

A Longstanding Violent Legacy

The horrific kidnapping of 300 school girls by Nigerian Jihadists and the subsequent mass murder of hundreds of civilians has drawn worldwide condemnation. Most Muslims feel embarrassed that Boko Haram claims they did these atrocities in the name of Allah. As a result, many are trying to distance themselves from these “distortions” of Islam. But the fact is, the Qur'an endorses such actions. Interestingly, mainstream Muslim groups in North America, like CAIR have not excommunicated Boko Haram. One wonders if there are,, perhaps, significant numbers of Muslims who are aware that the Qur'an contains verses supporting abduction and slavery? <http://www.frontpagemag.com/2014/robert-spencer/sex-slavery-horror-in-nigeria/>

Faced with this shameful, repulsive reality, many Muslims are becoming disillusioned. Considerable numbers of Muslims have even become secularists or atheist while significant numbers are turning to Jesus Christ. A similar trend has already been noted over the last thirty-five years in Iran since the Khomeini imposed a repressive, radical regime. More recently in Egypt millions of Muslims are becoming disillusioned with Islam, having witnessed the bloodiest violence against Christians in 700 years, i.e. by the Muslim Brotherhood and their supporters.

The outcome, according to Egyptian Christian leaders, is that “Never before have so many asked so much about a faith that has oppressed so many for so long... This situation presents the church with one of the greatest opportunities of this generation,” to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.
<http://incontextministries.org/images/EgyptCrossroads.pdf>

If the shedding of Christian blood in Egypt is opening Muslim eyes, so also is Muslim-on-Muslim bloodshed across the Arab world. Not only so, the Jihadist onslaught in Nigeria perpetrated against various kinds of non-Muslims underscores Daniel Greenfield's article, *Islam's Religious War with **Everyone***. I highlighted '**everyone**' because it lends further weight to Genesis 16:12 which reads, “His [Ishmael's] hand will be against **everyone**, and **everyone**'s hand will be against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.” (NIV) <http://www.frontpagemag.com/2014/dgreenfield/islams-religious-war-with-everyone/>

Considering the prevailing winds of political-correctness that are suppressing criticism of Islam, it isn't surprising that many Christians are reticent to cast Ishmael in a negative light. Could this be one of the reasons why some translators have argued for a less negative way to translate Genesis 16:12. As attractive as these arguments may seem, they do not fit the wider context and flow of Scripture.

The truth in this prophecy (Genesis 16:12) is evident throughout Scripture and is reflected in our world. Let me begin by tracing a credible ancestral link between Ishmael and a significant number of Arabs. The Bible says Kedar was a son of Ishmael. For this reason, among others, Cornelius, an evangelical scholar concludes his article, , "Not all Arabs are descendants of Ishmael. Some Arabs probably are descendants of Ishmael..." A Wikipedia article provides further evidence suggesting an even stronger link, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishmaelites> particularly with Arabs living in the northern region of Saudi Arab.

Still further evidence can be seen in Chris Flint's article, “God's Blessing to Ishmael with Special Reference to Islam.” http://www.stfrancismagazine.info/ja/images/stories/Complete-SFM_October2011.pdf St Francis Magazine, Vol. 7 No 4, October 2011.

Flint says, “a stronger case can be made for Kedar, of whom, Knauf argues, the Nabataens are a sub-clan. In Old Testament prophetic literature, “Kedar” is associated with Nebaioth, and can also be used as shorthand for all the North Arabian tribes. Kedar is portrayed similarly to the Arabs: far from Israel, and known for camels, tents, trade, military power, and **aggression**.” (p. 22) I have purposely added bold font as I intend to comment on this later.

Further support for this connection comes from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. ISBE explains who the Hagarites are, “The correspondence of names in Genesis and 1 Chronicles leaves little doubt that

'Hagrite' is a generic term roughly synonymous with "Ishmaelite," designating the irregular and shifting line of desert tribes stretching along the East and South of Palestine."

