

ISMA'IL IN THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

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I. Introduction

In the midst of the Municipality Garden in Nazareth you see a huge and expressive statue entitled “The Tent of Hajar”. It represents Hajar raising her son Isma’il high in her hands towards heaven and shouting with pride and anger before God and the world protesting her destiny and the destiny of her son having been expelled from the house of Abraham to wander aimlessly about in the desert, as if she was saying to God: Why, O Lord? And to the world: Why are you rejecting this lad?...The first drop of tears which is mentioned here in the Bible is exactly the drop of tears of Hajar: “And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went, and sat down over against him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot¹; for she said: “Let me not look upon the death of the child.” And as she sat over against him, she lifted her voice and wept.”(Genesis 21:14-16). It is known that the prevailing tradition and which is based on the Book of Genesis, view that the Arab peoples are from the progeny of Hajar and Isma’il. The Arab peoples at the top of whom is the Palestinian people is still groaning under the pressure of a big injustice which reached its peak in recent

¹ Here we can refer to the similarity of expressions in this text and the texts which talks about the prayer of Jesus in the Olive Garden and his agony of death. The text here says: “about the distance of a bowshot”, and in the Olive Garden, the text says: “And he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw. (Luke 22:41).

years. The second letter of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East described this state by saying under the title: “An Agonized Human Being”:

“And the human being in our area is an agonized human being. Ordeals from every side have rallied against him in his contemporary history, so that he came to live under the sign of pain and suffering and he walks in the path of pains carrying his cross. He is agonized in his internal entity because of the psychological and social restrictions from which he sometimes sees no exit, in his daily living circumstances which he struggles in order to improve their conditions in a situation of limited potentials, and in his human, political and civilizational aspirations whereby he views that the others deny him this right, and they want him to curtail and subjugate him, and in his desire to have a place for him at the dining table of `peoples so that he contributes in developing them and making them grow. He is agonized because of his internal restrictions or because of what is imposed on him or because of the interference of others in his affairs or because of the view of the others of him or because of the suppressive tools to which he is exposed every day from his household and from the others. He looks at his glorious past, his difficult present and his ambiguous future and he is agonized. In the midst of all of this, he longs for emancipation and liberation so that he can achieve his humanity and make it able to take its role in the march of the present world. Thus we see him anxiously searching for his identity and his originality and for his personality and his message. In the outbreak of his anger and his distress, we sometimes see him recourse to express himself in a negative way by means of violence or extremism or aggressiveness or fanaticism where he sees that the world threatens him in his identity, his personality and his entity. Perhaps these orientations are an outward expression of his hidden fear, his anxiety and his lack of stability.”²

Therefore this study is not neutral. Rather it takes the position of solidarity with these peoples and their aspirations and it moves between their distant past and their disturbed present. Isn't it time to lift the burden from the children of Hajar and Isma'il this big injustice so that they take their place and their status among the peoples of the earth?

² The letter of the Catholic Patriarchs of the East “The Christian Presence in the East: A Testimony and a Message,”1992, number 53.

What is the significance of Isma'il in the Christian tradition?....This is what we are attempting to present in this hasty work. It is natural that this presentation be based basically on the Bible in its Old Testament (specially The Book of Genesis) and the New Testament, with the help of the explanations which are mentioned in the books of interpreting the Bible, and then, after this tour in the Bible, we give some theological observations which are related to this topic. Here it is inevitable to observe that this presentation is governed by a Christian vision, that is the interpretation of the Bible and what is related to Isma'il from it comes in the light of Christ and His teachings. This might cast new lights on what was mentioned in the Bible and which might open the door for a new and creative thinking about Isma'il and his progeny³.

*A depiction of Hagar and her son
Isma'il in the Arabian
desert by François-Joseph Navez.*

*Prophet,
Patriarch,
Apostle to Arabia,
Father of the Arabs*



II. Isma'il in the Old Testament

³ In addition to the Bible and its interpretations, we were inspired by two important studies by Father Michel Hayik, the Lebanese Maronite priest, who studied the personality of Isma'il based specially on what is mentioned in the Holy Quran, in two books in the French language and they are: *Le Mystere d'Ismael* (1964) (*The Mystery of Isma'il*, 1964) and *Les arabes ou le bapteme des larmes* (1972) (*The Arabs or the Baptism of Tears*, 1972).

It can be said that the personality of Isma'il in the Old Testament and the New Testament does not form a focus of an extensive and real interest. For it seems that his story ends in a vacuum without apparently leading us to any place. In reality with the death of Isma'il the Bible stops mentioning him and talking basically about him. Thus we find that the interpretations of the Bible in the Christian tradition do not stop except accidentally and in a quick way at this personality or they are absolutely not interested in it, and by this they follow the Bible itself. The events which are related to his life and his destiny are not registered except as functional events on the margin of the history of salvation and they are narrated in order to make the role of Isaac and his progeny prominent. Rather the focus is on Isaac the youngest son of Abraham⁴ and his progeny as being the position of the promises of salvation, and subsequently it is he who preoccupies of the march of the history of salvation> Nevertheless, in the narrative of the Old Testament itself there is a collection of signs which are rich in its implications and which deserve a special interest and justify the question about this personality, its features and its status in the history of salvation.

