

Palestinian Arabs as Co-Heirs of the Abrahamic Promise: Revisiting a Literal, Unconditional Interpretation

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Abstract

A majority of American evangelicals interpret God's promise to give a certain land to Abraham's descendants both literally and unconditionally (see Gen 12:2–3 and Gen 15). Because the promise is literal, Abraham's living descendants are the rightful heirs of the promised land; because it is unconditional, this right belongs to Abraham's biological descendants regardless of their behavior, beliefs, or other changeable factors. Evangelicals who support Israel as a Jewish nation-state do so largely in response to this way of reading the biblical Abrahamic promise. Meanwhile, others express alarm at what this implies for Arabs who live there, as well as for those who have been compelled to leave. The result is an impasse in Christian political posture toward the role of Arabs in the modern state of Israel, seemingly with no hope of resolution apart from a seismic shift in approaches to biblical hermeneutics. This article argues, however, that even a literal, unconditional reading of the Abrahamic promise, when followed to its logical end, leads necessarily to the welcoming of modern Arabs in the promised land. Without minimizing the importance of hermeneutical differences among Christians, the article shows that these do not need to be resolved before an unqualified advocacy for the welcoming of Arabs, both in Israel and elsewhere, can become standard among all Christians.

Introduction

Many American evangelicals¹ believe that God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 and 15 should be interpreted both literally and unconditionally.² Its purpose is to put God's faithfulness on display, not to reward Abraham or his progeny for their virtue or good deeds.³ It is argued that:

¹ This belief is shared by many evangelicals worldwide, especially where American evangelical publications are available.

² This is common knowledge, but a study conducted by LifeWay Research confirms this claim statistically (Joel Rosenberg, "Evangelical Attitudes toward Israel and the Peace Process," LifeWay Research, December 2017, <https://research.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Evangelical-Attitudes-Toward-Israel-Research-Study-Report.pdf>).

³ Anton Deik, a Palestinian Arab Christian, writes of his surprise at learning that Christian Zionism is the "default position of evangelical churches in many parts of the world." He cites research showing that, "[i]n the USA, for example, between 25 and 30 million evangelicals are Zionists, along with no less than 80,000 pastors, 1,000 Christian radio stations and 100 Christian TV stations holding and proclaiming Christian Zionist teachings" (Anton Deik, "Christian Zionism and Mission: How Does Our Understanding of Christianity Impact our Witness in the World?," in *The Religious Other: A Biblical Understanding of Islam, the Qur'an and*

- God promised to give a certain piece of land to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants
- the promise was part of an unconditional covenant
- the covenant is still in effect, giving Abraham’s contemporary descendants right to the promised land

Based on Genesis 12:3’s assurance that God will “bless those who bless (Abraham),” it is concluded that Christians should continually seek the wellbeing, peace, and flourishing of Abraham’s surviving descendants today.⁴

Given that Abraham surely would have understood it literally, this way of interpreting the promise has merit. However, separating out Abraham’s descendants four thousand years later from those who are not presents a formidable challenge. While modern Jews are, understandably, considered Abraham’s family, historical data from both biblical and extra-biblical sources show that they come by this identity through a variety of means, both biological and otherwise. That is, modern-day Jews cannot be considered Abraham’s descendants in a strictly *literal* sense.

This observation does not present the same challenge to Jews as it does to the aforementioned Christian interpreters. Jews have frequently, openly, and unapologetically welcomed Abraham’s non-biological “descendants” into the Jewish fold for millennia through conversion. This fact, as we will demonstrate in the following, compromises modern Christians’ ability to truthfully identify the heirs of the Abrahamic promise *absolutely, exclusively, or unequivocally* with all modern Jews. This does *not* mean the Jewish claim to Abrahamic ancestry is vacuous. It is not. However, it *does* mean that this ancestry cannot be understood in a strictly literal sense. Importantly, it is also true that Abraham’s biological family is far larger than modern Judaism.⁵ There is considerable biblical and historical evidence suggesting that a substantial number of

Muhammad, ed. Martin Accad and Jonathan Andrews [Cumbria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2020], 76). For examples of advocacy for this view, see “What Is the Abrahamic Covenant?,” GotQuestions.org, November 11, 2004, <https://www.gotquestions.org/Abrahamic-covenant.html>; Steve Johnson, “Coming to Terms: Promises,” Insight for Living Canada, May 1, 2020, <https://www.insightforliving.ca/read/articles/coming-terms-promises>; Harvey Richardson, “Is Replacement Theology Biblical?,” Jews for Jesus, August 21, 2021, <https://jewsforjesus.org/answers/is-replacement-theology-biblical/>; David M. Levy, “Q: What Is God’s Covenant Relationship with Israel?,” Israel My Glory, April/May 2022. <https://israelmyglory.org/article/q-what-is-gods-covenant-relationship-with-israel/>.

⁴ Based on his extensive research of evangelical support of Israel, Stephen Spector writes, “This verse (Gen 12:3) is by far the most prominent reason that evangelicals cite for their backing of the state of Israel” (Stephen Spector, *Evangelicals and Israel: The Story of American Christian Zionism* [Oxford: Oxford University, 2009], 23).

⁵ As will be argued further on, the same can be said of Sarah even though she only had one child, for many Arabs today are not only the descendants of Ishmael, but also of Isaac and Jacob.

Abraham's family members are today's Arabs. In the following, five premises that form an argument for the inclusion of modern Arabs in a literal, unconditional reading of the Abrahamic covenant are considered. These build upon rather than undermine such a reading.

