

ISHMAEL OR ISAAC? THE SALVATION-HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE SONS OF ABRAHAM

CONFLICT OF RELIGIONS

In our age of globalization, we are seeing more and more of a confrontation between the religions and cultures of the world. To alleviate these tensions between these religions and cultures, politics is trying to enforce the principle of tolerance and equal rights.

In resolving this issue, however, the discussion is not based on which revelation comes from God, but on how conflicts can be minimized in our world. The claim of a religion to reveal the truth, which by the post-modern society is no longer considered to be „a revelation“, is being pushed into the background or streamlined in order to cause no offense to people who think or believe otherwise. The fact that people can no more distinguish between „true revelation“ which comes from God and „false invention“ which is created by man because of this controversy, seems - spiritually speaking - only to accelerate the victory of Satan in his basic function as the “Confuser” (Diabolos) (heb. Shin-Tet-Nun).

In this global conflict, the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are in the foreground, which have fought each

other over the centuries because each has made an absolute claim to truth.

This conflict dominates world politics today, as the Islamic world has a religious problem with assigning to the Jews the land of Israel. 1.5 billion Muslims are at odds with approximately 15 million Jews, who are only *one* percent of their total number, to raise the claim to possess the land of Palestine physically according to the promise of God in the Torah.

This claim raises the question as to who is the legitimate bearer of the blessing of God’s promises. Both Jews and Muslims attribute their respective claim to the blessing of Abraham, since they consider themselves his “physical” descendants. That is why we speak today of the so-called „Abrahamic religions“, with the aim of appeasing all parties and giving them the chance to see themselves related to Abraham in one way or another, including the Christians.

In this lecture, we will *not* question the legitimacy of the „Abrahamic religions“ - this would be beyond the scope of this lecture - but rather try and consider the two theological questions:

a) What are the reasons for God to chose the son of Sarah, Isaac, the

younger son of Abraham, instead of Ishmael, his firstborn, as the bearer of his blessing, and

b) what are the consequences of this salvation-historical fact for our Christian faith?

In this issue not only the theme of „pre-election“ of Isaac by God needs to be considered, but also the „background“ which has led to this pre-election needs to be highlighted. Without this differentiation of the question of the election of Isaac as the bearer of blessing in the Old Covenant, a discussion of the salvation-historical implications and the equality of all monotheistic religions cannot be performed objectively.

That is why this issue is important for both, spiritual edification and theology, as well as for our current political discussion, which, as mentioned, we are now concerned about globally.

1. THE PROMISES TO ABRAHAM

The current history of salvation adopted its concrete form with the person of Abraham. When God commanded Abraham to leave his home country and immigrate to a new homeland, which did not belong to the *Semitic* settlement of which Abraham was a descendant, salvation history according to the Bible was significantly altered.

At the time when Abraham received God's command, he was already living in *Haran*, which is located in the northern region of Mesopotamia on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. Abraham's father, Terah, had

emigrated with his family from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran earlier (Gen. 11:31-32).

1.1 The two sons born in Canaan

Thus the command was given to Abraham to complete this migration, and to move across the Euphrates River and go to Canaan which is located to the „west“ of the Euphrates river (the Levant):

Gen 12:1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

Gen 12:2 "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

In this new homeland God wanted to establish Abraham as a great nation and as a blessing. But the blessing, which is indicated here, is still vague. While speaking here of a „great“ people, this terminology, however, is not specified any further. Also, at this stage Abraham was not given any specific promises as to land inheritance:

Gen 12:3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Gen 12:4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.

The phrase „in you shall be blessed all peoples on earth“ explains what impact Abraham and his descendants will have for God's salvation history for all mankind after the Flood. This blessing, which God promises, however, is bound to Abraham himself, and in particular to the blessing of children, as we are going to see later on.

The relationship of this „personal“ blessing to Abraham is explained in the promise of God when he arrives in Canaan leaving Mesopotamia behind him:

Gen 12:7 The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.”

We read here that Abraham will not inherit the country himself as a legacy, but „... your descendants ... „. Thus, both sons of Abraham have been born into this promise, with equal residence and living rights.