1) The Narrative of Isma'il

The Bible deals with the story of Isma'il in the Book of Genesis, and basically in chapters 16, 17, 21, 25 and this is within the several stages of Abraham's life. These chapters are collecting of different narratives and various oral traditions which developed between the sixth and the tenth centuries with a theological vision which is special to each of them and which were confirmed and focused in the first part of the millennium which preceded Christ when the editor collected them and bestowed on them the final formulation which we know today⁵ Of

⁴ In this hasty work, we use the two names "Abraham" and "Sarah" knowing that they are called "Abram" and "Sarai" in the first part of the narrative until God changes their two names into "Abraham" and "Sarah" (see Genesis 17: 5, 15) except in the texts which are quoted from the Bible itself whereby the names are mentioned as they came in the original text.

⁵ We can notice that the narrative of Isma'il in the Book of Genesis forms a complete and integrated march of life, from the cradle to the tomb, and this indicates its importance. We can also notice that the literary structure which is used in the narrative of Ismail is quite parallel to the structure of the narrative of Isaac and is similar to it, for it uses nearly

course, our study can deal with the issues which are related to the history of the text, its structure and its meaning, the cultural framework in which it came, the milieu which conveyed it and specifying its historical, social, mythical and oral backgrounds. However, all of these considerations do not form a real necessity for our research because the Bible is not a history book in the modern sense and it is not a sociology book or human genealogies and others. Rather it is a religious and theological book in the first place in which the theological vision might vary with the variation of the different traditions.

From the summary of these traditions, they can narrate the major events of Isma'il's life and the main features of his personality. The birth of Ismail was an initiative from Sarah, the first wife of Abraham. She was barren, and this forms a thorny issue for a woman in general and to a woman who was and her husband were promised with many offsprings. So she gave up begetting children who will guarantee a big progeny for Abraham, as God had promised him. "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (Genesis 12:1), and it is the promise which is regularly repeated in the narrative of Abraham. Sarah had "an Egyptian maid whose name is Hajar. "So she asked Abraham to beget a son for him from her." Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar; and Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her. "And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarah." (Genesis 16:16:1-2). This was not a strange matter in that historical period. The laws of the peoples of Mesopotamia legislated such practices. They allowed the husband of the barren woman to take a slave woman as wife for him in order to beget children from her. These laws recognized their legitimacy and their right in inheritance. Thus Abraham begot Isma'il from her. He was called Isma'il, and it means "God hears." "Behold, you are with a child, and shall bear a son; you shall call his name Ishmael; because the Lord has given heed to your affliction."

the same expressions (the birth, circumcision, the covenant, the promises, the blessing, the progeny, the death...) which allows us to compare between the two of them easily.

“And Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abraham was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. (Genesis 16:15-16). However, as soon as Hagar was pregnant, that she became haughty and felt superior over her lady, and she behaved as if she was the housewife. This aroused the sensitivity of Sarah which began to persecute Hagar to the extent that the latter was forced to flee. However the angel of the Lord appeared to her (exactly as he had appeared to Abraham at different stages of his life) and he ordered her to return to her lady.

Here a new narrative for another tradition (Genesis chapter 17) begins. It narrates the sign of the covenant between Abraham and God, and which is circumcision: “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.....and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.” (Genesis 17:10-11). Then God promised him that he would have a son from Sarah whose name is Isaac, “I shall establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.”(Genesis 17:19). As for Isma’il, no fear is about him. Following the wish of Abraham:” O that Isma’il might live in thy sight!”, God said “As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly...and I will make him a great nation.”(Genesis 17:20). So Abraham was circumcised and his entire household was circumcised including Isma’il. “That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; and all the men of his house were circumcised.” (Genesis 17:22-26).

In chapter 21, the book of Genesis narrates the birth of Isaac. “And Abraham circumcised Isaac when he was eight days old,” And the child grew and was weaned” (Genesis 21: 4, 8). Here too, the jealousy of Sarah took its course again, when she had seen her son playing with Isma’il, so she was afraid that he would inherit with her son. “But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.”(Genesis (21:9-10). Abraham was displeased with this speech because he was attached to Isma’il and considered him his son. But God reassured him saying: “As for the son of the maid, I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman

because he is your offspring.”(Genesis 21:14). This is what happened. On this account, “Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba,” (Genesis 21:14) where the angel of the Lord appeared to her (and the angel is God Himself), and asked her to take care of the lad. The Book of Genesis adds by saying: “And God was with the lad, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.” (Genesis (21:21).

The Book of Genesis returns anew to Isma’il in chapter twenty-five to enumerate the genealogy of Isma’il. It seems that they are the names of Arabian clans and tribes which indicates that the tradition sees in Isma’il the father of the Arabs (see Genesis 25:12-18). The Book of Genesis concludes the narrative of Isma’il by the news of his death: “These are the years of the life of Ishmael, a hundred and thirty-seven years; he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his kindred.” (Genesis 25:17-18). With this the narrative of Isma’il ends, who disappears to leave the place for his brother Isaac who and his progeny appropriated the following narrative. The two brothers did not meet except when they buried their father (see Genesis 24:9): “Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him.” (Genesis 25:9). There is perhaps in this last meeting a certain sign and a prophecy.

III. Isma’il between Sarah, Abraham, Hajar and God:

Since the beginning and throughout his life, Isma’il was in the middle of several divine and human attractions, which understanding them can help to crystallize the personality of Isma’il and his position in the history of salvation. And these are attractions between Sarah, Abraham, Hagar and God.