Premise #1: Ishmael Was a Bona Fide Member of Abraham's Family

There is no suggestion in Genesis 12:2–3 that God's blessing of Abraham's future family was meant to be applied selectively among them. The innumerability of Abraham's offspring, in fact, is emphasized in Genesis 15:5. The boundaries of the land that God promises to give Abraham extend all the way from the Nile River to the Euphrates, including not only modern Israel, but also all of Jordan and large portions of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iraq. This is important because not only Isaac, but also Ishmael and Abraham's other six sons settled within this area after Abraham's death. There is no indication in the Bible that this was a mistake, much less a wrong action, on their part (see Genesis 25:1–6). Furthermore, while Genesis clearly indicates that Isaac was chosen to be Abraham's primary heir, Genesis nowhere suggests that Abraham disowned or rejected his other sons. On the basis of Genesis 12:2–3, there is no reason to conclude that God intended the promised land would be inhabited *only* by Isaac's descendants to the exclusion of their relatives.⁶

Even though Ishmael did not receive the same status as his brother (see Gen 17:19–20), he was nevertheless one of Abraham's sons, and was given the same inheritance as the six sons that Abraham had by his third wife Keturah. In fact, when God gives circumcision as a covenantal sign (see Gen 17:9–12), the text states twice that Abraham circumcised Ishmael, noting that Ishmael underwent the ritual on the same day as his father (see Gen 17:22–7). This suggests that Ishmael was considered an heir of God's promise both by the author of the text and by Abraham. Of course, the choice of Isaac as Abraham's primary heir would likely have challenged assumptions about the eldest son's status. But given that Hagar was Abraham's second and secondary wife, it was certainly less problematic than what happens later in the Jacob and Esau saga. In that story, even though Esau was the older brother by Isaac's only wife, Jacob is nevertheless chosen as Isaac's heir. No interpreter would suggest that Esau's birth was a mistake, or that the ensuing conflict between Jacob and Esau was the result of Rebecca's having twins. Yet, the supposed conflict between Ishmael and Isaac, for which there is only ambiguous evidence in the text of Genesis,⁷ is often described as

⁶ As will be noted in Premise #5, the very idea that Isaac's descendants, even within one generation, could be cleanly separated out from the descendants of others ignores women's contribution in reproduction. Neither Isaac nor any of the patriarchs ever had a descendant on his own.

⁷ See Christopher Heard, "On the Road to Paran: Toward a Christian Perspective on Hagar and Ishmael," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 68, no. 3 (2014): 270–85; and Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2023), especially chapters 2 and 3.

the result of Abraham and Sarah's "mistake." For example, a note on Genesis 16 in a study Bible authored by one a popular evangelical Bible expositor reads, "Isaac's descendants are Jews while Ishmael's are Arabs. The centuries-long conflict between the two peoples has its origin in Abraham's and Sarah's unwillingness to trust God for the perfect timing for the birth of their promised son."⁸ This statement, demonstrably untrue as it is, serves as an example of how selective reading affects the way (too) many evangelicals view Arab-Jewish relations today. Given the prevalence of polygamy in the Bible, those who point to Abraham's marriage with Hagar as evidence that Ishmael's existence was an unfortunate blunder are engaging in special pleading. Indeed, being consistent in making such a claim would require that the same be said regarding half of Jacob's sons, only six of whom were born of his first wife. Judah, whose family would later receive the messianic promise through David, was the fourth son of Jacob's first wife, whom he married (one might say) "by mistake," through the deceptive machinations of Jacob's uncle Laban (Gen 29). The patriarchs are presented in Scripture as both the recipients and perpetrators of a wide variety of errors. None of these, however, ultimately gets in the way of God's plan. Repeatedly, God is presented not only as working *around* those errors, but also in and through them.⁹ Thus, while one might rightly say that Abraham should not have married Hagar and that Jacob's marriage to Leah was a mistake, neither the birth of Ishmael nor the birth of Judah should be described ultimately as a hitch in God's providential activity. Furthermore, there is nothing inevitable about any conflicts that may have materialized between the various brothers or their descendants in the biblical story.¹⁰ Peace between these brothers was always possible. Thus, singling Ishmael out as a "mistake" from among the several offspring of polygamous unions in the Genesis story is unwarranted. Ishmael was one of Abraham's children. His offspring, therefore, should be considered co-heirs with their cousins of the promised land.

Premise #2: Ishmael Was Only One of Many Fathers of the Arabs

⁸ David Jeremiah, "The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Genesis 16," *The Jeremiah Study Bible*, accessed April 19, 2022, <http://www.jeremiahstudybible.com/Genesis/arab-israeli-conflict/>.

⁹ See Derek Rishmawy, "I Am Not Abraham's Mistake," Patheos.com, February 27, 2013, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/christandpopculture/2013/02/i-am-not-abrahams-mistake/>.

¹⁰ Some might point to Genesis 16:12 to counter this point. However, the wording of this verse does not require a prediction of perpetual conflict and is better understood in its context as predicting respectful relations between Ishmael's and his brothers' families. See Heard, and Maalouf, chapter 2.

Though Jews and Arabs are often considered Isaac and Ishmael's descendants,¹¹ respectively, Arabia was inhabited long before either of them was born.¹² As was noted, Isaac and Ishmael's six half-brothers also settled in the Arabian Peninsula (see Gen 25:1–6), joining the multitude of those one might call the fathers of today's Arabs. In the Bible, Ishmael's family members are called "Ishmaelites," distinguishing them from other inhabitants of Arabia.¹³ However, with time, the terms "Ishmaelite" and "Arab" became synonymous. Tony Maalouf explains the ancient origins of this association well: "[I]ntermarriages among the different tribes that roamed all over north Arabia somewhat tied the descendants of Hagar and those of Keturah together ethnically. Those who were not Ishmaelites by blood became labeled 'Ishmaelites' by geographical and cultural associations."¹⁴ The boundaries of ethnic identities are notoriously difficult—and maybe ultimately impossible—to delineate without ambiguity. This ambiguity presents no ethical problem when the goal of embrace and mutual enrichment between ethnic groups is coupled with an openness to change. But all too often the search for ethnic boundaries is conducted for the sake of exclusion instead. Whether or not Arabs descended from Ishmael is important for the present discussion because Ishmael's perceived rift with the Abrahamic family in the biblical story has led many Christians to conclude that the conflict between modern Arabs and Israeli Jews is unavoidable *unless* Arabs accept their own exclusion from the promised land. This perspective, which makes embrace and life together appear impossible for Jews and Arabs in the promised land, is problematic theologically on its own. However, the point being made here is that it is also historically and exegetically misguided. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines "Arab" as "one whose native language is

¹¹ This idea is mentioned often in popular Christian media and teaching. For example, in a study Bible note, a popular American evangelical Bible expositor writes, "Genesis 15:19-21 lists 10 ancient nations that once inhabited Canaan and who opposed the intrusion of Abraham's descendants after their exodus from Egypt. None of those nations exists today. But the descendants of one man, who was also an opponent of Abraham's descendants, today comprise one of the largest ethnic groups in the world: Arabs" (Jeremiah).

