

ABSTRACT

“God’s Covenant with Isaac and the Promises to Ishmael: Missiological Implications”— This article addresses Ishmael’s place vis-à-vis Isaac within the framework of the Abrahamic covenant. The study discusses some essential aspects of the Abrahamic covenant that are related to the promises, unity, and conditionality of the covenant. Then, it undertakes a close examination of Isaac in the context of the promises and blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. Finally, it examines Ishmael’s role in the Abrahamic covenant and his characterization vis-à-vis Isaac. Clearly, the Bible by no means regards Ishmael out of the purview of the covenant blessings. No group of people has special privileges or priorities to the exclusion of others when it comes to salvation. Jesus is the true seed of Abraham.

Keywords: Abrahamic covenant, Isaac, Ishmael, missiology, covenant blessings

RESUMEN

“El pacto de Dios con Isaac y las promesas a Ismael: Implicaciones misiológicas” — Este artículo aborda el lugar de Ismael con respecto a Isaac dentro del marco del pacto abrahámico. El estudio discute algunos aspectos esenciales del pacto abrahámico que se relacionan con las promesas, la unidad y la condicionalidad del pacto. A continuación, lleva a cabo un examen detenido de Isaac en el contexto de las promesas y bendiciones del pacto abrahámico. Finalmente, examina el papel de Ismael en el pacto abrahámico y su caracterización en relación con Isaac. Claramente, la Biblia de ninguna manera considera a Ismael fuera del ámbito de las bendiciones del pacto. Ningún grupo de personas tiene privilegios o prioridades especiales que excluyan a otros cuando se trata de la salvación. Jesús es la verdadera simiente de Abraham.

Palabras clave: pacto abrahámico, Isaac, Ismael, misionología, bendiciones pactuales

GOD'S COVENANT WITH ISAAC AND THE PROMISES TO ISHMAEL: MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

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Introduction

Postmodern attention to marginal characters and recent conversations with Muslims have prompted scholars¹ to consider Ishmael's role and characterization in the biblical narrative. And inasmuch as Muslims claim Ishmael as their spiritual progenitor,² this topic is not a minor one and should be undertaken with exegetical and theological sensitivity. This article addresses Ishmael's place vis-à-vis Isaac within the framework of the Abrahamic covenant. In order to accomplish this goal, this paper addresses three interrelated areas that correspond to the three sections of the study. First, it delineates some essential aspects of the Abrahamic covenant that are related to the promises, unity, and conditionality of the covenant. Second, it undertakes a close examination of Isaac in the context of the promises and blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. Third, it examines Ishmael's role in the Abrahamic covenant and his characterization vis-à-vis Isaac. Finally, a summary and a few conclusions are offered as a contribution to the conversation with our Muslim neighbors and friends.

1. See, e.g., Albert de Pury, "Abraham: The Priestly Writer's 'Ecumenical' Ancestor," *Rethinking the Foundations: Historiography in the Ancient World and in the Bible: Essays in Honour of John Van Seters*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Thomas Römer, Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 294 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 163–181; Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003); Thomas Naumann, "The Common Basis of the Covenant and the Distinction between Isaac and Ishmael in Gen 17: The Case of Ishmael and the Non-Israelite Descendants of Abraham in the Priestly Source," in *The Foreigner and the Law: Perspectives from the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Reinhard Achenbach, Rainer Albertz, and Jakob Wöhrle (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2011), 89–109; David J. Zucker, "Ishmael and Isaac: Parallel, Not Conflictual Lives," *SJOT* 26, no. 1 (2012): 1–11; John Travis Noble, "Let Ishmael Live before You!': Finding a Place for Hagar's Son in the Priestly Tradition" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2013).

2. See Reuven Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands: The Evolution of the Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990); Shari L. Lowin, *The Making of a Forefather: Abraham in Islamic and Jewish Exegetical Narratives*, *Islamic History and Civilization* 65 (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

Essential Aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant

One scholar aptly notes that the Abrahamic covenant stands “as the framework within which all other concepts of relationships concerning the people of God would arise.”³ In this connection, three important aspects of the Abrahamic covenant deserve attention: the promises, the unity, and the conditionality. It seems that the promises are the least controversial aspects of scholarly discussion; therefore, a brief outline of the issues will be offered. More attention will be devoted to the unity and conditionality of the Abrahamic covenant.

Promises

Several promises are offered to Abraham, some of which are encapsulated right at the beginning of God’s interactions with the patriarch:

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; / I will bless you / And make your name great; / 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. . . . To your descendants I will give this land” (Gen 12:1–3, 7).⁴

Five major promises emerging from this passage are part of the covenant God makes with Abraham: (1) the promise of the land (אֶרֶץ), (2) the promise of a great nation, (3) the promise of a great name (שֵׁם), (4) the promise of a blessing for all families of the earth, and (5) the promise of descendants (זֶרַע, “seed”). Interestingly enough, each one of these promises function as some kind of reversal of previous judgments God had inflicted upon the rebellious human race:⁵ The promise of the land offers a palliative to the first parents’ expulsion from the garden of Eden. The promise of a great nation and the promise of the seed look back to the promised “seed” who would

3. William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology*, rev. ed. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013), 105.

4. This paper follows the NKJV, which may at times be modified to reflect a more precise reading of the original language.