2) Sarah:

We begin with Sarah whom is preoccupied by two obsessions: the obsession of begetting and progeny on the one hand, and God's promise to her husband Abraham that he will be a father of "a great nation" (Genesis 12:2). And how can this be and she is barren "did not beget children for him," For the Lord has prevented me from begetting children" (Genesis 16:1-2). So she resorted to that custom which was recognized in the laws and traditions of her time, which is resorting to the Egyptian slave woman, Hajar, in order that she begets a son for him "It may be that I shall obtain children by her."(Genesis 16:2). Abraham adopted his wife's idea, and he begot from Hajar his son Isma'il. "And Hagar bore Abraham a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram." (16:15). However, Hajar behaved as any woman would behave in this case. So she felt superior on Sarah, for "she looked with contempt on her mistress" (Genesis 16:4). Sarah's reaction was that she felt insulted and humiliated. So she began to think of how to get rid of her. She complained to Abraham, and told him:"May the wrong done to me be on you!" and she asked him to stand by her. She began to humiliate Hajar who felt that she had no place beside Sarah, "so she fled from her" (Genesis 16:7). She wandered aimlessly in the wilderness. However, the Lord appeared to her and asked her to return to her mistress and humiliate herself before her. So she did as the angel of the Lord commanded her to do.

When Isaac was borne of Sarah by God's planning, and he grew up, "But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac." (Genesis 21:8). So the feelings of jealousy and competition returned to act in her heart. So she asked Abraham to expel Hajar and her son: "for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac." (Genesis 21:10). Abraham reluctantly accepted. After the Lord had reassured him concerning his son Isma'il, he provided Hajar with bread and water and sent her away. "So she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba." (Genesis 21:14).

With the behaviors of Sarah, one might ask about mentioning these human confusions (and they are many in the Bible), including cheap and low-level feelings, in a religious text. And this makes us say that God has his own scheme concerning human beings, but this scheme takes its course through human confusions with all the crookedness, sins, feelings and behaviors in them, because God deals with real human beings and not imaginary ones. The Portugese proverb says: “God writes in straight lines through zigzagging lines.” The straight lines are His salvation scheme and the zigzagging lines are the human feelings, which do not inactivate the divine scheme. God goes beyond human contradictions, and He goes with His divine scheme towards completion.

3) Abraham:

We come to Abraham. Abraham considered Isma’il his son before the birth of Isaac and after it. He did forsake him at any time. However, he yielded to the feelings of his wife Sarah, even reluctantly, and he left Hajar with her, “Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please.” (See Genesis 16:6). The Book of Genesis insists on calling Isma’il “his son” (Genesis 16:15, 17:23, 26...). The Book of Genesis mentions that Abraham was the one who called Isma’il with this name, after God had called him with this name. Giving the name indicates that he considers him a real son of him. As Isaac was later circumcised, so Isma’il was circumcised too. “That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised” (Genesis 17:26). After the birth of Isaac, he did not forsake his son Isma’il. So when Sarah asked him to expel Hajar and her son, “And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son.” (Genesis 21:11). However, he yielded here also to the instinctive demands of Sarah, and this time at the request of God, who emphasized that to Abraham that he would not forsake the lad, “because he is your progeny.” (Genesis 21:13).

4) Hajar:

As for Hajar, she is between Sarah who is jealous from her, and Abraham who considers Isma’il his son, and God who takes care of the lad and his mother. She considers Isma’il her son and Abraham her husband. In all cases, she stayed beside the lad and took care of

him. God himself also interferes and reassures Hajar that He too would not forsake the lad. He we reach to God's position **towards Isma'il and his mother.**

5) God:

God has His own rulings and His salvation scheme which are not connected to human beings. He chooses whom He wants to implement this salvation scheme, despite all of the human confusions which accompany its implementation. He had chosen Isaac "for through Isaac shall your descendants be named." (Genesis 21:12). From that time, the Book of Genesis began to focus on Isaac because he is the son of the promise, who would achieve the salvation scheme through him. At this time, Isma'il is absent from the theater, and leaves it to Isaac and his progeny, and the history of salvation continues its march through him.

Here we draw the attention to the fact that God is free in His Choices, and He does not submit to the estimations of human beings and their ideas and their criteria. From the text it seems that Isma'il surpasses Isaac from many aspects. For Isaac seems to be weak and Isma'il strong ("He was an expert with the bow" (Genesis 21:20). He is the firstborn and Isaac is the younger brother. Also Isma'il seems to have a prominent character and able-bodied in contrast with Isaac who has a weak personality, whereby his brother mocks him. Despite this, God chooses Isaac and not Isma'il. For the choice of God is liberal and free and does not submit to the achievements of human beings or their characteristics, rather it contradicts human logic in many instances. God chooses whom the human beings do not expect Him to choose. He had chosen Isaac instead of Isma'il, Jacob instead of Essau and Joseph instead of all of his brothers, and he was the youngest of them in age. He also chose David from all of his brothers although he was the youngest in age among them. This is the wisdom of God which is not perceived and its mysteries are not known. However, here it is inevitable to notice also that God's choice is not a reason for pride and boasting. For the choice is not a privilege, rather it is a message. The choice does not mean that the chosen one has a higher status and characteristics than the others. God does not complete His scheme in this form, that is Isaac against Isma'il. For each of the two has his own course, no matter how various the courses are. God chooses freely,

but He does not discriminate, rather the human beings are those who change the choice into a privilege, breaking up and division.

