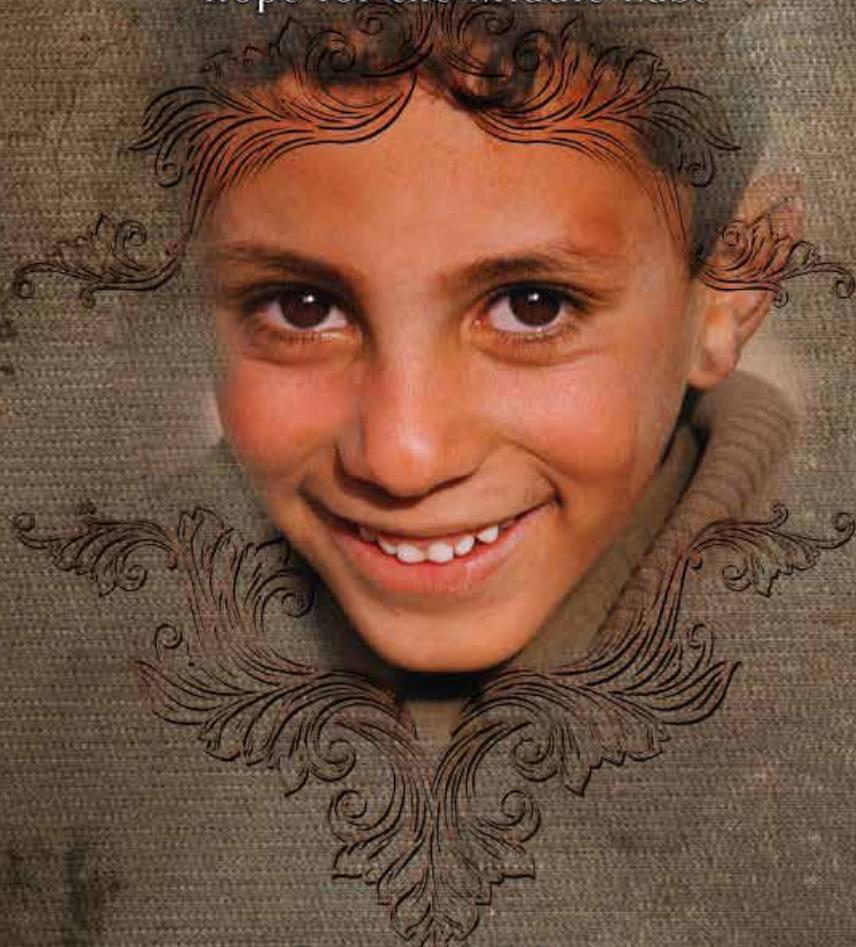




Rejected and Loved

From Ishmael to
Hope for the Middle East



~ Laurens de Wit ~



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Enjoy reading.

What readers say...

This book is an absolute must for anyone who wants to learn more about the history of the Middle East. The writer knows better than anyone how to describe the ups and downs between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael. The reader is taken on an intense, confronting, open and honest journey in the trials of rejection and disappointment that the peoples of the Middle East have lived through and the signs of which are still visible every day. At the same time, this special story describes the Light that shines as a beacon of Hope for the nations. – Antoinette

The first part immediately appealed to me. The story of Ishmael gives many good insights into the drama that took place in the past. Laurens de Wit then takes you along in a very hopeful message for the Arabs, that at the same time gives us Western Christians a lot of homework – to allow the love of God for them into our hearts. Our often critical and contemptuous view of the descendants of Ishmael is challenged through God's word, spurring us on to look differently. This view will certainly contribute to a different peace than the one the world is trying to bring to the Middle East. – Piet

Very impressive and a beautiful way of telling the stories. – Peter

The message that the writer wants to convey is very clear and straightforward, and cannot be ignored. I love the unique story format of the book combined with diving deeper via the website. – Anita

I finished it in one go. – Hannah

*Rejected
and Loved*

From Ishmael to
Hope for the Middle East

Laurens de Wit

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Foreword

After the railway crossing barriers were closed, Kerem used to tell me, 'Change the signal to green.' Following his instructions, I would reach up to the shiny handle, grab the safety catch and turn the heavy arm downward. The chain would rattle, and half a mile away the red signal arm would move into the 'safe' position. Thus, I spent many an afternoon in the railroad crossing operating room with our Turkish tenant. After living several months in our home, Kerem brought his wife and children from Turkey. Immediately, I befriended his eldest son, who was my age. I enjoyed the hospitality and warmth of this Islamic family and spent many happy hours in the house that the Dutch Railroad Company had assigned to its immigrant employee.

Years later, I moved to the Middle East and became immersed in the Arab culture. Initially I felt unsafe, but the more I became acquainted with neighbors and colleagues, the more I enjoyed their hospitality and community life. My experience, however, did not fit the image I had from the Bible. I was familiar with the story of Hagar's encounter with the Angel of the Lord in Genesis chapter 16, where the Angel had told her that the infant in her womb would be like a stubborn, wild donkey, and always quarreling with others. Didn't the Bible expositors take this to be a reference to the aggressive and wild Arab nomads in the Middle East?

One day, as I carefully re-read the story, I wondered how Hagar would have understood the message from God. To my surprise I found out that, from her perspective, God pronounced great blessings over Ishmael.

This prompted me to research the Bible regarding Ishmael and his descendants and as a result, I discovered some intriguing concepts. For instance, from a certain point the Ishmaelites are no longer mentioned, but instead Arabs appear on the scene.

An in-depth study confirmed that the term "Arabs" refers to the descendants of Ishmael, not only in the Bible, but also in other historical records. Over time, more and more peoples were grouped with them, so that today it is difficult to determine which Arabs are to be seen as true descendants of Ishmael and which are not.

While studying all the prophecies about the nations surrounding Israel, I began to see a pattern regarding the Arabs. As a result, some prophetic utterances in the Old Testament became much clearer to me. I noticed that

several of these promises have not yet come true. Apparently, they are yet to be fulfilled!

I felt excited, yet hesitant, for I did not want to make arbitrary claims of things that no one had ever noticed before. Then some friends pointed me to others, such as the Lebanese scholar Tony Maalouf, who had discovered the same thing. In fact, already in 1847 a Jewish writer named Isaac Da Costa wrote a poem in which he looked forward to the fulfillment of these promises.

Would this not be an important message for the Arabs and for all who consider Ishmael's father Abraham to be their spiritual father? What would happen if the Christians were to realize that God loves the Muslims as much as He loves them? What if the Muslims discovered how important they are in God's eyes and that He still has a unique plan for them after they have put their trust in Jesus Christ? Imagine the Jews personally witnessing God's love and mercy, reaching out to the hearts of their neighbors with whom they often live in discord. Humanity might face a wonderful future. True peace could come to the Middle East. All may be able to see the loving-kindness of the all-wise God, even those who believe God doesn't care about the suffering in the world.