5. James Luther Mays, ed., *Harper’s Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 93; Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 62.

eventually smash the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). The promise of a great name echoes the aspirations of the builders of Babel, who undertook a massive project in order to make a name (שם) for themselves (Gen 11:3). Ironically, what they failed to achieve by works, God freely gives to Abraham.⁶ In the same vein, the promise of a blessing (בְּרָכָה) to the families of the earth may intimate a reversal of the curse brought about by the transgression of the first parents in the garden. While Adam and Eve brought a curse (אָרַר) upon the earth, Abraham's seed will bring a blessing (בְּרָכָה) to all the families of the earth.

At the same time, the promises made to Abraham also point forward to what God would accomplish on behalf of the world in the eschatological times. Thus, the promise of the land transcends the territorial promises related to Canaan. Because Jesus receives authority over heaven and earth, "the boundaries of his land are now extended to the extremities of the earth (Matt. 28:18–20)."⁷ And ultimately, the land promise will find its eschatological fulfillment in the new earth announced by John in Revelation (Rev 21–22). The promise of a great nation points to the eschatological people of God coming from all tribes, tongues, and peoples who worship the lamb enthroned within the heavenly city. The promise of a great "name" reverberates with the name that would later dwell in the temple and be eschatologically revealed in the name of Jesus Christ, the name above any other name. The promise of a blessing to all families of the earth found its fulfillment in Christ. The promise of descendants (זָרַע) met its fulfillment in the "seed" Jesus Christ. So, it was not by accident that the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew begins with Abraham. Jesus is the seed of Abraham in whom the covenantal promises made to that patriarch reach their consummation.

Thus, the promises of the Abrahamic covenant not only entail material blessings for Abraham and his descendants, but indicate the remedy God graciously provides to mitigate and eventually eliminate the effects and consequences of sin on the human race. This is a covenant of redemption in which one family is chosen to serve as a channel of grace to the entire world.

6. Bernard Och, "The Garden of Eden: From Re-Creation to Reconciliation," *Judaism* 37, no. 3 (1988): 340–351 (343n1).

7. Nathan MacDonald, "Did God Choose the Patriarchs? Reading for Election in the Book of Genesis," in *Genesis and Christian Theology*, ed. Nathan MacDonald, Mark W. Elliott, and Grant Macaskill (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 266.

Unity

Some scholars argue that God's dealing with Abraham involves two distinct covenants.⁸ Thus, following ancient Near East parallels, they take Gen 15 to be the report of a covenant of grant—an unconditional covenant—while Gen 17 represents a conditional covenant or “covenant of circumcision.” One such scholar thus summarizes the distinctions between the covenants of Gen 15 and 17, respectively: “Whereas the promissory covenant of Genesis 15 is unconditional, the establishment or ratification of the covenant of circumcision is dependent upon Abraham's continuing obedience to God.”⁹ According to one opinion, Ishmael's circumcision as reported in Gen 17 suggests that he participated in the covenant of circumcision, as opposed to the promissory covenant given to Isaac.¹⁰ But according to another view, “Genesis 15 is the only covenant under which Ishmael falls. He is explicitly excluded from the covenants of Genesis 17 (see vv. 18–21) and Genesis 22 (see vv. 2, 12, 16).”¹¹ However, as argued below, such bifurcation of God's dealings with Abraham into two covenants finds no clear support in the biblical text.

A close examination of the biblical narrative indicates that God indeed cuts just one covenant with Abraham, which unfolds in three main stages as shown in Gen 12, 15, and 17.¹² These chapters stand as the culminating points of the Lord's covenant with the patriarch. Genesis 12 portrays the first stage of this process as God commanding Abraham to leave the land of Ur and go to the land of Canaan. Genesis 15, in turn, reports the Lord walking through the pieces of the sacrificial animals representing the ritual formalization or “cutting” of the covenant. As the biblical text summarizes: “On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram” (Gen 15:18). On that occasion the Lord reiterates the promise of a great nation to the old patriarch.

8. Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 114–116; Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose*, *New Studies in Biblical Theology* 23 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 86–91; T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 176–179.

9. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 177.

10. Bruce Wawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 224.

11. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant*, 105.

12. Gerhard F. Hasel and Michael G. Hasel, *The Promise: God's Everlasting Covenant* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2002), Kindle location 387.

Subsequently, Gen 17 reports the reconfirmation of the covenant as God commands the rite of circumcision, which would function as the covenant sign. Thus, Gen 17 reports not the ratification of another covenant, but simply the confirmation of the covenant already formalized in Gen 15. As one scholar aptly notes,

There is no theological development of the concept *berit* in Genesis 17. That chapter is merely a reaffirmation of the material of Genesis 12 and 15. In the chapter the formation of the twelve-tribe Israelite confederacy through Isaac and then Jacob is foreshadowed (v. 19). They are now the covenant people, and we are at the beginning of their history.¹³

But additionally, some important reasons may be adduced in support of the view that God made only one covenant with Abraham. First, when the Lord confirms the covenant with Isaac, three major promises of the Abrahamic covenant already given to Abraham in Gen 15 and 17 are reiterated to Isaac as part of one single covenant:

Dwell in this land, and I will be with you and bless you; for to you and your descendants I give all these lands, and I will perform the oath which I swore to Abraham your father. And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed (Gen 26:3–4).

