; 18:1). He was God's prophet and warner for the Midianites.

To escape from Egypt, Moses left the traditional route to Palestine and turned south to Midian. The reason for this detour could have been his desire to meet Jethro, who had the reputation of serving the true God. Three times Scripture calls him "the priest of Midian" (see above). As such, he surely had a strong influence on Moses, who probably regarded him as his spiritual teacher. This is confirmed in the story of Jethro's visit to Moses when, later on, he led about two and a half million Israelites through the wilderness.

"So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, bowed down, and kissed him. And they asked each other about their well-being, and they went into the tent" (Exodus 18:7). The way the meeting is described shows that Jethro received

the highest honour someone could give to another person. The Hebrew word used here for "bow down" is the same as "prostrate" or "worship." Also when Reuel gave advice to Moses regarding administrative issues, Moses "heeded the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said" (Exodus 18:24).

Yet the most impressive passage on Reuel is this one:

"Then Jethro rejoiced for all the good which the LORD had done for Israel, whom He had delivered out of the hand of the Egyptians. And Jethro said, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh, and who has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods; for in the very thing in which they behaved proudly, He was above them.' Then Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took a burnt offering and other sacrifices to offer to God. And Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses' father-in-law before God" (Exodus 18:9-12).

Please notice that Reuel leads the first sacrificial worship service of the people of Israel in the desert! Long before God appointed any priest from among the Israelites, Jethro the Midianite serves as their priest. He comes to meet Moses when he and the multitude have reached Mount Sinai, the very place where Moses once pastored Reuel's sheep, and now the place where God Himself comes to meet with His people. After 400 years of slavery in Egypt the Israelites have forgotten most of the principles of the faith of their fathers, so God has to teach them His laws.

Quite at the beginning of the wandering, the Children of Israel have to learn anew the meaning of the Sabbath Day. God teaches them through the miracle of Manna (Exodus 16). It is right after this first lesson and just before God gives them the Ten Commandments (chapter 20), when Reuel shows up (chapter 18). This is the perfect time for a visit!

We can assume that Reuel, being the Midianite priest of the God of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Midian, and Jacob, is aware of God's law, and has not forgotten it. He surely keeps the Sabbath and all the other divine commandments, because they are still written in his memory and in his heart. This is why God led Moses, the refugee from Egypt, right into his home! The 40 years that he spent in the wilderness of Midian provided the ideal preparation for his present task as a leader of Israel. He had to unlearn a lot of what he had learned at the court of Pharaoh; and Reuel was the best teacher that he could have had for what he needed to learn about the faith of his fathers.

Genesis was written in Arabia

It is generally assumed that Moses wrote the book of Genesis while working as a shepherd in Midian. Before that time, however, he had been a student of

Egyptian sciences – surely not the best environment to strengthen his faith in the true God! And afterwards he was busy leading the people of Israel. But with Reuel as his spiritual teacher and guide, and 40 years as a shepherd in Midian, Moses had both godly tuition and enough time to write; so maybe we can think of Reuel as co-author of the book of Genesis and the first chapters of Exodus.

If this assumption is true, we may recognise the possibility that Moses went to Midian to learn more about his ancestors, because he knew that the stories of the patriarchs were kept alive in the minds of the Children of the East. While the Israelites had lost their roots during their long exile in Egypt, the descendants of Ishmael had preserved their independence and their Abrahamic faith.

In the same way, many Muslims today have kept their belief in the creation, the marriage institution, and the flood account of Genesis while the majority of Jews and Christians have lost it during the last century.

The Wiseman hypothesis, sometimes called the “tablet theory”, is a theory of the authorship and composition of the Book of Genesis suggesting that Moses compiled Genesis from tablets handed down through Abraham and the other patriarchs. Wiseman pointed to more than ten sentences in Genesis that could be interpreted as so called colophons, kind of imprints at the end of a book or manuscript where the name of the author or other facts about its production are given (Genesis 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10,27; 25:12,29; 36:1,9; 37:2). This would divide Genesis into twelve sections.

According to this theory, the first section would have been dictated by God Himself to Adam. The other sections would be reports by Adam, Noah, his three sons, Shem, Terah, Ishmael, Isaac, two by Esau, and one by Jacob. The name of the twelfth section is missing, but it could very well have been Reuel or Moses.

While most of the 12 sections are not longer than 4 chapters, three are longer than 10 chapters. According to the hypothesis the names of two of these lengthy sections would be those of Ishmael and Esau, two Sons of the East. This could well suggest that Moses used their reports extensively because he wrote Genesis in Midian and thus had easier access to their “diaries.”

However the information was gathered, we have every reason to thank God for the very inspiring book of Genesis, edited by Moses under divine inspiration. His sources might have been purely oral. But it is a fact that clay tablets were in extensive use in Mesopotamia and Egypt after the flood and during the time of the patriarchs. They were used for all kinds of literature including essays,

hymns, laws, short stories, recipes, letters, and of course reports. So it is not unlikely that the patriarchs used them too.

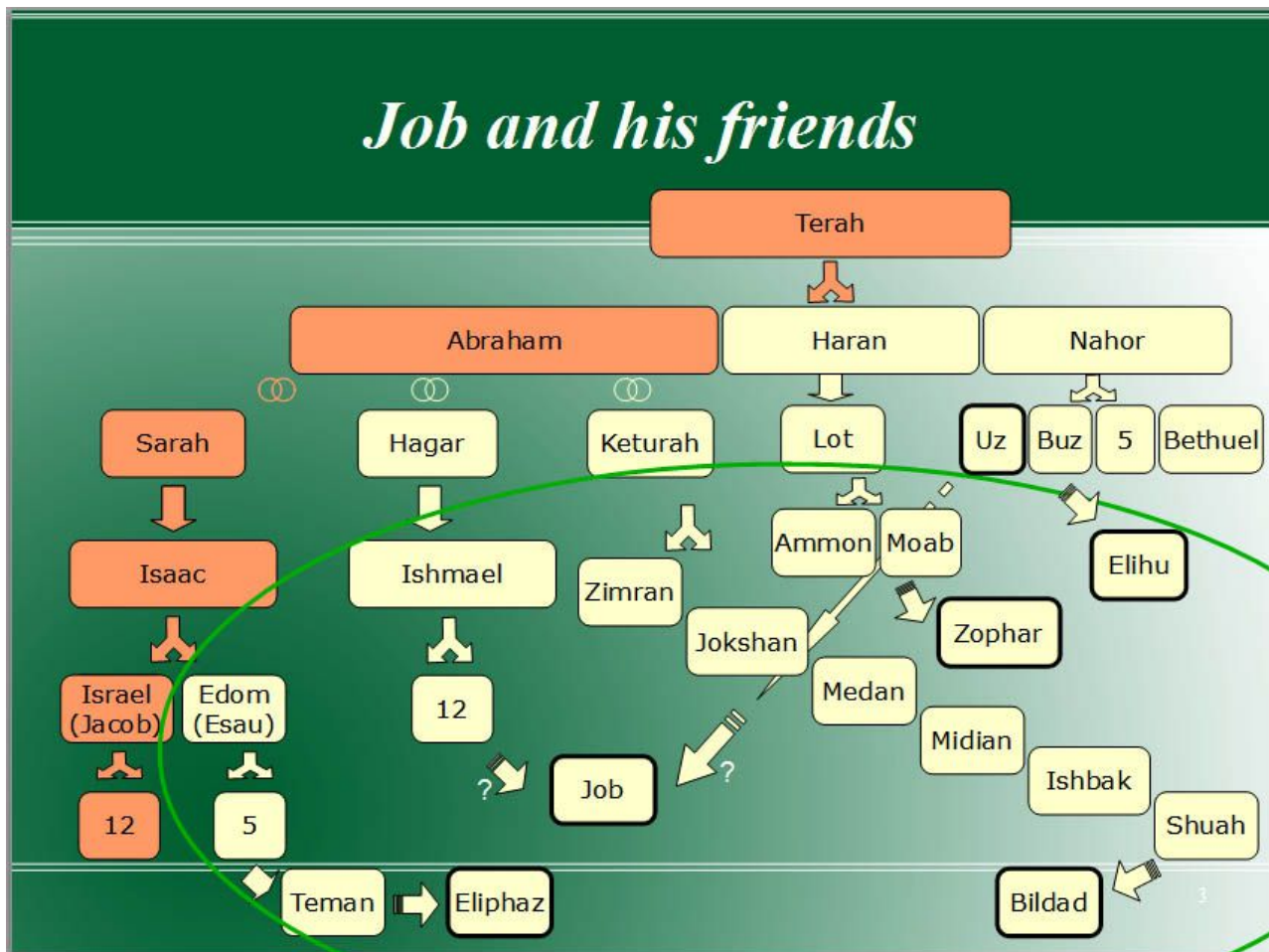
The story of Job took place in Arabia

The Bible records the story of the prophet Job. The book called by his name deserves our special attention because its setting is in the land of the East. Job is called "the greatest of all the people of the East" (Job 1:3). The terminology of the book includes several words and expressions that are found nowhere else in Scripture. Some have even assumed that the original text might have been written in Aramaic, Arabic, or Edomite.

The book records the names of Job's four friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu (Job 2:11; 32:2). All of them were Children of the East. As a Temanite, Eliphaz belonged to an Edomite tribe (Edom was Abraham's grandson); Bildad was a Shuhite (Shuah was a son of Abraham's wife Keturah); Zophar was a Naamathite, which is a Moabite name (Moab was Abraham's grandnephew); and Elihu was a Buzite (Buz was a nephew of Abraham).

Furthermore, Job lived in the land called Uz (Job 1:1); and Uz (or Huz) was a brother of Buz, both sons to Nahor, Abraham's brother (Genesis 22:21). We also know of another Uz, who was an Edomite (Genesis 36:28). It means that all the names mentioned in the book of Job are connected with Abraham and placed under God's special blessing. Here they are, included in the Abrahamic family tree:

CHART IV: Job and his friends



It comes as a surprise to many to discover that the book of Job is an entirely Eastern book, set in the Ishmaelite line of blessing. We may wonder: how did it get into the canon of Hebrew scriptures? Who translated it into Hebrew? Obviously the first person that comes into our mind is Moses, because never before or after had the relationship between Israel and the Children of the East been as close as when he was in Midian. Remember that the great prophet and leader of Israel was the son-in-law of one of the most important personalities in the East, the priest of Midian. And who else could have familiarised him with the story of their greatest hero of faith? It must have been Reuel.

Job is depicted as a sheikh living in the Land of the East. He had acquired such wealth that he owned several houses and a huge amount of cattle. He himself states that as a young man he used to live in a tent: "When I was young ... God's counsel graced my tent" (Job 29:4).

The book, which is written in poetry, is full of descriptions of the life in the Arabian wilderness. The word "tent" is used 14 times, "dust" 26 times, "caravan" 11 times, "desert" 7 times; wadis are mentioned (6:16,17; 11:16; 12:15; 14:11,19), as are withering flags (8:12) and snakes (20:14-16; 26:13). There are also references to lions (9x), gold (13x), locusts (39:20),

horses (39:19), and trumpets (39:24-25), which are used symbolically of Islam in the Biblical book of Revelation. And this is just a glimpse of the Eastern atmosphere present in the book of Job.

The theology of the book is very deep. It speaks about the origin of evil, about Satan's actions behind the scenes, a heavenly tribunal and about the reasons for human suffering – in a way equalled by no other book in the Bible.

