

ISHMAEL AND ISAAC

“Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants” (Gal. 4:24.)

“Allegory” is a Greek word. It comes from “allos,” which means “other,” and “agoreuo,” which means to speak in an assembly. It was a teaching tool used by public speakers. A simple story, which was easy to remember, was used to illustrate a concept, which was profound. Webster defines an allegory as a “description of one thing under the image of another.” The Galatians were confused about their own relationship with law and grace. For this reason, Paul used an “allegory,” to teach them the truth of God.

Ishmael and Isaac were half brothers. They had the same father, but different mothers. They were similar in many ways. Abraham beget both in his old age. God spoke to both mothers and prophesied about the future of their sons. Both were circumcised. Both became great nations. Both lived in the same part of the world. Both helped bury their father. Since both had the same father, it is quite possible that they were similar in appearance. We may also assume that both wore the same type of clothing, ate the same type of food, and had the same life style. If we saw them from a distance we might easily confuse one with the other.

They were, however, quite different. They were not only different they were radically different. The word “radical” comes from the Latin “radix,” which means, “root.” (This is the basis of our English word “radish,” which is a root.) These brothers were radically different. They were as different as black and white, bitter and sweet, night and day.

Paul taught that these men, and their mothers, were allegories (Gal. 4:21-31.) They were like two different covenants, or two different approaches to God. One was carnal, and the other spiritual. One was after the flesh and the other by promise. One produced bondage, and the other freedom. One was like an organization, and the other like an organism. One was characterized by “dead works,” and the other by “service to a Living God” (Heb. 9:14.) One covenant represented Judaism, and the other Christianity.

Judaism and Christianity were also similar in many ways. Both Jews and Christians met each week and studied the Scriptures. Both had nothing to do with pagan idols. Both had high standards of moral conduct. Both emphasized the importance of prayer. Both had elders and deacons. Both were evangelistic. Both baptized by immersion. When seen from a distance, one might easily confuse one with the other.

Nevertheless, Judaism and Christianity were radically different. They could never be combined. To attempt to do so would be like putting new wine in old skins, or new cloth in an old garment. The old covenant and the new covenant are irreconcilably different. The old covenant was written in stone. It was cold, rigid, inflexible, and without mercy. The new covenant is the opposite of the old. It is filled with warmth, flexibility, emotion, and compassion. It is not written in stone, or pieces of paper, it is written in the mind and heart of believers (Heb.8:7-10.)

HAGAR AND ISHMAEL

Before considering Hagar, and her son, Ishmael, let us briefly review the promises of God. Among other things, God promised Abram that he would have a son.

- God made promises to Abram when he lived in Mesopotamia (Acts 7:2.)
- These promises were repeated when Abram lived in Haran (Gen. 12:1-4.)
- Some time later, after Lot was separated from him, the promises were again repeated to Abram (Gen. 13:14-18.)
- After Abram paid tithes to Melchizedek, the promises were repeated yet again (Gen. 15:1-21.)
- Abram believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness (Gen. 15:6.)

Sarai, Abram's wife, apparently did not believe that these promises applied to her. She had been barren all of her life. She did not believe it was possible for her to have a child. Therefore, she encouraged Abram to have a child by Hagar, her Egyptian handmaid. Hagar conceived and gave birth to Ishmael (Gen.16: 1-16.)

It is important to note the carnal nature of this relationship. Nothing about it was spiritual, or supernatural. The original thought, in the mind of Sarai, was carnal. It did not come from God. The relationship that Abram had with Hagar was carnal. The birth of Ishmael was also carnal. Abram, as you know, was not infertile. After the death of Sarah, he married Keturah and had six more children (Gen. 25:1-2.) The Old Covenant, allegorized by Hagar and Ishmael, was known as the "law of a carnal commandment" (Heb. 7:16.)

ISHMAEL WAS A "WILD MAN"

After Hagar conceived, the angel of the Lord told her that her son was to be named "Ishmael," because God had heard her affliction (Gen. 16:11.) The name Ishmael means, "God hears." The angel further predicted that Ishmael would be a "wild man." The NIV translates it as "wild donkey of a man." The word refers to a beast that was stubborn and difficult to tame. Ishmael would be like this. He would be a continual source of controversy and division:

"And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren" (Gen. 16:12.)

A brief review of Ishmael's life will help to understand his combative nature. For almost fourteen years he had every reason to believe he would inherit the wealth of his father. During this time, he was not only the firstborn son of Abram, he was the only son. He was also much loved by his father. As proof of this, when Abraham was informed that Sarah would have a son, he cried out to God: "O that Ishmael might live before thee!" (Gen. 17:18.) Such, however, was not to be.