This led me to write down my discoveries and insights in a way that is easy to understand. I ended up with a textbook in story form, combining fact and fiction. Each chapter is marked with a balloon mentioning the Bible passage on which it is based. Thus, the reader can easily check what is Biblical and what is fictional. I also included genealogies and timelines to indicate the historical figures versus the fictitious ones. Finally, I have added some links to a website where many background articles and in-depth studies can be found on important or controversial topics.

I hope and pray that you will read this book with an open mind and encourage you to study the Bible passages as if you were reading them for the first time. Allow God to speak to you through his Word. The Holy Spirit will guide you concerning his plans for the descendants of Ishmael and the role He may have for you in the fulfillment of his plans.

I wholeheartedly agree with the words of Isaac Da Costa, who wrote, "Will these things really be so?" you ask, and I answer, "Maybe not exactly according to this interpretation, perhaps in a different order, maybe not separately, but simultaneously or soon after one another and flowing together. But it is also possible that many more glorious things are to be expected, than we find recorded here from the Scriptures."¹

I look forward to the unfolding of God's plan with all those who claim Abraham as their patriarch through Ishmael, Arabs and Muslims alike, and how this will impact the Jews, his chosen people.

Let us love them all with God's love. May his name be glorified.

Laurens de Wit

Word of thanks

First of all, I thank God the Father in heaven for opening my eyes to his great love for the Arabs, as recorded in the Bible. He inspired me to write down all the stories in this book. When I was wondering if a textbook in story form was wise, He led me to the conclusion that I should follow his example. His book, the Bible, doesn't follow the rules of one particular literary style either.

I also want to thank all who have stood behind me in the two years that I've been working on this book. I especially thank my wife who has always encouraged me, as well as those who have been thinking along with me and sacrificed many hours of their free time proofreading and giving me feedback. I would also like to thank the Arab men and women who have patiently helped me to properly articulate the mindset of Muslims. Finally, this English edition would not have come into existence without the tireless efforts of the translator and of Bill Stowe, Alan Pashkevich, Helen Cook and other proofreaders.

Dedicated to

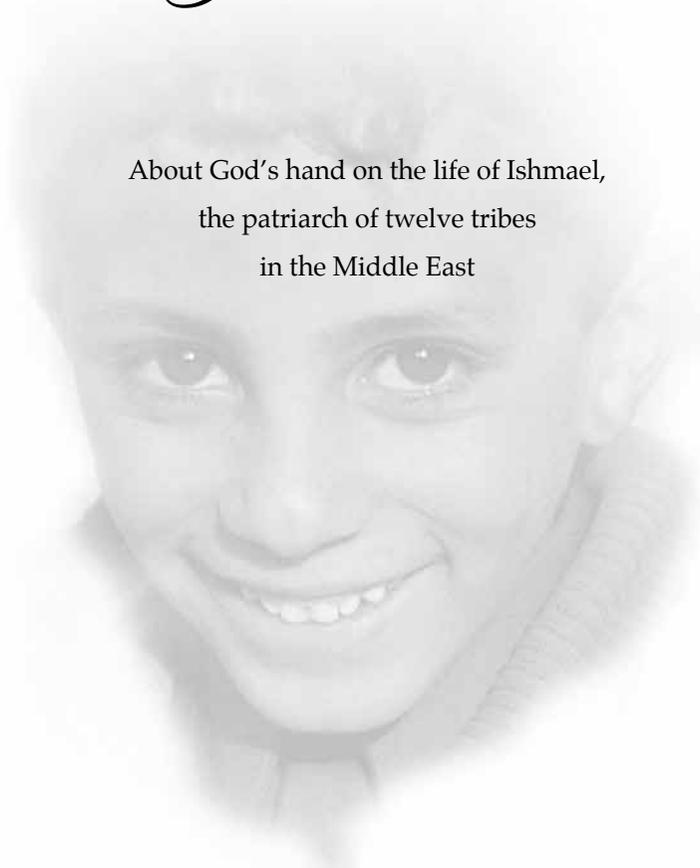
I dedicate this book to all my Arab friends who have embraced me. They gave me a love and appreciation for the Arab world and culture.

I also want to dedicate this book to all those who consider themselves to be sons and daughters of Ishmael. God knows your silent pain and grief over the rejection that you experience in many ways, especially in and from the West. God has a message of hope for you: you are valuable and loved. God even has a very special plan for your life. Put your trust in the Messiah and let him use you to be a blessing for many.

Part 1

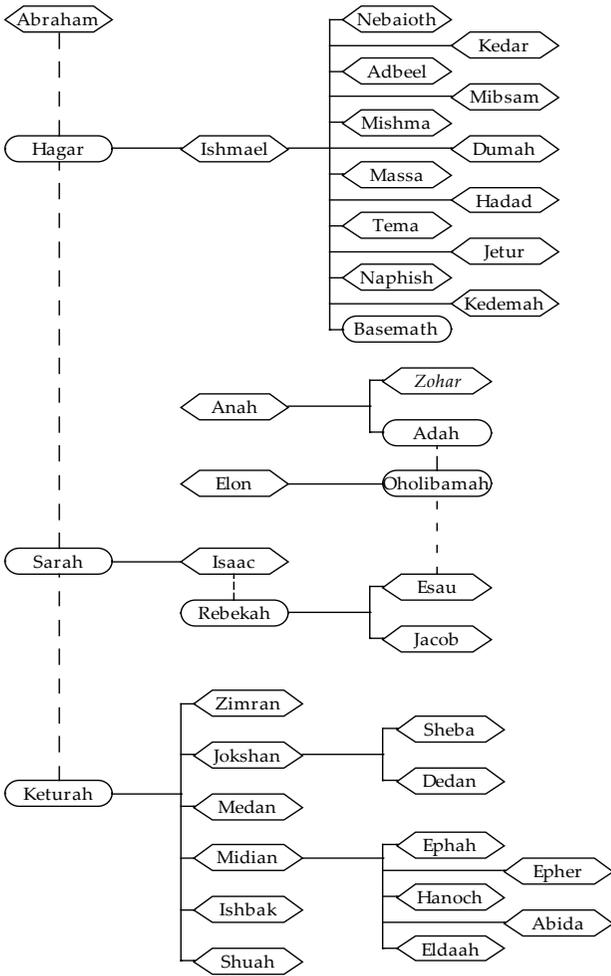
*The Beginning of
a Great People*

About God's hand on the life of Ishmael,
the patriarch of twelve tribes
in the Middle East