Since this book is the story of one of his children, Abraham has blessed the world through it. Indeed the world owes this book to the Children of the East, the Ishmaelite line of blessing. Thanks to Reuel and Moses it has become part of Scripture and is here for us today. While this particular blessing has bypassed Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants, Jews and Christians may appreciate it as their Arab heritage, and Muslims need to re-discover it as their own Ishmaelite contribution. Would it not be nice if some of its big issues were studied together by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike?

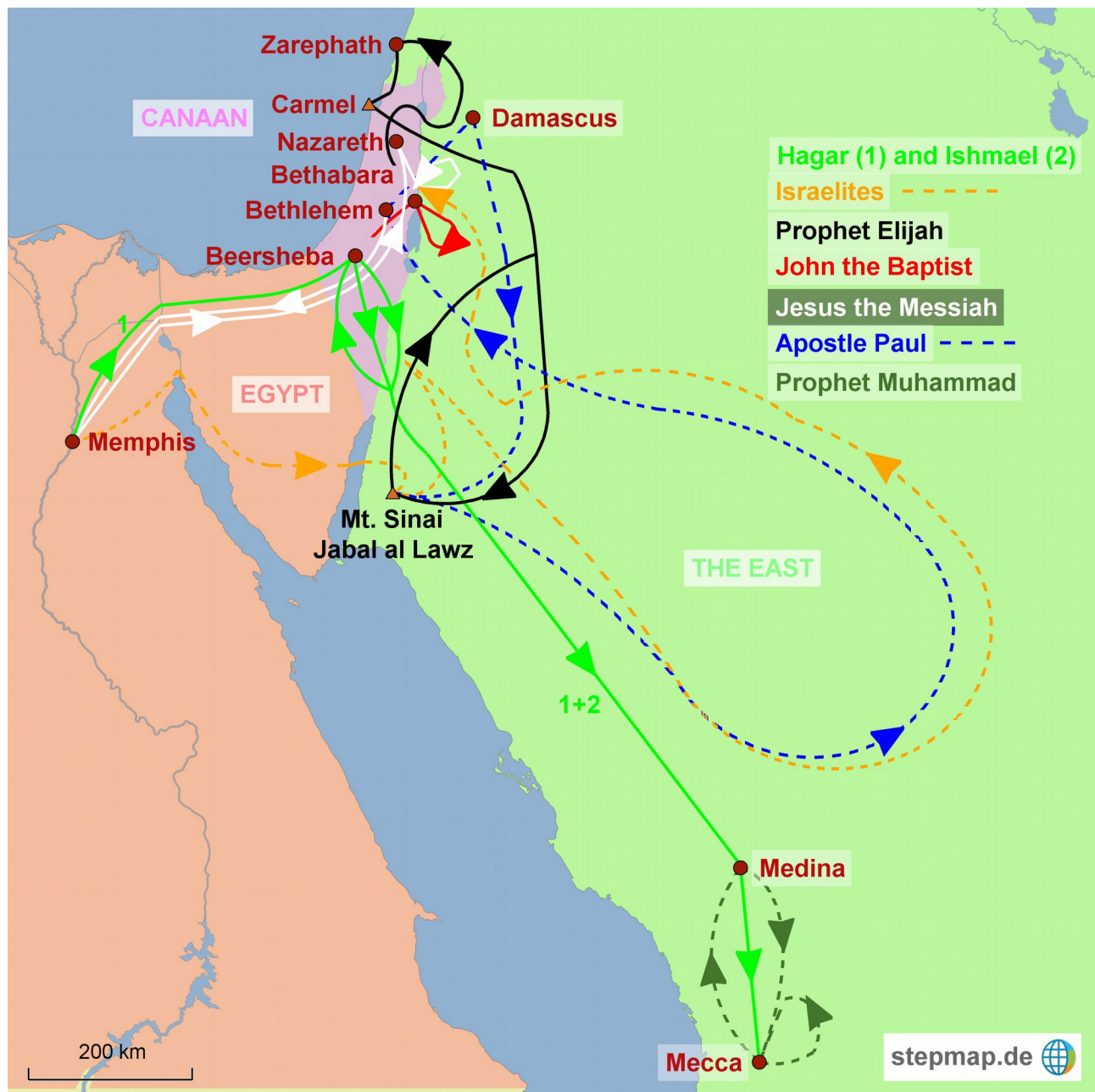
The classical exodus

Let us recapitulate what we have discovered about the Egypt-Ishmael connection. Its best example remains the exodus of the Children of Israel, led by God into the freedom of the Arabian wilderness. Once they had crossed the Red Sea, they sang and danced on Arabian ground. Manna became their "Arabian" food. The Ten Commandments became their "Ishmaelite" law, the sanctuary service became their "Arabian" educational system. Their whole culture was shaped in the Arabian Peninsula. Truly "God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran ... His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of His praise" (Habakkuk 3:3 CJB).

God revealed Himself in the land of the East, in Arabia. Here Israel was free from Egyptian oppression. God's delivering intervention of Hagar and Ishmael and his care and guidance for them were re-enacted for the people of Israel. Like Hagar and Ishmael, and like their leader Moses shortly before them, they were now led into the desert to be taught the true way of life, from the Creator of life Himself.

Later on, Prophet Elijah, John the Baptist, Jesus the Messiah, Apostle Paul and Prophet Muhammad all followed this call into the desert. Jesus the Messiah was led into the Eastern desert where he conquered Satan's temptations; however he is the only one mentioned for having stayed in Egypt when his parents fled with him from King Herod, i. e. he is the only one who experienced the Egyptian part of the Egypt-Ishmael connection. All of these men of God experienced a special protection while being in the desert.

MAP G: The Egypt-Ishmael connection II



Is there a lesson in this for today? Don't we all need a deeper level of deliverance? We need to recognise that we can only experience this when we grant absolute freedom to our friends, neighbours, and even our enemies, when we "loose the bonds of wickedness, undo the heavy burdens, let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke" (Isaiah 58:6).

And perhaps we should understand from this Egypt-Ishmael connection of liberation that the most important freedom of all is spiritual freedom, as it is said: "Man does not see what the LORD sees, for man sees what is visible, but the LORD sees the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Therefore we invite you to be open for your own desert experience. Your willingness to love your Abrahamic brothers and sisters will open the door to it.

Conclusion 5

This chapter has shown how the Messianic purpose of God was constantly moving between Egypt and the land of the East. A repeated exodus from Egypt by Abraham, Hagar, and Moses prepared a whole nation – the people of Israel – to be set free from slavery, from their own error and their ignorance. Even Joseph's slavery in Egypt was a necessary step for liberation, as paradoxical as it may sound.

In the same way, the Children of the East were actively protecting and teaching the principal characters in the Messianic line. It was probably under the tutelage of the priest of Midian that Moses wrote important parts of the Bible like the books of Genesis and Job. By offering the first sacrifice on Israel's journey through the desert, Reuel also initiated a whole people into what later became their sanctuary service.

Thus the origins of all Abrahamic brothers and sisters are more closely connected than most of us had thought. Knowing what we now know, let us seize every opportunity to build bridges and reconnect with those from whom we have become separated.

The next chapter deals with two more children of the East: Moab and Ammon, and how one of their humblest daughters became another impressive message of hope for the world.

6

MOAB AND AMMON

Arabs Prepared the Way for the Messiah

This chapter looks into the history of Moab and Ammon. Both were Abraham's grandnephews. Living east of the Jordan River they belonged to the Children of the East – the Arabs – although their closer geographical vicinity to Israel is the reason why they are often mentioned separately.

They seem to have been sandwiched between Isaac's and Ishmael's descendants, and their relationship with Israel was as ambiguous as their connection with the other Arabian tribes. On the other hand the Bible reports much about how they brought Jews and Arabs together on several occasions.

Incest among God's children

We remember the somewhat shameful circumstances of Ishmael's birth. Even more were those of Moab's and Ammon's. While Ishmael was the product of a failure to trust God's promises and of an illicit relationship with an Egyptian slave, Moab and Ammon (pbuh) were the product of an incestuous encounter between the two daughters of Lot and their inebriated father (Genesis 19:30-38). How a man of God like Lot could get into such an ignominious situation requires an explanation:

When Abraham's and Lot's flocks became too large to live together, Abraham (pbuh) gave Lot the choice of which land to take as his territory. Lot (pbuh) claimed the most fertile areas and moved to the plains around the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 13:10-13). While Genesis 13 mentions Abraham's wife, it only talks of Lot's servants (Verse 1,5). This suggests that at the time Lot was childless like Abraham – and probably single.

It is surprising for a nomad, who was used to dwelling in tents, to settle down close to big cities! He had moved away from Haran together with Abraham (Genesis 19:2); and now he seemed to be again dazzled by the apparent advantages of pagan city life.

Here in Sodom Scripture speaks for the first time about Lot's wife and her attachment to this city – and how this eventually cost her her life. This tragic story leads us to assume that she was a native "Sodomite" (Verse 26). No doubt their two daughters had been influenced by the sexual immorality surrounding them although the text specifies that their father had succeeded in

keeping them untouched (Verse 8).

A simple calculation shows that Abraham's son Ishmael was 13 years old at the time when Sodom and its surrounding valleys were destroyed. Thirteen years should be sufficient to let information travel between the two families, i. e. from the highlands, where Abraham stayed, to the lowlands, where Lot resided. Therefore Lot's family must have been familiar with the way by which Abraham tried to secure himself an heir. Did Abraham's deviation from God's plan facilitate the deviation that later took place in Lot's family? At least it did not encourage them to a deeper faith in God.

After God told them to flee from Sodom, Lot and his family first settled down in the smaller, but equally evil town of Zoar. Because of its wickedness they could not stay there and went into the mountains nearby at the border to the lands of the East. There they lived in a cave, which was obviously not the most romantic home to choose. Seeing no prospect of marriage and family for themselves, Lot's daughters did the same as Abraham and Sarah: they devised an alternative way of achieving what they wanted and securing a future for the family line; they intoxicated their father with alcohol and committed incest with him.

How sad to see that Abraham's lack of faith seemed to have had more consequences than he could have anticipated!

Separation not due to incestuous origin

Scripture reveals God's clear verdict on Moab and Ammon:

"An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the LORD; even to the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the LORD forever" (Deuteronomy 23:3).

Interestingly, however, God does not justify this strict verdict with the incestuous origin of these nations, but with the fact that they did not offer hospitality to Israel when they passed their area on their Eastern journey from Egypt to Canaan (Verse 4). After all, what responsibility had Moab and Ammon for the way they came into being? They were the victims, and as such only responsible for their conscious acts! God does not judge man for the wrongdoing of his forefathers.

"The person who sins is the one who will die. A son won't suffer punishment for the father's iniquity, and a father won't suffer punishment for the son's iniquity. The righteousness of the righteous person will be on him, and the wickedness of the wicked person will be on him" (Ezekiel 18:20 HCSB).

Nor does God judge man for his unknown sins. Jesus the Messiah clearly states: "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains" (John 9:41).

Protected enemies

From the time of Moses onward, there was enmity between Israel and these two neighbours Ammon and Moab. They led wars against each other, and after Ehud, an Israelite judge used lies and deception to kill the Moabite king Eglon, he called the Moabites Israel's enemies! "The LORD has delivered your enemies the Moabites into your hand" (Judges 3:28).

God, however, had commanded them not to fight against Moab and Ammon: "Show no hostility toward Moab, and do not provoke them to battle, for I will not give you any of their land as a possession, since I have given Ar as a possession to the descendants of Lot" (Deuteronomy 2:9 HCSB). A similar statement is made regarding Ammon in verse 19.