God chose Isaac but He did not cast off Isma'il. When we read the Book of Genesis, we notice that God accompanies Isma'il with His care and His love at every important junction of the march of his life. So when Hajar fled from Sarah, we see that God is manifested to her in the image of an angel, and He asked about her "because the Lord had given heed to your affliction." (Genesis 16:11). He named the child which she would give birth to Isma'il. Here too, giving the name by Od Himself means that God looks at him in a special way and He would not forsake him. God sought her and asked her to return to her house.

When Isma'il was born and became exposed to Sarah's persecution, we see that he remained the object of God's care. This is what appears in his dialogue with Abraham (see Genesis 21:12-13). This is what specially appears when Sarah wandered aimlessly in the desert and God manifested Himself to her anew and said to her: "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand." (Genesis 21:17-18). He guided her to a water well, "so she went and filled the skin with water and gave water to the land to drink." The Book of Genesis adds: "And God was with the lad, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow." (Genesis 21:20). God not only took care of, protected and looked after him, but he was from God the object of a covenant, a promise and a blessing.

IV. A Covenant, a Promise and a Blessing

Isma'il did not remain outside the circle of the covenant, promise and blessing. So what is the meaning of all of this?

1) The Covenant:

The custom of circumcision had been known among the peoples of the area, their culture and their religions. Circumcision was a rite for integration in the community and belonging to it. The lads approaching the youthful age submitted to it. For circumcision was a social function. It expresses belonging to a certain religious or ethnic

community which takes out the person from the narrow circle of his self so that his personality is completed in the community. This practice was transferred to the Old Testament, and it acquired, in the priestly tradition, a religious meaning. This rite appeared at the time of Abraham (see the Book of Genesis 17:9-14), and in the Book of Leviticus it became a religious law “And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.”(Leviticus 12:3). God concluded a covenant with Abraham: “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.”(Genesis 17:7).

As for circumcision, it is a perceptible and bodily sign for this covenant: “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you... so shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.” (Genesis 17:9-11,13).

On this basis, Isaac was circumcised eight days after his birth (Genesis 21:4). However, what interests us here is the circumcision of Isma'il. “Then Abraham took Ishmael his son and all the slaves born in his house or bought with money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcized the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcized in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcized in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcized,” (Genesis 17:23-27). What is the meaning of this circumcision? It is the meaning of the covenant, that is it means that Isma'il is not remote from or out of the covenant, but rather he is within it and in its core.

It is clear that the Book of Genesis uses the same expressions in the circumcision of Abraham and Isma'il, and they are the same expressions which will be used later upon the circumcision of Isaac. There is no difference here between Abraham, Isaac and Isma'il. For all of them are the children of the covenant which circumcision represents an eternal sign for it.

2) The promise

The Book of Genesis is the books of promises. Abraham and his progeny were the subject of these promises (see Genesis 15; 4-6, 17:16, 26:24....). The promises mean that the covenant has a future and continuity. What is the matter of Isma'il and the promises?... Isma'il was not deprived of the divine promises. It is suitable that we draw the attention to them to understand their meaning. When Hajar fled for the first time from Sarah "The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness" and he told her: "I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude."(Genesis 16:10). He adds: "Behold, you are with a child, and shall bear a son; you shall call his name Ishmael...."(Genesis 16:11). He continues saying: "He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."(Genesis 16:12), and this is a sign of the wars and raids between him and his kinsmen throughout the history of salvation. An interpreter of this verse in the Jesuit edition of the Bible: "The grandsons of Isma'il are the Arabs of the desert, and their life is a nomadic life and a life of independence: and this reminds us of the Jahili (period before Islam) era and its poetry."⁶

After the birth of Isaac, Hajar and her son Isma'il were expelled to the wilderness. So God said to Abraham: "And I will make a nation of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring."(Genesis 21:13). In the wilderness also, the angel of the Lord caught up with Hajar once again and told her: "What troubles you, Hajar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation."(Genesis 21:17-18). It is true that the implementation of divine promises will be done by Isaac, but these promises to Isma'il do not make alien or excluded from the divine promises, specially that the expressions which are used by the Bible are the same in the two cases of Isaac and Isma'il.

⁶ Footnote number 4, p.91.

3) **The Blessing:**

We come to the blessing which also forms one of the constants of the history of salvation. In the Book of Genesis, this blessing is directed to our first parents (Adam and Eve), whereby the writer says: “And God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...”(Genesis 1:28), in addition to blessing the animals which God had created (Genesis 1:22), and also the seventh day (see Genesis 2:2-3). This blessing was repeated for all of the creation with Noah: “And God blessed Noah and his sons” (Genesis 9:1). Then the blessing of God for His creation continued through Abraham: “and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2), and then with his progeny: Isaac, Jacob and Joseph...Did Isma’il have a share in this blessing? The Book of Genesis says in the mouth of God: “As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 17:20).

What is the meaning of the blessing? The blessing is a free grant from God, the giver of life and the generous; it expresses His generosity, His love and His care. He grants it to whom He wants and according to His long-term salvation scheme. For God is the source of the blessing, and it is dynamic and effective and it has a salvation value with no return from it. As for the topic of this blessing, it is connected with life, and it has various forms: prosperity, strength, life and salvation. It includes the earthly bounties (the offspring, the big progeny, the land and its bounties). However, it also includes the salvation bounties. Before everything, the blessing indicates a special relationship between God the one who blesses and the human being the one who is blessed. This is what makes the blessed human being a place of radiation, that is, the one who is blessed becomes a source of blessing for the others: “All the tribes of the earth shall be blessed by you” God tells Abraham. Concerning the human being or the community, the subject of the blessing, they respond to this blessing with gratitude and thanking God. From here come the expressions of the prayers of blessing in the Bible, specially in the Psalms (see for example Psalm 103). Since Isma’il was the subject of a blessing from God, all these meanings apply on him.