*"The LORD has listened to your affliction."
Genesis 16:11*

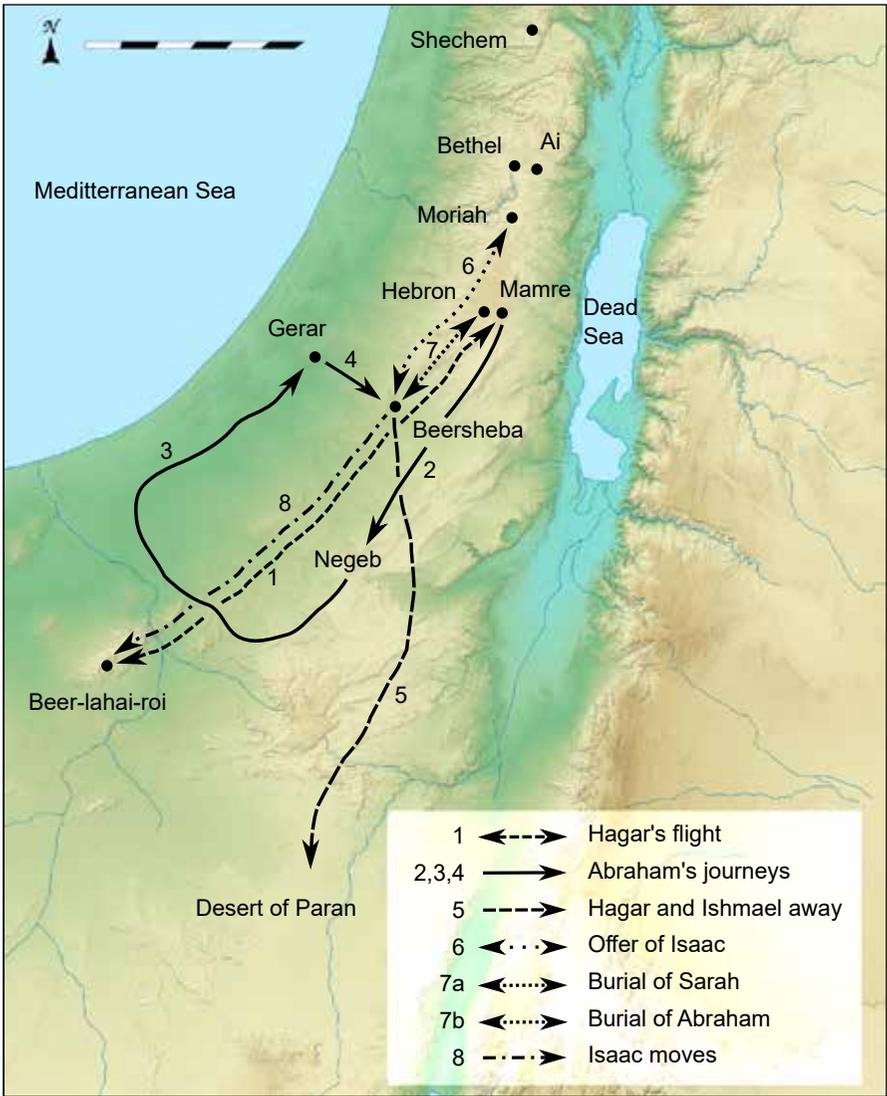
Abraham's children and grandchildren



Legend

- | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| | Biblical person - male | - - - - - | wedding tie |
| | Biblical person - female | ————— | descendant |
| | fictional person | | |

Family tree of Abraham's descendants



Several important locations in the life of the patriarch Abraham



For an animation clip of Abraham's travels, go to www.godlovesishmael.com/journeys

One day, four thousand years ago...



1 *The Word of God*

Bare mountains rise up on every side from the desolate landscape. Their shapes are rugged, having been carved out by numerous sandstorms. Here and there, scattered bushes appear between the cracks. The valley is decorated with large boulders as well as several acacia trees. Desert dust has turned the leaves on the trees to a yellowish-brownish color, causing them to appear lifeless. Only after one of the rare rain showers do the leaves wash clean and then for a few days they look fresh and green. On days like that, rainwater gushes down the mountain slopes, quickly turning into a swirling flashflood, yet disappearing within a matter of hours. Two full moons ago, the rainy season ended and now the entire valley looks barren. The dry carcass of a gazelle emphasizes the ominous atmosphere.

Trails mark the winding road connecting Canaan to Egypt. It is tranquil. The only thing that can be heard is the soft whisper of the warm wind. High above, silhouetted against the deep blue sky, an eagle circles in search of prey. Other than that one eagle, there is no trace of life in this sweltering heat. With the sun at its zenith, both man and beast have withdrawn to the shades during this part of the day.

Yet, a solitary person appears, dressed entirely in black. The enormous shadows cast by the surrounding rock formations accentuate the woman's insignificance as she struggles through the *wadi*.* Her head bent down on her chest and her eyes downcast, she tries to protect herself from the fine dust by covering her face with her veil. She looks worn out.

Why would a woman be there, all by herself on this trade route, which is normally only frequented by men and their caravans of camels and donkeys? She's not carrying anything, not even a water skin. She has nothing but the clothes on her back. There is no one with her, no one protecting her. All alone, she plods through the barren land, on her way to..., where could she be going?

Feelings of relief compete with utter desperation in her heart. *At least I am free*, she reasons with herself; *never again will I be terrorized or beaten by my mistress. At home, my father and brothers will protect me.* Mentally she counts the days she has been walking, and she estimates it must be about four days.

* A *wadi* is a dry riverbed.

Besides, if my master had wanted me back, his servants would have overtaken me on their speedy camels by now.

Her stomach grumbles with hunger and she wonders whether she will be able to reach her home. Since she escaped her mistress she has hardly found anything to eat, and she still has many days to go. But at this very moment it is thirst that plagues her most; her tongue feels thick and dry. The last time she had a drink was shortly before sunrise. *I must be close to the well, but where can it be?*

One mountain resembles the next; she has been here only once before. That was years ago, when she and her master traveled from Egypt to Canaan. While she trudges on, memories from that journey overwhelm her.

What a joy that had been! Filled with a sense of wonder having been freed from the cruel master in Egypt who used to beat her and who sometimes used to withhold food from her as a punishment. She had wondered so often how she would be able to take abuse like her parents had suffered. But her new master, with his funny foreign accent, had been so different, so kind. He had never hit her; he was hardly ever angry with any of his servants. He even treated the sheep and donkeys with respect, as if they were precious to him.

In the beginning she had been homesick. She had longed for her parents and her older brothers, but soon her new master's servants came to consider her as their sister. Her master had strictly forbidden them to mistreat any of the girls. She had felt very safe there.

After many bends in the dusty road, the woman finally notices a cluster of palm trees in the distance. The luscious foliage betrays the presence of a large spring, a sanctuary in the desert where travelers stop to drink, rest, and sometimes spend the night.