It was during their sojourn in Moab that God renewed His covenant with the Children of Israel (Deuteronomy 29). He also chose Moab to be the place where He laid Moses to rest (Deuteronomy 32:49; 34:5) before He had him resurrected and caught up to heaven by His angel (Jude 9; Matthew 17:3). Therefore we may assume that Moab was far from being cursed ground. Like the Edomites, the Moabites and the Ammonites were recipients of Ishmael's blessing because they were part of the Children of the East. Scripture highlights them as parts of the Arab peoples:

"Together they shall plunder the people of the East; they shall lay their hand on Edom and Moab; and the people of Ammon shall obey them" (Isaiah 11:14).

Yet Moab's and Ammon's wrongdoings had consequences as did the errors of the people of Israel. They became notorious for their gods Chemosh and Moloch, whom they worshipped with child sacrifices and sexual orgies. However, let us not forget that Israel fell into the same sins when they started worshipping other gods and also suffered the consequences of their idolatry.

Ruth the Moabite, mother of King David and Jesus the Messiah

The story of Ruth the Moabite (pbuh) is another record of a celebrated Arab woman. Her famous words have inspired people all over the globe and throughout the ages:

"Entreat me not to leave you,

Or to turn back from following after you;
For wherever you go, I will go;
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God.
Where you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.
The LORD do so to me, and more also,
If anything but death parts you and me"
(Ruth 1:16-17).

These words were spoken to declare her attachment to Noemi, her mother-in-law (pbuh), after her Israelite father-in-law and her husband had died, and she subsequently moved to Bethlehem with her. Thus she became the great grandmother of David (pbuh) and, through this great king and prophet, an ancestor of the Messiah (pbuh). Like Hagar, Ruth became another Arab woman of faith; and as in the case of Job, the Arab sheikh, a whole book of the Bible is named after her. This is how the Arabs helped to prepare the way for the Messiah both genetically and also spiritually, since Ruth's story must have had a great impact on Maryam the mother of Jesus as it must have had on any Jewish girl.

The beautiful poem of loyalty quoted above becomes even more meaningful when it is applied to our relationship to the Messiah. Ruth was fully submitted to the God of Noemi; and this is the meaning of the word "Islam" (surrender). Will we follow the same path? Jesus the Messiah did! Do we lodge where the Messiah lodges? Are his people also our people? Is his God our God? Will we die where he dies? Will we be buried where he is buried?

The apostle Paul confirms these thoughts: "Don't you know that those of us who have been immersed into the Messiah Yeshua have been immersed into his death? Through immersion into his death we were buried with him; so that just as, through the glory of the Father, the Messiah was raised from the dead, likewise we too might live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will also be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was put to death on the execution-stake with him, so that the entire body of our sinful propensities might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." (Romans 6:3 CJB) "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." (Galatians 2:20 NKJV)

Yes he even goes deeper when he declares: "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life ... nor things present nor things to come ... shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in the Messiah Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Ruth's words may also be applied to the relationships between Abrahamic brothers and sisters. It is time to ask ourselves about our attachment to each other: are we willing to travel together to the heavenly city where we all want to go? Are we ready to relate with each other? Do we understand that the God of Israel and the God of Ishmael is the same God – the God of Abraham? Are we willing to give our lives for each other? Are we willing to share our homes with each other in true Abrahamic hospitality? (Much could be said about how Abraham hosted his guests, as portrayed for example in Genesis 18).

This might sound a bit emotive; yet it is time to consider a change of inner attitude. Since we all want to be resurrected and enjoy eternity, we need to be willing to share our lives together with our Abrahamic brothers and sisters. This is at least the plan of our compassionate God: "God wants every man to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4).

While Jacob and Esau reconciled with each other, but respectfully separated, Ruth and Noemi bonded. In this way Ruth entered in the Messianic line. Here is a strong message to her Eastern compatriots: Jesus the Messiah is also for them!

Nobody prohibits us from loving each other. Let us try it the way Ruth did. And if the book of Ruth fails to convince you, let the Messiah teach you. Nobody in history has taught pure, selfless love better than he did because he himself was *zakee*, "pure" (Maryam 19:19). The Gospel is a treasure chest full of knowledge and love.

Unfortunately, centuries of traditional interpretation have distorted its truth to a considerable extent. But this happens to every holy text. Forces are at work to bury the truth under tradition. But do not be afraid of comparing what you read with the rest of the Holy Scriptures; then you will surely find much more harmony than you may think.

Refuge-givers for the persecuted

Later, Ruth's great grandson David was persecuted by King Saul, as this weak king sensed the threat to his throne. David sought refuge in Moab, for himself and for his parents. Maybe this is astonishing, but remember: Moab was a neighbouring country, and David had Moabite blood in his veins!

"Then David went from there to Mizpah of Moab; and he said to the king of

Moab, 'Please let my father and mother come here with you, till I know what God will do for me.' So he brought them before the king of Moab, and they dwelt with him all the time that David was in the stronghold" (1 Samuel 22:3-4).

Even if family relations played a role here, the fact still remains that the Arabs again sheltered a persecuted prophet from his own brethren, just as they had sheltered Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and later Elijah and the Messiah (pbuh). This was one part of God's plan for the Children of the East, as He said: "Let My outcasts dwell with you, O Moab; be a shelter to them from the face of the spoiler" (Isaiah 16:4).

Executors of judgement

In Israel's history God even used the Sons of the East to execute judgement against His people. We read how in the time of the Judges "the anger of the LORD was hot against Israel; and He sold them ... into the hands of the people of Ammon" (Judges 10:7) . This happened until Judge Jephthah (pbuh) conquered the Ammonites (11:32).

Another example of an Eastern judgment is the story of Zabad and Jehozabad, whose mothers were Arabs and who were behind the murder of the apostate King Joash (2 Chronicles 24:24,26). You can find this aspect of the mission given to the Children of the East throughout the Bible. It would be very worthwhile to study the role of Ishmael's descendants in the book of Revelation. Yet I will only hint at it in the last chapter.

Can it be that some Children of the East became a tool of judgement in God's hands by killing some children of Israel, and vice versa? Does Scripture make God the master killer behind all – or at least many – killings?

The answer is: no! Scripture makes it clear that God's judgements are nothing else than his reluctant decision to withdraw His presence and protection whenever people do not want it (Romans 1:18-32). God respects our free will; yet, He does not withdraw His spirit at once. We need to understand that God is the source of life; and whoever separates from Him would perish right away if God withdrew His presence at once. But in His compassion, He gives us many chances to wake up and open our eyes. However, if we insist on taking the way towards death, He "hands us over to" our own choice. He "leaves us and lets us go our sinful way," which will eventually destroy us (Verses 24, 26, 28 NCV/JUB).

What about today? There is much hatred between nations and religions. People tend to see others in black or white. We hear of "Islamophobia," "anti-Semitism," "anti-Westernism" and much more. Yet, Scripture teaches us that reality is much more complex than that: God has used weak, erring human

beings for His purposes.

The all-knowing God sees the heart and the motives; and He works even with our dark sides – for which we sometimes even have to suffer bitter consequences. However, He is willing to use us in His master plan of salvation, and to save us like brands out of the fire – provided we let Him do so.

Promises for our time

There is a special promise given to some of the Children of the East for the end of time: they will be saved from the power of the Dajjal (the Antichrist):

“But these will be saved from his power — Edom, Mo'av and the people of 'Amon” (Daniel 11:41 CJB).

Who will intervene to save them? God Himself!

“Yet I will bring back the captives of Moab in the latter days,’ says the LORD.”
“But afterwards I will bring back the captives of the people of Ammon,’ says the LORD” (Jeremiah 48:47; 49:6). Some translations speak of “restoring” Moab and Ammon and “blessing” them.

Therefore, the Bible encourages everyone who identifies with Abraham (pbuh) to appreciate such promises and understand the mission and the blessings God has given to Abraham's various descendants. This can make a significant difference in the midst of today's suspicion and hatred between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

Conclusion 6

This chapter has shown that God is full of mercy to the Children of the East, even though their origin, in some respects, is due to regrettable and even appalling circumstances. But the example of Moab and Ammon shows how God blessed victims of misfortune in order to make them heirs of precious promises regarding salvation.

By allowing one of his humblest and most loyal girls, Ruth the Arab, to become an ancestor of the Messiah, God has woven Moab into the Messianic line. Take her out of Christ's ancestry, and the Messiah would not have been Jesus! Take out the intervention of Arabs to save the lives of Messianic prophets, and the course of history could have been totally different.

Let us therefore imitate Ruth's loyalty and the Arabs' hospitality, and we will contribute to a less violent and more efficient communication between

Abrahamic brothers and sisters.

In the next chapter we will show how the wisdom of the Arabian sages – which had been gathered and handed down since the times of Job and his wise friends and which leads to peace and virtue – was treasured by King David and King Solomon.

EASTERN WISDOM

A Creed of Peace and Virtue

This chapter looks into an aspect of the Arabian culture that is often overlooked. Arabian wisdom has a big share in what is called the wisdom literature in the Bible. Arabian wisdom, inspired by God, has influenced the world until today.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, David spent some time with his parents at the royal court of Moab (1 Samuel 21:3-5), which was his great grandmother Ruth's homeland. After he returned to Israel, King Saul tried to kill him, so he had to flee. At the entrance to a cave near Engedi they finally met and David delivered his beautiful speech of loyalty to the king, ending with a proverb.

All translations say that it is a proverb of the ancients, yet the word for ancients is *Qadmoni*, the same word used in Genesis 15:19 to designate one of the ten indigenous tribes of the land promised to Abraham, the Kadmonites. Together with the Kenites and Kenizzites they were the only three tribes not to be expelled by Joshua and the Israelites, firstly, because they had come to believe in the God of Abraham, and secondly, because they came from the East, not Canaan. *Qedem* literally means East and *Qadmoni* literally means Easterner. Even the period before Abraham entered Canaan came to be known as the time of the East. Therefore the words East and Eastern are also used in the sense of antiquity or ancient.

Given the fact that David had only recently returned from his sojourn in one of the lands of the East, it is highly probable that this visit had inspired him to quote one of the Eastern sayings:

"ka'asher yomar mashal ha qadmoni:

mersha'ím yetsé résha, we-yadáy lo tíhye bákh."

"As the old [Eastern] saying has it:

Out of the wicked comes wickedness, but I will not lay a hand on you"

(1 Samuel 24:13/14 CJB).

What an inspiring commitment to peace! Although David had already killed many soldiers in war, by quoting this proverb he acknowledged that violence, after all, is wicked.

Yet this was not the only wise saying from the East that is mentioned in Scripture. Eastern wisdom was famous and only the wisdom of David's son Solomon surpassed it, as we learn from the following scripture: "Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt" (1 Kings 4:30 (5:10) NASB).

The book of Proverbs

We already know that the book of Job belongs to the Eastern wisdom literature. But King Solomon gathered more of this Eastern wisdom when he wrote the book of Proverbs. Maybe his father David had kindled in him the curiosity for this type of wisdom, and surely God Himself gave him the wisdom to separate the silver from the dross.

Some have thought that Solomon is the original author of every single proverb in this book. Yet, his own advice "to understand the sayings and riddles of those who are wise" (Proverbs 1:6 NIRV) and to "listen ... to your father's instruction, and [not to] reject your mother's teaching" (Verse 8 HCSB) must surely have been heeded by himself. So the wisdom of his father David and of the wise men of the East has certainly left some traces in the book of Proverbs.