When Isaac was born, an incredible thing happened. Ishmael, the firstborn and beloved son of Abram, was driven out and disinherited. No wonder he was angry. He

must have “cried out” to God for justice, as his mother did many years before. His cries to God would provide another insight into the reason he was called “Ishmael.”

This is, of course, an allegory that helps us to understand the nature of law. The very essence of law is litigious and quarrelsome, just like Ishmael. That which is written in stone never changes. Our understanding, however, does change. Consequently, our understanding of law is in a constant state of flux. Human beings are seldom at the same level of knowledge and understanding. Sometimes we even abandon previous positions about which we once felt confident. This is one reason why the Old Law, written in stone, will always be controversial. Take, for example, the commandment to remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Scholars have debated the meaning of these words for over three thousand five hundred years . . . and still do not agree. Legal judgments are quite often appealed, and legal libraries have hundreds of books. The very nature of law is litigious and quarrelsome, just like Ishmael.

Perhaps this is one reason God found fault with the old covenant (Heb. 8:8.) It was a constant source of controversy. It was harsh, like being in jail (Gal. 3:23.) Its commandments and ordinances were “carnal,” (Heb. 7:16, 9:10.) It was “weak and beggarly,” (Ga. 4:9.) Peter called it a “yoke . . . which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear” (Acts 15:10.) Those who based their relationship with God on the old covenant were like Ishmael. They were always crying out for a legal remedy. They were always ready for an argument or debate. Consequently, they were always divisive, and divided.

Carnal religion is still a source of controversy and division. Those involved in it are constantly complaining and consistently critical . . . just like Ishmael.

SARAH AND ISAAC

Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, God appeared again to Abram and renewed His promises. This time the promises were given in association with the covenant of circumcision, and the changing of names. Abram (exalted father) was given the name Abraham (father of multitudes.) Sarai (Jehovah is Prince) was given the name Sarah (princess.)

The very essence of Isaac’s birth involved the supernatural. From the human point of view Sarah couldn’t have a baby. It had ceased to be with her after the manner of women (Gen. 18:11.) She was “past age” (Heb. 11:11.) She had a dead womb (Rom. 4:19.) She had wanted to have a baby all of her married life, and had failed. The very idea that she could conceive, after menopause, was preposterous. This idea, as you know, did not come from man, it came from God.

The name Isaac means “laughter.” Abraham laughed at the idea of his birth (Gen. 17:17,) and so did Sarah (Gen. 18:12). Isaac also must have laughed when he inherited everything Ishmael had hoped for. The fact of Isaac’s inheritance is explicitly stated in Scripture. When Abraham died, the Bible plainly states that Isaac received everything he had (Gen. 25:5.) The son of the bondwoman was not an heir with the son of the freewoman (Gal. 4:30.) This, as you know, is like Christianity. Our inheritance is like that of Isaac. It is both miraculous, and undeserved.

While Ishmael was arguing and complaining, Isaac was laughing. This is indeed a poignant allegory of the two covenants.

ISAAC TRANSCENDED LAW

It needs to be remembered that although Abram lived long before Moses, he still obeyed laws. God said: "Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (Gen. 26:5.) The Law of Moses, as you know, came four hundred and thirty years later (Gal. 3:17.)

The birth of Isaac, however, transcended law. There had never been a birth like his. The unique nature of his existence placed him outside the jurisdiction of the law of nature, the law of the Patriarchs, and the Law of Moses. There was no precedent for a legal judgment. The nature of Isaac was spiritual. It transcended the laws of earth.

In recent years our minds have been stretched by travel in outer space. Astronauts do not get speeding tickets. They operate outside the jurisdiction of earth. They travel in the heavens. Objects that are dropped on earth fall. Objects "dropped" in space merely float. Those "in the heavens" are operating in a different environment. They are beyond the limiting affects of the earth and its atmosphere. Isaac was like this. He too, was outside the realm of earthly law. No wonder he was so happy. Neither Ishmael, nor anyone else, could condemn, or disinherit him. He is like a beautiful allegory of Christianity. Nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:37-39.) Paul stated it succinctly: "If ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law" (Gal. 5:18.) No wonder Christians are so happy!

APPLICATION OF THIS TRUTH BY THE APOSTLES

Abram and Sarai were so anxious to expedite the promises that they took matters into their own hands. They didn't "wait" upon the Lord, but ran ahead of Him. They quit trying to "transform" the world, and became "conformed" to it. Their approach was "carnal," not "spiritual." It seemed to work. It produced visible results, but it did not please God.