Fortunately, everything is quiet. At the previous oasis where she had slept, the men had pestered her. She had been so frightened. Her master had been a kind man, but the inhabitants of this strange land are evil. She can't trust any of them. She has heard numerous stories about the dangers lurking on these roads. She is vulnerable, especially as a woman on her own. Screaming for help would have been of no use; no one knows her, and no one would have even cared. She was but an insignificant slave, a human being without value.

Suddenly she realizes something. At the last well, just as one of the men grabbed her arm, a lion appeared out of nowhere! So quickly as a flash the men left her, busying themselves protecting their donkeys against the predator. The lion saved her life!

Relief sweeps over her when she spots a basket next to the well. Even though the water is low this time of year, she is able to draw enough water to

quench her thirst, as well as wash the dust off her face and hands. The cool water feels good on her hot skin. Only now does she realize how exhausted she is. Here, in the shade of the towering palms, is a good place to sit and rest a while. As she closes her eyes, she allows her thoughts to wander again.

Just a few months ago her life had been wonderful. She had been chosen to become the master's concubine. It had been the most beautiful day of her life. This was the best possible future for a slave girl like herself. If she were to have his child, and if that child were to be a son, he would inherit the master's wealth and she would cease to be a slave. Instead, she would be taken care of in her old age. Of course, she would have had to relinquish her son to her mistress, because Sarai was barren herself, but her master, the father of her son, would care for her every need. Even if her master were to die, her son would surely take care of her. What a wonderful future! Then she had become pregnant. She had been so excited that she had told everyone within hearing.

Unfortunately, along with the pregnancy, problems started. She was no longer a slave, but her mistress had thought quite differently about that. She put her to work doing the most mundane and humiliating tasks, just as if nothing had changed.

Well, she had decided that she wasn't going to take it any longer. There were plenty of other slaves to do her job; she refused to be treated like them. After all, she was now the master's wife, only second to Sarai. With this position came certain rights and she was determined to enjoy her life a bit more, just like her wealthy owners. At first, the master had defended her, but in his weakness for his first wife he had relented. "My wife Sarai is your mistress," he had stated. Since the master's word is law, Sarai could do whatever she wanted towards her.

From that day on her life was chaotic and then became out of control. So she had decided that she would return to her parents' house in Egypt. Anything was better than the daily pain of humiliation.

"Hagar," a quiet, firm voice speaks.

The woman looks up, alarmed; she had not heard anyone approach. *Who is this? How does he know my name? What does he want?* Facing her is a stranger. She doesn't recognize him; neither does she remember his voice. His dark brown eyes are friendly yet piercing. It is as if he knows exactly what she feels and thinks.

"Servant of Sarai, where have you come from?"²

How does he know this? Hagar is frightened and wants to run away from him, since strange men are usually not to be trusted. At the same time she is excited, as this man is different. He radiates a sense of peace, which reminds her of her master. She answers his question, and then, without hesitation,

she tells him the whole story from beginning to end. She tells him about her promotion, and about the growing tension between her and Sarai. "Sarai yelled at me time and time again, 'you will do exactly as I say; you are my servant!' Every time those words hurt me deeper and deeper. I have always been a faithful servant. But now that I am expecting a baby, she still doesn't want to relieve me of the heavy household duties. And she continuously mistreats me."

As Hagar shares her painful experiences with the stranger, her muscles tense and her cheeks flush with renewed anger. "And then there was an accident," she continues, "I was tired, and the kettle was heavy; it slipped out of my hands. Boiling water splashed over the side and burned Sarai's foot."

Recounting the events of that day, Hagar realizes that it wasn't entirely by accident. Deep in her heart she had often hoped that something awful would happen to Sarai, and in her anger and frustration Hagar had handled the kettle rather roughly. "Sarai was furious! She ranted and raved, and then..."

Hagar points at her left cheek and neck. Her skin is scarlet and full of large blisters. She feels the pain of rejection again and bursts into tears. The stranger looks at her full of understanding and compassion. It is as if he bears her pain. Sobbing, Hagar blurts out, "Why did Sarai have to throw scalding water in my face? I didn't hurt her on purpose. I couldn't take it anymore, so I fled."

The man speaks again. He neither encourages her, nor passes judgment. Instead, he calmly asks her, "Where are you going, Hagar?"

"I am on my way to my parents' house in Egypt. They are the slaves of a wealthy businessman. I used to work for him as well. Perhaps he will take me back. And if not, I will find somewhere else to work."

The stranger listens attentively. When Hagar has finished speaking, he says to her, "Return to your mistress."³

What? Immediately, she feels disdain. *You can't be serious!* But he is serious.

"Submit to her," he continues. Just the thought of it fills her heart with terror. *Return to that horrible woman? Never!* With clenched fists and tightened lips, she endeavors to contain her rage and quickly turns her head away to avoid his confronting gaze. She would like to shout at him, "Are you out of your mind?" But his words have such authority, that she doesn't dare contradict him.

After she lets his words sink in a little, Hagar ventures a quick glance at his face. Looking into his eyes she senses an inexplicable peace, which melts the anger and bitterness in her heart. Could it be that this is the best way for her and her unborn child?

"I will surely multiply your offspring", the stranger continues, "so that they cannot be numbered for multitude."⁴

Hagar is visibly confused. *What does he mean? How can he do such a thing? Is he proposing to marry me?* Her face relaxes, but she represses a smile, not only because her burned face still hurts, but also because she doesn't want to laugh at him. *What a peculiar man,* she can't help thinking. To make sure that she is not dreaming she takes a deep breath. The fresh air, the smell of greenery and flowering plants surrounding the spring are enough to convince her. *This is not a dream! This is for real!*

Meanwhile, the man keeps talking with quiet confidence. "You are pregnant and shall bear a son."⁵

But... but how does he know that I will have a son. Wouldn't it be just as possible for me to have a daughter? Then joy overtakes her confusion. Wonderful, a son! To have a son is the greatest desire of every woman, and her firstborn will be a son! It is almost too good to be true. She would like to dance for joy. But at the same time doubt creeps into her heart. Can she trust the words of this stranger? *But he knew my name and even whose slave I was.* She continues to listen eagerly, for he isn't finished speaking yet.

"You shall name him Ishmael," he says, "because the Lord has listened to your affliction."⁶

Little by little, Hagar starts to remember the stories her master Abram used to tell; stories about his God and how He had instructed him to move to an unknown place, how he had listened, and how this God had taken care of him. She used to watch Abram build altars for this God. Back home, she had only known about the Egyptian gods. Since these were very powerful deities, she had remained faithful to them. But the words of this man sound so like the way Abram used to speak about God. This stranger speaks with the same convincing certainty and yet it all seems so impossible. After all, she is Hagar, only a worthless slave. As a child she had heard that all too often, and isn't that exactly what Sarai has been telling her lately?