Another couple of verses reveal that Solomon was wise and humble enough to collect all true wisdom he could get hold of: "Pay attention and listen to the sayings of those who are wise. Apply your heart to the sayings I teach ... Here are **more** sayings of those who are wise" (Proverbs 22:17; 24:23 NIRV). Obviously the sayings in proverbs before and after these verses were not all created by Solomon, but collected and maybe edited. "Those who are wise" is the translation of ha-hakhamim, the wise men, the sages.

This is a clear confession to education and scholarship by Solomon. The superiority of Eastern wisdom shows that the Ishmaelite or Arabian community treasured wisdom and education in spite of their rootedness in the desert. This heritage has deeply influenced Muslim thinking over the centuries.

At least the last two chapters (30 and 31) of Proverbs are definitely of Eastern origin.

The words of Agur

This is how chapter 30 of Proverbs begins: "The words of Agur son of Jakeh of Massa" (Proverbs 30:1 RSV). Many translations render *Massa* as oracle, utterance, or revelation. Yet Massa is identical with the name of Ishmael's seventh son Massa. It is true that it means burden or tribute, but in this verse, where Agur is introduced and identified, it makes much more sense to understand this word as a proper name. Further, the names of Agur, Jakeh,

and the tribe of Massa have been found in Arabian (Nabatean and Sabaean) inscriptions (see Longman & Enns, *Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 429).

In this case the whole chapter has been authored by an Ishmaelite. And indeed the vocabulary confirms this. Agur uses the word *Eloah* for God (Verse 4), which is not used elsewhere in Proverbs, but more than 40 times in the book of Job and twice in the Song of Moses, which he sang shortly before his death in the land of Moab (Deuteronomy 32:15,17). *Eloah* is closer to the Arabic word Allah than the more commonly used words for God in the Hebrew Bible: *Elohim* (an intensive form) and *El* (a shortened form). Other Eastern words like '*aluqah* (leech, verse 15), *yaqaha* (obedience, verse 17), *hon* (enough, verses 15,16), and the Arabic *al-qum* (the army, verse 31) give a special Oriental flair to this chapter.

Not only the use of *Eloah*, but also the following verse from Agur's words clearly reminds us of the Eastern wisdom book of Job. The questions resemble closely those God asked in Job chapter 38:

"Who has gone up to heaven and come down?
Who has gathered the wind in His hands?
Who has bound up the waters in a cloak?
Who has established all the ends of the earth?
What is His name, and what is the name of His son—
if you know?" (Proverbs 30:4 HCSB).

Now what is the message of Agur? First he humbly confesses that he knows nothing (Verse 2-3). Then he acknowledges the wisdom of God (Verse 5-6). The next thing is that he prays his famous prayer:

"Two things I ask of You; don't deny them to me before I die:
Keep falsehood and deceitful words far from me.
Give me neither poverty nor wealth; feed me with the food I need.
Otherwise, I might have too much and deny You, saying, 'Who is the LORD?'
or I might have nothing and steal, profaning the name of my God"
(Proverbs 30:7-9 HCSB).

A favourite author of mine commented on this passage in the following way:
"The prayer of Agur should be our prayer. And as we pray, we should act our part in the answer of the prayer." (Ellen White, *Health Reformer*, December 1, 1870)

Five poetic quartets

In the following verses Agur denounces those who do not listen to their parents, those who think highly of themselves and thus become violent against the poor and the slaves. After describing this generation in a fourfold lament, he illustrates this self-centredness through five poetic quartets. He starts with an evil quartet and then alternates between good and evil quartets.

Firstly, he illustrates self-centredness and insatiability through the horrible quartet of the grave, the barren womb, the barren ground, and the cruel fire. Because: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Secondly, he shows how wise and joyful it is to pursue one's goal with complete gentleness. This he does through the beautiful quartet of the migrating eagle flying almost noiselessly through the air, the sleek snake slithering gently on the rock, the gliding ship that is navigated softly through the waters, and a man's tender intercourse with his wife in spite of his physical ability to hurt and crush. Each needs complex skills and achieves high goals. Agur quickly contrasts the last example to the adulteress who adapts sex in order to prevent conception. It is kind of a disclaimer to avoid misunderstandings.

Thirdly, he illustrates the results of oppression through the wicked quartet of a slave who becomes king, a fool who is satisfied with bread, a cast-off who is married, and a slave woman who becomes heir to her mistress. Once they are relieved from the natural consequences of their oppression, it becomes obvious what violence did to them. For they seem to feel the need to take vengeance "asymmetrically", although their victims might be completely innocent of their tormentor's former fate. And yes, foolishness most often is the result of violence too, if only of the violence of neglect.

Fourthly, Agur shows the extreme wisdom of the non-violent: the foresighted bustle of the ants, the prudent industry of the rabbits, the harmony of equality among the locusts and the quiet agility of the geckos. Extraordinary! Imagine these humble creatures as the heraldic animals of this world adorning its coats of arms. Planet earth would be a better place. Agur calls them "hakhamim mehukamim," the wise of the wise, the greatest sages.

Lastly, another quartet contrasts the aforementioned animals. Some have seen a positive climax in it. Yet, in my opinion this quartet illustrates that beauty can hide a malicious, violent, or otherwise offensive character: the cruel lion, the impure greyhound, the wicked goat, and the king with his army. They are admired as symbols of strength, speed, self-assertion, or power. None of these animals needs a lot of wisdom for what it does, so obviously Agur criticises the militaristic king. Solomon himself was a king of peace who led no wars. This is why he was allowed to build the temple instead of his bloody-handed father

David (1 Chronicles 22:7-13). For sure Agur's words merit a place in Solomon's book.

Agur's final conclusion is:

"If you have been foolish by exalting yourself
or if you've been scheming,
put your hand over your mouth.
For the churning of milk produces butter,
and twisting a nose draws blood,
and stirring up anger produces strife"
(Proverbs 30:32-33).

This is the recipe for peace: refrain from force and violence! "Let there be no compulsion in religion: truth stands out clear from error" (al-Baqara 2:256 Yusuf Ali). Regardless of all Jewish, Christian, and Muslim violence in history, the fact remains that peace is the true core of these religions, when they are properly understood.

The words of Lemuel

Directly after Agur's words, we find another Ishmaelite whose wisdom concludes the book of Proverbs. He belongs to the same tribe as Agur and his name is Lemuel. Two words in his exposition are of non-Hebrew Eastern origin: *bar* instead of the Hebrew *ben*, meaning son (Verse 2), *melakhin* instead of the Hebrew *melakhim*, meaning kings (Verse 3).

Instead of presenting his own wisdom, Lemuel rather tells us the counsels his mother gave him concerning women, alcohol, and the poor. This indeed sounds very Ishmaelite. Until today chastity, temperance, and charity have been considered to be highly important within the Muslim community.

Ever since alcohol became the reason for the curse which Noah's son Ham experienced, this beverage in all its variations has wreaked havoc in society. Arabs and Muslims have become outspoken enemies of alcohol, unlike the majority of Jews and Christians who have even given a special place to alcohol within their religious rites. In this way they reject the counsel of Eastern wisdom incorporated within their own Holy Scriptures.

As everyone is a king in his own realm, the words of Agur always apply:

"The words of Lemuel, king of Massa, which his mother taught him:

What, my son? What, son of my womb? What, son of my vows?

Give not your strength to women, your ways to those who destroy kings. It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink; lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress; let them drink and forget their poverty, and remember their misery no more.

Open your mouth for the dumb, for the rights of all who are left desolate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, maintain the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:1-9 RSV).

Western societies have at least understood that alcohol needs to be prohibited for those who are "kings" of a car, i. e. those who drive one. Otherwise they will forget what has been decreed, pervert the right of others, and maybe even kill other people on the road. Unfortunately Western societies seem powerless to do much more than they are already doing to restrict the use of alcohol. Therefore alcohol remains one of the worst scourges in the West.

Lemuel's counsel to give strong drink to those who are depressed, dying, or poor should be understood as a cynical stinger against alcohol because the following words encourage activism for the poor and needy and thus qualify this counsel.

This is what the Qur'an says: "They will ask thee about intoxicants and games of chance. Say: 'In both there is great evil as well as some benefit for man; but the evil which they cause is greater than the benefit which they bring'" (al-Baqara 2:219 Muhammad Asad). "O You who have chosen to be graced with belief! Intoxicants, gambling and games of chance, sacrificing animals on stones i. e. altars of idols and idolatrous practices, and divining of the future by such means as arrows, raffles and omens, is all Satan's handiwork. Refrain from it that you may prosper" (al-Ma'ida 5:90 Shabbir Ahmed).

Caring for the poor (zakāt) is one of the five pillars of Islam. While charity also plays a role in Judaism and Christianity, it has never risen to the prominence it enjoys in Islam. Eastern wisdom has kept its place in Arabia where its influence can be felt the most.

The virtuous woman

The majority of Lemuel's wise sayings however elaborate on the counsel not to spend one's energy on women. It is the first thing that is mentioned in his words, although only briefly, yet it is finally completed through a detailed acrostic poem on the virtuous woman. For choosing the right woman seems to be the ideal alternative.

Contrary to the traditional role of women in some Muslim countries the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31 is described as being a tradeswoman of high reputation in her town. This reminds us of Muhammad's first wife Khadijah, a very successful merchant in Mecca who was known by such affectionate titles as Princess of Quraysh, the Pure One, and Khadijah the Great. From what we know about her, she was the embodiment of the virtuous woman described by Lemuel's mother and was Muhammad's only wife for 25 years until her death. She was 15 years older than Muhammad, and when she died he was already 50 years old. All the political marriages he contracted afterwards never meant to him what Khadijah still meant to him during the twelve years he lived after her death.

We only know one personage in the Bible by name who is called a "virtuous woman" and this is Ruth the Moabite (Ruth 3:11), the Arabian girl who became the ancestor of King David and Jesus the Messiah. She followed in the steps of Ishmael's daughter Basmath, other Arabian girls like Job's daughters Jemima, Kezia, and Kerenhappuch, and Moses' wife Zipporah.

Arabian womanhood in its original form is praised in the Bible. This is why Abraham looked for a wife from the East for his son Isaac. The girl he found, his grandniece Rebekah, clearly demonstrated an Eastern mindset in her behaviour, firstly through her devoted hospitality to Abraham's servant, and secondly when she was told that the man approaching was her bridegroom: "Then she took her veil and covered herself" (Genesis 24:64 NASB).

The sages of the East

Edom was still known as a centre of wisdom during the time of the prophets. Obadiah 8 speaks of the sages of Edom and Jeremiah 49:7 speaks of the sages of Teman, an Edomite tribe named after a grandson of Esau and/or a name for the region of Jemen. Sages came from the East when the Messiah was born. Also today, many centuries later, the world is a better place because of the influence the Islamic Golden Age with its Eastern sages had on Europe and its colonies.

Conclusion 7

In this chapter the words of two Arabian sages have captured our attention: Agur and Lemuel. Their Eastern wisdom focuses on peace and virtue and is a declaration against violence and the oppression of women.

In the next chapter we will study the heroism of a few Arabs depicted in Scripture in a way we seldom hear of. And we will discover how God has worked to transform the mindset of his children from violence to non-violence.

The Apostle Paul will be the last person featuring in this chapter, because he experienced this transformation in his own life in the East just before entering

the city of Damascus, and later in the area of Mount Sinai in Arabia.