Not only can Ishmael's descendants be traced through Kedar, but also there are other Arab descendants of Ishmael through his other eleven sons. They probably became 'mixed' with other Arab peoples. (Note: the word *Arab* literally means mixed) The violent trait as seen in Genesis 16:12 fits the pattern of a radical, violent brand of Islam which emanated from Saudi Arabia under Muhammad after he had consolidated his rule over Mecca. This trait can be seen today in Bin Laden and his nineteen Saudi Al Qaeda cohorts who killed nearly 3,000 people on 9/11.

Shouldn't we encourage love towards Muslims – rather than feeding prejudice and Islamophobia?

I heartily agree we must obey Jesus who taught us to love our enemies just as he displayed this trait himself. It is deplorable to see how some are using horrifying atrocities like 9/11 or the civil war in Syria and the recent kidnapping of 300 Nigerian school girls to fuel hatred or fear of Muslims. Indeed, we must love Muslims but we must also be realists who discern our times and "correctly handle the word of truth." (2 Tim. 2:15)

Speaking of prejudice, the question may arise, "Does Genesis 16:12 fuel prejudice against Muslims?" Before grappling directly with this question it is helpful to recall that so far we have established a clear link between Kedar and Ishmael. But were there not other Arabs who may also have ancestral links to Ishmael through the other eleven sons of Ishmael? One does not have to be able to trace a complete and definitive genealogical line of these eleven sons to come to the conclusion that there are a substantial number of Arabs who are physically linked to Ishmael. However, we need to bear in mind that most Muslims in the world are **not** Arabs. They are **not** physically descended from Ishmael, yet they feel a strong emotional, mental, spiritual connection to Ishmael which implies a significant link. What conclusions can we draw?

Is it perhaps valid not only to see a connection between Ishmael and radical Saudi Muslims, but a link that extends even wider to the Muslim world? Does Scripture justify seeing Muslims as being somehow connected to Ishmael metaphorically just as the apostle Paul portrayed Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4? Paul said Hagar corresponds to a worldview characterized by bondage-to-law. Also Paul linked this mindset to Mt Sinai in Arabia.

This makes sense. It does seem that the hostile trait (tendency) in Genesis 16:12 is reflected in our world today in many Muslim-majority areas, particularly among Arab Muslims, more especially the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia. Another strand of supporting evidence is the long history of bloody sectarian clashes **within** Islam from the earliest days. This correlates with the entire statement as found in Genesis 16:12, especially the latter part; "and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers."

Some writers disagree with my conclusion, for example, Chris Flint, whom I already quoted, and Tony Maalouf in his book, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003). Maalouf discusses Genesis 16:12 at length on pages 69 to 77. A crucial statement on page 73 reads, "Not only did Hebrew translators of old fail to detect a sense of enmity and hostility in that expression [*al-pene* all his brethren], but also modern Hebrew translators did not reflect it either." (p. 73).

This claim seems rather presumptuous considering that four respected translation teams have rendered this phrase negatively, i.e. hostility, defiance, being at odds with, etc. (see NIV, NLT, Holman Christian Standard Bible and International Stand Version) Not only so, three other teams of respected translators used the term "against" which also has a negative shade of meaning, albeit perhaps less intense. (see ESV, American Standard Version and King James 2000 Bible)

There is another weakness of Flint's view, i.e. that Ishmael's descendants are a threat to Isaac's offspring in the sense of "imperilling their inheritance by mimicking their identity." Flint fails to show how this threat unfolds in subsequent generations. On page 23 Flint, himself, acknowledges this "Arabs are nowhere presented [in the OT] as subverting Israel's identity or challenging their inheritance."

However, if one examines the alternate interpretation, one sees that it unfolds appropriately in the many OT instances showing hostility between the Israelites and their Ishmaelite or Hagarite cousins, Arabs. See Genesis 37:25-28; Nehemiah 2:19; 4:7; 6:1; Psalm 83:5-8. Notice in this latter passage it speaks of an “alliance” between the Ishmaelites, Ammonites and Midianites. It was these very same groups who are seen in the earlier passages, combining forces to attack their common enemy, Israel. These examples show that this interpretation harmonizes better with the wider flow of Scripture better than Flint's view.