So, the promise of land points back to Gen 15:18 and 17:8. The promise of descendants (עַרְבֵי) points to Gen 15:5 and 22:17. And the promise of universal blessing points back to Gen 12:3 and 22:18. Therefore, it seems clear that the Abrahamic covenant as reconfirmed to Isaac is one single covenant.

Second, elsewhere in Scripture the Abrahamic covenant is referred to as one single covenant. Even when referring to God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Scripture speaks of one single covenant. For example: "So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob" (Exod 2:24; cf. 2 Kgs 13:23). In the NT, Peter also recognized one single covenant with Abraham: "You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham,

13. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 100.

‘And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Acts 3:25). In addition, as one scholar demonstrates, in Rom 4 Paul “connects the circumcision of Genesis 17 with the faith-righteousness of Genesis 15 in a way that indicates, as we have said, that there is only one Abrahamic covenant”:¹⁴

Does this blessedness then come upon the circumcised only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised (Rom 4:9–12).

To conclude this section, we should note that some scholars suggest that Abraham’s obedience, manifested in the Akedah, fulfilled the requirement of the supposedly distinct covenant of circumcision,¹⁵ which was initiated in Gen 17. Thus, the divine oath sworn by the Lord in response to Abraham’s obedience (Gen 22:16) has been understood as the ratification of such a covenant.¹⁶ However, it should be noted that the divine oath cannot be related to one supposed covenant of circumcision to the exclusion of a promissory one. As clarified above, God made only one covenant with Abraham. At this point, we should reiterate that when Scripture associates oath and covenant, it makes no reference to more than one covenant. Expressions such as “the covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac” (1 Chr 16:16; Ps 105:9) only show that “covenant” and “oath” are parallel synecdochical terms¹⁷ indicating the same “legal package.”¹⁸

14. Jeffrey J. Niehaus, “God’s Covenant with Abraham,” *JETS* 56, no. 2 (2013): 259.

15. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 89–91.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Anthony C. Thiselton, “Oath,” *NIDB*, 4:310.

18. Niehaus, “God’s Covenant with Abraham,” 253.

Conditionality

Since the unity of the Abrahamic covenant has been demonstrated, the idea of an unconditional covenant of promise (Gen 15) contrasted with a conditional covenant of circumcision (Gen 17) cannot be sustained. Thus, attention must be given to the discussion about the conditionality and/or unconditionality of this covenant. Perusal of the scholarly literature shows that those who focus on Gen 15 tend to see the Abrahamic covenant as unconditional.¹⁹ After all, according to the biblical text only the Lord walks through the animal pieces in what is often understood as a self-imprecatory gesture.²⁰ So if Gen 15 is taken as the decisive factor, the Abrahamic covenant can be understood as an unconditional relationship established by God with Abraham, in which case the Lord unilaterally pledges to fulfill promises made to the patriarch. Close examination of the biblical text, however, indicates that along with elements of unconditionality the Abrahamic covenant contains some clear aspects of conditionality.

Prior to examining the conditional aspects of the Abrahamic covenant, it must be noted “God’s choice of Abraham was not based on any inherent superiority that called for a reward.”²¹ Although Abraham shows unswerving faithfulness to God at some crucial moments of his life, such loyalty does not accrue him any merit that would prompt God to choose him in a *quid pro quo* arrangement. Indeed, God’s choice is based on underserved love and grace, also bestowed upon Abraham on those occasions when he shows himself to be much less than perfect (e.g., Gen 12:1–20).

Some clearly conditional elements are noted in the following injunctions God makes to Abraham. First, Abraham and his descendants

19. See, e.g., Howard Frederic Vos, *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Manners and Customs: How the People of the Bible Really Lived* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 158; David Gunn, “An Overview of New Covenant Passages, Ostensible and Actual,” in *An Introduction to the New Covenant*, ed. Christopher Cone (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2013), 48.

20. See, e.g., Noel Weeks, *Admonition and Curse: The Ancient Near Eastern Treaty/Covenant Form as a Problem in Inter-Cultural Relationships*, JSOTSup 407 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 117; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 112; John Day, *From Creation to Babel: Studies in Genesis 1–11*, LHBOTS 592 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 125. For a review of major interpretations of this rite, see Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Meaning of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15,” *JSOT* 6, no. 19 (1981): 61–78.

21. Hasel and Hasel, *The Promise*, Kindle location 402.

should keep the covenant: “And God said to Abraham: ‘As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations’” (Gen 17:9). From this injunction follows the fact that the covenant could be broken or invalidated. Second, circumcision becomes the covenant sign and therefore has to be practiced. This indicates the possibility that some persons may be excluded from the covenant if they ignore the circumcision law: “And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant” (Gen 17:14; cf. Exod 4:21–26). Third, conformity with God’s ways is required:

Since Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice, that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him (Gen 18:18–19).