¹² Zondervan's *Encyclopedia of the Bible* summarizes what the Bible says about these inhabitants before Ishmael thus: "The Arabs first appear in the Bible in the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 and in other early genealogies. Among the descendants of Cush (10:7), the following are located in Arabia: Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Sheba, and Dedan. The descendants of Joktan, who was of the line of Shem, include the following names which have been attached to placed in Arabia: Hazarmaveth, Uzal, Sheba, Ophir, and Havilah (10:25–29). The names of the descendants of Nahor are associated with tribes or areas in N Arabia: Uz, Buz, Chesed (the sing. of the name whose plural is tr. Chaldeans), and Hazo (22:20–23)" (Moisés Silva, ed., s.v. "Arabian, Arabians, Arabs," in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2009]).

¹³ It seems that Josephus was the first to propagate the idea that Ishmael was the father of Arabs as a whole. However, Josephus lived long before the Muslim empires spread Arab culture and language far outside of the Arabian Peninsula. It was, therefore, somewhat more accurate for him to speak of Ishmael as the father of the Arabs that it is for people living after the expansion of Islam. Bible teachers and preachers today, on the other hand, have little excuse for spreading the idea that the vast people group called Arabs are distinctly the descendants of Ishmael in any meaningful sense.

¹⁴ Maalouf, 176.

Arabic.”¹⁵ This describes over 400 million people in the world today. Ishmael is not the only person in his generation who could claim paternity of nearly one-seventeenth of the modern world’s population!

Claims that Arabs and Jews have been in conflict for a long time (a precise period is seldom proposed) is also common in popular evangelical teaching.¹⁶ But the claim that Ishmael and Isaac’s families lived in perpetual—or even prolonged—hostility is also historically inaccurate.¹⁷ Actually, even if one overlooks the inaccurate association between Arab ethnicity and Islam, historians agree overwhelmingly that, until relatively recently, Jews fared much better under Islamic rule than they did in Christian Europe. This point serves more as a condemnation of Christendom than a commendation of Islamic imperialism, for Jews were by no means treated as equals under Islamic rule either. Nevertheless, the observation remains true. It is also true that anti-Semitism in the Arab world was fomented by slanderous European propaganda within the last two centuries. This included Nazi propaganda translated into Arabic.¹⁸ Historian Norman Stillman writes, “Modern anti-Semitic attitudes made their first appearance in the Middle East among the Arab Christians of Syria during the nineteenth century.”¹⁹ Over the past millennium, Jews were not uniquely singled out for persecution or scapegoated for wider societal problems in the Arab world as much as they were in Christian Europe.²⁰ Again, the purpose of making this point is not to commend Islam, but to note

¹⁵ McKenna, Amy, et. al., s.v. "Arab," in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified February 18, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arab>.

¹⁶ Here are some examples: “Isaac’s descendants are Jews while Ishmael’s are Arabs. The centuries-long conflict between the two peoples has its origin in Abraham’s and Sarah’s unwillingness to trust God for the perfect timing for the birth of their promised son” (Jeremiah); “As the angel of the Lord foretold, the conflict in Abraham’s home would weave itself into the fabric of Ishmael’s personality and, ultimately, his offspring: ‘he will live in open hostility against all his relatives’ (16:12). Ishmael became the father of the Arab nations through his twelve sons (25:12–18). Given what you know about the Middle East, how has the angel’s prophecy played out through the centuries?” (Charles Swindoll, “Abraham: One Nomad’s Amazing Journey of Faith: Running ahead of God,” *Insight for Living*, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://insightforliving.swncdn.com/pdf/broadcast/2017.11.23-notes.pdf>. This is a study guide based on Charles Swindoll, *Abraham: One Nomad’s Amazing Journey of Faith* [Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2015]).

¹⁷ See Mark Durie, “Ishmael is Not the Father of the Arabs,” *Middle East Forum*, March 6, 2019, <https://www.meforum.org/57936/ishmael-father-arabs>.

¹⁸ Norman A. Stillman, “New Attitudes toward the Jew in the Arab World,” *Jewish Social Studies* 37, no. 3/4 (1975): 200.

¹⁹ Stillman, 198.

²⁰ See Stillman. See also Martin Gilbert, *In Ishmael’s House* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University, 2011), chapters 9–18. In fact, Pinchas Goldschmidt, who was chief rabbi in Moscow for twenty-nine years but was forced to leave due to his refusal to endorse Russia’s invasion of Ukraine last year, the week before this writing advised all Jews to leave Russia for fear that they will soon be scapegoated, as they have been in the past, for hardships Russia will experience as a result of the war (Stephen Burgen, “Exiled Chief Rabbi Says Jews Should Leave Russia While They Can,” *The Guardian*, December 30, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/30/exiled-chief-rabbi-jews-should-leave-russia-while-they-can-pinchas-goldschmidt-war-ukraine>). Vladimir Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church’s mutually supportive relationship is publicly known. This illustrates the fact that Jews, disturbingly, continue to have reason to fear persecution in both Christian and Muslim-dominated places.

that the modern Arab-Israeli conflict over land and control of Jerusalem is a recent phenomenon. It is completely unrelated to the circumstances of Abraham and Hagar's conception of the baby Ishmael.

