

THE HAND OF HISTORY

THE CHILDREN OF ABRAHAM

BIBLE STUDY 1

Reading Genesis 12: 1-8 COMMENT

'It is time the West confronted its ignorance of Islam. Jews, Muslims and Christians are all children of Abraham'. Tony Blair.

The story of Abraham is the story of the beginning of mankind's personal relationship with God. As Abram he was called to "Go ... to the land that I will show you". There he was to begin the creation of a nation through whom God's Name would be made known and which would bring blessing to all the earth.

Genesis 15 records the encounter in which God makes His covenant with Abram promising him an heir from his own body through whom His earlier promise *'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. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'* (Genesis 12: 2, 3) would be fulfilled.

In the following chapter we read of the birth of Ishmael to his wife's Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. She and her son are ultimately driven away but she is assured by an angel that the promise made to Abram would apply through Ishmael. This promise is repeated five times in chapters 16, 17 and 21. 14% of Muslims are in direct descent from Ishmael and it is through

him that they call themselves Children of Abraham.

In Genesis 17: 3 - 7 God changed Abram and Sarai's names to Abraham and Sarah signifying a new relationship with Him. They are now able to produce a son of their own through whom God's promise would also be fulfilled. It is this son, Isaac, who becomes a Patriarch of the Jewish nation and it is through the line of Isaac and his son Jacob that Jews and Christian consider themselves as Children of Abraham.



The story in Genesis makes clear that God's promise is not exclusively committed to Abraham and Sarah. He also makes promises to Hagar and Ishmael and recognises Ishmael as a son of Abram. 'God was with Ishmael' (Genesis 21:20). 'God was with Abraham' (Genesis 21:22)

The story of Abraham's sons Isaac and Ishmael are told in both the Bible and Quran, although the details are a little different.

It's those details that have driven apart the Muslim and Jewish faiths over the centuries. Isaac became a patriarch of Judaism, and is thus part of Christianity as well. Ishmael's eventual descendants included Mohammed and the birth of the Islam.

However we understand this story what is clear is that all those who regard themselves as 'Children of Abraham' are called to bring God's Blessing to all the families of the earth.

CONTEXT Muslims in Ireland

Today, there are 22,000 Muslims in Ireland, 2000 of whom live in Northern Ireland, with Muslim communities in every major town and city. There were 10,000 Muslims in the Republic of Ireland in the 1991 census, so the Muslim population in the state has doubled in the last decade. If this trend continues, then in thirty years time over the course of a generation, Muslims could become our second largest faith community. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds, but they are Irish and an authentic part of our story.

The Irish engagement with Islamic society goes back to a time before the Crusades. The first Muslim may have arrived in Ireland in the 9th century, when al-Ghazal was sent by Abd al-Rahman II on a diplomatic mission from Cordova in the year 845.

In the mid 14th century, the Archbishop of Armagh, Saint Richard FitzRalph of Dundalk, was one of the earliest Western scholars in the field of Islamic studies. He was familiar with the earliest translations of the Quran, and wrote extensively about the Quran and Islam.

Church of Ireland parish records in the Diocese of Raphoe show Muslims were living in Co Donegal from the mid-18th century. In the 19th century, Major George Foster Sadlier from Cork became the first European to cross the Arabian Desert, and John Thomas Keane, the son of a Church of Ireland rector, made the *hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca. But the travel was not all one-way: Mir Alaud Ali was Professor of Arabic and Persian at Trinity College Dublin at the end of the 19th century. A few prominent Irish people converted to Islam in the following century, including Lord Headley from Killarney, Co Kerry, and the filmmaker Rex Ingram. In recent years, Irish scholars have earned international acclaim for their understanding of the Islamic world, including Dr Malise Ruthven, Dr Fred Halliday and Dr David Easterman.

The Muslim community in Ireland grew rapidly in the 1950s with the arrival of a new generation of Muslim students. The Dublin Islamic Society was formed in 1959, and the first mosque was established in Harrington Street. The mosque moved to the former Donore Presbyterian Church in

1983. The 1980s and 1990s saw a steady increase in the number of Muslims in Ireland, with refugees arriving from Bosnia and fleeing civil strife in Nigeria, Somalia and many other countries.