In summary: Isma'il appears to us in the Book of Genesis as the son of the covenant, the focus of the promises and the subject of blessing. The relationship of God with Isma'il, through all of this, is a prophetic sign which heralds upcoming times, which makes for this name and his progeny a certain future. Nobody knows the thoughts of God, but these signs indicate that Isma'il has a future in the salvation scheme of God, and we do not know when, where and how. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?"(Romans 11: 33-35). For God is the Lord of history and the Lord of His unity.

V. Isma'il in the New Testament

The New Testament does not mention Isma'il except accidentally as we shall see. For the New Testament is a continuation of the Old Testament, and the writers of the New Testaments accept the narrative of the Old Testament as it is without a discussion. Accordingly, the New Testament follows the footsteps of the Old Testament, and sees in Abraham the focus of the promises, and his progeny after him which is represented in Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.... (See Hebrews 11:8-22). Nevertheless, we may mention some texts which refer, in one way or another, to Isma'il.

1) The Children of Abraham:

Who are the children of Abraham?... The question is posited in the New Testament, and that is in the framework of the arguments among the religious groups, such as the Pharisees and the Saddouqis. The Jews used to declare loudly that they are the children of Abraham. Subsequently, salvation is guaranteed for them by merely belonging to Abraham bodily. John the Baptist, during his preaching, faced this mentality, which expresses itself by this declaration: We are the children of Abraham. So he answered them saying: "and do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father," for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."(Matthew 3:9-10). By this he means that the progeny of Abraham

are those who do the actions of Abraham, and not those who boast of belonging to Abraham bodily.

This argument returns with all of intensity between Jesus and a group of Jews, who also confronted him by saying that they are the progeny of Abraham, subsequently, they are not slaves and they do not need anybody to liberate them (see John 8:31-33). Jesus answered them: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ...I know that you are descendants of Abraham...if you were the Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this not what Abraham did."(John 8:34-41). Jesus goes as far as describing them as being the children of satan: "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires."(John 8:44). The interpretation of the Jesuit edition of the Bible adds by saying: "The progeny of Abraham" is not merely an inherited or a social truth, but rather it also requires harmonization between their position and the position of Abraham in lifetime. It is inevitable that this harmonization be accompanied by action. For the attempts to kill Jesus are the evidence which does not accept argument that those who attempt to kill Jesus are not Abraham's children except in a pure human way."(See the footnote 22, p.316). From here came the expression in the New Testament that Abraham is "The Father of the Believers."

Here it is possible also to mention the parable which Jesus said. It is the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). In this parable we see poor Lazarus in the lap of Abraham while the rich man, who is the son of Abraham bodily, went to "the place of torture," whereby he is separated from Abraham by a great abyss.

2) Sarah and Hajar in the Epistle to the Galatians:

There is a text which we find in the epistle of Saint Paul to the Galatians, whereby Saint Paul, in the context of his presentation, mentions Hajar and Sarah and subsequently Isaac and Isma'il without naming this latter even if he implicitly mentioned. The text is the following:

“Tell me, you who desire to be under law, do you not hear the law? For it is written in the book that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. Now this is an allegory; these two women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem slave is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: ‘Rejoice, O barren one that dost not bear...So, brethren, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.

The scientists of the Bible acknowledge that this text is the most ambiguous text in the epistle to the Galatians. Suffice it for us to mention the general framework in which this text is mentioned and its meaning, without entering into details at which we do not stop and which do not interest us in this hasty work of this kind. In order to understand this text, we must go back to the circumstances in which this epistle was written. Saint Paul writes to Christian communities in Galatia (in the middle of Turkey today). Most of their members are from the rightly guided pagans, and they are a group whose members did not remain faithful to the evangel the good news of which he told them. It seems that other evangelists came to this community after him, and taught that believing in Jesus Christ is not sufficient to attain salvation, rather they have, and they are rightly guided pagans, to follow the Law of Moses if they wanted full salvation. Paul breaks out in anger with those “stupid persons” and sees that the attempt to impose the Law of Moses is treason for the evangel.⁷

In this framework, Saint Paul searches for a symbol in the Old Testament which helps him to clarify his idea. So he came upon the story of Sarah and Hajar in the Old Testament. He views in “Sarah and her children” an image or a symbol of the freedom which the evangel came up with, and in “Hajar and her children” an image or a symbol of the slavery of the law. “A Symbol”: this word clearly indicates the aim of Paul’s interpretation: It is not a logical evidence,

⁷ See: The Jesuit father David Neuhaus, We get acquainted with Saint Paul and his epistles, “The Door of Faith” series, Jerusalem, 2016, pp.44-46.

rather it is an example. If the human being is Abraham's son according to the body, on the example of Hajar's son, he remains in slavery which the Old Testament is characterized by. And if he is Abraham's son according to the soul, on the example of Isaac, he is liberated and was able to enter Jerusalem which is above, to the promised kingdom.⁸ In this presentation, Saint Paul remains faithful to what was mentioned in the Old Testament. For he walks in a line which considers the Old Testament as inspired by God, as is the case in the Christian tradition which is constant throughout the generations, and he is enlightened by it in order to clarify his idea. It is noticeable that this epistle also comes in the framework of the pagans entering upon faith. Saint Paul wants to emphasize that this entering upon faith is from the salvation scheme of God. Her Father Michel Hayik adds: "If the doors of salvation are open for the pagans, the more so they are open to Hajar's children, and that is within a comprehensive vision of salvation.