The historically incorrect idea that Jews and Arabs have been in perpetual conflict becomes especially problematic theologically when the circumstances of Hagar's pregnancy are causally connected to it. In a series of remarkable claims, a note in a study Bible published by a highly respected evangelical publishing house reads,

As a result of a lack of faith, Abram entered into a relationship with his wife's servant Hagar, attempting to produce a child to fulfill God's promise. Ishmael was the son born from this relationship. ...Ishmael fathered twelve sons—the ancestors of modern-day Arabs. The hostility between Ishmael's family and Abram's family continues today in both the political and spiritual arenas. Tragically, many Arabs refuse to follow the teachings of Jesus because he is a descendant of Abraham and choose instead to follow the teachings of Mohammed, a descendant of Ishmael and the founder of Islam.²¹

Astonishingly, the author of this note distinguishes between Abraham and Ishmael's descendants—*even though Ishmael is Abraham's son!* The note further suggests that Muslims “refuse to follow the teachings of Jesus because he is a descendant of Abraham” despite the well-known fact that most of the revered prophets in Islam, including Mohammad himself, are revered in part *because of their* Abrahamic ancestry—and Jesus is one of them!

Those details aside, the more widely accepted claim to which this note alludes is also incorrect. While the Israelites experienced conflict with several Arabian people groups in the biblical story, including Ishmaelites, there is no evidence that Ishmaelites were abnormally difficult to live with. In fact, the Ishmaelites are conflated with Midianites in the only two places where they encounter Israelites as hostiles (see Gen 37 and Judg 7–8; cf. 1 Chr 5 and Psa 83). This observation exposes the double standard often used to suggest that Ishmael's birth was problematic for the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham through Isaac. For example, the conflicts that Israelites had with Edomites, Esau's descendants, are relatively prominent in the Bible.²² Yet, no one published in popular Christian media would suggest that it was a mistake, or contrary to God's will, for Isaac and

²¹ Grant R. Jeffrey, ed. *NIV Prophecy Marked Reference Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 26. Popular preaching is often rife with inaccurate information about the Middle East. It would be superfluous to list examples, which a perusal of sermon transcripts provided on the websites of large churches can quickly provide. This example, however, is from a work edited by a highly respected evangelical publisher, suggesting that Ishmael's mistaken status as “father of the Arabs” has been so widely accepted that even some professional editors do not critique it.

²² See 2 Sam 8:13–14; 2 Kings 14:7; 1 Chr 18:12–13; 2 Chr 21:9; 25:14; 28:17.

Rebecca to have twins! Israel more frequently fell into conflict with the descendants of Abraham's son Midian.²³ Yet one never hears it taught on Christian radio that this was due to Abraham's mistake in marrying his mother Keturah. There is no biblical reason for modern interpreters to assume that any of Abraham's eight sons would be or should have been excluded from the Abrahamic promise—much less that their existence was a mistake. Hagar's pregnancy was not an accident in God's economy. A proper theology of God's providence does not allow for that way of interpreting the beginning of a human life.

Premise #3: Jew and Arab are Overlapping Categories

Contrary to what is often suggested, Arab and Jew are not mutually exclusive identities. Many Jews have been Arabs, and many Arabs Jews. Yosef Tobi writes, "According to their own tradition and according to new archaeological findings, Jews lived in the country later known as Yemen at least since the seventh century BCE."²⁴ Historian Martin Gilbert further notes, "It is possible that the migration of Jews to Yemen began even earlier. When Yemen was ruled by the Queen of Sheba in 900 BCE, the trading and naval networks established by King Solomon brought Jews from Judaea to Yemen, a journey of 1,400 miles."²⁵ These Jews lived in Arabia centuries before today's Arabic culture and language, influenced and shaped as they are by Islam, existed. Furthermore, Islam, the most enduring and pervasive product of Arabic culture in the world today, would be unrecognizable without the influence of Judaism. The many differences notwithstanding, anyone familiar with the Qur'an or the essential tenets and rites of Islam—which include a strict monotheism, circumcision of all males, a yearly sacrificial festival, reverence for Jerusalem, dependence upon biblical narratives, etc.—can readily perceive Islam's debt to Jewish influence. As is often noted in the history books, before the mass emigration of Jews to Israel after it became a nation-state in 1948, between 800,000 and one million Jews lived in Iran and the Arab world. These Jews were no less Persian or Arab than other groups who had been subdued by the great Muslim empires. Of pre-Islamic Arabian Judaism, Gordon D. Newby writes,

Judaism in Arabia was a vital Diaspora culture. Jews could be found in all areas of Arabian society. They were merchants, bedouin, farmers, poets, artisans, and warriors. They lived in castles, houses in cities, and in tents in the desert. They spoke Arabic, both formal and Judeo-Arabic, as well as Aramaic, and made use of Hebrew idioms. They were connected

²³ See Num 25:16–17; 31; Judg 6–7; cf. 1 Chr 5:19.

²⁴ Yosef Tobi, "Jews of Yemen," in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations*, edited by Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 2013), 248.

²⁵ Gilbert, 1. See also Gordon D. Newby, "The Jews of Arabia at the Birth of Islam," in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations*, eds. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, 2013), 40–1.

with the major Jewish intellectual and religious centers in Babylonia and Palestine, but they had their own Arabian practice of Judaism.²⁶

Jews who lived in Arabia were speaking Arabic long before it was spoken by modern Iraqis, Syrians, Palestinians, or anyone in the North African countries now identified as part of the “Arab World.”²⁷ In other words, before *any* Iraqi, Jordanian, Egyptian, Moroccan, or Syrian could have been considered Arab, there were Arab Jews living in the Arabian Peninsula.

Indeed, while the number of Jews who still live in Arabic-speaking lands today is tragically tiny,²⁸ Arab Jews still exist.²⁹ Far too often, Arab ethnicity, and even the Arabic language, is associated uncritically with Islam both in the West and elsewhere. While most of today’s Arabs are Muslim, Christians should have no trouble understanding that this has not always been the case. Indeed, the oldest Arabic inscription uncovered by archaeologists in Arabia predates Muhammad and was apparently written by Christians.³⁰ Arab Jews and Christians alike existed long before anyone could have been called an Arab Muslim.