1.2 Both Sons born in old age

Now, as humans, we all cherish promises. However, if promises do not materialize, it is quite difficult for us to believe what has been promised. This is what happened to Abraham when God spoke to him in a revelation:

Gen 15:1 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

Gen 15:2 But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"

Gen 15:3 And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

gen 15:4 Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir."

Gen 15:5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

Gen 15:6 Abram believed the LORD,

and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Arriving in Canaan, in the foreign land, Abraham receives for the first time the promise that he will have a physical heir, from whom should come forth a great people. Although he and his wife were already at an advanced age, Abraham still believed that God will give him a descendant! However, he did not know how and when this will happen.

Because Abraham believed, God made a covenant with him, to guarantee him all this:

Gen 15:18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.

Now the country is specified the offspring should inherit according to God`s promise to Abraham, which was previously announced in 12:2. But it is not yet determined who of the two sons will be the heir. On the contrary, the descendants are numerous. This suggests the following:

- a) Abraham received these promises of God only when he came to Canaan.
- b) None of the two children was born until now.
- c) Therefore, this promise was fully valid for both sons who were born to him later.

1.3 Both sons are under the covenant of circumcision

Well, we all know how the story goes on. Abraham`s wife, Sarah, recommends him to have a child by her maid Hagar. Since the two could no longer believe in a miracle - even

at that time it was just as difficult to believe as it is today - Abraham follows the counsel of his wife and gets a son, Ishmael, from her maid:

Gen 16:15 And Hagar bare Abram a son: and Abram called his son's name, which Hagar bare, Ishmael.

Gen 16:16 And Abram was eighty six years old, when Hagar bare Ishmael to Abram.

Thus, Ishmael was the firstborn of Abraham and, according to Semitic law, the bearer of the blessing after Abraham. For Abraham all his worries ended with the birth of his son Ishmael and he saw it as the completion of God's promises to him. At this time Abraham was 86 and Sarah 76 years old.

Thirteen years later, God again appears to Abraham and renews his covenant with him and confirms the renewal of this covenant with two, to be more precise, three signs:

First, his name is changed by God from Abram to Abraham, which means, the „father of many“:

Gen 17:5 No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.

As the *second sign* the circumcision of every male in the house of Abraham is ordained:

Gen 17:10 This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

Gen 17:14 Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people ...”.

This covenant sign is given in order to monitor physically who belongs to the blessing of Abraham and who is excluded from it.

One verse further, however, the *third sign* of the covenant appears unexpectedly:

Gen 17:15 God *again* said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”

This third sign of the covenant is mentioned only in the second round, when God spoke *again* to Abraham. At the same time it is also a „double“ sign of the covenant since, on the one hand the name of his wife was renamed from Sarai to Sarah, and on the other hand, Abraham is promised a son by her, who will also be a “people“ like Ishmael. So actually we are speaking of *four* covenant signs what concerns the advent of Isaac.

In connection with the covenant of circumcision, it is to be noted that the later son of Abraham, Isaac, was included from the outset into this covenant, like Ishmael, who at this time was already 13 years old. Thus, both sons of Abraham have received the same requirements to be bearers of blessing.

2. DIFFERENT MOTHERS

With the third and *fourth* sign of the covenant, God challenges the faith of Abraham again. For Abraham could not understand and believe - yes, he

even laughed (Gen 17:17), that he at the age of 99 and Sarah at the age of 89 years should still have a child. Ishmael was sure for him. Another son, who could cause dispute over the inheritance? How could this turn out successfully?

So Abraham wrestles with God in order to endorse Ishmael as the sole heir, because he is his first-born:

Gen 17:18 And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"

But God responds to Abraham:

Gen 17:19a "No, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac ...

Thus, Abraham had to start over again in his faith and wait for the fulfillment of the new promise of God. First he had to leave his homeland. Now he is supposed to reject his first-born? Is this still human?

2.1 Different promises of blessing

Through this, indeed, almost "inhuman" faith of Abraham, the blessing which Abraham receives from God, contains a new dimension which until now has not been visible in such a way and which is directly and exclusively connected to the second son:

Gen 17:19b "... I will establish my covenant with him as an *everlasting covenant* and his descendants after him."

