

The Questor

Bible history....

....A tale of two sons

God's deal with Abraham was that, if he agreed to move his family to Canaan, he would become the father of a great nation. Well, both Abraham and his wife Sarah were getting old and no heir had been born to them.

According to the culture of Mesopotamia where they came from, it was essential for a man like Abraham who had significant wealth to have someone to pass it on to. And that, if he didn't have a direct descendent, then the inheritance would go to someone the couple had adopted, maybe a slave.

Maybe with that in mind, Sarah suggested to Abraham that he should sleep with her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar. He did that and she became pregnant. As a result, the relationship between Hagar and Sarah deteriorated to the point where Hagar ran away. God sent an angel to her and told her that her son would become the father of many people, that she should call him Ishmael and that she should return to her mistress. In due time the boy was born and they named him Ishmael.

Sometime later, God renewed his covenant with Abraham and told him that as a sign that he accepted it, he and all his household and future descendants should be circumcised – a custom that was common in the surrounding tribes, signifying that a boy had reached adulthood. That was a tough ask on God's part, but Abraham agreed and was circumcised himself along with all his male entourage – setting a precedent for all Jewish males.

God continued to insist that Sarah would give birth to a son and that he should be called Isaac. But the would be parents laughed at the idea because of their age. Nevertheless, at the time God had said, Sarah gave birth to a baby boy and they called him Isaac.

On the day that Isaac was weaned, Abraham gave a great feast and Sarah saw Ishmael

mocking her son. So she told Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael.

The next day, Abraham gave Hagar some water and a bag of food and sent her and the boy away. She went into the desert of Beersheba in the northern Negev where, eventually, the water ran out. Hagar and the boy sat down thinking that they would die. But again, God sent an angel to Hagar to remind her that God intended to make a great nation of Ishmael. Then the angel showed her a well and she replenished her water supply.

God was with the boy as he grew up and he became an archer. His mother got a wife for him from Egypt – maybe from her family. Genesis chapter 25 tells us that Ishmael had twelve sons who each became head of a tribe. They lived in the desert on the eastern border with Egypt and are considered to be the origin of the Arab peoples. The people of Islam trace their history back to Abraham via Ishmael. Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, traced his line back to Ishmael's oldest son, Nebaioth.

God continued to test Abraham's obedience and the greatest test was when he told him to sacrifice Isaac, his beloved son that he'd so longed for. The story in Genesis chapter 22 tells us that Abraham took the boy to the designated place, built an altar and laid wood on it. Then he bound Isaac and placed him on the wood. He was just about to kill him when an angel intervened and told him to use a nearby ram instead.

So Isaac grew and in due course needed a wife. Abraham didn't want him to marry anyone from the local tribes so he sent his most trusted servant back to his own relatives in Northern Mesopotamia to find a wife. There's a lovely story in chapter 24 of how the servant came to identify Rebekah who was the beautiful granddaughter of Nahor, Abraham's brother.

Abraham died "an old man and full of years..." and it's very moving to read in Chapter 25 verse 9 that "His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him....."

Would that Jews and Muslims could come together like that today.