Muslim tradition famously claims that Muhammad was one of Ishmael’s descendants and, generally speaking, Christians seem to have accepted that claim. Indeed, while the version of the Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael saga in Islam does not agree with the version presented in the Bible, there is no reason to rule out the possibility, in principle, that Muhammad was a direct descendant of Ishmael. However, many Christians do not know that, according to Muslim tradition, Muhammad’s paternal great-grandmother was Jewish.³¹ In the modern context of world Judaism, this is an important fact. To the surprise of many, an official decision was made in 1983 by a

²⁶ Newby, 43–4.

²⁷ Newby, 41–2.

²⁸ Happily, there are some encouraging efforts in some Arab countries to re-welcome Jews. See Aviva Klompas, “Is the Future of Jews in the Arab Middle East,” *The Jerusalem Post*, November 29, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/is-the-future-of-jews-in-the-arab-middle-east-opinion-687350>. Cf., “The Arab world is re-embracing its Jews,” *The Economist*, Jan 22, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/the-arab-world-is-re-embracing-its-jews/21807243>. This year, the United Arab Emirates decided to begin including Holocaust education in its official primary and secondary school curriculum, which will hopefully set a precedent for others to do the same (“UAE to Include Holocaust Education in School Curriculum,” *Gulfnews.com*, January 8, 2023, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/education/uae-to-include-holocaust-education-in-school-curriculum-1.1673170929237>).

²⁹ According to a recent article on the website of the World Jewish Congress, approximately 15,000 Jews still live in Iran and the Arab World, down from approximately one million in the first half of the twentieth century (Andrea Mifano, “The Expulsion of Jews from Arab Countries and Iran—An Untold History,” *World Jewish Congress*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/the-expulsion-of-jews-from-arab-countries-and-iran--an-untold-history>).

³⁰ Sam Bostrom, “Archaeologists Discover that Earliest Known Arabic Writing Was Penned by a Christian,” *Ancientorigins.net*, March 22, 2016, <https://www.ancient-origins.net/news-history-archaeology/archaeologists-discover-earliest-known-arabic-writing-was-penned-christian-020778>.

³¹ John Andrew Morrow, “The Prophet Muhammad and the Children of Israel,” *Interfaith Institute of Long Island*, [interfaithny.com](https://www.interfaithny.com/ICLloct3.php), <https://www.interfaithny.com/ICLloct3.php>.

representative body of Reform Judaism, the largest religious tradition in Judaism today, to consider any person Jewish if either one of his or her parents is Jewish.³² The decision radically altered the two-thousand-year-old Jewish tradition of defining a person's Jewishness by the mother's ethnic status only. If an anachronism may be allowed, by this new, liberal standard it is theoretically possible that Muhammad could have claimed Jewish identity had he chosen to do so (and had he been alive after 1983).

Of course, Muhammad was not Jewish. However, it is important for the present purpose to note that Muhammad had the *biological* pedigree that would have earned him that label had his ancestors stayed within the Jewish tradition—at least, according to the generous standards of Reform Judaism today. According to the rules by which many Jews define themselves today, what excludes Muhammad from being Jewish is not his ancestry but the religious identity he adopted and the time in which he was born. Furthermore, one of Muhammad's wives, Safiya, was also Jewish. She had no children, but she was surely not the only Jewish woman to marry into the early Muslim community. Jewish "blood" has been in the Muslim community since its inception.

The complex and diverse sets of rules that have developed over millennia to define Jewishness vis a vis other groups were, obviously, nonexistent at the time of Abraham. When God promised Abraham that his descendants would be a blessing to the whole world, Abraham surely understood this to mean his biological progeny, not those who would someday assent to a particular religion called Judaism. This fact should be especially important for Christians wishing to bless Abraham by blessing his descendants. All Christians agree that Jesus is God's Messiah, that he is God incarnate, and that he is the Savior of the world. But most Jews deny such beliefs. If the Abrahamic promise is both literal and unconditional, whether or not Abraham's descendants hold right beliefs about Jesus is irrelevant to the question of whether or not they are rightful heirs of the Abrahamic promise. For *that* question, only biological descent matters. The implications, though perhaps counterintuitive, are undeniable: If many Jews have become Muslims over the past millennium and a half, it follows that many Muslims today are descended from Jews. These are, therefore, descendants of Abraham—*not only through Ishmael, but also through Isaac*. Blessing Abraham, therefore, would involve not only blessing some Arabs, but also some Muslims as well—which introduces the fourth premise.

Premise #4: Over the Millennia, Many Arabs Have Converted to Judaism

³² See "Reform Rabbis Change Rule on Who Is a Jew," *New York Times*, March 17, 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/03/17/us/reform-rabbis-change-rule-on-who-is-a-jew.html>.

It is widely understood among Jews today that (almost) no one who is born a Jew can cease to be a Jew.³³ In this way, the title “Jew” corresponds to other ethnic or racial categories. However, anyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, can become a Jew by choice. This makes Jewishness uniquely difficult to define *strictly* along ethnic lines. Normally, a person can only join an ethnic group by being born into it. But being Jewish has been an exception to this rule for well over two and a half millennia.

The implications of this unique feature of Jewish identity for an unconditional, literal interpretation of the Abrahamic promise are significant. As was noted, Abraham surely interpreted God’s promise literally. However, if that is so, he could not have imagined that people would one day be able to join his family from the outside by an act of their own will (except for by marriage). As the Israelite identity evolved, however, it became far more than a family, tribe, or nation; it became a religious identity as well. This problematizes a literal, unconditional reading of the Abrahamic promise on two levels. First, if the covenant was for Abraham’s literal offspring, descendants of converts are simply not included. To say otherwise would be to “spiritualize” the promise. Second, if the promise is unconditional, no conversion process, which necessarily involves conditions (e.g., rituals like circumcision, Torah learning, baptism, acceptance of commandments, etc.), could *either* include *or* exclude a person from it. The unconditionality of the promise would be, therefore, compromised by the presence of converts within the Jewish community.