Here, the blessing of Abraham which until now was tied up to land and people only, is transformed by Isaac into an *everlasting* covenant. It is important to recognise that in this context (with Isaac) neither land nor wealth has been promised. Only the

„eternal" aspect of the covenant is mentioned here.

Ishmael, in contrast, is to become a great nation that will have many territories and will bring about great princes:

Gen 17:20 And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation.

But Ishmael was not supposed to be the covenant partner between God and man and establish the "eternal" line of blessing, like as Isaac:

Gen 17:21 But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year."

We notice that with this *fourth* and last sign of the covenant between God and Abraham, the blessing was divided into two lines:

- a) the *earthly* and *perishable* covenant, which was promised to Ishmael, his firstborn, and
- b) the *spiritual* and hence *everlasting* covenant promised to Isaac, his son from Sara.

This is the new aspect of the covenant which God gave Abraham through his two sons: the splitting into TWO different structures:

- a) a *mortal* and „transient" blessing through his Firstborn Ismael and
- b) an *immortal* and thus "everlasting" covenant through his second son Isaac.

2.2 Sara is part of the eternal blessing

The question that we are now dealing with in this context, is: Why is the

eternal covenant promised especially to Isaac and not to Ishmael, the firstborn of Abraham?

This question must be examined from different perspectives in order to be able to recognise the dimension of God's blessing correctly and which forms the basis of this election here.

One answer to this question can be found in the same verse:

Gen 17:21 But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year."

The first reason why Isaac became the eternal covenant partner lies in the fact that he is the *physical* descendant of Abraham *and* Sarah. If we follow the history of Abraham's descendants, a similar picture can be established in the story where Abraham looks for a prospective a wife for his son Isaac. In Gen. 24:3f Abraham says to his servant Eliezer:

Gen 24:3 I want you to swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living,

Gen 24:4 but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac there."

Here we see that it is very significant whether the wife is from the same tribe as the bearer of the blessing himself or not.

The same phenomenon can be observed when Rebecca, the wife of Isaac, who was brought by the servant of Abraham from Haran, demanded from her husband, Isaac, to do the same for her son Jacob:

Gen 27:46 Then Rebekah said to Isaac, "I'm disgusted with living because of these Hittite women. If Jacob takes a wife from among the women of this land, from Hittite women like these, my life will not be worth living."

Gen 28:1 So Isaac called for Jacob and blessed him. Then he commanded him: "Do not marry a Canaanite woman.

Gen 28:2 Go at once to Paddan Aram (Haran), to the house of your mother's father Bethuel. Take a wife for yourself there, from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother.

Why do the women from the same family play such an important role in salvation history?

To answer this question, we need to go back a little in time, up to the period immediately after the flood.

When Noah fell into an intoxication and woke up again, he shared the blessing he has received from God (Gen. 9:1f), with his sons:

Gen 9:6 He said, "Praise be to the LORD, the God of Shem! May Canaan be the slave of Shem.

Shem received the blessing of his father Noah, while Canaan, the son of Ham, who did not cover up the nakedness of Noah, was cursed. Thus, all descendants of Shem became the blessed ones of God, while all the descendants of Ham became the cursed ones.

If we follow the genealogy of the women in the life of Abraham and his descendants, we can discover the following:

- Abraham and Sara both are descendants of Shem (Gen. 10: 21ff, 11:10ff and 20:11-12) and belonged to the lineage who were the bearers of God's blessing.
- Hagar on the other hand was an Egyptian slave girl (Mizrajiem), which is therefore to be assigned to the descendants of Ham (Gen. 10:6). Therefore she was a descendant of the lineage which was cursed through her ancestral father and did not belong to the blessed lineage of „Shem“.

Consequently, the eternal bearer of blessing, Isaac, could only descend from the blessed lineage of Shem, to which both Abraham and Sarah belonged (Graph 1) to complete the promise of God to Shem, which he received from Noah, his father. If the bearer of the eternal blessing would have descended from Hagar, the Shem's lineage of blessing would have been interrupted at least by one parent. But as the blessing of the Lord was awarded only to the Semitic line, Hagar would have never been able to produce the „spiritual“ heir, as the promises of God are irrevocable.