HEROES OF THE EAST

From Violence to Non-Violence

In this chapter we will look into the lives of several more Arabs whose deeds have been reported in the Bible. Some of these deeds might seem very strange to us; yet they might also be an important key to understanding Scripture and God's character. They also may help us appreciate and love our Abrahamic brothers and sisters in a deeper way.

Caleb, the fearless “Muslim”

Caleb was a Muslim? How can we suggest such a thing? Caleb and Joshua (pbut) were the two spies who unlike the other ten tried to inspire the people of Israel with faith to conquer the Promised Land. Because of their words of encouragement, they were almost stoned to death – so terribly fearful, angry, and wicked were the Israelites (Numbers chapters 13+14; 26:65; 32:12).

Caleb is introduced as the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite (Numbers 32:12). As we have already seen in the second chapter of this present book, the Kenizzites were one of ten nations that lived east of the Jordan and whose territory had been promised to Abraham.

Yet when Joshua was about to conquer the Promised Land, he was only told to drive out seven of the ten nations. Obviously the other three (which included the Kennizites) had joined the Children of the East and had accepted their religious beliefs, so that there was no need for the Children of Israel to drive them out. Caleb, who evidently later joined the tribe of Judah, when Israel passed through the Eastern wilderness, was such a Kenizzite (1 Chronicles 4:15), and this is why we must count him among the Arabs, and give him some space here.

Caleb's courage and boldness has made him famous. The giants in Canaan did not frighten him. He said: “Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it” (Numbers 13:30). The response of the people to these encouraging words, however, was devastating. At the gates of the Promised Land, they started to cry and mourn for fear and disappointment over the challenges ahead.

Caleb's and Joshua's admonition not to rebel against God or to fear the giants, made the Israelites so angry that they decided to get rid of the men of God by

stoning them to death (14:9,10). Fortunately, God saved them just in time. Yet as a consequence the Israelites had to wander through the Arabian desert forty more years before they finally entered the promised land.

Yet Caleb did and dared what others did not. His faith in God gave him courage. He could easily distinguish between the truth of God's promises and the error of men's doubts. This is why God could say about him: "My servant Caleb, because he had a different spirit with him and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it" (Numbers 14:24).

When the Children of Israel finally had crossed the Jordan River, Caleb asked Joshua for the place most difficult to conquer, the city of Hebron. This is where the giants lived – those frightful men he had seen during his scouting of the area forty years previously (Joshua 14:6-15). At that time he was already 85 years old; it was surely time to retire and ask for the large territory he deserved. Yet he did not do so. Instead he conquered the giants himself to benefit Israel and to glorify God (15:15-19). Thus he gave an example of courage, perseverance and humility to everyone.

The fact that Caleb killed people in his conquests once raised a lot of questions in my mind – until I realised that this was nothing specially mentioned or something he was praised for. It had indeed characterised the Israelites from the time they began to murmur against God, and it continued to characterise them when they asked God to give them a kingdom, which has always included an army that is trained to kill.

So we should not draw false conclusions: Caleb was a hero, but not because he used weapons and killed giants, but because he was more fearless and daring than his fellow men. He was an example of faith and surrender to God; or we may say, an example of rootedness in true Islam. His courage eventually became a trade mark for the Children of the East: no fear of death at all! Unfortunately, this fearlessness has become notorious in an often distorted way that is associated with the willingness to kill oneself together with innocent people.

Caleb, however, was no suicide bomber. His fearlessness was rooted in knowing God's will and in trusting Him. Of course, the fact that he killed did not make it any easier for his posterity to avoid further bloodshed. It would need many more centuries to start the process of healing the scourge of violence.

Interestingly enough, the main reason for bad communication is often nothing more than fear. This is where Caleb can teach us an important lesson. If we do not fear others, we will be able to step into a close relationship with people we

have maybe never dared to speak to before.

Jael, the unscrupulous Arab heroine

To me Jael (pbuh) seems to be the most disturbing figure in the Bible. She is remembered in history as the cruel murderer of King Sisera. One of the most outstanding poems in Scripture praises and describes her treacherous act in detail. The climax of this poem is the famous verse: "Thus let all your enemies perish, O LORD! But let those who love Him be like the sun when it comes out in full strength" (Judges 5:31).

Jael was the wife of Heber the Kenite (Judges 4:17). The Kenites were the Arabian tribe to whom Moses father-in-law Reuel and his wife Zipporah belonged. The Kenites were also one of the three nations who had joined the Arabs and accepted their Abrahamic faith. Obviously the Kenites had merged with the Midianites somewhere close to Moses' family, in the region that bordered the land of the Edomites. This is implied in the Bible, since King Saul warned the Kenites to separate from them (1 Samuel 15:6) when he planned to attack the Amalekites, an Edomite subtribe.

Again, we have to recognise that it was not Jael's killing that made her a heroine. Remember that she lived at a time and in a region where brutality was normal and non-violence seemed to have been an unknown concept. God's people had reached a low level of morality, but God was willing to bring them up step by step to higher standards and to collaborate with them in this way.

What really made Jael a role model of loyalty was her readiness to change the course of history. With the few simple "weapons" available, she took action to rescue God's people against her natural inclination.

The book of Judges reports many quite shocking acts committed by God's people; but since they had spiritually drifted away from Him, the very first thing they were likely to do whenever they turned back to God was a step in the right direction; to devote their cruelty to God's cause. God appreciated this extreme zeal as a first step and tried to lead them into more light and self-control. Also keep in mind that their "conversion" was, as often is the case, driven by the feeling of hopelessness.

Jael's loyalty to God's people gave her the courage to kill her enemy. Yet however praiseworthy this might have been, her action was short-sighted: had she understood the principle of true love and loyalty toward each one including one's enemy, the peace that followed might have lasted even longer than the reported 40 years.

Clearly she was not familiar with the words that would inspire God's children in

later ages:

"Love your enemies, do what is good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone hits you on the cheek, offer the other also. And if anyone takes away your coat, don't hold back your shirt either" (Luke 6:27-29). "Good and evil are not alike. Repel evil with what is good. Then you will find your erstwhile enemy like a close, affectionate friend" (Qur'an, Fussilat 41:34 Ahmed Ali).

Many Arab wives, mothers, and girls have since shown the same loyalty and courage as Jael. And even now, those who follow the principle of the one who said "love your enemies" and showing it in a meek and non-violent way can significantly change the attitude of hatred so common in this world. Those who have started to practice peace without knowing the one who is the source of it – the Messiah – are surely moved by God's spirit, which always sweetens the character of those who love God with all their heart.

Let us therefore learn from Jael to act loyally and courageously for the sake of selfless love and undiluted truth. If we fought for non-violent communication with the same spirit of courage that she had, the world would surely become a better place in which to live.

The Rechabites: no idolatry, no alcohol, no settling

Like Jael, Reuel, and Zipporah, the Rechabites (pbuh) belonged to the Kenites (1 Chronicles 2:55) and were an Arabian subtribe. The stories related to them give us a tremendous example of the potential of non-violent heroism.

Jonadab the son of Rechab (pbuh), accompanied King Jehu of Israel on his systematic purges of the house of Ahab and the Baal cult (2 Kings 10:15-28). He is mentioned twice. Once as a witness to Jehu's killing the house of Ahab, and once when making sure that at the final Baal festival no true worshipper of the true God would be present (the festival was arranged by Jehu as a trap to kill all Baal worshippers and thus eradicate Baal worship from Israel).

Again, the violent purging method of Jehu was a reflection of the low moral level of God's people of the time and of the pagan world at large. What makes Jonadab a hero, though, was his loyalty to the God of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Israel. At a time when it was extremely dangerous to oppose Baal worship, his active rejection of idolatry surely made him a champion. Jonadab's actual heroism, however, can only be understood by knowing more about his descendants.

We skip 200 years of history and arrive in the time of Jeremiah (pbuh). This great prophet invited the whole house of Rechab into the temple of Jerusalem and offered them wine to drink. The Rechabites answered that they would not

drink the wine. Their reason was that their father Jonadab had prohibited them to use wine, to build houses, to have vineyards, and to do agriculture (Jeremiah 35:8,9). Instead they would dwell as nomads in tents and touch no alcohol whatsoever (Verse 10).

Jeremiah praised them for their loyalty to their father Jonadab and contrasted their obedience to the disobedience of Israel towards God (Verses 12-17). He blessed them with God's promise: "Jonadab the son of Rechab shall not lack a man to stand before me forever" (Verse 19). Indeed, until today there are Bedouin tribes in Arabia who claim to be descendants of Jonadab son of Rechab.

The prohibition of alcohol was revived by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) so that today everyone who really identifies with the heritage of Ishmael and the Children of the East adheres to this law. Since the use of alcohol has always increased the rate of violence and licentiousness in society, this abstention has often contributed to a purer and a more peaceful atmosphere. (On the other hand it is no safeguard against violence as many terrorists prove.) Some people think that alcohol helps them lose their shyness and improve their communication skills. But that is not what actually happens; since alcohol impairs brain function, they should not expect any improvement in meaningful and efficient communication while being under its influence!

Jonadab's refusal to live in houses, to have vineyards, or to do agriculture also holds an important lesson for us. It is no secret that the hotbeds of wickedness can always be found in the large cities. Those who decide for an alternative lifestyle are much better off in the countryside. Living in a secluded country location and doing agriculture might seem out-fashioned. But Jonadab recognised that it even would be a temptation for him if he lived in a house. He would rather follow the example of Abraham and stay a nomad than following the example of Lot and settling down in fertile plains. The nomadic life was also a protection against an indulgent and degenerate lifestyle; and because of the lurking danger of alcohol, the proximity of vineyards was absolutely out of question.

Even if we have to live in cities, we may catch the spirit of Jonadab the Arab and live a simple and frugal life. This too will make us more sensitive to spiritual matters and the needs of our Abrahamic brothers and sisters.

Jabez, hero of prayer

Another character who should be added to our list of heroes is a man named Jabez (pbuh). Who was he? The genealogy of Judah the son of Israel (pbuh) reports that three families of Kenite scribes dwelt in a place called Jabez (1 Chronicles 2:55). So are we talking about a man or about a location? Two chapters later a man with the name of Jabez is mentioned within another

genealogy of Judah (4:9). So this word applies to both a place and a man, and on both occasions in connection with the Israelite tribe of Judah and the Kenites!

Since these two chapters are the only ones in Scripture mentioning Jabez, we may assume that Jabez was a Kenite – like Reuel, Zipporah, Jael, Rechab, and Jonadab (pbut). Caleb the Kenizzite (pbuh), whom we have talked about above, is also mentioned in this same genealogy. Yet, neither Jabez nor Caleb are clearly said to be descendants of Judah, which means that they probably joined the tribe of Judah as foreigners. Caleb a Kenizzite and Jabez a Kenite both belonged to an Arab subtribe.

In the midst of a long genealogy, what is written about Jabez catches the attention of the careful reader like a hidden gem.

“Now Jabez was more honourable than his brothers, and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, ‘Because I bore him in pain.’ And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, ‘Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!’ So God granted him what he requested” (1 Chronicles 4:9-10).

This prayer reminds me of the Fatiha prayer that Muslims pray several times each day: “In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. All praise is due to God, the LORD of the Universe; the Beneficent, the Merciful; LORD of the Day of Judgement. You alone we worship, and to You alone we turn for help. Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed; not of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray” (al-Fatiha 1:1-7 Wahiduddin Khan).