It is important to remember that converts to Judaism over the centuries did not isolate themselves from other Jews. Rather, they married, built families, and eventually became indistinguishable from their Jewish fellows. One can even observe biblical Israelites welcoming outsiders to become full members of their nation. Exodus mentions casually a “mixed multitude” that left Egypt with the Israelites (Ex 12:38). While little is known about who these people were,³⁴ it is sufficient for the point being made here that they were somehow ethnically distinct from the Israelites and yet seem to have been absorbed into their midst. Another example would be Uriah the Hittite, the first husband of Bathsheba. Women’s religious identity was not always a prerequisite for their inclusion in the Israelite community. Still, Zipporah, Rahab, and Ruth could also serve as biblical

³³ Aaron J. Hahn Tapper writes, “[P]erhaps the only thing that mainstream Jews can agree on with regard to Jewish identity and how to answer the question ‘who is a Jew’—regardless of their affiliation (or lack thereof)—is that Messianic Jews are not *real* Jews. Although Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Renewal, and Reconstructionist Jews disagree on many aspects of Jewish belief and practice, both formally and informally these movements unanimously maintain that Messianic Jews should not be accepted into the mainstream Jewish community” (Aaron J. Hahn Tapper, “Will the ‘Real’ Jew Please Stand Up! Karaites, Israelites, Kabalists, Messianists, and the Politics of Identity,” in *Who Is a Jew?* [West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University, 2014], 220–21).

³⁴ See Shaul Bar, “Who Were the ‘Mixed Multitude’?,” *Hebrew Studies* 49 (2008): 27–39 for a helpful discussion of the possibilities.

examples of “converts” to Israelite faith. The most striking example in the Bible is probably Esther 8:17 which says, “And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them” (ESV).

For a variety of reasons, historians find it difficult to estimate how many people converted to Judaism in ancient times. What is clear, however, is that Judaism spread significantly between the Babylonian Exile and the first century, and that many people converted during those six centuries. “[T]here is considerable evidence,” writes Louis H. Feldman, “that Judaism, especially in the period from the second century BCE. to the first century CE, was open to converts and ... there is considerable evidence that many did indeed convert, both in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora.”³⁵ In his detailed article on the subject, Feldman marshals a wide range of data to argue that conversion explains a dramatic increase in the number of Jews leading up to the first century. He notes that very little is known about individual converts, and very few of their names. However, this only goes to show how well they were integrated into the Jewish community. They were surely there, but it would be impossible now to separate them or their descendants out from the Jewish community as a whole, especially now that two thousand years have passed.

Arabs also converted to Judaism. The Idumeans converted to Judaism during the Hasmonean Period. According to Josephus, they were compelled to do so by the infamous John Hyrcanus.³⁶ The Idumeans lived in what is modern-day Jordan. Another important group in Arabia that converted to Judaism was the fourth-century CE kingdom of Himyar in what is Yemen today. As was noted previously, ethnic Jews had lived in that area since ancient times. But the Himyarite people are an example of formerly non-Jewish Arabs who became Jewish by conversion. These two historical examples of Arab people groups that converted to Judaism are by no means the only ones. They merely illustrate the fact that some Arabian people groups have converted to Judaism in the past, as have people from other areas of the world.

It is impossible, at this point, to distinguish the “original” descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob within the modern Jewish community from those who joined it later. Shaye J. D. Cohen writes that, while there is evidence that genealogical records existed for priests who served in the Jerusalem Temple before its destruction in 70 CE, there is no evidence that genealogical records were kept for all Jews. “In the Roman diaspora, certainly after 70 CE, there is no evidence of obsession with genealogical purity and hardly any evidence for public archives and archival

³⁵ See Louis H. Feldman, “Conversion to Judaism in Classical Antiquity,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 74 (2003): 116. The New Testament also testifies to the presence of converts (See Matt 23:15 and Act 6:5).

³⁶ Josephus, *Ant.* XIII: 257.

records.”³⁷ Even more importantly, “A register for converts is even less likely to have existed. ...Conversion was entirely private and personal. A register for converts before the second or third century CE is impossible to conceive; a register for converts after the second or third century CE is conceivable but undocumented.”³⁸ This means that, even if it so happened that no intermarriage between descendants of Jewish converts and Jacob’s biological descendants had occurred until the modern day, it would still be impossible to distinguish the “real” Jews from the descendants of converts. This is no problem for most religious Jews generally, for they have found ways to make room for converts in their tradition. But for Christians who emphasize the literal and unconditional nature of the Abrahamic promise, a distinction between Abraham’s *biological* descendants and those who merely claim a religious affinity is crucial.

Perhaps even more important in today’s political situation, however, is the fact that some Jews have converted to Islam over the centuries. If Jews are indeed the biological progeny of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and if God’s covenant with Abraham is indeed unconditional, it follows that, not only were these Jewish converts to Islam true heirs of the covenant, but their descendants are as well. By this time these descendants—virtually all of whom are still Muslims today—could potentially number in the hundreds of thousands. Perhaps the most important group to be mentioned here are Jews who lived in Israel when Islam first began spreading outside of Arabia. Mohammad Hatimi writes,

[T]he victorious advance of the Arab warriors, who in record time succeeded in defeating strong and organized armies and in integrating civilized peoples, was able to spark the curiosity and admiration of a few Jewish communities, particularly those of the small towns of Palestine. The learned saw these successes as proof of the imminence of the fulfillment of biblical prophecies and the advent of the messianic era. They converted in the hope of taking part in that event.³⁹

Many Jews, of course, converted to Islam under duress or even threats. Others did so for marriage, and still others out of a sincere conviction that Islam was the true faith. Hatimi provides a variety of specific examples in his helpful chapter on the subject. However, for the present purpose, the motivation of conversion should not matter if the Abrahamic promise is understood unconditionally. On an unconditional reading, Arab Muslim heirs of the Abrahamic covenant undoubtedly exist

³⁷ Shaye J. D. Cohen, “‘Those Who Say They Are Jews and Are Not’: How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?,” in *Diasporas in Antiquity*, eds. Ernest S. Frerichs, Shaye J. D. Cohen, and Calvin Goldscheider (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown Judaic Studies, 1993), 23.