3) The Woman in the Book of Revelation:

There is an exciting text in the Book of Revelation which does not directly point out to Hajar and her son, but it includes insinuations which justify going back to Hajar and her son. First we mention the basic sections of this text:

"And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another portent appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon ... And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth. She brought forth a male child... but her child was caught up to God and to His throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which to be nourished... And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had borne the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle that she might

⁸ The Bible, the Jesuit edition, foot note number 16, p.580.

fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourishedin security from the serpent. The serpent poured water like a river out of its mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river which the dragon had poured from his mouth..." (From Revelation 12:1-18).

Firstly we must mention that this text belongs to a special Biblical kind and it is "the kind of revelations." It is considered pictorial by the writer who had the revelation and it is not a description of events which took place. Then, as we had previously said, the text does not explicitly point out to Hajar and her son, but it includes several signs which justify such an approach. For it can be said that the text came, in its literary formulation, on the background of the story of Hajar and her son. For Hajar wandered aimlessly "in the wilderness" (Genesis 16:7). "And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba."(Genesis 21:14). The woman who is mentioned in the Book of Revelation also "fled into the wilderness" (Revelation 12:6) and "she was given the two wings of the great eagle to fly by them into the wilderness" (Revelation 12:14). In the same way that God took care of Hajar in the wilderness, so He takes care of the woman in the wilderness, and save the two of them from the ordeal in which they found themselves. If we move to the son, we see that the son of Hajar is exposed to perdition due to the persecution by Sarah, and also the woman's child is exposed to perdition due to the dragon who wants to devour him. However, both of them were the object of care from the Lord, for God saved Isma'il from death, and also God provided for the woman's child too salvation from the dragon. Can we go further than this? We believe so.

Who is this woman who is mentioned in the text?...The text does not specify her identity. This is what opened the door wide for the interpreters to specify the identity of this woman. Some of them see Eve in her, others see Zion or the people of the Old Testament and others see the church⁹. However, the most common and continuous interpretation in the history of the church and by the Church Fathers, the ecclesiastic tradition and the iconographic is that the woman who is mentioned in this text is the Virgin Mary, and this is what we too

⁹ See: Father David Neuhaus, We Get Acquainted with the Book of Revelation, "The Door of faith" series, Jerusalem, 2014, pp.50-53.

believe in. From this starting point, we can make a comparison between Hajar and the Virgin Mary to end up saying that Hajar is an image for the Virgin Mary. Father Michel Hayik develops aspects of similarity between the two of them: Hajar is a “slave woman” and Mary says about herself that “I am the slave woman of God,” and also “God looked at his humble slave woman;” both of them were visited by the divine messenger, who promised Hajar with the birth of a son who would be a father of a great nation, and Mary with a son “...who will reign over the house of David forever.”(Luke 1:33). ; the Virgin Mary stands by the cross to see her son dying from thirst before her eyes, and Hajar too watches her son dying from thirst in the desert, and she cried; the son of Hajar is exposed to the ordeal, so she fled with him into the wilderness, and Jesus, the son of Mary, is exposed to persecution, so she fled with him to Egypt across the wilderness¹⁰. I believe that all of this justifies that we see in Hajar an image for the Virgin Mary.

VI. Theological Notes

After this tour which is related to the character of Hajar and her son Isma'il and the destiny of the two of them across the Bible in the Old Testament and the New testament, we would like, in this last section, to stop at some general concept its which are connected, in one way or another, with the topic that we are dealing with. Our dealing with these concepts sets out from a collective and comprehensive vision which might restore to the marginalized and the wronged persons, across all the history their place and their status in the history of salvation. This approach from a Christian viewpoint might shed some light on some aspects of the history of salvation which might be misunderstood, and may lead to negative results.

1) The Choosing and the Exclusion:

The history of salvation is penetrated by a successive series of personalities who were called by God to a certain message in the history of salvation. We might not understand anything from the intentions of God if we do not take this fact into consideration. But

¹⁰ See: Michel Hayek, *the Arabs or the Baptism of Tears*, Paris, 1972, pp. 212-213.

does choosing a certain person mean casting off another person and excluding him?...unfortunately, human thought is a contradictory thought, meaning it considers that choosing a certain person is excluding another person. This leads to negative results which are quite different from the intentions of God. For the sinning human being refuses the grace of choice which is enjoyed by others, and he considers it as belittling him. This leads to jealousy with all of its consequences, as was the case with Cain versus Abel (see Genesis, chapter 4) where the matter ends with Cain killing his brother. When a certain person is himself the object of God's choice, he is exposed to the experience of considering this choice as a right for him, a privilege and a reward. This leads to his feeling superior over others, with the negative consequences included in this towards those who did not enjoy this choice. Unfortunately, the Bible was very often understood from this angle. So Cain was understood as being against Abel, Isaac against Isma'il, Jacob against Esau and Joseph against his brothers....All of this had led to injustice, fighting, competition, and the desire to cancel and even killing.