Paul dealt with the same problem in his day. Some lost sight of the spiritual nature of Christianity and became carnal. They "marketed" Jesus like a huckster. In fact, this is precisely what Paul accused them of. He wrote: "We are not as many, which corrupt the word of God . . ." (II Cor. 2:17.) He made a sharp distinction between his ministry and theirs. The word translated corrupt" is "kapeleuo." It refers to a petty retailer, or huckster. They were hucksters, but Paul was not. Paul's approach to Christianity was spiritual. Hucksters will do almost anything to make a sale. Some preachers would do almost anything to "make" the church grow. Paul wouldn't!

The hucksters saw things from a human point of view. Paul didn't (II Cor. 5:16.) Since they had fleshly minds, they depended heavily upon fleshly letters, but Paul didn't (II Cor. 3:1). They were consistently trying to impress men, but Paul wouldn't. He wrote to the Galatians that if he tried to please men, he would not be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10). Paul accused them of "walking in craftiness" and "handling the word of God

deceitfully" (II Cor. 4:2.) Paul's preaching was without deceit, uncleanness, or guile (I Thess. 2:3).

God does not think the way men think. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Is. 55:8-9). In His infinite wisdom, God did not choose many wise men after the flesh. He deliberately overlooked those who were mighty, and noble. He chose those whom the world considered foolish, that He might put to shame the wise. He chose the "weak" to confound the "mighty." He chose that which was "base" and "despised." One reason He did so, was that no flesh would be able to glory in His presence (I Cor. 1:24-31).

The original twelve apostles, as you know, were without human credentials. They had no money, power, or prestige. Many modern churches would consider them only qualified to do manual labor. God, however, saw them as foundational to the future of a new kind of kingdom. Paul was an exception. He had an excellent education, and many other fleshly things about which to glory. Instead of helping him, however, his human credentials were a hindrance. He wrote to the Philippians, "But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ" (Phil. 3:7.) Paul abandoned his earthly achievements like garbage that he might know Christ and the power of His resurrection.

Note his utter dependence upon the power of God:

"And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech, or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (II Cor. 2:1-5.)

In his second letter he would make the same confession with these words:

"Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God . . . " (II Cor.3:5.)

Christianity, like Isaac, is utterly dependent upon God. There was no human law to which Isaac could appeal that he might receive the inheritance of his father. Human judges, and human lawyers, would not, and could not understand what happened.

AN INSTITUTION OR AN ORGANISM

The Old Covenant created an institution. It was, of course, a divine institution, created by God Himself. God did not do so, however, to glorify institutional religion. It was a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ that we might be justified by faith! (Gal. 3:24)

Note the fleshly nature of Old Covenant religion. The qualifications for the high priest, for example, were fleshly qualifications. First, he had to come from the Tribe of Levi, and the family of Aaron. His spiritual depth, or maturity, was not a factor. Further, he could not have any "physical" blemish. Some of these "blemishes" are listed in Leviticus.

“For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose, or any thing superfluous. Or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded, or crookbacked, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eyes, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken; NO MAN THAT HATH A BLEMISH OF THE SEED OF AARON THE PRIEST SHALL COME NIGH TO OFFER THE OFFERINGS OF THE LORD MADE BY FIRE: HE THAT HATH A BLEMISH; HE SHALL NOT COME NIGH TO OFFER THE BREAD OF HIS GOD” (Lev. 21:18-21.)

If a man met these physical qualifications, he could serve as high priest, even if he was spiritually corrupt. Caiaphas and Annas proved this in the time of Christ. Both were so spiritually debauched that they played an active role in the crucifixion of Christ. Yet, both served in the office of high priest. Even though their hearts were far from God, the Lord honored the office in which they served. Take, for example, the words of Caiaphas in John 11:50. In this passage Caiaphas said that “it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not”

John, the inspired apostle who recorded these words, then explained:

“And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; and not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad” (John 11:51-52.)

Institutional religion is still the same. Individuals with carnal credentials can serve in the institution, regardless of the condition of their heart.

Christianity, by contrast, is described in Scripture as a “body.” It is not an “organization,” it is an “organism.” Every member of the body must be spiritually alive in order to function. To be “severed from Christ,” is to no longer be a part of the body. It is to “fall from grace” (Gal. 5:4.)

Jesus used a similar analogy on the night before Calvary. He said:

“I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned” (John 15:5-6.)