In 1996, Dr Moosaje Bhamjee became the first Muslim in the Dáil when he was



elected a Labour TD for Clare. That year the Islamic Cultural Centre, with a new mosque and national school, opened on a four-acre site in Clonskeagh, close to University College Dublin. The centre now includes a library, shop and restaurant, and hosts the secretariat of the European Council for Fatwa and Research. The Belfast Islamic Centre, dating from 1977, is home to the largest mosque in Northern Ireland. There are smaller Islamic communities in Bray, Ballyhaunis, Cavan, Cork, Craigavon, Drogheda, Dundalk, Galway, Letterkenny, Limerick, Waterford, and many other towns and cities. A Shia Muslim community is also prospering in Ireland, with a resident imam at the Alhul Bait Islamic Centre, which opened in 1995.

Not all Muslims in Ireland are immigrants, students or asylum seekers. Indeed, these account for a very tiny proportion of the community, while an increasing proportion of Muslims in Ireland are Irish-born. They often face fear and prejudice, particularly after outrages and attacks supposedly committed in the name of Islam but what do we know about their beliefs, faith and religious practices?

CONVERSATION

READ Genesis 12: 1 -8

PRAY

WATCH Watch the enclosed DVD 'The Hand of History'

TALK

- In what way does the Muslim understanding of Jesus influence our attitude to dialogue?
- In trying to understand our Muslim neighbour, how important is it to understand our own faith?
- Could you explain the Christian understanding of Jesus to a Muslim?
- In what ways do you think we can see God at work in other Faith communities?

CONTEMPLATION

This is an edited version of a talk given at a World Community Day program entitled "Daughters of Abraham Called to Peace" sponsored by Church Women United across the USA on November 1, 2002.

THE LEGACY OF ABRAHAM

Jews, Muslims, and Christians agree that there is one God, the Creator of the Universe. We have much in common and on which we agree - and much that we disagree about - and that causes us too often to look at each other with suspicion and mistrust. Abraham - the friend of God - is spiritually the shared ancestor of half the people alive today - Jews, Christians and Muslims. In the story of Abraham we can find justification for continued suspicion and mistrust, or we can find in Abraham the point of contact, the cornerstone for a new relationship.

Abraham is discussed in the Torah, in the New Testament and in the Quran, but the stories often disagree even on basic points - we have what may be seen as competing traditions.

The TORAH tells us that Abrahams legacy is that through his descendants God will bless the nations of the world.

The NEW TESTAMENT tells us in St John 8:39 that if we were Abraham's children we would do the works of Abraham

The QUR'AN tells us in chapter 11:118 that if our Lord had so pleased, He would have made humanity one community. And further in 2:147-148 that "The truth is from your Lord, so do not be one of the doubters. Each community has a direction to which it turns, so compete with one another in doing good works. Wherever you may be, God will bring you all together, for God has power over all things."

From the time of Isaac and Ishmael until today we have fought over Abraham and his heritage. Perhaps we can find a way through dialogue and building relationships to bring reconciliation - even Isaac and Ishmael reconciled and came together to bury Abraham.



Abraham is buried in Hebron and Jews, Christians and Muslims have fought to control this site for generations - Jews built the original shrine - the Byzantines rebuilt it as a church - and the Muslims rebuilt it as a mosque. This tomb, rather than unite us in remembrance of our common forefather

has been the scene of bloodshed over the centuries and divided us. We can continue to focus on the differences in our views of Abraham or we can focus on the many commonalities that emphasize the family relationship. Is it possible for the children of Abraham to coexist peacefully?

Pope John Paul II visited Jerusalem in 2000 and left a prayer written on a piece of paper in a crack in the Western Wall:

God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the nations. We are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer. And asking your forgiveness, we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the covenant.

If the children of Abraham would compete in doing good and struggling against injustice and misery we could truly be a blessing for this world - and regain our shared legacy from Abraham.

Let us pray to God to enlighten and guide us.

Sheila Musaji

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