Let us compare the two prayers:

The desire of Jabez to be blessed is also expressed in the Fatiha, where God is addressed as “Most Gracious,” “Beneficent,” “Merciful,” and as “LORD of the Universe and of the Day of Judgement.” His desire to receive more territory and for “God's hand” to be with him is equivalent to the Muslim petition for God's guidance to the straight path and in turning towards Him for help. Jabez' desire to be kept from evil and violence matches with the Qur'an's request to be kept away from those who taste God's wrath and go astray.

If God granted the request of Jabez, son of the East, a “Muslim” Arab of old, what might be his response when millions of Muslims ask him for the same blessings many times every day? The spirit of prayer has been a special characteristic of the Children of the East. Jabez and Muhammad (pbut) are

outstanding examples of this spirit.

Praying for an enlargement of territory without causing others pain is quite interesting. Usually people enlarge their territory at the expense of others. Did Jabez want to enlarge his territory into areas where no one lived? The answer is found in his prayer that God may increase his positive influence. Obviously he wanted to enlarge his territory by become a blessing to others. If we went to God with the same request for our Abrahamic brothers and sisters, can you imagine how beautiful the results would be?

Other children of the East

There are many more children of the East mentioned in Scripture. One positive character was Jeter the Ishmaelite (pbuh), who was the husband of King David's niece Amasa (1 Chronicles 2:16). Others included Mibhar the son of the Hagarite, Zelek the Ammonite, Ithmah the Moabite (pbut), all of whom were valiant men in David's army (11:38,39,46). Also worthy of mention were Obil the Ishmaelite (pbuh), who was in charge of all the royal camels (27:30), and Jaziz the Hagarite (pbuh), who was responsible for the royal flocks (27:31).

Apostle Paul and his trip to Arabia

The last individual I want to mention in this chapter was not a child of the East but a man who made a surprising journey to the East.

If it were not for his letter to the Galatian Christians, we would not know that Saul of Tarsus, also known as the Apostle Paul (pbuh), went to Arabia. In his letter, he identifies Mount Sinai as a place in Arabia (Galatians 1:17; 4:25). If we had to place this trip, chronologically speaking, in the book of Acts, we would have to place it in chapter nine, which means inserting it between the escape of the apostle from Damascus after his conversion (Acts 9:25) and his return to Jerusalem, where the author of Acts records that: "when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple" (Verse 26).

The question is: why would the Apostle make a trip to Arabia after his impressive encounter with the Messiah in a vision? He was on his way to Damascus when Jesus spoke to him, but the massive paradigm shift in his thinking, which resulted from that encounter, apparently made him feel a deep desire to walk in the footsteps of Moses and Elijah (pbut) – in Arabia.

As we know from Scripture, Moses also fled in fear to the desert of Sinai to escape the wrath of the Pharaoh. Like Paul later on, he had been violent in following his conscience: he killed an Egyptian slave-master for God. After about forty years of learning meekness and humility through shepherding, Moses eventually had the special burning bush encounter with God at Mount

Horeb (Exodus 2-4), which is Mount Sinai. Elijah as well had "crusaded" for the LORD killing 450 prophets of Baal in the process, but then he became so fearful of Queen Jezebel that he fled into the same desert. There – on the same mountain as Moses – he experienced the presence of God in an even more powerful way than Moses had experienced at the burning bush (1 Kings 18-19). And now the Apostle Paul wanted a similar encounter with the almighty God!

As far as we know, neither Moses nor Elijah ever used the sword again after having come back from Mount Horeb. When the Egyptians attacked, Moses just wielded his staff of faith, as God had taught him on Mount Sinai; and the Red Sea opened and closed again to rescue Israel from their enemies (Exodus 14:16,27). When Israel fought against the Amalekites, Moses was praying for them on a hill with raised arms demonstrating that safety and well-being is not dependent on weapons or violence (17:10-12).

On Mount Sinai Elijah was taught that God's character is a "still small voice" and not a violent and destructive storm, earthquake, or fire (1 Kings 19:12). After this Elijah no longer used the sword to kill God's enemies.

But even after this experience Elijah called fire from heaven to consume those who had come to take him captive (2 Kings 1:9-12). He just spoke in faith with his voice, and this does not really sound like a move to non-violence. When the king sent another troop of fifty soldiers to detain him, Elijah even repeated the drama. Yet, when a third company of soldiers came, its captain taught him a lesson on the value of life. Falling on his knees before Elijah, he beseeched him:

"O man of God, I pray thee, let my life and the life of these fifty thy slaves, be precious in thy sight" (Verse 13 JUB).

The angel of the LORD confirmed this lesson when he said: "Go down with him; do not be afraid of him" (Verse 15 JUB). Here we understand Elijah's problem. He already had put down the sword, but his heart was still full of fear, a fear that only love could drive away.

What a lesson for us! Elijah understood it, and from now on he refrained from calling fire from heaven. Later the Messiah clearly reproved his disciples when they asked him if they should imitate Elijah and destroy a Samaritan village for having insulted him by calling fire from heaven (Luke 9:54). He said to them: "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them" (Verses 55-56).

While in Arabia, the Apostle Paul experienced the same change from violence

to non-violence as Moses and Elijah. After his conversion he writes:

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse ... Repay no one evil for evil ... Beloved, **do not avenge yourselves**, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the LORD. Therefore, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:14,17,19-21).

It is true that violent terminology is found in Paul's writings, but only in a spiritual sense:

"We are human, but **we don't wage war as humans do**. We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey the Messiah" (2 Corinthians 10,3-5 NLT).

"Put on the full armour of God so that you can stand against the tactics of the Devil ... Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the spirit, which is God's word" (Ephesians 6:11-17 HCSB).

You might want to read the whole description of Paul's warfare found in chapter 6 of his letter to the Ephesians.

Unfortunately, many Christians have misunderstood his admonition. They believe that they should go around the world with a quarrelsome and combative spirit, using verbal violence to achieve spiritual goals. This view, however, does not fit into Paul's theology. His intention was rather to turn violence upside down. In using the terminology of warfare he sought to ban violence, as all the weapons he describes represent the opposite of violence: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and God's spirit. So everyone who seeks to eradicate violence from his speech and thoughts is certainly moving in the right direction.

It is worth observing here that in the life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) we can see non-violence and a willingness to suffer – especially in his early time in Mecca. While it is true that in his later life as a statesman in Medina (no doubt due to the pressure of the situation and of those around him) he adapted his approach and went to battle like the kings and prophets of Israel, yet he finally resumed his non-violent stance towards the end of his life. He turned his steps again towards Mecca and accepted a somewhat humiliating peace treaty with the Meccans, took over the city two years later with almost no violence, and received his bitterest enemies as his brothers and as leaders within the

community.

Conclusion 8

In this chapter we have taken a brief look at the lives of some less well-known Children of the East. All of them, Caleb, Jael, Jonadab, the Rechabites, and Jabez became heroes of faith in their own way with specific lessons for us to learn. We have also mentioned Paul's experience on his way to Damascus, his search for a deeper encounter with God, and his visit to Arabia to find it.

Even though violent acts have been committed by these heroes, loyalty and faith to God were their motivation. God knew that their understanding of His character was limited, yet He heard their cries and did everything to save them and lead them to higher moral ground. And we can be sure that He is still leading believers steadily towards peace, love, and meekness by increasing step by step their understanding of His character.

What made those personages heroes? Their fearlessness, loyalty, courage, temperance, and simplicity, along with their prayers, and their willingness to receive a changed heart and bless others. This is what these stories of surrendered "Muslim" Arabs in Scripture teach us. Despite of their obvious insufficiencies, their deeds reflect the character we need to promote an efficient and selfless relationship with our brothers and sisters.

The next chapter will focus on incense, the fragrance of the Middle East that has a significant meaning. We will see how God made incense a central component of the sanctuary service of Israel, thus making the incense trade of the Arabs an integral part of his Messianic plans. We will also study how the Queen of Sheba and the Wise Men of the East have become beacons of submission to God for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

THE INCENSE ROAD

Connection between East and West

This chapter will deal with one of the most fascinating aspects of the Ishmael line, namely the incense trade between the Arabs and Israel. From the time of Joseph until many millennia later incense was, together with gold, *the* merchandise that kept the Abrahamic children in constant positive contact.

Keturah means incense

After Sarah died, Abraham married Keturah (qtura). Keturah means “burning incense” and has the same Semitic root radicals (qtr) as Qatar (qtar), the Middle Eastern country of today situated just opposite the famous ancient incense harbour of Gerrha in the Persian Gulf.

In a previous chapter we have read how Keturah's and Abraham's sons settled on the Arabian Peninsula like their eldest brother Ishmael had done before them. Together with Edom, Moab, Ammon, and some other relatives of Abraham, they built the mixed multitude of the East generally called “the Arabs.” Soon they began to trade with various aromatic gums used in incense.

This is how Keturah became a spiritual mother of all the Children of the East. Her name became the trademark for the Arabs – not only in a literal, but also in a spiritual sense.

MAP H: The Incense Road



The three Mosaic incense laws

In the days of Moses God made incense a legal requirement in the Torah. Three laws were given which made frankincense mandatory in the daily sanctuary service of the Israelites: frankincense, which was cultivated in southern Arabia (Yemen and Oman) and in the horn of Africa, had to be the fourth part of the incense by a law given for the sanctuary service (Exodus 30:34). Another law prescribed that the daily grain offering needed to be sacrificed with frankincense (Leviticus 2:1). A third law dealt with the showbread that had to be sprinkled with frankincense (Leviticus 24:7). Through these laws God ensured that Israel would always be in close contact with their Abrahamic brothers as frankincense did not grow in Israel and had to come to them through the Arabs over the route that has become famous as

"the Incense Road."

If we realise that the sanctuary service pointed to the coming of the Messiah as the supreme revelation of God's love to us, we see that the Arabs were meant to be an integral part of this plan: they were the ones to provide incense and thus to point to the Messiah. The underlying message is that Jesus the Messiah did not only come for the Israelites: he also came for the Arabs.

This explains why the most influential heirloom that Ishmael and the Children of the East have bequeathed to us – Muhammad and the Qur'an – speak of the Messiah in a way that they do not speak of any other messenger of God. They call him "God's Word ... and Spirit from Him" (an-Nisa' 4:171), "Mercy from God" (Maryam 19:21 Muhammad Sarwar), "a pure Son" (Verse 19 Abdel Haleem), "strengthened with the spirit of holiness" (al-Ma'ida 5:110 Maududi), and "a Sign for all people" (al-Anbiya' 21:91 Wahiduddin Khan).

Famous caravans on the Incense Road

The Bible mentions several caravans that carried incense to Canaan. The caravan of the Arabs that took Joseph to Egypt is the first mentioned in Scripture which used the Incense Road. It carried two incense gums, tragacanth and myrrh, plus balm (Genesis 37:25).

In the time of Solomon two caravans helped to increase the popularity of this trade route: one brought the Queen of Sheba to him, and the other brought him his beloved Shulamite, the Arab heroine of the *Song of Solomon*.

About the Queen of Sheba it is said: "And she gave the king six-score talents of gold, and of sweet odours exceeding much, and precious stones. There came no more such abundance of sweet odours, as the Queen of Sheba gave to king Solomon" (1 Kings 10:10 GNV).

About the caravan that brought Shulamite, Solomon's bride, from the desert the Song of Solomon says: "Who is this coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the merchant's fragrant powders?" (Song of Solomon 3:6).