Is the God of Abram interested in me then, a slave girl? Has he really heard about my suffering, about my difficulties with my mistress? This is what the stranger says. And such a beautiful name. Hagar can't imagine a more perfect name for her son. Ishmael – "God hears". Could it be possible that God has heard her silent pleas?

In the quiet of her heart she had often wished that she could meet Abram's God. Suddenly, it dawns on her. This is it! She is meeting Abram's God, face to face! At once she sees how easy it was for her to share her burdens with him. His gentle appearance exudes confidence and she feels completely safe.

The man hasn't finished yet. "He shall be a wild donkey of a man; his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."⁷

In her mind Hagar pictures the wild donkeys near the water wells. She has seen them often, and even more often has she wished to be as free as they are. Abram was a wealthy man, with lots of donkeys, but they were not free to roam wherever they wanted. They had to obey their master. Hagar felt the same way, as if she was some kind of animal, who deserved a scolding or a beating when disobedient. She had tolerated more than enough of this and so had fled from the tyranny of Sarai.

This man promises that her son will be free. It would be a miracle indeed! She had hoped for just such a promise when she became Abram's concubine. But that dream had been shattered when she decided to flee, back to her parental home, where her parents were slaves, where her grandparents and all her other relatives were slaves. *A wild donkey*... freedom... the words reverberate through her head.*

As she turns to thank the man for his great encouragement, he is nowhere to be found. Hagar climbs a high rock and peers into the distance in every direction, but to no avail. He has disappeared without a trace, just like his appearance earlier, suddenly and silently.

Hagar then fully realizes who this stranger must have been. He couldn't have been a mere man. He was an appearance of God himself. Only God himself could have known who she was. Only He could have told her about her offspring. Only He could have known that she is expecting a boy.

How does God want me to respond to him? Hagar muses. Then she remembers Abram and how he communicates with God. He would often go for a walk during the twilight hours of the evening and talk out loud. It had almost looked funny to her, as if he were talking to himself, and yet it had been such a familiar sight that she had become quite used to it. Perhaps she should give it a try.

Slightly uncomfortable, yet deeply grateful she utters, "You are the God who sees me."

At that very moment, her heart overflows with gladness and the last trace of fear vanishes. The baby inside her womb stirs. Hurriedly she follows the same tracks of the dusty road she had trodden. She still can see the vague prints of her footsteps. What a change has come over her. God has seen her plight. Now all will be well.

* More information about the wild donkey can be found at www.godlovesishmael.com/donkey.



2 *God's Greatness Visible*

The soft blue shimmer of the moon covers the mountains and changes the appearance of the brook down below into a thin silvery snake. Apart from the shrill squeaks of some bats, the only other familiar sound is the soothing crackling of nearby wood fires. Camels and sheep are sleeping peacefully near to darkly silhouetted Bedouin tents.

Only one person can't get to sleep. Abram has been tossing and turning all night, and he can't stop himself from thinking about the events of the previous day. It had started as an ordinary day. At the crack of dawn he got up from his bed for his morning stroll. When he returned for breakfast, the servants were anxiously running back and forth. He had ordered them to calm down and asked for an explanation for all the ruckus they were causing.

"Hagar is gone," they told him. "All her clothes are still in the tent, but we can't find her anywhere."

"Oh well, she will turn up sooner or later," he had responded confidently.

But when the sun was overhead and the scent of fresh baked bread for the midday meal wafted throughout the encampment, Hagar had still not returned. It wasn't until then that Abram started to worry, and he sent some of his menservants out to search the surroundings. They returned at sunset without Hagar. Sarai had then recounted in detail the incident of the day before. At that moment it dawned on Abram that Hagar must have run away and now he can't stop thinking about it.

Finally he gets up and without a sound, he goes out of the tent. He walks towards his favorite spot, a place where he can be at peace when there are too many distractions in the encampment. Trying not to disturb the silence of the early morning hours, he carefully avoids the loose rocks scattered on the way to the top of the hill. Thanks to the bright moonlight, he can see exactly where he is going and the climb is easy. As he reclines on a protruding rock, his trained eyes scan the valley below. *If only Hagar would come back. She is carrying the child of God's promise.*

While he meditates upon the time that God spoke so powerfully to him, Abram looks up and watches the twinkling stars in the cloudless sky. It had been many summers ago, but God's words have been engraved in his mind ever since. "Look up at the sky and count the stars — if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be."⁸

Abram had believed God. After all, hadn't God also taken him out of Ur, guided him to this foreign land, and provided for all his needs? Abram

had greatly rejoiced when he found out that Hagar was with child. But now she is gone. Softly he prays, "Lord God, please bring Hagar back. I want to trust you to fulfill your promises."

Abram unwittingly begins to count the stars. As he lifts his eyes to the sky, slowly peace settles back in his heart. God is good. He will surely do as He promised; this Abram knows.

The next few days seem to drag. All kinds of thoughts take hold of Abram's mind. He should have never told Sarai that she could treat Hagar any way she pleased. Sarai might be his wife, but Hagar was carrying his child. He feels ashamed of giving in to the whims of his own wife. He, the leader of his clan, who is not afraid to fight against kings, had been afraid to displease Sarai.

It is now clear to him that Hagar has run away because of Sarai. Abram is consumed by negative thoughts. *Why would Hagar ever come back? She has been so mistreated by her mistress. The desert is a dangerous place. Perhaps some predator has killed her, or maybe one of the surrounding tribes has taken her hostage.*

Every time such thoughts enter his mind, Abram purposely focuses his attention on the God who made him that personal promise. *Hagar must come back, for He has promised that my offspring would be too numerous to count.*

In the evening, as the setting sun drapes the mountains in an orange-red hue, Abram enjoys the cool breeze, while he rests under a large tree. A young servant comes running toward him. He is yelling something, but Abram can't quite understand what it is about. It is impolite to shout at the master, also from far away, so the young man must have something of great importance to report. Slightly irritated at having to break up the conversation with some of the other men, Abram listens intently. Finally, he gets it. The boy cries that Hagar is coming!

Abram cannot quite believe it, but his heart is beating faster.

After a few minutes, a lone female figure appears around the bend. Immediately Abram gets up and walks as fast as he can to meet her. He warmly embraces her with both relief and love.

That same evening all the older servants are invited into the tent of meeting. As hot drinks are served in tiny earthenware cups, steam rises and becomes visible in the flickering light of the campfire in front of the tent. The buzz of dozens of voices is indicative of the general excitement over Hagar's return. The tent fills with people, and as soon as everyone has found a place on the ground to sit, Abram speaks. "Today is a day of celebration," he begins, "for the lost sheep has returned home."

Then he directs his attention to the woman next to him. "We are all glad that you have returned to us, Hagar."