Unfortunately, this is the experience which the followers of the different religions fell into. So the Jews consider themselves "god's chose people," The Muslims "the best nation among all human beings," and the Christians "God's new people." This led them to despise others, excluding them, cancelling them or become tyrannical over them and feeling superior and haughty over them, with all the detrimental results of this wrong understanding of God's choice. In reality, the choosing is not a privilege, and it is not the result of human achievements or personal characteristics or traits (see Deuteronomy, chapters 5-11), rather it is a free and unconditioned choosing by God. For it is a favor from God and a grace and an expression of His generosity towards human beings. And it is a commitment and requirement on the believer to endeavor to be deserving the grace of God and His choosing. This is seldom achieved in all the religions. Rather in all of them the human being remains weak, without the divine choosing for which God calls him. For choosing is a message which the called person is entrusted with. This choosing is a service, and it is not controlling or feeling proud (see Mark 10:41-45). Choosing is a divine initiative which does not follow the measures of human beings, their specifications and their criteria. Thus, very often choosing came contradictory with these measures, criteria and

specification. So God chose the youngest and the weakest instead of the strongest or the one who has pedigree and lineage (see 1 Corinthians: 1:26-31). This is what we attempted to explain when we read the story of Isaac and Isma'il. Choosing the one does not mean casting off the other or cancelling him or excluding him. Choosing is a message and a service before everything. For God chooses Abraham, not to enjoy the blessing for himself, but so that all the tribes of the earth are to be blessed by him. In the evangel, the verb "called" is always followed by the verb "sent", because the choosing is for the message. When we look at the choosing from this angle, we consider it a care which we share the others with, a blessing by which others are blessed and generosity from God by which we overwhelm others.

The image which is adopted by the New Testament is the image of the body (see Corinthians 12:12-30). For the head, despite all its importance, is in the service of all of the body. And so are the smallest and most humble organs. For the hand cannot say: I am not a head, so I am not from the body, and neither the hand: I am not an eye, so I am not from the body. Rather all the organs are in the service of each other for the sake of the common structure and the general welfare. In the evangel of Luke there is a proverb which was mentioned by Christ and which indicates this truth, and it is the proverb of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). The father went out to meet his son who returned home after his ungratefulness and his recklessness. So his elder brother became angry and envied him. However, the father went out to meet his elder son too, to tell him that "you are my son too, like your younger brother," and to tell him: "This is my son, and you are my son, this is your brother and you are his brother." God chooses all human beings and manifests to them His generosity, each according to his position and his situation, and He does not exclude anyone.

2) **The Injustice:**

Father Michel Hayik sees in Hajar and her son a beginning of a wide series of injustices, to which human beings and human groups were exposed throughout the holy history and throughout the general history (including the injustice done to Al-Hasan and Al-Husain). After he had seen in the tear of Hajar the first tear in the Bible, he sees the same tear in the first Arabic verse of poetry which is known in Al-Jahiliyyeh (the period before Islam) (Umru' Al-qays: "O You two,

stand and weep...".He continues his search to see in the contemporary Arabic poetry a continuation of this pain and injustice. He cites the symbolism of the cross in the modern Arabic poetry (Badr Shaker Al-Sayyab, Salah Abdul-Sabour, Mahmoud Darweesh....)¹¹. This brings us back to the statue of "Hajar's tent" in the Garden of the Municipality of Nazareth which tragically and expressively depicts all the injustices of history, including the marginalized, the rejected, the cast off and the deprived, individuals and groups.

When we open the evangel, we are faced by a wide group of those wronged one, marginalized and rejected, including women, children, sick persons, lepers, handicapped, poor persons, and those having modest professions. What Jesus does is that He takes out these people from ambiguity, marginality and injustice in order to put them at the forefront and to direct to them His salvation message. Is not it a thing that draws the attention that the first blessing in the evangel of Luke is directed to the poor: "Blessed are you poor."(Luke 6:20). Jesus puts them at the forefront in order to integrate them in the history of salvation which the formal religious institution deprived them of. Among the examples which draw our attention is His behavior with the children. When the children came around Jesus, the disciples scolded them. However, Jesus was displeased with the conduct of His disciples, and told them: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God."(Mark 10: 13-16). The deprived, the wronged ones, the marginalized and the cast off have become an inseparable part of the march of salvation. The matter did not stop at this limit, rather Jesus Himself became the deprived, the wronged one, the marginalized and the outcast when He was hanged on the cross, "he had no form or comeliness.....a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief....Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows"(Isaiah 53:2-8). In His resurrection, He transformed these pains and griefs into a resurrection, whereby He overcame the forces of evil, marginalization and rejection, as if He were saying to all of those: Get out of the grave (John 11:43-45).

¹¹ See: Michel Hayik, the above-mentioned book, pp.235-236. See also: Sahar Sami, The Religious Intertextuality in the Poetry of Mahmoud Darweesh, in "The Poets" Journal (Ramallah), spring and summer of 1999, pp.84-89.

If we look at the modern age, we see that the Palestinian people has been exposed to the greatest injustice which the contemporary history has known after the Second World war, whereby this people was expelled from its land to wander aimlessly in the wildernesses of the land of human beings. The tragedy is that this injustice came on the background of the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We also see that the Arab peoples are also exposed to a great injustice in recent years, whereby it is worked on removing them from the theater of history, as if the world is telling them: either you become slaves or you disappear from existence. These peoples are the image for all the injustices in modern ages and all ages, in all the continents from Africa to Asia to America and Europe.