Man cannot produce “fruit.” Only God can do that! Human laboratories can produce something that looks like fruit, and tastes like fruit, but it is not fruit. True fruit, produced by God, has life within it. Seeds from that fruit will grow if they are properly planted.

As in the case of Ishmael and Isaac, it is sometimes difficult to tell the carnal from the spiritual. Ananias and Sapphira, for example, looked like true Christians, but they were not. They were not joined to Christ, and henceforth could not produce fruit. In an institutional church they would never have been discovered. Outwardly, they

appeared spiritual. Inwardly, however, their hearts were far from God. Consequently, they were condemned. Dead branches do not belong on a living tree.

“ESTABLISHING CHURCHES” OR “MAKING DISCIPLES”

There is a constant temptation for modern disciples to be like Ishmael. For example, many boast of going out to “establish churches.” At the risk of sounding technical, Jesus did not command His disciples to “establish churches.” He told them to “make disciples” (Matt. 28:18-20.) While these two concepts may seem similar, they can be as different as Ishmael and Isaac. Man can create a carnal institution just as Abram could father a fleshly child. Only God, however, could bring Isaac into the world. In similar fashion, only Christ can create the living, spiritual Body, which is His Church. (As a point of interest, the Scriptures never refer to “members” of the “church,” only “members” of the “body.”)

Note these Scriptures. Jesus promised that He would build His church (Matt. 16:18). Once created, He added to it those who were being saved (Acts 2:47). It is explicitly stated that Jesus is the Head of His Body (Col. 1:18), and that He is the Head of all things pertaining to the church (Eph. 1:22). He is the one who sets people in positions of leadership in His Body, which is His church (I Cor. 12:28). The church of Jesus Christ is not an organization, it is a living organism. Man can head up an organization, but only Jesus is the Head of His Church.

As in the case of Abram and Sarai, it is easy to run ahead of God. There is a perennial temptation to take matters into our own hands and make something happen. If we are paid Christian workers, the pressure to produce is even greater. Consequently, we need to be continually reminded about the spiritual nature of Christianity. The church of Jesus Christ is a spiritual house, built of living stones (I Pet. 2:5.) We are cautioned to take heed how we build on Christ (I Cor.3:10.) Every man’s work will be tried by fire to see if it is genuine (I Cor. 3:13.) In the final analysis, only God can give life. Only God can add members to His Body. One man can plant the seed, and another can water it, but only God can give the increase (I Cor. 3:7.)

Unconverted people can found organizations, and erect physical buildings. In fact, the largest and most ornate Temple to Jehovah was built by Herod the Great. This was the same cruel despot who tried to kill the baby Jesus. Herod began the temple in 19 B.C. and it was not completed until A.D. 64. Josephus described its grandeur in the most eloquent terms. Its polished marble reflected the sun with such brilliance that it was difficult to tell one from the other. The disciples came to Jesus “to show Him the buildings of the temple” (Matt. 24:1.) Jesus was not impressed. As a matter of fact, He warned them that the day was coming when that temple would be destroyed. He said: “There shall not be left here one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down.”

The early Christians, by contrast, had nothing physical about which to boast. Like the salt of the earth they silently penetrated and preserved the ancient world. Like leaven hidden in three measures of meal, they relentlessly did their work until the whole was leavened. On December 29, 1967, speaking at the Hartford Forum, the late W. Carl Ketcherside described the spiritual work of the early church with these words:

“No earthly power could halt their triumphant processional. They invaded every part of the earth and penetrated every stratum of society. Eventually they toppled the tyrannical Caesars from their thrones and the cross which had been a badge of shame became the symbol of their conquest.

The heart pulsates more rapidly as one contemplates their fearless exploits on the frontiers of life, the eye grows moist and the vision becomes misty when one reads of the way in which they faced death. And admiration deepens and wonderment increases when it is realized that their magnificent accomplishments were achieved without any of the machinery deemed essential to promote and procure our own feeble successes.

The primitive liberation army had no buildings of its own. There were no cathedrals, no edifices, no suburban chapels with well-manicured lawns, stained-glass windows, or cushioned pews. They operated from the small homes of the members, from third-story walk-up halls, from caves and catacombs, and from dens in the earth.

They had no lighted signboards flashing forth their address, no printing presses and no newspapers. They could not distribute scripture portions, or pass out copies of the New Testament. They could not give chapter and verse. There were no journals or tracts, no inspirational volumes, no religious libraries, no duplicated lesson sheets.

There were no television sets, no radio stations and no telephones with which to correlate arrangements. There were no cars, no buses, no trains, and no planes to link together the far-flung outposts of the empire.