Of course, also the cursed line of Ham, and therefore Hagar and her son, Ishmael, were integrated into the blessing of Abraham. But this genealogical lineage remained only as an „earthly“ and therefore “transitory” line of blessing. Whereas the line of Sara and her son Isaac became a „permanent“ and therefore a „heavenly“ line of blessing from which later on the Messiah would emerge.

Many centuries later, Jesus did speak of this „eternal“ covenant, when he said (John 8:56):

Joh 8:56 “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

These words refer precisely to this „everlasting“ blessing, which Abraham has obtained in relation to his son Isaac, and which Jesus has accomplished through his physical resurrection from the dead. By rising from the dead he has physically transformed the blessing of Abraham and Isaac into an everlasting covenant. Now HE is sitting to the right hand of Power with his resurrected body which has been transformed. Through him the believer can receive the Holy Spirit as a pledge of his „eternal“ life and become part of the „everlasting“ covenant, which God promised mankind through Abraham and Isaac.

2.3 The difference in age

If we now compare Graph 1 with the life line of Ishmael and Isaac (Graph 2), we can recognise a second important component which was decisive for the election of Isaac:

- a) If one compares the life span of Ishmael and Isaac, with the bearers of blessing since Shem, we see that Ishmael already died in the year 516 after the flood where as Isaac died in the year 572 after the flood.
- b) Heber, on the other hand, died in the year 531 after the flood. Thus Ishmael could not survive the oldest living bearer of blessing *after* Shem and become himself the patriarch of the Semitic lineage.
- c) **de facto** only Isaac could become the bearer of the Semitic lineage of blessing after the flood, which was transmitted to him from Noah, through Shem and Heber (cf. Gen. 10:21f). Because Isaac

survived the oldest living bearer of Sem's blessing, he was given this superior blessing from God and thus became the first of all the „earthly” bearers of blessing, and, through Abraham's faith, also the first bearer of the “everlasting” blessing.

3. IMPLICATIONS OF SALVATION HISTORY

3.1 The reliability of the Word of God

First of all, we note that God's promises from the beginning were performed in an extremely precise way. Because if one studies the Biblical genealogy in more detail (compare on this the different generations in the graphic), you can see a number of phenomena:

- a) In general, one generation is an average of 33 years old. But with the descendants of Terah one can recognize that a whole generation was skipped over because he was 70 of age when his first son, Abraham, was born.
- b) With Abraham, we notice that two generations (99-33 = 66 years) were skipped until Isaac was born.
- c) With Isaac surviving Heber and thus becoming the patriarch of *all* mankind after him, God - if we may say so - through the long life span and waiting time of Abraham, accelerated the contemporary history and salvation history, so that Abraham might yet see the promised blessing with his own eyes, namely the „everlasting” covenant given to him through his son Isaac.

- d) Therefore God did not put Abraham to the test by slowing down the promise, as it is always depicted. HE has rather skipped in the person of Abraham three full generations, so that he, Abraham himself, might become the direct bearer of the “everlasting” covenant, through his son Isaac.

Thus, God's word and revelation in the Old Covenant is extremely precise and reliable in every respect. It's just a matter of perspective, in order to interpret the history of salvation properly.

3.2 The eternal kingdom of the Messiah

In this blessing, which God promised Abraham through Isaac, the issue is not land, wealth or power. We have to recognize that this is a blessing that deals with a new dimension of grace, which is: „eternal life“. This is the true meaning of the blessing which God gave Abraham and Isaac, and through them to all the human race on earth.

The ownership of land, in any case, was not finally settled during in Abraham's lifetime. He remained a „wandering Aramean” as long as he lived. Only when Moses was called by God did the land conquest become a significant issue. Because by that time Israel had become a great nation with over one million people and God had to give his chosen ones a place to stay until the “everlasting” blessing could materialize.

This dwelling place for the people of Israel should also remain only a place of passage, until the Messiah would implement the „eternal” dwelling for

all the seed of Abraham (cf. Revelation 21:1ff). Only then can the claim to „everlasting“ blessing which God promised to Abraham through Isaac, be fulfilled. As long as the heavenly Jerusalem has not yet been revealed, all the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, wether physical or spiritual descendenats, are waiting for the fulfillment of this promise.

