

## **Ishmael and Isaac - Week 86**

We will all have been deeply troubled in recent weeks by the stories and pictures concerning the people of Gaza. Over a thousand people to date have been killed in Israeli attacks on Gaza, with thousands more being wounded or made homeless. Many of the victims have been civilians, and many of those civilians have been women and children. The global public outcry against Israel could hardly have been greater.

In response, the Israeli authorities speak of their legal right of self-defence in the face of the indiscriminate Hamas rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel, and of the many tunnels dug into Israel from Gaza. With the balance of fire power so massively in favour of the Israeli Defence Forces however, not many people seem to listen.

So we have been played out before our eyes the latest bout of the 4,000-year old hostility between the seeds of Ishmael and Isaac.

In Genesis 12. 2-3, we read of the Lord promising to make from Abram a great nation and a great name, and through Abram all the families of the earth would be blessed. Abram duly set out from Haran and travelled to the land of Canaan. In verse 7, the Lord made a new promise to Abram - the gift of the land of Canaan to Abram's seed.

The years passed, and Sarai remained barren. Sarai came up with what seemed to be the perfect solution (Chapter 16): Abram could father a child with Hagar, Sarai's maid. Hagar was legally the property of Sarai, so Hagar's child could count legally as the child of Abram and Sarai. That was obviously what the Lord had meant! - or was it?

Sarai immediately regretted what had happened, setting in train the long-standing friction between the natural child, Ishmael, and the child of the promise, Isaac, who was indeed born later, to Abraham and Sarah, just as the Lord had promised (21.1-5). We see that that friction remains today, most starkly in the ruins of Gaza.

The Lord promised (17.20) to bless Ishmael, and to make him fruitful, and to make of him a great nation - broadly speaking, the Arab peoples of today. In the circumstances, these promises display the Lord's deep grace and mercy towards Abraham, even though he and Sarah had got things so very wrong concerning Hagar.

But His most precious promises were to run through Isaac's line, rather than through Ishmael's line. The promises to Abraham over the years - the specific nation, the name, the source of blessing, and notably the land itself - all were promised to Isaac and his seed.

So scripturally nothing has changed. The whole land, from the Nile to the Euphrates (15.18), has been given by the Lord, to the seed of Abraham, via Isaac, as part of His holy covenant with His chosen people, the Jews.

Now in human terms much has changed on the ground since the days of Abraham and Isaac. Somehow the politicians of today have to meet the legitimate needs of two deeply-hostile peoples, who find themselves jostling for ownership of the same small piece of land.

The plot is made thicker by the presence of Jerusalem at the heart of biblical Israel: the holiest place for the Jews; a deeply-special place for the offspring of the Jews, namely the Christians; and reckoned as the third holiest place in the youngest of the so-called "Abrahamic" faiths, Islam. In June 1967 Israel conquered the Temple Mount in the Old City, on top of which stand two great mosques. It is no exaggeration to say that this small site remains at the very epicentre of world affairs.

Humanly speaking, who knows what sort of solution can be achieved to bring an agreement between Arab and Jew, between Ishmael and Isaac, concerning the land of Israel? The land has been given by God to the Jews; the Jewish State of Israel was proclaimed in 1948; but until recent times the land has been owned and inhabited by the Arabs.

As Christians we are to continue to pray for "the peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122), even if we cannot foresee when or in what form that peace will exist. That prayer has nothing to do with our having to applaud all the deeds of the Israeli government, or indeed of their Arab neighbours. All we need to be sure of is that the Lord's peace will come to Jerusalem in the Lord's good time, for He has promised.

And we pray of course also for as much peace between Ishmael and Isaac as can be achieved in these difficult times, to allow these two peoples to co-exist without bloodshed.

Our third key prayer is for the politicians themselves, who find themselves faced with trying to find a path through all the misery, into some sort of sense and hope.

"Lord, have mercy".

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