So, Abraham being commanded to teach his descendants to “keep the way of the Lord” indicates that the covenant is accompanied with certain obligations on the human side. This becomes even clearer in the purpose clause that follows: “The Lord may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.” Fourth, the fact that obedience is clearly an aspect of the Abrahamic covenant is shown by Abraham’s prompt obedience to the Lord’s command to sacrifice his son. Abraham’s obedience gives full credit in the divine statement: “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, *because you have obeyed My voice*” (Gen 22:18).²² Later on, as the Lord repeats the covenant promises to Isaac, God makes clear that they are grounded on Abraham’s obedience:²³ “And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws” (Gen 26:4–5). It seems clear from the previous

22. Emphasis added.

23. Ronald Youngblood, “The Abrahamic Covenant: Conditional or Unconditional?” in *The Living and Active Word of God: Essays in Honor of Samuel J. Schultz*, ed. Morris Inch and Ronald Youngblood (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 40.

considerations that the Abrahamic covenant contains a significant conditional element.

Thus, although the covenant contains some clear unconditional aspects—especially expressed in Gen 12 and 15—one should not overlook the conditional elements. Both the unconditionality and the conditionality of the Abrahamic covenant must be kept in tension. On God's side the covenant is unconditional in the sense that God would bring universal blessings to the world through Abraham's seed regardless of the conduct of Abraham's heirs. And this is exactly what happens in the history of Abraham's later descendants. Israel plunges into deep apostasy, and as a result is delivered into the hands of pagan powers. But regardless of the sorry state of the nation, the Messiah—the "seed"—comes into being in the fullness of time. So, although dispensationalist scholars place a strong emphasis on the promise of the land as the ultimate token of God's faithfulness to His promise to Abraham, the biblical text indicates that the promise of the "seed" stands as the crucial and absolutely unconditional element of the Abrahamic covenant. It is the "seed" that links the Abrahamic covenant to the universal covenant of redemption offered to Adam and Eve in the garden.²⁴

To conclude, it seems evident that the Abrahamic covenant contains both unconditional and conditional elements. As one scholar summarizes, "The Abrahamic covenant was unconditional because the Lord would see it through: it would not fail; on the other side of the same coin, the Abrahamic covenant was also conditional: any member of it could fail."²⁵ Even the nation of Israel as a particular ethnic entity in the story of salvation could fail, as it did, but God's unconditional promise of bringing blessings and restoration to the fallen world through the "seed" could never fail because God unconditionally committed Himself to accomplish His salvific purpose at all costs. Thus, on the one hand, the conditional elements of the Abrahamic covenant point to God's holiness and the fact that those who enter into a covenantal relationship with Him must respond to His grace with obedience. On the other, the unconditional elements reveal that God's salvific purposes for the human race cannot be thwarted

24. See Afolarin Olutunde Ojewole, "The Seed in Genesis 3:15: An Exegetical and Intertextual Study" (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2002), 231.

25. Niehaus, "God's Covenant with Abraham," 265.

by human or satanic opposition.²⁶ Ultimately, God's grace and love have the last word.

Isaac's Role in the Abrahamic Covenant

As soon as the Lord promises Abraham the blessings of the covenant there appear some potential heirs, who for one reason or another are soon passed over. It may be presumed that the first potential heir to Abraham's promises is his nephew Lot. But Lot excludes himself as soon as he separates from Abraham and chooses to live in the land of Sodom. The next candidate is Eliezer, but this option is soon discarded by the Lord, who promises that the heir will be a natural son of Abraham. Hence, Ishmael seems to be the heir of the Abrahamic promises. But it does not take long for the Lord to explain to Abraham that his heir will be a son born to Sarah as well. Thus, after all likely candidates are rejected, the Lord makes clear that the Abrahamic promised line will be carried through a son of Abraham through Sarah: Isaac.

Several indications point to Isaac as the chosen one. As one scholar observes, "the motif of the child born to a barren woman is one marker used to indicate that the child who is eventually born to such a mother both comes from and belongs to God"²⁷ (cf. Judg 13:2-5; 1 Sam 1). Since Abraham and Sarah are old and thus beyond childbearing age, Isaac emerges as a "miracle baby"²⁸ given by God; therefore, he belongs to God. And this characterization is linked with two explicit statements about the promise line passing through Isaac.

One statement occurs when God announces to Abraham the birth of Isaac:

"And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" Then God said: "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his

26. Ibid., 271.

27. Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 35-36.

28. Ibid.

name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him. 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. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year” (Gen 17:16–21).

Although Abraham at first thinks that Ishmael will carry the promise forward, God immediately corrects him and makes clear that this privilege and responsibility will be laid upon another son of Abraham, one to be born through Sarah. It is interesting to note that in God's plan for the Abrahamic seed there is also a personal role for Sarah. So, God changes not only Abraham's name but Sarah's as well to indicate that they will be blessed as husband and wife in producing an heir. And God reiterates specifically to Sarah some of the promises already made to Abraham (Gen 17:6). God will bless (בָּרַךְ) her and make her a mother of nations (עַמִּים), and kings (מְלָכִים)²⁹ of peoples (גּוֹיִם) will come from her (Gen 17:16). Although she had produced an heir by giving Abraham her slave girl, God does not endorse that human effort to fulfill the promise, much less approve “Abraham's polygamy.”³⁰ It is in this context that God promises to reconfirm the “everlasting covenant” (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) with the son to be born from Sarah (Gen 17:19).³¹ At this point the Hebrew narrative introduces a disjunction—as aptly reflected in the translation “as for Ishmael” (NKJV)—to switch the subject of the conversation to Ishmael and assert that the older son would also be blessed (Gen 17:20). In the next verse the conversation switches back to Isaac with a contrast syntactically indicated by the fronting of the direct object: “But My covenant [אֶת־בְּרִיתִי] I

29. As noted by K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, The NAC 1B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 202, the “reference to ‘kings’ among Abraham's descendants indicates that autonomous nations will result (17:16; 35:11); Abraham, though not a king himself, is the ancestor of multiple royal houses. Genesis shows the progressive realization of this promise by including genealogical lists of Ishmael's tribal rulers (17:16; 25:12–17) and Edom's kings (36:9–43); allusion to future rulers in Jacob's household is the blessing of Judah's ‘scepter’ (49:10; cf. 36:31).”

30. Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 185.

31. The expression (“eternal covenant”) also applies to the covenants made with Noah after the flood (Gen 9:7) and with the Israelites at Sinai (Exod 31:16; Lev 24:8), which indicates the underlying unity of the biblical covenants.

will establish with Isaac” (Gen 17:21). Again, the attention switches to emphasize that Isaac is the chosen heir of the covenant line.

The other clear statement occurs in the context of Ishmael’s eventual dismissal from his father’s household. God’s word to Abraham further confirms Isaac as the promise heir:

But God said to Abraham, “Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed” (Gen 21:12–13).

This passage furthers the points noted above. First, it is through Isaac that the promised “seed” will flow (v. 12). Second, as the next verse says, Ishmael, although not the heir, “will be a nation” because he belongs to Abraham’s seed. What seems to distinguish Isaac from Ishmael is the fact that Isaac will carry the “seed.”³²

From the above, it seems clear that the Genesis narrative portrays Isaac as the one who carries forward the Abrahamic “seed.”

Ishmael’s Role in the Abrahamic Covenant

In view of what has been shown above, it has become evident that the promise indeed passes through Isaac’s line rather than Ishmael’s (Gen 17:18–21; 21:10–12). For all intents and purposes Ishmael is clearly the non-elect. But having said that, it must be noted that a close look at Ishmael’s characterization reveals that although the Genesis narrative portrays him as a non-elect, he occupies a position singular in relation to other non-elects in Genesis.

Cain, a non-elect, murders his brother and is penalized with a life in exile far from the garden, although his judgment is somewhat mitigated by a sign of protection. Eventually his laconic genealogy climaxes in the violence of Lamech and finally disappears with the flood. Next in the Genesis narrative comes Ham, a non-elect whose disrespectful attitude towards his father’s indiscretion reaps a most serious curse, prophetically laid on his son Canaan.³³ Esau, another

32. It should be noted that this is the aspect of the Abrahamic covenant most emphasized in the NT (Gal 3:15–16). The promise of the land, in contrast, fades into the background. See W. D. Davies, *The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

33. According to *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, “Noah’s

non-elect figure, exchanges his primogeniture rights for a plate of lentils. Obviously enough, the biblical account offers a very negative assessment of these three prominent non-elect figures. Each exemplifies some bad trait of character or misdeed that results in a forfeiture of patriarchal blessing or loss of status. Over them hovers a shadow of negativity, which is recognized by subsequent biblical writers. Cain is a murderer (Heb 11:4; John 3:11–12); Ham, a mocker (Lev 18:3);³⁴ and Esau, a bargainer (Heb 12:16–17).

It is striking, however, that Ishmael, another prominent non-elect in Genesis, not only receives no negative evaluation but also is portrayed in ways that closely resemble the chosen ones. And interestingly, some aspects of Ishmael's experience place him on par with Isaac, Jacob, and other special people whose experiences are recorded in Scripture.³⁵

It is instructive to examine Ishmael's place in the literary structure of the pertinent section of Gen 12 through 22. One scholar³⁶ shows that in both Gen 12:1 and 22:2 God commands Abraham "go yourself" (הָלַךְ-אָבְרָהָם) to "the land I will show you" or to the "land of Moriah." This forms an inclusio between these two chapters, which is emphasized by the fact that the phrase "go yourself" (הָלַךְ-אָבְרָהָם) occurs only here in the Bible. He further notes that first journey precedes

course does not seem to have been pronounced resentment, but rather as a prophecy. The prophecy does not fix Canaan in particular or Ham's sons in general in the bonds of an iron destiny. It is merely a prediction of what God foresaw and announced through Noah. Presumably Canaan already walked in the sins of his father, and those sins became such a strong feature in the national character of Canaan's descendants that God later ordered their destruction." "Cursed be Canaan" [Gen 9:25], *Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed., ed. Francis D. Nichol (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1976), 1:267.

34. Although the sin of Ham most likely was restricted to mocking his father's nakedness, commentators have noted the intertextual connections between Gen 9 and Lev 18. See, e.g., Jacob Milgrom, *A Continental Commentary: Leviticus; A Book of Ritual and Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 201; John D. Barry, et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012, 2016), 18:3; David W. Baker, "Leviticus," in *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, ed. Philip W. Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1996), 2:131; Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 342–344; Robert I. Vasholz, *Leviticus: A Mentor Commentary* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2007), 219–220.

35. This by no means suggests that Ishmael was a flawless character. In fact, he and others in the narrative were far from perfect. See Bernard P. Robinson, "Characterization in the Hagar and Ishmael Narratives," *SJOT* 27, no. 2 (2013): 198–215.