As we make the transition from OT to NT times, one wonders, “Did believers after Christ continue to see a connection between Ishmael and Arabia?” Flint believes Paul saw a connection as indicated in Galatians 4:21-31. Indeed, he says these verses draw “on first century beliefs in an Ishmaelite-Arab connection” (Flint, p.24)

You may recall that earlier I highlighted a statement by Flint showing he acknowledges “aggression” as an Arab trait in OT times. Unfortunately, he downplays repeated instances of Ishmaelite hostility in the OT and in a similar way he downplays hostility in the NT. For example, Galatians 4:29 says Isaac was “persecuted” by “the son who was born in the ordinary way” but Flint prefers not to see any nuance of hostility.

He bends over backward to interpret this verse so as to minimize any negative, violent meaning. He sees persecution here as involving mimicry and mockery. While I would not deny those elements are here, does this mean one has to rule out negative elements like hostility?

If one applies Galatians 4:29 to our modern world one is hard pressed to deny that Muslims, who are spiritually or metaphorically children of the slave woman, often persecute “the children of the free woman” not just by mimicry, but also in hostile, violent ways.

I have gone to considerable length to show that Ishmael's mimicry is not the **main** issue because it does not adequately account for the wider teaching of Scripture. But this does not necessarily mean we must rule out this meaning. It can fit within the framework of the so-called negative interpretation. For example, I have no difficulty seeing Muslims, as Ismael's spiritual descendants, mimicking or counterfeiting God's plan to bring salvation to the world through the Messiah. It is not uncommon for Muslims to portray Muhammad as a special intercessor or saviour figure. The Hadith quotes Muhammad as claiming to be the “cornerbrick” which implies he was the only one who fulfilled this role of a cornerstone. See <http://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/cornerstone.html> . But the Bible says, “Jesus... is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:11-12) As such Muhammad was a usurper and a counterfeit. This is precisely the issue: Islam mimics and counterfeits the truth. And this rivalry is expressed in violent ways. Islam, therefore poses a threat not only in terms of its deceitfulness and subtlety but also in its hostile and violent manifestations.

This article focuses on interpreting Genesis 16:12 so readers may get the impression that the Bible has nothing positive to say about Arabs, but this is not true. God loves the whole world including Muslims, as is evident in the following passages: 2 Chronicles 6:32-33; John 3:16; Revelation 5:9; 7:9-17. There are also several passages which specifically mention Arabs in a positive way: 2 Chronicles 9:1-14; (Note, the kingdom of the queen of Sheba was in the Arabian peninsula – what in modern times is called, Yemen) 1 Chron. 26:5-8; 27:30-31; Isaiah 42:10-12; Isaiah 60:6-7. If one reflects on these Scriptures you will realize that the Bible definitely does not encourage prejudice, xenophobia or Islamophobia.

Conclusion

In keeping with John 3:16 – mentioned above – let me repeat what I said earlier: “This situation presents the church with one of the greatest opportunities of this generation,” to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. As we grasp this opportunity, let us be aware, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 16:9, that “*a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.*” The above-mentioned passages from Revelation remind us that opposition implies persecution, even laying down our lives for the sake of the Gospel.

Persecution of Christians in our day is a grossly under-reported but undeniable fact. Not only so, persecution is growing especially in those parts of the world where most Christians live, in the non-western world. Several relevant articles are listed here:

http://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/persecution_sign.html

<http://www.frontpagemag.com/2014/mark-durie/boko-haram-and-the-dynamics-of-denial/>

<http://www.frontpagemag.com/2014/frontpagemag-com/islams-role-in-boko-harams-kidnapping-of-schoolgirls-on-the-glazov-gang/>

<http://www.wnd.com/2014/05/western-leaders-warnedislam-demands-subjugation/>