The country of Sheba was famous for its incense: "For what purpose to Me comes frankincense from Sheba, and sweet cane from a far country?" (Jeremiah 6:20). As we have seen before, Sheba was situated in the desert mountains of Southern Arabia, mainly in today's Yemen and may have extended across the Red Sea down to the Horn of Africa.

Another caravan travelled with gold, incense, and myrrh to Jerusalem. This

time, there were Wise Men from the East, coming to bring these precious gifts to the Messiah. Because of the cruel King Herod's persecution, the Messiah and his parents escaped to Egypt for a three-year exile. There, the oriental presents of the Children of the East were exchanged for food and all that could preserve the life of the Messiah (Matthew 2:1,11).

Prophet Isaiah had prophesied that this would happen: "The multitude of camels shall cover your land, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall ascend with acceptance on My altar, and I will glorify the house of My glory" (Isaiah 60:6,7); and it was indeed fulfilled by the Wise Men from the East. It seems, however, that the promise also speaks of the end of time and of a fulfilment on a larger scale.

These two verses connect together all the main descendants of the children of the East: Abraham's sixth son Midian and four of his grandsons: Ephah the son of Midian, Sheba the son of Jokshan, Kedar the son of Ishmael, and Nebaioth the son of Ishmael. This is the united family of Hagar's and Keturah's sons. These sons of the East travel together the Incense Road all the way to Jerusalem. By providing part of the requirements for the sanctuary service and by supporting the Messiah to whom all the symbols of the sanctuary pointed, they contribute to the praise of the one and only God.

The Queen of Sheba and the Wise Men were all Arabs from the East. It is not so surprising that Arabs were the only foreigners who came to welcome the Messiah after he was born. Remember that it was one of their own prophets, Balaam, who had prophesied the coming of the Messiah more than a millennium before.

Balaam, prophet of Arabia

Prophet Balaam was the son of Beor (Numbers 22:5). Beor is mentioned in Scripture as father of the first Edomite king Bela (Genesis 36:32). Thus it might very well be that Balaam was Bela's brother; and if not, we wonder who would name his child after this famous personage! Only another patriotic Edomite would probably have done so. Yet, Balaam's prophethood was so famous that the king of Moab, in order to solicit his services, sent a delegation of elders from his own country and from the country of Midian on a long journey to Balaam's home near the Euphrates river (Numbers 22:7).

This is another example of how integrated the Children of the East were. The cooperation of Moab and Midian to hire an Edomite prophet shows that they had basically the same Abrahamic religion and worshipped the same God. Like the Patriarch Job, Balaam dwelt close to the Euphrates river although he was

an Edomite. This may be one piece of evidence for the mobility that the Children of the East had within Arabia.

Returning to the Wise Men from the East, notice how accurately they fulfilled Balaam's prophecy by embarking on their journey towards Jerusalem! Here it is: "I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near. A star will come from Jacob, and a sceptre will arise from Israel. He will smash the forehead of Moab and strike down all the Shethites" (Numbers 24:17 HCSB).

Even though this prophecy was included in the Torah, most of the Israelites did not see the connection. Is it not amazing to see that Arabs were the only ones who identified the connection between the new star and the Messiah?

Jesus' message was more non-violent and pacifist than anything else presented in Scripture. Therefore, we wonder how such a prophecy as "He will smash the forehead of Moab and strike down all the Shethites" can apply to him. How can he who condemned the use of the sword (Matthew 26:52) and who did not resist his violent tormentors "smash the forehead of Moab and strike down all the Shethites?" "Shethites" probably refers to all perpetrators of violence; but how can the Messiah violate his own principle? Does the Bible not encourage its readers not to "repay evil with evil" (Romans 12:17; 1 Peter 3:9), but instead to "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21)?

The book of Revelation gives the answer: evil and violence are overcome by the blood of the Lamb, the blood of the Messiah (Revelation 12:11) – and not by the blood of the Shethites or violators. The Messiah was pierced and by his blood he redeemed people from all nations and tongues (5:9).

Yet Jesus was raised to God, and when he comes back to judge his enemies, his garments will be stained with blood because his own blood is the only blood that he ever shed (19:13). His armies are made up of those prophets, saints, and martyrs who have followed the same straight path of suffering that he trod (19:14; 17:6; 16:6). And on the last day, his enemies will perish from the consequences of their own violence. They will die because they cannot endure his gaze and his word (19:12,15,21), so that God's presence becomes to them like a devouring fire (21:9,10).

The fact is that "to smash the foreheads" may be translated "to conquer the hearts of men for God." And this is what the Messiah did. When they start to trust his message, many violent people eventually surrender to the almighty God. This is true Islam: complete surrender. This way, we may say that their foreheads are smashed and their sinful ego dies. Henceforth they live the holy life of the Messiah.

Unfortunately, others resist him and are smashed by their own sins and their consequences until they finally perish, or as Scripture puts it, "Whoever falls on that stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder" (Luke 20:18). Other translations of the same verse say, he "will be smashed to pieces" (CEV). That is what the Messiah said about himself when he identified himself with the cornerstone of the temple (Psalm 118:22).

Dear reader, let us choose this beneficial suffering instead of heading towards eternal and final suffering. Let us surrender to God in genuine Islam by following the straight path of the Messiah! This path is the way to successful inter-Abrahamic communication. Selflessness imparted by the Messiah is of the best quality. It has the highest efficiency and the greatest love factor. Somehow the Arabs understood his importance and therefore brought him frankincense and myrrh as gifts.

Incense and prayer

In Scripture incense is closely connected with prayer at the altar, as the following verses show: "Let my prayer be set before You as incense" (Psalm 141:2). "You must worship and burn incense before only one altar?" (2 Chronicles 32:12). "And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand" (Revelation 8:4).

Therefore when the temple with its altar of incense was destroyed in 70 AD by the Romans the Jews stopped sacrificing. Instead they would pray during the specific times of the daily sacrifices. By the way, set prayer times and the call to prostrate oneself in prayer to God are also characteristics of those who identify with the Ishmaelite heritage today. According to the Qur'an, prostration in prayer is a sign that will identify the true believers among Ishmael's Messianic brothers:

"Yet all are not alike: among the People of the Book there are upright people who recite the verses of God in the watches of the night and prostrate themselves in worship" (Al 'Imran 3:113 Maududi).

Praying together is one of the most important secrets for harmony and efficient communication among Abrahamic brothers and sisters. The Messiah has promised that "if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:19,20). So if we agree to pray together to the almighty God asking Him to show us His will, we will experience in our midst the peace and love that the Messiah proclaimed; for the character of the Messiah is meekness and selflessness. Praying in His name means asking in the same spirit.

Song of Songs and its interpretations

Incense plays a significant role in "Song of Songs" or "Song of Solomon." This part of the Bible is truly a gem in world literature. There are at least three interpretations of it, including a literal interpretation describing the love relationship between King Solomon and his bride Shulamite. But there are also two allegorical interpretations: one describing the love relationship between God and His people Israel, and the other describing the love relationship between His Messiah and the believers as individuals or as a whole.

Scripture itself gives evidence for these allegorical interpretations. In Hosea for example God describes his relationship with Israel in terms of a love relationship:

"I will take you to be My wife forever. I will take you to be My wife in righteousness, justice, love, and compassion" (Hosea 2:19 HCSB).

And the psalmist sings about the Messiah – Messiah literally means "the Anointed," and his spouse:

"I recite my verses for the king: ...Your lips have been anointed with grace ... Your God has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy ... At your right hand is **the royal bride** in gold of Ophir. Listen, daughter: ... Let the king be enthralled by your beauty; honour him, for he is your lord ... her virgin companions follow her" (Psalm 45:1-14 NIV).

This text suggests that the Messiah King of this psalm is married! Indeed, when the apostles applied this Psalm to Jesus (Hebrews 1:8) they understood the bride mentioned in this Psalm to be his spiritual wife. The Messiah himself spoke about his marriage when he said: "The wedding is ready" (Matthew 22:8), and "their master ... will return from the wedding" (Luke 12:36); and the book of Revelation adds: "The marriage of the Lamb, has come, and his wife has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7). Later on, it continues by identifying the New Jerusalem as his bride (21:2,9,10).

Jesus also mentioned the "daughters of Jerusalem," "the daughters of Zion," "the virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom" (Song of Songs 3:5,11; Matthew 25:1) to illustrate the believers. This should be sufficient evidence to endorse the validity of an allegorical interpretation of Song of Songs.

Shulamite, Arab bride of the Messiah

Yet we find various hints in this love song that Shulamite was a daughter of the East, i. e. an Arabian girl; for she says about herself: "I am dark, but lovely, O

daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Kedar” (Song of Songs 1:5).

As we have already seen, Kedar was the second son of Ishmael, and Solomon brought Shulamite in his sedan from the Arabian desert on the Incense Road to Jerusalem: “Who is this coming out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the merchant’s fragrant powders?” (3:6).

There it is: Shulamite's coming to Jerusalem is compared to a caravan of incense and myrrh.

There are more verses in Song of Songs describing Shulamite in Arab terms: “O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the cliff” (2:14).

The Hebrew word for Rock is *Sela*. This is why this verse reminds us of the end time prophecy where two entities are mentioned together: Sela and Ishmael's son Kedar (Isaiah 42:11). The Greek equivalent of Sela is Petra, which happens to be the name of the Edomite capital. Could it be another evidence for Shulamite's Arab identity?

In Song of Songs, one of the most poetic descriptions of love is found in Solomon's words as he praised his relationship with his beloved Arab woman:

“Who is this, coming up from the desert, leaning on her darling? I awakened you under the apple tree. It was there that your mother conceived you; there she who bore you conceived you. Set me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm; for love is as strong as death, passion as cruel as Sh’ol; its flashes are flashes of fire, as fierce as the flame of Yah [Allah]. No amount of water can quench love, torrents cannot drown it. If someone gave all the wealth in his house for love, he would gain only utter contempt” (Song of Songs 8:5-7 CJB).

What a passionate love between this Arab girl and the Messiah King!

Shulamite is compared to more Arab symbols: to the classical tree of the desert oasis – the date palm (7:8); and to a horse (1:9) – horses were a sign of military strength. The Arabian horse came to world fame and is predicted in the prophecy of the apocalyptic trumpets as a main feature of the military strength Muslim armies had in history.

In this vision of the trumpets frankincense plays an important role as well. It rises as smoke from the Arabian desert (the bottomless pit). Song of Songs

hints at this military strength of Islam in several places. For example, "O my love, you are ... beautiful ... Awesome as an army with banners!" (6:4); and "Who is she who looks forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, awesome as an army with banners?" (6:10).

This verse is special because it is the only one in Scripture where the beauty of the moon is mentioned. There is no Hebrew word in Scripture meaning "crescent." Yet the crescent is the most beautiful guise of the moon. It has also become the symbol of Islam, which is the religion that from its inception took up the heritage of Ishmael and the Sons of the East.

Finally, Shulamite in Hebrew is the feminine form of Solomon (Shlomo). Both names are derived from the word *shalom* (peace). The Hebrew word *shalom* is the same word as *salām* in Arabic. The word *islām*, however, is the causative of *salām*, which means that everything causing peace is implied in the word Islam: to make peace, to submit, surrender, yield, relinquish, deliver oneself up, bring about peace, reconcile.

Love between Abraham's children

At this stage we need to raise an important question: do Abrahamic brothers and sisters love each other spiritually in the way Solomon the Westerner loved Shulamite the Arab? Solomon did not belong to the Children of the East. Yet he sings:

"O fairest among women ... let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely ... Your lips, O my spouse, drip as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under your tongue ... Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon you" (1:8, 2:14, 4:11, 6:13).