36. Jonathan Magonet, *Bible Lives* (London: SCM, 1992), 23–32.

an encounter with the Pharaoh in Egypt, where Abram passes off his wife as his sister. The second journey comes after a meeting with Abimelech in Gerar, where the patriarch follows the same strategy. After the encounter with the Pharaoh Abraham rescues Lot along with the king of Sodom from the kings of the East. And the encounter with Abimelech is preceded by Abraham interceding in Lot's favor prior to Sodom's destruction. Interestingly, while the first rescue precedes the sealing of a covenant between God and Abraham, the second follows another covenant sealing. Between the two covenant ceremonies lies the story of Ishmael's birth.³⁷

- A. 12a (vv. 1–8) The call; blessing promised
- B. 12b (vv. 1–9) Abram in a foreign land; wife-sister motif
- C. 13–14 Lot in danger; Sodom
- D. 15 Covenant
- E. 16 Hagar and Ishmael
- D.' 17 Covenant
- C.' 18–19 Lot in danger; Sodom
- B.' 20 Abraham in a foreign land; wife-sister motif
- E.' 21 Hagar and Ishmael
- A.' 22 The call; blessing confirmed³⁸

Because Ishmael—not Isaac—occupies the center of the structure, one scholar refers to it as a false climax.³⁹ Another author also seems troubled by the prominent position of Ishmael and says that in the broad context of Genesis “Ishmael's birth was a diversion.”⁴⁰ Another detail that needs attention in this structure is the second block of material referring to Hagar and Ishmael, which apparently disrupts the otherwise neat chiasmic structure. In this regard it should be noted that since all other elements related to Abraham are doubled, the material about Hagar and Ishmael is also doubled. As one scholar observes, “there are two stories about Hagar and Ishmael as there are two about Abraham and the blessing, two about Abraham passing

37. John Goldingay, “The Place of Ishmael,” in *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives*, ed. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines, JSOTSup 257 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 146.

38. *Ibid.*, adapted.

39. Magonet, *Bible Lives*, 29.

40. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, WBC 2 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 13.

off his wife as his sister, two about Lot and Sodom, and two about the covenant.”⁴¹ It seems that at the structural level of the narrative, Ishmael tends to receive similar treatment.

It is not without significance that Ishmael's birth is preceded by a supernatural communication to Hagar—the first annunciation story in the Bible—⁴²in ways that recall the birth of Samson (Judg 13), Jacob and Esau (Gen 25), and even the Messiah (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:20–21).⁴³ As the Genesis narrative says,

And the Angel of the Lord said to her: “Behold, you are with child, / And you shall bear a son. / You shall call his name Ishmael, / Because the Lord has heard your affliction. / He shall be a wild man; / His hand shall be against every man, / And every man's hand against him. / And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren (Gen 16:11–12).

On the same occasion the angel of the Lord says to her, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude” (Gen 16:10). Hagar is the only matriarch to receive such a promise. And she responds to that revelation thus: “Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, ‘Have I also here seen Him who sees me?’ Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; observe, it is between Kadesh and Bered” (Gen 16:13–14). Hagar, the Egyptian servant, is also the only woman in the Bible to have named God!⁴⁴

It is important to note that Ishmael receives promises that the Lord bestowed on Abraham. For example, from the creation mandate prescribed in Gen 1:28—“Be fruitful and multiply”—flows the promise to Abraham, “I will make you a great nation” (Gen 12:2). And this very promise was fully reiterated to Ishmael: “And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly” (Gen 17:20a). God promises that Ishmael will beget “twelve princes” (Gen 17:20b; 25:12–16),

41. Goldingay, “The Place of Ishmael,” 149.

42. Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 67.

43. For the significance of birth annunciations in the Bible and in the ancient Near East, see Scott A. Ashmon, *Birth Annunciations in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East: A Literary Analysis of the Forms and Functions of the Heavenly Foretelling of the Destiny of a Special Child* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2012).

44. Charlotte Gordon, *The Woman Who Named God: Abraham's Dilemma and the Birth of Three Faiths* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009).

which parallels the twelve sons of Jacob. And more importantly, since Ishmael is circumcised by Abraham and the circumcision functions as the sign of the covenant (Gen 17:10–11), Ishmael must be included in the covenant.⁴⁵

Another detail that deserves attention is the correlation between Gen 21 and 22. As noted by rabbis and modern commentators, Ishmael's expulsion from his home (Gen 21) at Sarah's request bears some similarities with the Akedah (Gen 22).⁴⁶ When the Lord tells Abraham to do as Sarah had requested and send Ishmael away, the Bible says "Abraham rose early in the morning" and sent Hagar and Ishmael away (Gen 21:14). When the Lord commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah, the same expression appears: "So Abraham rose early in the morning" and set on his journey to Mount Moriah (Gen 22:3). We should also note that in both circumstances each son comes close to death and is saved by a voice from heaven. When Isaac is about to be slaughtered, "the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!'" (Gen 22:11). Likewise, when Hagar, who had already distanced herself from Ishmael, is weeping and waiting for his death, "the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, 'What ails you, Hagar?'" (Gen 21:17).⁴⁷ Indeed, the web of allusions and intertextual connections between Gen 21:8–21 and 22:1–14 establishes an interesting parallel between the two sons of Abraham.⁴⁸ Both have the affection of their father and both are saved by the Lord from impending death.