Everyone nods with approval. "I will now give you an opportunity to share with us what has happened to you."

Hagar looks at Abram with gratitude as she gets ready to speak. Except for the rustling of some of the animals that are trying to get comfortable on the straw spread out for them, the entire place is hushed in anticipation of Hagar's story. She tells them all about her flight, how frightened she was traveling alone, about how some men had bothered her and how seemingly out of nowhere a lion had appeared to distract the villains. She continues by describing her wondrous meeting with the stranger who called her by name and who knew where she had come from.

When Abram hears her talk about the stranger, his heart skips a beat. *I remember someone who spoke just like that; where was that again? Who could that have been?*

"He told me that I would become the mother of a great nation," Hagar continues.

"Not true, I am that mother!" Sarai interrupts her sharply.

Abram glances at his wife. Calmly, yet resolutely he admonishes her to be quiet. It was her fault that Hagar had run away. Now Abram will make sure that that is not going to happen again. Sarai is clearly alarmed by her husband's reaction, and she knows that it is better to shut her mouth.

Because of Sarai's interruption, Abram has forgotten what he heard last. "Can you please say that again?" he asks Hagar.

"From this child a great nation will come," she repeats.

When Abram hears these words he realizes why this strange man had seemed so familiar to him. He talked to Hagar in the same way God had spoken to him soon after he arrived in Canaan. God had promised him just the same thing: that his offspring would become a great nation. Abram concludes that it was God himself who had spoken with Hagar as well. The Lord is going to be true to his promises after all. Almost instantaneously Abram exclaims, "Praise be to the Lord, the Lord God Almighty."

During the weeks that follow, life in the Bedouin camp returns to normal. Hagar has stopped boasting about her pregnancy. Whenever Sarai sets her to a task, she does it without complaining.

Hagar hasn't shared everything the stranger told her. If Sarai knew the whole truth, she would certainly take advantage of her. No, Sarai is not to know that the man has instructed her to obey her mistress. That part she keeps to herself.

Hagar does submit and complies obediently. In the beginning it had been so difficult. Sarai would mock her and send her on all sorts of useless

and trivial errands. Hagar had to keep a stiff upper lip. But whenever she focused on those promises, she felt an inexplicable power in controlling her emotions.

Gradually, Sarai changes. Abram has reprimanded her, saying she ought to be thankful that Hagar is back and that she should be gentler. At first that was easier said than done, but Sarai tries. In time, she notices a change in Hagar. No longer does she brag about her pregnancy. As she starts to look forward to the birth of her son, Sarai decides that it is better to put the pain of the past behind her. Even if he didn't come from her own womb, this child will be her son. With his birth the stigma and shame of her barrenness will be erased.

A few months later, the birth pains announce the coming of the baby. Hagar is thrilled at the thought of holding her little one in her arms. On the one hand she is deeply convinced that it will be a boy. God had clearly said so. On the other hand, she can't help but wonder. *What if it is a girl after all? What will my master then say? Remarkable that one can be so doubtful, even after such an extraordinary encounter with God. Would others have doubts like that too?* Afraid he will label her an unbeliever, she doesn't dare tell Abram about her conflicting thoughts. Fortunately, she doesn't have to wait long for the answer.

When Abram cradles his baby boy in his arms, his face beams with joy and his eyes are filled with tears. God is so good. How many years has he been waiting for this moment? This is his first-born, his heir, and the one who will bear his name. This is the son through whom God will give many descendants. God has kept his promise. As Abram's heart overflows with gratitude, he decides to organize a grand feast to celebrate this special occasion. Besides his relatives and his servants, Abram also invites his friends in Canaan. He wants to let everyone know that God has removed the shame of being childless. While his brothers, Nahor and Haran, had had children years ago, he, Abram, servant of the Lord Most High, had remained childless. But God has reversed his fate and fulfilled his promise.

Indeed, this is not just any son. Abram remembers every detail of what Hagar had shared on the evening of her return to the camp. "He shall make me the mother of a great nation." Hagar had even come back with a name for the boy. Every word she spoke that night has been carved into his memory.

Especially what Hagar said about Ishmael's future affects Abram greatly. "Ishmael will be a wild donkey of a man."

It resonates beautifully with what God had told him, Abram, as well. "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and

mistreated there.”⁹ At that time these were disturbing words, evoking feelings of fear and sadness in Abram. His offspring will suffer immensely. Oh, he would do anything to prevent that. But God has providentially confirmed through Hagar that Ishmael will be a wild donkey of a man. Abram thinks about the herds he has seen on his journey from Ur to Canaan. Those wild beasts kept their distance from men. He had not even attempted to catch a few. It was a beautiful sight to see them roam around in freedom and some of his donkeys had become restless when they heard the wild ones’ bray. Who knows, had they not been tied up so well, they might have run away to freedom too.

This is what God will give Ishmael: freedom. A time of slavery may be coming, but one day his descendants will be free.

One by one, Abram’s neighbors and friends arrive at the camp to congratulate him on the birth of his son. Proudly he tells them about Hagar’s meeting with the stranger. Some of them have heard the story before, but it continues to fascinate them, undoubtedly because the prediction of a son has come true.

“And then the man said to her, ‘You shall name him Ishmael’, so that is his name,” Abram explains.

The company turns very quiet. Ishmael! What a splendid name! Abram certainly serves a peculiar god, so different from all the other gods they worship in Canaan. They bring them sacrifices, and when they ask their gods, the rains sometimes come. Sometimes the gods defeat their enemies, after the people perform rituals, but they never speak. They have never spoken at all. On the other hand, Abram’s God has instructed him to come to this land. He has even told him what to name his son, a name with a beautiful meaning, “God hears.”

They also remember how, with his small band of armed men, Abram had fought five powerful enemy kings to free his nephew Lot. When he had asked them to join him in battle, they had responded, “You are out of your mind, we cannot possibly fight that many armies.”

Abram had responded confidently that God would be with him and give him success. In the end only three of his best friends had accompanied him, and they accomplished the impossible.

With only a few hundred men Abram defeated all five of the hostile kings and their mighty armies. What kind of god is Abram’s God?

Ishmael is hardly ever sick and grows quickly. While crawling around in the tent, he finds all sorts of interesting things to put into his little mouth. His parents often laugh at his antics. It is just so cute when he has a mustache of dirt, sticking to the drool from his nose. During the first few years of his life,

Ishmael remains in Hagar's care. She nurses him and whenever needed she makes him new clothes. But as soon as Ishmael is weaned, he will sleep in Sarai's tent; after all he is legally her son. Sarai is Abram's spouse, while she, Hagar, is only a concubine.

