

Who was Ishmael in the Bible?

Ishmael is considered a patriarch of Islam based upon legends that have developed around him and information found in the Qur'an. But what does the Bible tell us about Ishmael?

Ishmael was the firstborn son of Abraham. God had appeared to Abraham and promised that he would have a son and that he would be the father of many nations (Genesis 15). However, as time went on, Abraham had no children. His wife, Sarah, had been unable to conceive, and they began to question just how the promise would be fulfilled.

In Genesis 16 Sarah suggests that Abraham should have a child with her slave Hagar, an Egyptian. Apparently, this was a somewhat common practice at the time (also practiced in Genesis 30 by Jacob's wives): the wife would give a female slave to her husband, but any children born would be counted as the children of the wife (perhaps an ancient version of surrogacy). While this may have seemed like a workable solution for Abraham and Sarah, in actuality it caused more problems than it solved.

Hagar did conceive a child with Abraham. When Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to "despise" Sarah, and Sarah appealed to Abraham for help. Abraham told Sarah to do as she saw fit, so she began to mistreat Hagar, and Hagar ran away (Genesis 16:4-6).

The angel of the Lord found Hagar in the desert and told her to return to Sarah. He then told her about her yet unborn son: "You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery. [Ishmael means "God hears."] He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers" (Genesis 16:11-12). So Hagar went back and bore a son; Abraham was 86 years old.

In Genesis 17, when Abraham is 99 years old (making Ishmael approximately 13), God appeared to him once again and reiterated the promise that he would be the father of many nations. God told Abraham that Sarah, who was 90 years old, will have a son. Abraham had a hard time believing this and asked that God would fulfill His promises through Ishmael (verse 18). From this we can see that Abraham genuinely loved Ishmael. But God said the promise will be fulfilled through a son that Sarah will bear: “Your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. 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 my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year” (verses 19-21).

In Genesis 21, Sarah’s son, Isaac, is born, and once again problems arise. Sarah sees Ishmael mocking the young Isaac, and she demands action from Abraham: “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac” (verse 10).

“The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, ‘Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring’” (Genesis 21:11-13). Once again, Abraham’s love for his son Ishmael comes through, and God promises to bless Ishmael. Abraham gathered some provisions and sent Hagar and Ishmael away. After the provisions had been exhausted, Hagar and Ishmael were overcome

with grief, assuming that they would die in the desert. “God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.’ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink” (verses 17-19). Once again, God appeared to Hagar and promised that Ishmael will be a great nation. Finally, we are told that “God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt” (verses 20-21).

Upon Abraham’s death, he left everything to Isaac, but Ishmael did help his half-brother bury Abraham (Genesis 25:9). Genesis 25:12-18 lists the descendants of Ishmael. They are indeed numerous, divided into twelve tribes, and, as God had earlier revealed, “They lived in hostility toward all the tribes related to them” (verse 18). Ishmael lived a total of 137 years (verse 17).

Genesis 25 is the last mention of Ishmael as an individual (except for later genealogies); however, his descendants continue to be mentioned in relation to Israel. Esau marries a descendant of Ishmael since his mother did not want him to marry Canaanite women (see Genesis 28:6-8; 36:3). Ishmaelites are mentioned as a people group in Genesis 37-Joseph’s brothers sold him to Ishmaelite traders who took him to Egypt as a slave. Ishmaelites are mentioned incidentally a few more times in the Old Testament (as well as other, unrelated men named Ishmael), but the New Testament is silent about him. Ishmael is not held up as an example either to be followed or avoided.

Islamic lore reports that Abraham took Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca, and Ishmael is

considered a patriarch of Islam. While it is not accurate to say that all Arabs are descended from Ishmael, many probably are. There is still a great deal of strife between the descendants of Isaac and those who see Ishmael as their father. One wonders how things might have been different had Abraham simply trusted God to bring about His promise without any added "help" from Abraham and Sarah.