Let us imagine that Solomon lived today as a representative of Western culture, of Abraham's Western children, and that Shulamite served as the representative of Eastern Oriental culture in these days. Let us try to look for a few moments through the eyes of two lovers who see only beauty and attraction in each other and pass over each other's weaknesses in silence.

Would Solomon love to hear "her" Arabic voice, for example, when calling from the minarets to worship the Almighty? Would he love the incense of prayer to God? Would he admire her Muslim religious architecture and art? Would he appreciate her rejection of idols and images – out of respect to God's commandments? Would he marvel at the undreamed-of beauty the world is enriched by through her houses of prayer?

Would Solomon today respect the hospitality of Abraham, which she cherished?

Would he reverence the chaste reserve that she teaches her daughters? Would he be willing to be inspired by her devotion to learn Scripture by heart, recite it, and prostrate himself several times a day before God? Would he not study the rich words, the biblical messages presented in images of Arabic poetry in her book, the Qur'an? Would he not desire to learn from the self-control shown when she abstains from food and drink from dawn until dusk a whole month per year to show her surrender to God?

Some readers might think these glasses which I am suggesting we look through are too rose-coloured. Yet the lover enjoys his perspective and sees that there still is some spiritual incense coming on the Incense Road from Arabia to Abraham's Western children!

And how would Shulamite view her bridegroom? Would she not see his quest to treasure the oldest manuscripts of Scripture and unearth all evidence of its contemporaneous history? Would she not admire his desire to show God's mercy by protecting human rights and freedoms? Would she not respect any Western endeavour to protect girls and women from exploitation by men? Would she not reverence the non-violent principles of the Messiah as a revelation of God's true character?

Would Shulamite not be willing to be inspired by Western scriptural movements of healthful living and a life in close touch with nature? Would she not join the Reformation they have made possible towards a new obedience of God's Ten Commandments including the Sabbath commandment that Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) also kept? Would she not desire to learn from the sensitivity many of Abraham's Western children show towards God's creation in fauna and flora? Would she not long for the unique moral purity of the Messiah whom Scripture describes as sinless? (Isaiah 53:9; Hebrew 4:15; 7:26; 1 Peter 2:20; 1 John 3:5; Maryam 19:19 zakee = pure, sinless)

Love transforms the perception of the loved one. So is there something in the Messiah and his Western followers that attracts the Children of the East? – I think there is.

Sexual purity, a treasure from the East?

Shulamite says: "Why should I be like a veiled woman beside the flocks of your friends? ...You are a garden locked up, my sister, my bride; you are a spring enclosed, a sealed fountain" (1:7; 4:12 NIV).

Only a true lover who looks for a life-long commitment can appreciate this type of femininity. While the veil has become a symbol of oppression to most in the West, Solomon – through his love glasses – sees something positive in it.

Indeed, Islamic countries seem to belong to the last big territories today where people are fighting a losing battle against the sexualization of society and the steady dissolution of the family. Many Muslims even balk at any Western influence to protect their ideal of chastity and family from extinction. Partially they go to the extremes of murder and massacre in their attempt to fight immorality, as the brothers of Dinah did long ago in Shechem (Genesis 34). In horror many in the West have therefore started to identify the veil as one of the most visible symbols of Islam, as the symbol for terror.

Clearly, however, violence is not God's solution because it contradicts His character. It will not solve the immorality of the West. It only brings more suffering and shame.

Shulamite kept herself pure out of love for her bridegroom. Therefore the pure love for the Messiah will also today be the protection needed by any Muslim girl and boy, woman and man who want to stay pure amidst today's immorality.

Shulamite's deep longing

More than any other woman, Shulamite is longing for Solomon. And indeed, a deep religiosity makes Muslims seek God's will daily. "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine ... His left arm is under my head, and his right arm embraces me" (Song of Solomon 1:2; 2:6 NIV).

Shulamite is longing to be obedient to Allah who has sent – according to the Qur'an – His Word in the person of the Messiah to Maryam. The Word coming from God has brought to mankind the gospel, truth, healing, and resurrection, life and spiritual food. Shulamite wants to be guided by Allah on the straight path. As such, Jesus fulfilled this promise that was already proclaimed in the Torah and by the prophets (Al 'Imran 3:45-52; al-Ma'ida 5:110-114).

Like Solomon in his Song, it was the Messiah who spoke: "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away" (2:10).

The Qur'an calls all believers who identify with Ishmael to come away from idolatry and sin. And Shulamite is willing to listen and obey: "My beloved thrust his hand through the latch-opening; my heart began to pound for him ... I opened for my beloved, but my beloved had left; he was gone. My heart sank at his departure. I looked for him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer. The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. They beat me, they bruised me; they took away my cloak (veil), those watchmen of the walls!" (5:4-7 NIV).

Distorted and apostate faith that tries to sanctify immorality can also be a kind of beating that inflicts wounds on Shulamite.

Shulamite says: "Make haste, my beloved, and be like to a gazelle or a young stag on the mountains of spices" (Song of Songs 8:14). Shulamite longs for the Messiah to come. The following scripture confirms it in another way: "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that hears say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Revelation 22:16).

Many pious Jews, Christians, and Muslims long for the coming of the Messiah. Shulamite is searching for the Messiah with a remarkable hunger and passion and he will allow her to find him. Today there is a renewed interest of Muslims to follow the Messiah and his message within Islam. The love story depicted in Song of Songs continues to the present day.

Muhammad in Song of Songs

Many Muslims have sat up and taken notice of the book Song of Songs because it contains the only verse in pre-Islamic scripture that has the word Muhammad in it (Song of Solomon 5:16). However, because it cannot be explained in a few sentences, this topic must wait for another time.

Just keep in mind that our attention has been especially drawn to that very part of the Bible that invites Jews and Arabs to come together around the Messiah.

Like the book Song of Songs, many other parts of Scripture have a special application in our time. As we believe that the day of Judgement comes closer, let us realise that "whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

Therefore it is time to cross the cultural divide between West and East. We are not suggesting an ecumenical agenda that does not care about the Truth anymore, but rather a genuine search for the Truth? Should not both sides make an effort and try, in the spirit of love, to build a bridge of understanding from both sides of the divide, which will one day meet in the centre. Love will light a fire that will be warm, comforting, and enlightening!

Conclusion 9

This chapter has shown that God intended Israel and Ishmael to stay connected. Through the incense needed by Israel for its sanctuary service, Isaac and Ishmael stayed in connection. Various Arab caravans carried the precious product and traded it from Arabia into the rest of the world.

The same road we have called "Incense Road" brought both caravans of the Queen of Sheba and of Solomon's bride Shulamite, and the Bible compares Shulamite's arrival with incense. She is indeed a powerful symbol for the Arab bride in spiritual love for the Messiah King.

By bringing incense from the East to the West to supply the needs of the Messiah, the Wise Men followed the prophecy of the ancient Arab prophet Balaam.

Where is the incense connection between West and East today? Has it maybe to do with prayer? Surely, because in Scripture incense is closely related to prayer. Has it something to do with love? Of course, because passionate love from both sides seems to be the main ingredient necessary for this love story to reach a glorious consummation.

EPILOGUE

It truly is a tragedy how Islam and the West have drifted apart. But there is hope that faith and peace are available for all who will take the time to go back to the roots of Abrahamic heritage.

With the story of Hagar and Ishmael this book has shown how the separation began, yet how from the start lessons against slavery and violence, along with lessons of surrender and self-sacrifice are woven into the relationship of Abraham's children. The Sons of the East and the messianic line are destined to make peace and invite everybody to enjoy the benefits of the divine promises to Abraham.

Reading the Bible through the eyes of Ishmael helps to erase the impression that he was just a poor relation of Abraham, a quarrelsome lad that God had saved him from. No, this is not the God of Scripture! The Bible reveals profound and far-reaching plans for Ishmael and Isaac.

Ishmael created the new culture of Arabia, a brotherhood of a mingled people from Abraham's non-messianic descendants. These sons of the East populated the Arabian peninsula and became a resource of blessing for Israel and the Messiah. They hosted the Israelites on their territory during their early years, taught them the value of a life in the wilderness, initiated them to their sanctuary service, provided their incense, and continued to intervene when a prophet of Israel was persecuted by his own people.

Two related strong identities were shaped in a continual exchange of ideas and merchandise: the Jewish and the Arabian identities. Both identities were open to integrate ethnic foreigners of all backgrounds resulting finally in the broader identity of the Jewish-Christian and the Muslim culture respectively. The Holy Scriptures of both cultures are heavily interrelated given the fact that whole parts of the Bible, like Genesis, Job, Ruth, and parts of Proverbs have Ishmaelite origins; and many places in the Bible and the Qur'an refer to each other or at least to each other's culture and history.

Arab men of deep spiritual insight like Jethro, Balaam, the Queen of Sheba, the Wise Men from the East, and Muhammad drank deeply from the messianic sources. And Jewish men of an equally spiritual depth like Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, Jesus the Messiah, and the Apostle Paul received much inspiration from an Eastern desert experience.

The story of Ruth the Arab, grandmother of King David and ancestor of Jesus

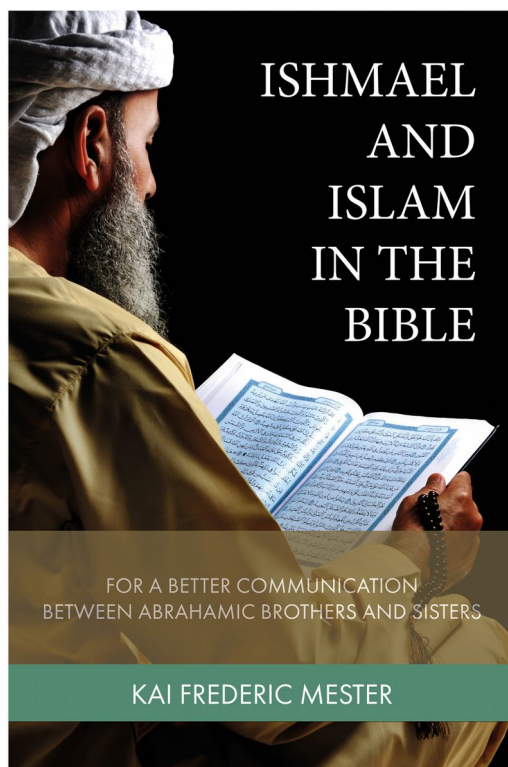
the Messiah, shows that even the blessing of the Messiah should in no way be excluded from the Ishmaelites. Her attachment to her Jewish mother-in-law and her marriage to one of Jacob's descendants Boaz call Abrahamic brothers to similar affection.

All the violence that can be seen in Ishmael's and Israel's history was never intended to be experienced by them, neither actively nor passively. Yet it was allowed under certain circumstances as a pedagogical judgement on their journey towards non-violence. To reach such a desirable state of peace, the ingredients to be learned and practised are fearlessness, temperance, and prayer.

The realization that many Jews, Christians, and Muslims strongly identify with Abraham makes all the information on Abraham's descendants in Scripture so fascinating. One piece of information is Shulamite the Arab and her love relationship to Solomon the Messianic King. This encourages us to passionately look for ways to open our hearts for the spark of divine love between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. We might have to go back to our roots and shed some of our traditions in a joint quest to experience revival and reformation in our spiritual journey. Yet the love depicted in the Song of Songs makes it all possible.

It is my desire that this present book will be a contribution towards that end.

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