All too soon Ishmael's third birthday arrives, which means he is ready to be weaned. Abram celebrates this first milestone in his little son's life with a feast for all his servants. Everyone is delighted to have an afternoon off, although the men in Abram's household are the ones who will enjoy the celebration party the most. The women are required to make drinks, prepare refreshments of fruit and nuts, and wash the dirty dishes afterwards.

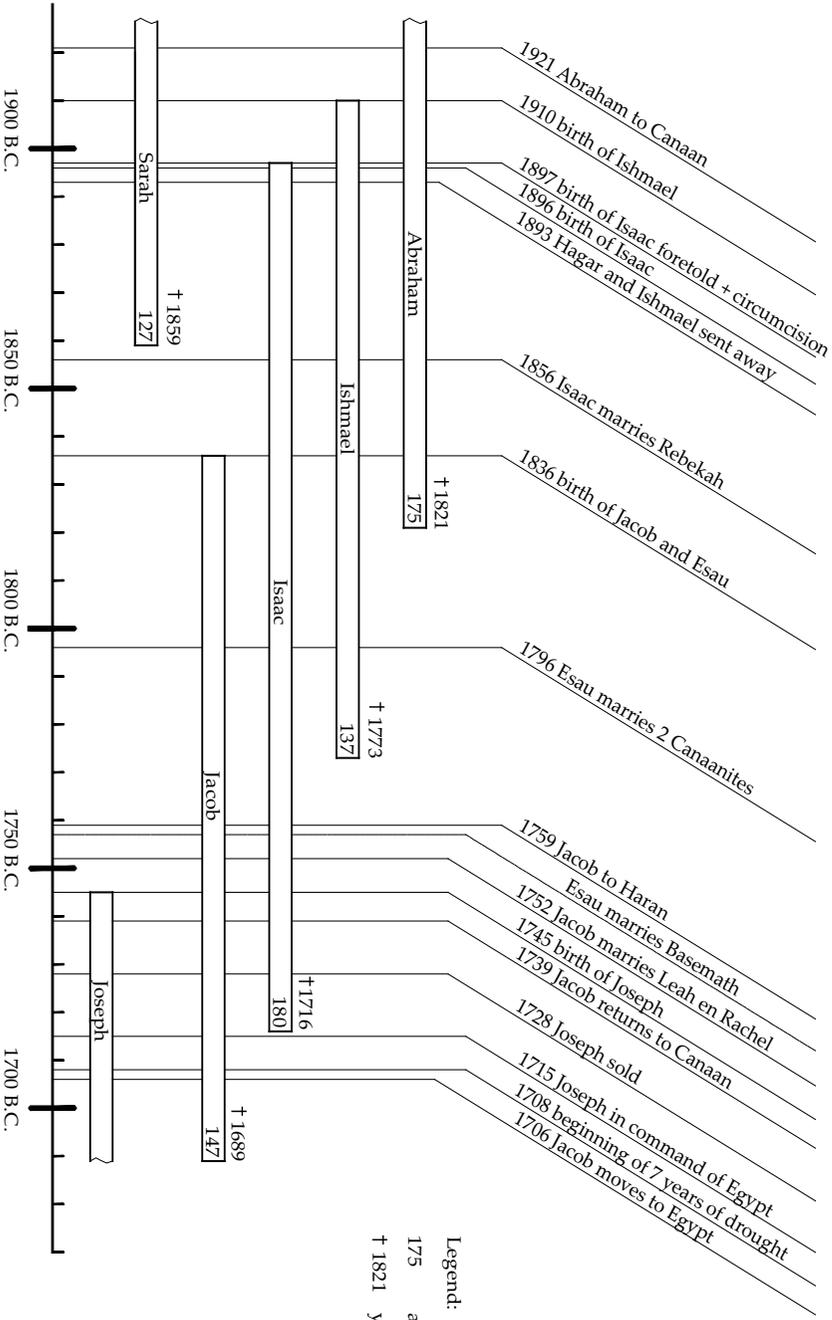
When Ishmael turns six, playtime is over. The time has come to learn to carry responsibilities by doing his chores. Ishmael doesn't mind. On the contrary, he has looked forward to this day with great anticipation. Finally, he will be allowed to join Father when he goes to market to trade for goats or sheep. Father has even given him a few little lambs to care for. Ishmael savors his childhood. He turns out to be a healthy and studious boy, and everyone in the camp admires him.

One day, Ishmael discovers something curious about himself. "Mama, why is the color of my skin darker than yours or dad's," he asks.

"That's an amazing story, my son," Sarai answers. She has been expecting this question for some time already, and this is a good moment to talk to him about it. "You are my legitimate son, and yet I didn't bear you," she says.

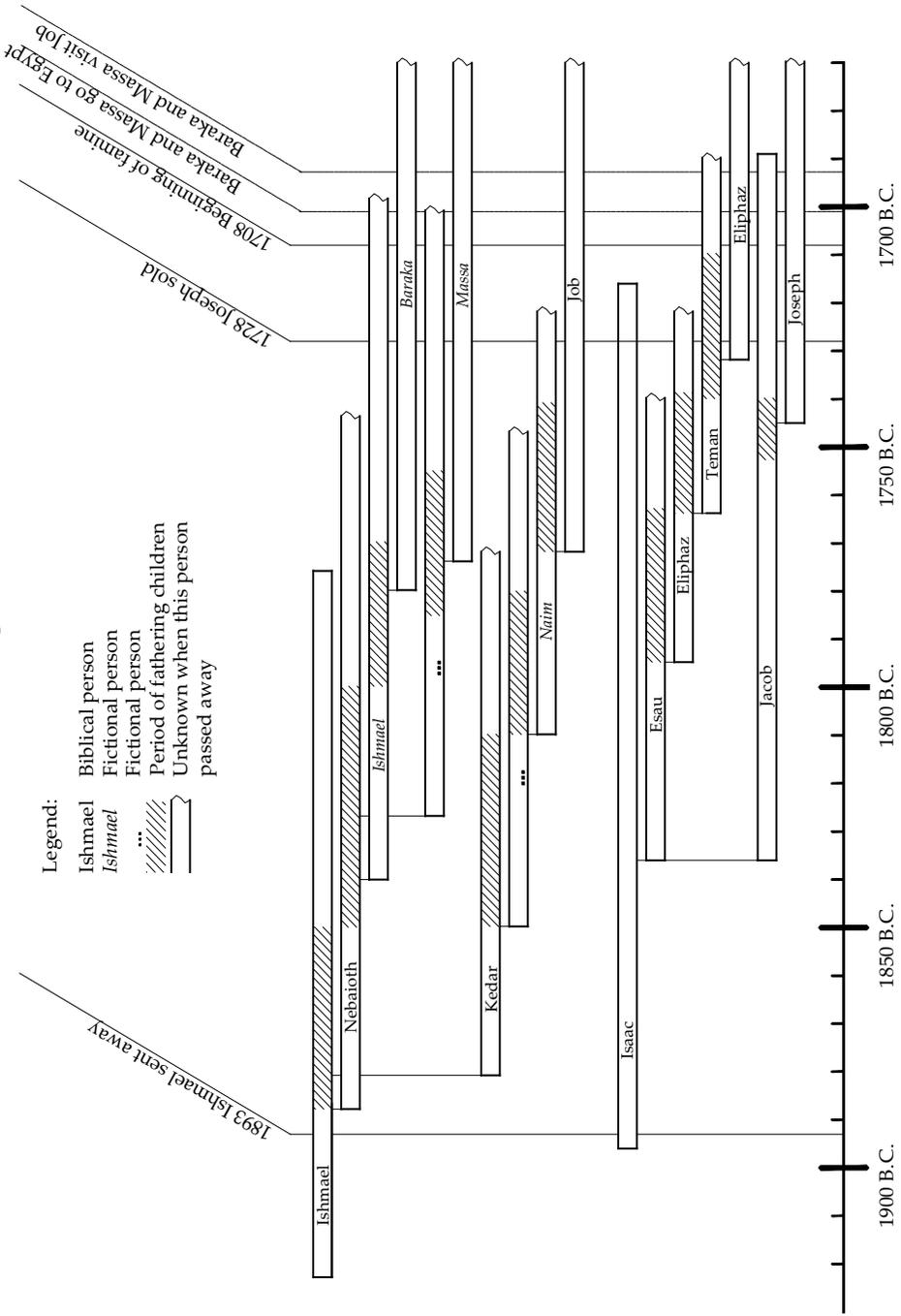
As Ishmael looks at his mother with growing curiosity, she explains that Hagar gave birth to him. But before she can finish, Ishmael jumps up with a guileless "OK" and runs off to continue playing with his friends. He feels safe in Sarai's love and his curiosity has been satisfied. It is time for Ishmael and his peers to practice throwing pebbles. Every shepherd needs to be an expert stone thrower to keep the sheep from straying and, when he is older, he wants to be able to show the animals who is boss.