³⁸ Cohen, 24.

³⁹ Mohammad Hatimi, “The Conversion of Jews to Islam,” in *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations*, eds. Abdelwahab Meddeb and Benjamin Stora (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2013), 139.

today.⁴⁰ Again, at this point it would be impossible to separate them out from those Arab Muslims who can claim no biological descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But ignorance about who they are cannot nullify the promise's unconditionality.

Premise #5: By the Principle of Matrilineal Descent, the Offspring of Jacob's Daughters Were Jews—and Some of Them Are Probably the Biological Ancestors of Today's Arabs

It is easy to keep track of the heirs of the Abrahamic promise if only one, male heir represents the family in each generation. However, once all of Abraham's progeny are included, his number of heirs begins to multiply exponentially, and the project of tracking them becomes exponentially more difficult. If Abraham's female progeny is included—as they should be—the project becomes all the more complicated.

Jews have used a matrilineal standard of determining persons' Jewishness for about two thousand years. While this is a departure from the biblical pattern, in which a strictly patrilineal standard was employed, it would be ludicrous today to try and go back through the millennia to weed out those Jews who only qualified as such because of their mother's (as opposed to their father's) ancestry. The only Jewish group today that tries to determine Jewishness exclusively by way of patrilineal descent is the Karaites,⁴¹ a small group (about 50,000 worldwide) whose Jewishness is considered dubious by many Jews today as well as by Israeli immigration law.⁴² This is not to say that Jews are not a distinct ethnic group, or that there are no boundaries to Jewishness. However, those boundaries are *not* defined within any Jewish community today by consistently or exclusively "literal" or "unconditional" criteria. Rather, the criteria change to meet the needs and desires of the community as it grows within and adapts to various contexts.⁴³

The names of all twelve of Jacob's sons and their male offspring are recorded meticulously (Gen 46:8–25). But Jacob also had daughters (Gen 37:35; 46:7), even though the name of only one of them appears in the Bible (Gen 34). Where did these women end up living, and where did their offspring settle?

There are three likely possibilities. One, of course, would be Egypt. Joseph married an Egyptian woman. Given his high position, it would not have been strange for him to arrange marriages between one or more of his sisters and Egyptian officials. However, Jacob's sons were all

⁴⁰ Some contemporary Jews continue to convert to Islam. See jews-for-allah.org.

⁴¹ Tapper, 219.

⁴² Tapper, 220.

⁴³ For a concise history of this versatility, see Dan Mendelsohn Aviv, *End of the Jews: Radical Breaks, Remakes and What Comes Next* (Toronto: The Key, 2012).

grown by the time they emigrated to Egypt. It seems likely that Jacob's daughters would have been married before that time. A second possible area where Jacob's daughters may have built their families is upper Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia is where Abraham and Sarah's family lived, and where Abraham sent his trusted servant Eliezer to find a wife for Isaac (Gen 24). Rebecca later sent Jacob to marry one of her nieces from the same area. Jacob ended up with four wives as a result of his sojourn there: his Syrian cousins Rachel and Leah, and their respective handmaids, Zilpah and Bilhah, whom Jacob took as concubines and whose origins are, unfortunately, not discussed in the Bible. It is probable, then, that one or more of Abraham's female descendants—that is, Jacob's daughters—ended up marrying members of their extended family in upper Mesopotamia. The third possibility is that Jacob's daughters married into Abraham's family in Arabia.⁴⁴ The text says that Esau initially married two Hittite women, but that when he saw that these women displeased his parents, he took another wife from the daughters of Ishmael (Gen 26:34–5; 28:8–9), suggesting that his parents preferred this. All of Abraham's other sons by his third wife Keturah had settled in Arabia (Gen 25:1–18), as did Esau and his family. It is likely that Jacob would have done his best to arrange marriages for his daughters with members of the families of his brother and his seven uncles.

Precisely where Jacob's daughters built their families will probably remain a mystery. But given their proximity to Jacob and his family, it is likely that some of Jacob's daughters married into the families of Abraham's sons or Esau's offspring in Arabia. Nearly all the inhabitants of Egypt, Arabia, and Mesopotamia today speak Arabic and are considered Arab. It is difficult, therefore, to deny the high probability that some of today's Arabs are in the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by way of Jacob's daughters. This means, of course, that at least some Arabs—probably a substantial number—would be heirs of an *unconditional* and *literal* Abrahamic promise.

Women's contribution to ethnic identity is, perhaps, the least-considered problematizing factor in discussions of the identity of Ishmael and Isaac's respective descendants. But women are no minor detail, comprising a full half of what is important to consider regarding ethnic heritage—especially if “literal” descent is considered important. It is easy to find examples in the Bible of Israelite men who marry non-Israelite women. In much of Israel's history, intermarriage by Israelite men with non-Israelite women did not diminish the Israelite identity of their offspring. The Torah, in

⁴⁴ While some of Abraham's descendants lived in Arabia at this time, it would be anachronistic to call them “Arab.” Nearly all members of the vast group of people who are called Arab today are ethnically distinct from the majority of the inhabitants of Arabia in those days. Indeed, Ishmael and his sons certainly spoke the languages of their father Abraham and their mothers Hagar and Keturah, none of whom spoke Arabic as we know it. Ishmael was no more Arab for having lived in Arabia than Moses was for having lived and built a family there. Indeed, this is one of the problems with the tendency to superimpose the modern (and misguided) Arab-Jew bifurcation onto history—there have been many Arabic Jews/Jewish Arabs for thousands of years! While there *is* a difference between Arab and Jewish identities, they are not mutually exclusive.