They had no bank accounts, no budgets, no endowments, no investments, no interest-bearing bonds or annuities. They established no institutions, chartered no organizations, and created no fraternal orders. They had no schools or colleges to train and polish their vanguard, no courses in hermeneutics or homiletics, no missionary societies to send them forth and sustain them, no conventions to draft resolutions to the Caesars or their procurators, no board of church extension, no council of agencies.

There were no promotional secretaries, no crusade directors, no headquarters on earth. They sought no prestige by parading before the world the politicians, professionals or actors within their number. There was no appeal to the pagan public through sensationalism, sophistication or fabrication...”

Comparing the early church with our own, someone quipped: ‘If they did what they did with what they had, think what we could do with what we have, if we had what they had.’”

As you know, the early church was seduced away from the simplicity that is in Christ. Eventually they abandoned their spiritual emphasis and became an institution with great wealth and property. They had gold, silver, and precious stones in abundance. They did business with the kings of the earth. Such opulence and wealth,

however, were not assets. John, in the book of Revelation, described this kind of church as the great whore.

PERSECUTION

“But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now” (Gal. 4:29.)

It is interesting to note that just as Ishmael tried to destroy Isaac, institutional religion sought to perpetuate its power by persecution. This was true in Old Testament times, as well as in the days of Christ and His apostles. Jesus said that the wise men and prophets were consistently persecuted by the religious leaders of their day.

“Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify, and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachai-ias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar (Matt. 23:34-36).

This was also true in the time of Jesus. He sent out His disciples like sheep in the midst of wolves. He warned that those who put them to death would think they were doing God service (John 16:2). Jesus, as you know, was not persecuted by political leaders like Pilate and Herod. He was persecuted by the proponents of institutional religion. Pilate wanted to let him go, but the Jews answered: “We have a law, and by our law He ought to die” (John 19:7).

This was also true throughout the Apostolic Age. Stephen was not stoned by political leaders, but religious ones. Saul, the persecutor, became Paul the persecuted. As such, he understood the thinking of those who tried to kill him. He reminded Timothy of the persecution and afflictions he received in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, and then declared: “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (II Tim. 3:12). Eventually, the great whore was drunk with the blood of the saints (Rev. 17:6).

BY THEIR FRUITS YE SHALL KNOW THEM

Jesus warned of religious leaders who were like wolves in sheep’s clothing. Without His guidance, it would be difficult to tell the good leaders from the bad. Jesus, however, made it simple. He taught that the true nature of religious teachers is not determined by how they look, or what they say. It is discerned by what they produce. Jesus said you would know them by their fruits.

Ishmael and Isaac may have looked alike, but they produced different fruit. Ishmael produced division. God predicted that his hand would be against every man, and every man’s hand would be against him (Gen. 16:12.) The NIV confirms this prophecy by stating that the descendants of Ishmael “lived in hostility toward all their brothers” (Gen. 25:18.) The descendants of Isaac had a different future. God promised that wherever they went, they would be a blessing. Whoever blessed them would be

blessed, and whoever cursed them would be cursed. Eventually, though Isaac, all the world would be blessed (Gen.12:1-2.)

It is sometimes difficult to tell the nature of a tree by its leaves, or the grain of its wood. It is easy, however, to tell a tree by its fruit. Men do not gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles. In this regard it is easy to tell Ishmael from Isaac. One produced controversy and division, while the other produced a blessing.

Paul wrote that the works of the flesh were “manifest,” or “obvious.” They included such things as “hatred, variance, emulation’s, wrath, strife, sedition’s, heresies, envying . . .” (Gal. 5:20-21). God does not create bitter envying and jealousy. “This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work” (James 3:14-16).

Christian work, by contrast, is known by: “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.” (Gal. 5:22-23.) “The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace” (James 4:17-18).

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

Our relationship with God is ultimately and inevitably personal. **“The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son . . .” (Ez. 18:20).** When we stand before God, we will all be judged as individuals.

The church at Thyatira, for example, was a bad church. They allowed the woman, Jezebel, to teach and to seduce the servants of God to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols (Rev. 2:20). Not everyone at Thyatira, however, was condemned. They were all judged as individuals. The Lord said: **“And unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden, but that which ye have already hold fast till I come” (Rev. 2:24-25).**

It doesn’t matter what anyone else does, or does not do. You can be saved and have a wonderful relationship with Jesus Christ our Lord. You can lay up treasures in heaven and enjoy the prospects of eternal reward. Your work, however, will be more spiritually productive and effective, if you are like Isaac instead of Ishmael!