3.3 Faith and eternity

In the story of Abraham and Isaac it becomes obvious that the basis for the promises of God is always faith, as the Apostle Paul has clarified this in Rom. 4,1ff. This fact shows us that the „everlasting“ covenant of God has a characteristic which can not be conceived without faith. This covenant has no physical property yet but is rather metaphysical, which is spiritual. Spiritual matters can only be grasped by faith and not by physical means.

This is why Jesus told the Pharisees that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is a God of the „living“ and not a God of the dead. Because the covenant of God is always an eternal covenant because HE himself is the Eternal One. Therefore, the covenant partners, Abraham, Isaac, and with them all their descendants, first have to receive eternal life in order for this “eternal” promise to be fulfilled their lives.

Without the separation of „eternal“ and „transient“, „heavenly“ and „earthly“, there can be no substantive discussion on the promises of God to Abraham. Since HE is the eternal one, his eternal promises can only be grasped through faith, as long as we still live in a perishable body. This fact

makes it clear to us that without faith no one can experience God. In other words: Whoever wants to “know“ God must believe His scripture (which are His promises).

4. CONCLUSION

What do we learn from this for the current situation of Ishmael and Isaac, of Arabs and Jews?

In John 4:22 Jesus told the Samaritan woman:

Joh 4:22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews (the people of Israel).

True, the Promised Land also belongs to Isaac and his descendants according to Scriptures; that is why all Jews also enjoy the privilege of living in this country. For God has promised it to both sons of Abraham. But, and this is very important, immediately afterwards, Jesus said something else to the Samaritan woman - and every Israelite should take this to heart (V.24):

Joh 4:24 God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.

If we compare this word of Jesus with the promise to Isaac, we can see that Jesus takes up this very subject, namely:

- it is not a question of land, place or possession on earth, what constitutes salvation through Abraham’s blessing, but
- the possession of the „spiritual“ dimension of this covenant is crucial, in order to inherit the “everlasting” promises.

God is „spirit” and cannot be attained with earthly possessions or perishable works. Therefore, only those who worship HIM in spirit and truth, are able to inherit his promises.

To the church, the apostle Paul explains this problem as follows (1 Cor 15:50f):

I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ...

For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.

It is thus obvious that if one would like to have a part in the „eternal” promises of God, which he promised to Abraham and Isaac, everything in us needs to be transformed first into an immortal and incorruptible nature. What remains then of the earthly? Nothing, absolutely nothing. That is the tragic conclusion of the fallen creation.

That is why the struggle for Jerusalem and the Promised Land is of no lasting significance for the Jews. Whether they or the Arabs live in it, is not decisive for „their”, i.e. Jews’, spiritual heritage. For the „everlasting” inheritance is the „imperishable” life in the presence of God and with God (see also next Article by M. Goldsmith: the *Shekhina*). This, however, cannot be fulfilled in the earthly Jerusalem. Only when Israel receives the Savior and Redeemer, Jesus of Nazareth, whom they expelled from their city, will they be able to receive the true inheritance of Abraham and Isaac.

Jesus, by rising from the dead and taking his place at the right hand

of God, has also completed the transformation that is necessary for man to partake in the „eternal” inheritance of Abraham and Isaac. But if this „partaking” is no more dependent on „earthly” places and works, but only on faith and spirit, therefore, this blessing can not be dependent on flesh or blood, circumcision or law, race or ethnicity.

May Israel and all Jews recognize this „everlasting” dimension of their covenant through Abraham and Isaac and believe in Jesus. May the Lord open the eyes of the Arabs and with them all Muslims for the salvation that is prepared in Jesus. Only by faith in Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, the „eternal” blessing of Abraham and Isaac can be received, because HE, Jesus Christ, is the Lord who has materialized this eternal salvation. Amen!

PETER WASSERMANN, Stuttgart, is Mission Director of EUSEBIA-Missionsdienste, founder of EUSEBIA School of Theology (EST) and co-editor of STT. International lecturing ministry in the area of Biblical Theology, Islam and Missions.