Timeline of Abraham and his descendants

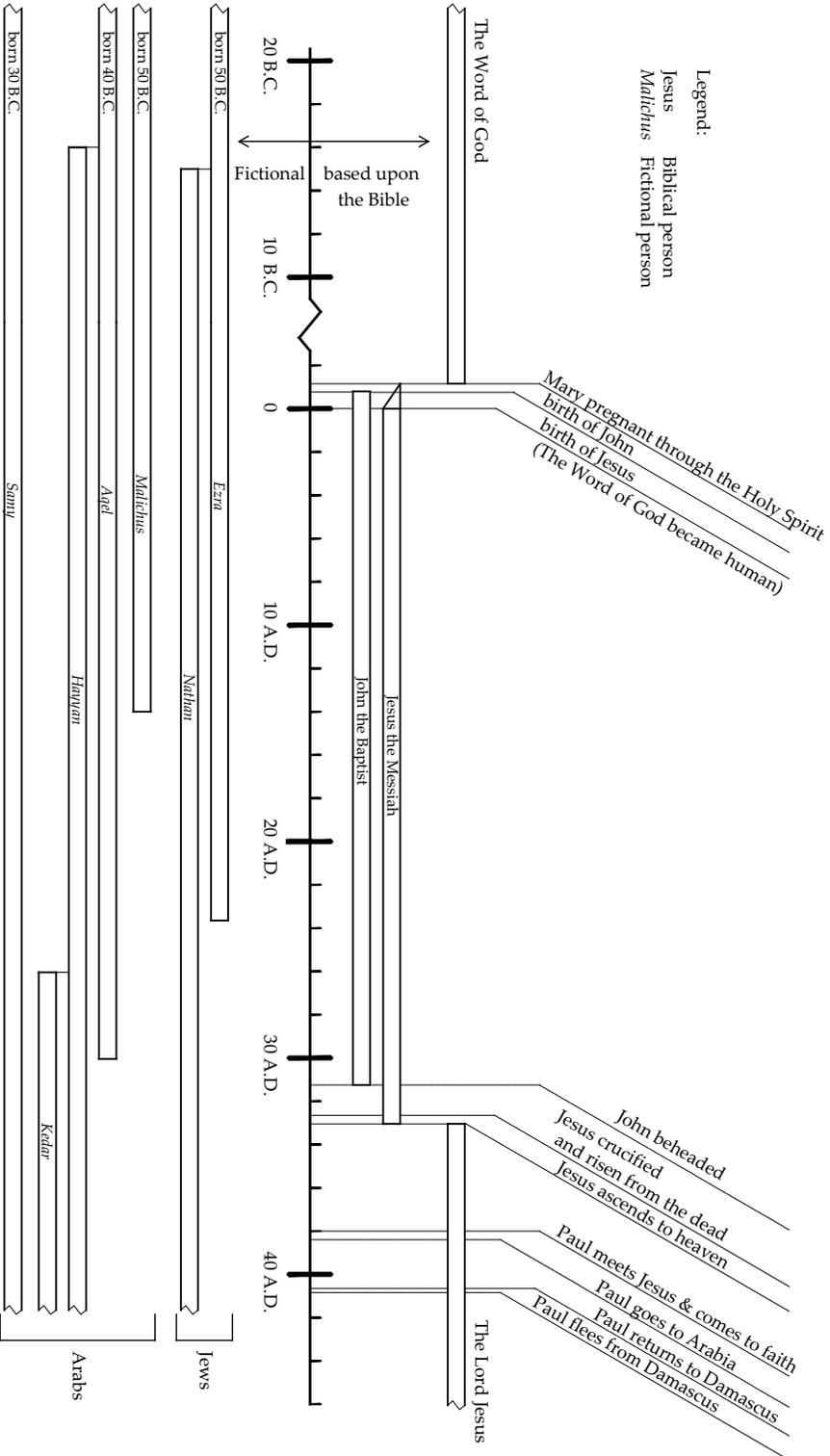


Legend:
 175 age reached
 † 1821 year of death

Timeline of first generations after Ishmael



Timeline of Jesus and Arabs



Imagine for a moment: you're a teenager and suddenly your dad throws you out of the house. Forever. And by God's command! This is what happened to Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar. This rejection left deep marks on the history of his descendants.

Yet, that's not the end of the story. God didn't really reject Ishmael. On the contrary, He deeply loved him and today, He still loves his descendants, the ethnic Arabs. Discover with the author how great God's love was and is and the unique plan God has for them in the future.

Laurens de Wit has lived in the Middle East for many years and describes life in Biblical times in a refreshing way. In the last section of the book, which deals with the present, he has woven authentic events from the lives of his Arab friends.

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