Finally, Ishmael is available to assist Isaac in the burial of their father. Interestingly, the sons of Keturah are not mentioned, which suggests that Ishmael and Isaac were closer to each other than to Abraham's other children. This final report of the two brothers together seems to convey a picture of peace and harmony: "And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite" (Gen 25:9).

45. As aptly noted by Naumann, "The Common Basis of the Covenant," 89–109, Ishmael was circumcised as Abraham's son and thus a bearer of the covenantal promise, not as a mere male member of the household like Abraham's non-Israelite slaves.

46. Aryeh Cohen, "Hagar and Ishmael: A Commentary," *Int* 68, no. 3 (2014): 247–256.

47. S. Nikaido, "Hagar and Ishmael as Literary Figures: An Intertextual Study," *VT* 51, no. 2 (2001): 219–242.

48. See Larry L. Lyke, "Where Does 'the Boy' Belong? Compositional Strategy in Genesis 21:14," *CBQ* 56, no. 4 (1994): 637–648.

To conclude this section, it is appropriate to examine briefly three passages that at first glance seem to contradict the positive characterization of Ishmael. First, we should note the apparent negative characterization of Ishmael in the promise to Hagar: “He shall be a wild man; / His hand shall be against every man, / And every man’s hand against him. / And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren” (Gen 16:12). This oracle seems to portray a bleak future of violence and oppression for Ishmael. However, close inspection of the Hebrew text shows that this imagery indicates Ishmael would “enjoy a free-roaming, bedouin-like existence. The freedom his mother sought will be his one day.”⁴⁹ Because of his mode of life as a nomad roaming from place to place, he may enter into conflict with sedentary populations. But this should not be seen as a curse or something bad in itself. Moreover, as one scholar notes,

Genesis contains no examples of brotherly conflict between the actual lives of Ishmael and his younger brother. At several points in the narratives there is discord and disagreement between their respective (step-) parents, Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. That anger, however, takes place in the previous generation. There is no indication that it colors, much less determines the relationship between the brothers.⁵⁰

Second, according to one passage, Ishmael appears to have behaved badly during Isaac’s weaning: “And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing” (Gen 21:9). A plethora of interpretations have been offered to this episode, ranging from innocent play to sexual misconduct.⁵¹ However, the underlying Hebrew word translated as “laughing” (קִחַץ) does not carry such negative connotations.⁵² Most likely, as one scholar observes, Ishmael’s “‘playing’ with Isaac means no more than that the older boy was trying to amuse his little brother. There is nothing in the text to suggest that he was abusing him, a motive deduced by many troubled

49. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 10–11.

50. Zucker, “Ishmael and Isaac,” 16, states, “The characterization of Ishmael is neither inherently negative nor pejorative. It presents the antithesis of the ‘civilized’ sedentary Israelites. It is thus not surprising to learn in Gen. 21:21 that when Ishmael grew, he dwelt in the wilderness.”

51. See Nina Rulon-Miller, “Hagar: A Woman with an Attitude,” in *The World of Genesis: Persons, Places, Perspectives*, ed. Philip R. Davies and David J. A. Clines, JSOTSup 257 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 81.

52. HALOT, s.v. “קִחַץ”.

readers in their effort to account for Sarah's anger."⁵³ And yet, in Gal 4:28–29, Paul interprets “playing” in negative terms: “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now.” We should be careful not to read more into the biblical narrative than Paul himself intended. Ishmael's “laughing/mocking” seems to have been colored by Jewish traditions according to which Ishmael made war⁵⁴ or threw arrows at Isaac.⁵⁵ It is important to keep in mind the allegorical appeal to the OT in this particular section of Galatians. Hagar and Ishmael represent those who still clung to the old covenant, as opposed to Sarah and her son who represent those born in the new covenant. But even if one takes Paul's negative characterization of Ishmael at face value, the positive characterization offered by the Genesis narrative still stands.⁵⁶ After all, since the Genesis narrative does not gloss over the flaws of Abraham and Jacob, it should not be surprising that it gives Ishmael equal treatment.

Third, another allegedly negative characterization of Ishmael occurs in connection with the report of his death in Gen 25:17–18.

These were the years of the life of Ishmael: one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people. They dwelt [וישָׁכְנוּ] from Havilah as far as Shur, which is east of Egypt as you go toward Assyria. He fell [נָפַל] in the presence of [עַל-פְּנֵי] all his brethren [כָּל-אֶחָיו] (Gen 25:17–18).

The exact meaning of the verb נָפַל in v. 18 is debated. It may simply indicate that Ishmael dies while his brothers are still alive.⁵⁷ Or, as one scholar cautiously suggests, this might indicate a fall from the covenant. If so, the “Pentateuch's last word about Ishmael, father of princes, reports his ‘fall.’”⁵⁸ However, since no covenant is cut with

53. Speiser, *Genesis*, 155.

54. *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to the Pentateuch* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2005), Gen 21:10.

55. Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd ed., trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 1:219–220.

56. See J. Gerald Janzen, “Hagar in Paul's Eyes and in the Eyes of Yahweh (Genesis 16): A Study in Horizons,” *HBT* 13, no. 1 (1991): 1–22, who implies that one should also read Hagar (and Ishmael) in light of Gal 3:28.