Isn't it time for the moment of resurrection for all of those?

3) **A Comprehensive Vision:**

In Jesus Christ, all of the promises of the Old Testament are gathered. In Him they took a new direction which is more comprehensive and spiritual. Christ is “Yes” of God for all His promises: “For all the promises of God find their yes in him.” That is why we utter the Amen through Him, to the glory of God.”(2 Corinthians 1:20). With Christ, a new reign begins which goes beyond all the ethnic barriers and the material and geographical visions to build a comprehensive vision, the harbingers of which appeared in the Old Testament, and they were completed and were firmly established in the New Covenant. For Christians, the promises are the grants of the soul to which the ethnical promises and the material bounties symbolize. With Christ, the marriage with the land and the people became an image for the union of God with all humanity and with all the land of human beings. Accordingly, the progeny of Abraham is no longer the resultant of flesh and blood, rather it became a spiritual progeny which gathers the circumcised and the uncircumcised, in faith, those who were aliens from the covenants and the promises, that is the pagans, became participants in the promise and the inheritance. They participate in the promises of Abraham, who became a father to all of us (see Romans 4:9-16). Christ destroyed the barrier which separates between the two groups to make one group out of the two of them (see Ephesians 2:1-18). By this, He opened the horizons for a comprehensive reconciliation, in which there is no chosen one, rejected one or and outcast, and neither a Jew or a pagan, or a slave or a free person, rather

all, with no exception or exclusion become the progeny of Abraham and inheritors according to the covenant (see Galatians 3:28-29). Then God becomes “the Lord of all” (Romans 10:12). In this case, the earth becomes a symbol for the spiritual Christian bounties, and points out to a more sublime reality, which is the kingdom which forms “a new earth” (Revelation 21: 1), and also Jerusalem and the Temple (see John 4: 19-24). On this basis, there is no place for possession or exclusion, because all human beings are called to form in faith the great progeny of Abraham. And this is what opens the door for the comprehensive reconciliation in the last times.¹²

4) **Isma’il and Islam:**

We are not here concerning the presentation of the view of Islam about Abraham and Isma’il. This dealt with by another specialist in this booklet. What we would like to draw the attention to here is the theological vision of some Oriental theologians about Islam in the history of salvation. And here, we point out to three of them who approached the topic in a new and exciting way which calls for thinking, and they are Father Yuwakeem Mubarak, Father Michel Hayik and Father Fadi Daw. The three of them posit this question: Does Islam have a status in the history of salvation from a Christian point of view?... in order to answer this question, Father Yuwakeem Mubarak sets out from Abraham¹³. He views that Abraham integrates the Muslims in the peoples of the Bible more than he separates them from these peoples. As for father Michel Hayik¹⁴, he sets out from Isma’il, to emphasize that Islam has a function from the divine providence in the scheme of God. Finally, Father Fadi Daw¹⁵ goes further than this to emphasize that “in the tree of salvation, Islamk represents a special branch which grows on the Abrahamite graft, like Judaism and Christianity”¹⁶

All of this is not but a mere reference to this theological line which takes its course in the Oriental and Western theology. It is a line which deserves

¹² See: Father Michel Hayik, the above-mentioned book, pp.76-78.

¹³ See: A Quintuple in Christianity and Islam, volume 2, The Quran and Western Criticism, Beirut, 2011, pages 1-125.

¹⁴ See the two books which are mentioned in footnote number 1.

¹⁵ Fadi Daw and Naila Tabbara, The Divine Magnanimity: The Theology of the Other in Christianity and Islam, Beirut, 2011, specially pages91-121.

¹⁶ The above mentioned book, p.99.

contemplation in it and developing it. Islam is a theological question which is posited on our Arab Oriental sentiment. We have no right to neglect it under the pressures of the disturbed current situations. In the historical relations between the Muslims and the Christians in the Orient throughout the generations, we were used to argumentative writings, setting out from the mentality of mutual accusation and defense, and which did not lead to any result, rather it kept the hearts and the minds far away. It is time that Christians and Muslims in the Orient take a new theological orientation which works on comprising and not on exclusion. This is a task which in the first place is shouldered on the Arab theologians. The mentioned attitudes which were developed by these thinkers put us on the real road. What we hope for is continue going in depth in this furrow so that we reach a wide vision for Islam in the history of salvation. The Second Vatican Council opened the door in this domain, and what we have to do is to build on it.¹⁷

VII. Conclusion

The Christian vision of the last of times focuses on the reconciliation between God and human beings and among all human beings. If the tears were the share of Isma'il's progeny, the Book of Revelation emphasizes that the last of times are times of peace and life, whereby "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4). In these new times God will be all in all. This bright vision of the last of times are transformed, among the believers in it, in this earthly life, into a message, which is working on reuniting the all the human beings. This applies to the followers of the three monotheistic religions, and it also applies to all human categories "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9). Working on bringing closer the followers of the religions and the different human categories is an urgent necessity so that the

¹⁷ Here, we can mention what was said by Pope Francis in the press interview in the airplane which took him to the Holy Land, whereby he talked about "the common roots" among the religions and "the common among our origins", and this is what makes dialogue inevitable.

humanity from now be an image of the future bounties and the final reconciliation which will be enjoyed by all.

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