fact, specifically regulates the practice of taking foreign wives as spoils of war.⁴⁵ To name a few prominent, specific examples, Moses married an Arab (Midianite) woman named Zipporah, and they had at least two sons together named Gershom and Eliezer. Joseph's sons Ephraim and Manasseh, the patriarchs of two of the tribes of Israel, had an Egyptian mother named Asenath. Jesse, the father of King David was born of Ruth, a Moabite. No modern Jewish person need question Gershom, Eliezer, Ephraim, or Manasseh's place in Abraham's family, for one can simply say that their mothers Zipporah, Ruth, and Asenath "converted" to Israelite religion. However, an appeal to conversion means that a *strictly* literal, unconditional standard of determining who does and does not participate in the Abrahamic covenant is no longer at play. An appeal to conversion also does nothing to solve the obvious problem of Israelite women who married non-Israelite men. If one applies the principle of matrilineal descent to the many unnamed Israelite women who married non-Israelite men both in biblical times and afterward, their offspring should also be considered Jewish!

Some might object to this premise by noting that, in the Bible, a woman's ethnicity does not matter in determining that of her children and, based on this appeal to a "biblical" standard, claim that it shouldn't matter when it comes to identifying the heirs of the Abrahamic promise today either. But this objection comes at too high a cost for, as previously noted, nearly all Jews have used matrilineal descent to determine membership in the Jewish community for about two millennia. Adopting a biblical standard of ethnic identity by ignoring women's contribution to the family line would render the whole project of finding Abraham's heirs today impossible. Women *must* count for any conversation about the fulfillment of a literal, unconditional Abrahamic promise to make sense today.

Conclusion

I am concerned that many evangelical laypeople are not being fairly informed about the complexity of Jewish and Arab history. Meanwhile, calls to pray for and otherwise support Israel as a Jewish nation-state are common in evangelical media, while the teaching that Ishmael's existence, from whom modern Arabs are said to descend, was a mistake. This way of construing the modern ethno-political situation in the Middle East colors the lens through which Western Christians view Arabs. Admittedly, a large part of me hesitates to write critically as I have here, since evangelical support of Jewish people is, in and of itself, praiseworthy. Given Christianity's appalling record of oppression and persecution of Jews, it cannot be denied that we Christians have a special, ongoing moral obligation to seek reparation for what we have done. I am also keenly aware that anti-

⁴⁵ See Num 31:13–20 and Deut 20:14.

Semitism is on the rise in my own country,⁴⁶ and that it continues to fester in the modern Middle East (including in Turkey, where I presently reside), fueled worldwide by a steady supply of conspiracy theories. A dangerously simplistic association of all Jews with the Israeli government and Israeli vigilante Zionists, who often engage in aggressive, deadly action against Palestinian Arabs, further exacerbates the problem and contributes to the disturbingly commonplace anti-Semitism in this region. In arguing that some Arabs can legitimately claim familial ties to Abraham, I may be exposing myself to accusations of being pro-Arab *as opposed to* pro-Jewish at a time when Jews in many areas of the world are, once again, being scapegoated and slandered in public. Idealistic as it may be, nevertheless, I do not see any authentically Christian option apart from being both. Arabs have also been scapegoated, and too many have been sacrificed for the sake of American security since 9/11 for American Christian silence on the matter to be morally justifiable.⁴⁷ The moral position is seldom the easiest to hold, and following Jesus more often than not means raising one's voice in the wilderness between political binaries. I worry that, when efforts to right past wrongs committed against Jews allow for an "us-versus-them" construal of the relationship between Jews and Arabs, many Christians can too easily ignore or even vilify Arabs—or others worthy of Christian hospitality, friendship, and reparation. Instead of seeing the modern Arab-Jewish conflict as a vexing problem in search of a solution in the peace of Christ, many Christians see it as an inevitable, cosmic battle, predicted in Scripture, whose end can only be the defeat of one "side"—namely, that of the Arabs. While the above article did not include moral obligation as a premise for seeking the mutual flourishing of Jews and Arabs alike, I admit that it is an important motivating factor for me in writing it.

In addition, I also want to note that I have intentionally left out the New Testament in this article, though I am aware that the lion's share of evangelical theology regarding the land of Israel, Jews, and Arabs hinges on interpretations of certain passages therein. Again, my goal has not been to effect a dramatic hermeneutical shift. Rather, I have tried to flesh out the implications of a standard understanding of a few biblical texts that have been enormously consequential for evangelical involvement in the politics of the Middle East—and, in turn, in the lives of millions of Middle Eastern people—by building upon the logic of an already-common way of reading Scripture.

Genesis 12:2–3 is routinely used by many evangelical theologians and preachers as the basis of a call to bless Abraham by blessing his family. I have no dispute with that call. Indeed, as a father

⁴⁶ "ADL Audit Finds Anti-Semitic Incidents in United States Reached All-Time High in 2021," Anti-Defamation League, April 25, 2022. <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/adl-audit-finds-antisemitic-incidents-in-united-states-reached-all-time-high-in>.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Mansoor Adayfi, *Don't Forget Us Here: Lost and Found at Guantanamo* (New York: Hachette Books, 2021).

myself, I cannot imagine a better way to bless another father than by seeking the wellbeing, peace, and prosperity of his children. However, there is another side to this coin that is too often ignored: As much as I, or any loving father, hope that my children will flourish and prosper as individuals, my deepest desire is that they would live in harmony and peace with each other, and that they would enjoy one another's companionship. Disharmony, much less war and violence, between one's children is a curse too heavy for any loving parent to bear. If this is true, the way to bless Abraham posthumously is by seeking not only the welfare, peace, and prosperity of Jewish people, but also of anyone else who may be a part of Abraham's family. Importantly for our contemporary context, it would include Arabs who live in and close to the land of Israel. Today, we call these people "Palestinian Arabs." Many members of Abraham's family are certainly among them.

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