57. Bernard P. Robinson, “Characterization in the Hagar and Ishmael Narratives,” *SJOT* 27, no. 2 (2013): 214n67.

58. Leon R. Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (Chicago: Uni-

Ishmael this suggestion seems unlikely. Most likely נָפַל in this passage functions as a synonym of שָׁבַן (“dwell”) as indicated by the parallelism between this passage and the promise to Ishmael: “He shall dwell [וַיִּשְׁבֶּן] in the presence of [עַל-פְּנֵי] all his brethren [כָּל-אֶחָיו]” (Gen 16:12), and “He settled [נָפַל] in the presence of [עַל-פְּנֵי] all his brethren [כָּל-אֶחָיו]” (Gen 25:18). That שָׁבַן (“dwell”) in Gen 16:12 corresponds to נָפַל in Gen 25:18 indicates that נָפַל parallels שָׁבַן.⁵⁹ Hence, the latter passage—far from bashing Ishmael—merely indicates that on the occasion of his death the promise had been fulfilled.

Thus, from the above considerations it appears that Ishmael bears the main characteristics of those chosen by the Lord. And he does so more than any other non-elect person in the Bible. In spite of being passed over in favor of Isaac, he is portrayed by the biblical text as standing under the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.

From the above considerations, the question may be asked whether Ishmael's descendants have any priority in the outreach efforts of Christians. The suggestion has been advanced that Ishmael's descendants should be prioritized on the basis that Paul started the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles by going first to Arabia (Gal 1:15–17).⁶⁰ However, as attractive as this suggestion may be, there is nothing else in the NT to corroborate such an idea. When addressing eschatological topics and the problem of Israel's unbelief, Paul says nothing about Ishmael.⁶¹ Having said that, two observations are in order. First, Ishmael's descendants, inasmuch as they profess a monotheistic faith, stand closer to biblical faith than those professing a non-monotheistic religion. It stands to reason that people professing a non-monotheistic religion would have more to unlearn as they come to faith in Jesus. Second, in the dispensation inaugurated in Jesus, ethnic, racial, and cultural barriers have been obliterated (Gal 3:28). Therefore, to claim that a specific people group should have theological priority in God's program to the nations goes against the grain of the gospel message itself. In Jesus all barriers have been demolished and Abraham has become “the father of us all” (Rom 4:16).

versity of Chicago Press, 2003), 376.

59. BDB, s.v. “נָפַל”.

60. Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel*, 217.

61. Bassam M. Madany, review of *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line*, by Tony Maalouf, *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 15 (2004): 245–248.

Summary and Conclusions

The observations made above do not seem controversial. They are based on a close reading of the Hebrew text and a commonsensical examination of the Genesis narrative. Two points may be inferred from the above exposition: First, the promise line flows through Isaac. As clearly affirmed in the biblical narrative, Isaac is the one with whom God reconfirms the covenant. In contrast, the text never says that God will make or confirm a covenant with Ishmael. Second, Ishmael nevertheless emerges from the biblical narrative as a very positive character in contrast to the other non-elects. So, a big question emerges: in view of such a positive characterization of Ishmael, what is his role in and relationship with the Abrahamic covenant? At this point the boundaries of exegesis, theology, and homiletics become very fluid. But it is worth risking some suggestions.

Although Hagar is an Egyptian slave and her son Ishmael is left out of the promise line, they receive a narrative treatment that places them on nearly equal footing with Sarah and Isaac. This speaks volumes about the openness of the Abrahamic covenant to the nations. It suggests that since its inception that covenant has stood open to Gentiles. The way Ishmael is portrayed throughout the biblical narrative indicates that Gentiles can benefit from the covenant as long as they abide by its requirements.

From this it may be inferred that Isaac's election by no means indicates a status of ethnic superiority of the chosen son over the other brother. Isaac's election was for carrying forward the promise line that would flow into the "seed," which would bring the ultimate blessing to the whole world. In other words, the preference for Isaac and his line through Jacob was for missiological purposes, the most prominent of which was to carry through the promise line that would bring the "seed" into the world. Close attention to the biblical narrative indicates that Isaac did not earn his status as heir of the promise line, nor did Ishmael forfeit it. The election of one brother over the other was an act of God's absolute sovereignty and grace.

Ishmael, although excluded from the covenant line that runs from Abraham to the eschatological seed, can live under the blessing that flows from the Abrahamic covenant. God himself reiterates to Ishmael some of the blessings promised to Abraham: numerous descendants, status, and nationhood. He also receives the covenant sign of circumcision.

From what has been said above, it becomes clear that the Bible by no means regards Ishmael damned out of the purview of the covenant blessings. Nor does Scripture say that Isaac, because of his chosen status, will escape the hardships and trials of life. As one scholar well expresses, “No sooner is the promise made than it is sorely tested; no sooner is exaltation conferred upon the beloved son than his humiliation begins.”⁶² Indeed, in the plan of salvation, the chosen son is the one who undergoes suffering and eventually surrenders his life to save the lost brother (John 3:16).

Finally, in the new covenant, all are invited to come to faith in Jesus. No people group has special privileges or priorities to the exclusion of others when it comes to salvation. Jesus is the true seed of Abraham. Through Him and in Him all tribes, peoples, and nations can enjoy the promises and blessings offered to Abraham.

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62. Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 65.