The Ishmael Factor:

Heart of the Middle East Conflict

by

Jerry L. Sherman

Chapter 13

Abraham's Plan B

Abraham is important to the identity of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. He has been called upon as peacemaker—why shouldn't the Arabs and the Jews live at peace alongside one another as cousins? For Jews he is the beginning of the covenant with God, the one to whom the Promised Land is announced and who will become a great nation to bless the entire human race. For Christians, Abraham is the example of saving faith, which justifies the fallen human. He is the one who acted out with his own son, Isaac, the drama in which God offers his Son to the world for their salvation. For Muslims, Abraham is their link to God and his plan for the world, and to the revelation that the Jews began and Islam has corrected and finished. Muslims believe Abraham and Ishmael together built the *Kaba'h* at Mecca, which is the center of the Islamic pilgrimage. They also believe that Ishmael, Abraham's first born, rather than Isaac, was the son almost offered as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah. That crucial piece of real estate in the Old City, the Dome of the Rock, houses the outcropping on which the knife was raised, and it continues to hold up for the world the question of who is favored in God's plan, Isaac or Ishmael, Jew or Arab.

Abraham is known to Christians as the biblical hero of faith who lived out the distinction of *faith and works*, which is the issue being pursued in this treatment of Cain and Ishmael, as we explore the biblical psychology within the Middle East conflict. The Christian idea has been surfacing as we move through this study, but it will be good to be explicit. Faith is trusting in the work of God through Jesus, who in life and death fulfilled the Law and satisfied its requirements for humankind, so that people can be justified through faith in him, "by grace, through faith," and not by works of their own. (Eph. 2:8,9) *Works* refers to human attempts to satisfy the law through moral and religious actions.

This "Faith and Works" or "Grace and Law" doctrine separates Christianity from other religions, and it is at stake when Christian groups lose their spark and begin to function in the manner of human religion. Individuals who believe in grace also struggle with the impulse toward legalistic self-effort. Spiritual maturity, when it happens, is the ongoing realization of one's dependence upon grace.

In the language of the nature-based theory that began Part Three, Abraham represents the human spirit ceasing to trust in its own power and learning to trust in a transcendent sufficiency. The human spirit ceases to labor at surviving by natural methods and learns instead to trust in what has been given as a gift. *Acceptance* is what is given, because when humanity became conscious that became the real need, although humans knew no way to achieve it but by the methods of nature. As put earlier, their new need was *subjective survival*, and the methods of nature worked against that, increasing guilt. The separated, alienated value system put in place by nature could never survive in the new realm of subjectivity, because it trusts in that which is mortal and stands in rebellion to the power that is eternal—which would otherwise inform the human spirit of its impotence. The hoped-for solution, one's own strength, is in fact the

problem. But Abraham somehow escaped that dead end, laying his human hope on the Rock in preparation for the commanded sacrifice; he was then rewarded for his abandonment by the appearance of the divine provision, and Isaac was restored to him.

Abraham overcame the grip of nature through this test at Mount Moriah, but he had already made his legacy of Ishmael, the son "born in the ordinary way." (Gal. 4:23) This was Abraham's backup plan in case God's promise was insufficient. What was compromise on his part lives on as a separate religious enterprise, in human religion in general, but in Islam in particular, which is bringing the problem and its results into view for the world to consider.

The message of divine sufficiency and human impotence has not in all history reached into the defensive human mind. Judaism contains it, and Christianity proclaims it, but haltingly; most of the world has never heard of it or has reduced it to a dim copy of its former self.

That dim copy is what I have been calling human religion, and my critique of it has been developing throughout this study, especially in chapter 7, which looked at the religion of Islam that lies behind Islamism and the whole Middle East disturbance. My claims at that point were that the human attempt to achieve righteousness results in the "horizontal" practice of religion, rather than contact with a genuinely vertical dimension (transcendence), and that it leads to division within the ranks of the followers. I will present those points more carefully here, adding that horizontal religion produces a flattened form of religious struggle, a prohibition of any challenging interaction between humanity and God, such as the struggle highlighted in the name, *Israel*: "He who struggles with man and God and prevails." Human religion avoids this and instead shifts blame to other humans, resulting in *jihad* (or *Kampf*) as we know it today.

Abraham's "Plan B" that produced Ishmael is the heart of what needs to be understood about the Middle East. The human attempt to do what only God can do has reared its ugly head to vociferously attack the message of *Torah* and the Gospel, and the fight is political because the future of the Land will prove who is right. So we need to look carefully at the meanings of the Abraham story.

i. Plan B in Action

At this place in my argument I sense that for some readers, the intelligent skeptics for whom I am writing, all of this biblical stuff may be stretching your patience too much (or perhaps such readers are not even here). Did Abraham really exist? Does this story about him with its religious implications really connect to political realities today? Such thinkers may want to grant only that stories like this do exist and are part of the cultures engaged in the struggle. And then they may wish that those people would let go of their ancient and troubling stories. But all I really require of a reader is this starting place, that the story exists, and that the Jews and the Arab Muslims (and the Christians) are affected by it. I have been arguing and will continue to argue that the story describes psychological conditions that have everything to do with how humans live and live together, or fail to do so. And I will be arguing more in these latter chapters that both the psychological conditions being described and their expression as cultural narratives are the nuts and bolts of an explanation of the Middle East crisis. Guilty people struggling to overcome their guilt band together in groups and against other groups to gain the sense of rightness they crave, *and* they collectively internalize the narratives that they get from the Bible and their modifications of it, seeing themselves as the expression of what those stories are about.

The second point could be said routinely about Western culture: we once built ourselves around the story of God's people expanding to bring salvation or enlightenment to the world, and we modified that (drastically) with our vision of ourselves as having mastered the forces of nature—little knowing for

three centuries that we were really just producing technology, while losing the values that had held us together. But in the Middle East the internalized narratives have stuck more closely to the question that the Bible has always raised: do humans build their own salvation, or is it given as a gift? And do God's chosen people inherit the Land because of their efforts or by unmerited favor? Does the Land go to those who follow *Torah* or to those who practice Islam? Who belongs on the Temple Mount, Ishmael or Isaac? We find the roots of these questions in the story of Abraham and his first and second sons.

Abraham was promised a son who would bring blessing to the whole world, but he and Sarah were old, and Abraham did not easily believe that God would do this. Sarah suggested he have a child and heir through her Egyptian servant, Hagar. This was the human solution. Abraham agreed, and the pregnancy happened—Plan B gives him his first son—and then Hagar became contemptuous toward her barren mistress. The do-it-yourself human spirit has no respect for those who wait barrenly for God's promise.

Facing such contempt, Sarah blamed Abraham for her distress, and he passively told her to do what she pleased with Hagar. She mistreated Hagar, who then ran away. This is the part of the story that will be examined in detail in the next chapter and that explains the alternative transcendence by which Islam retains its theistic look and feel, and by which Islamism is empowered. The angel of God told Hagar to return to her mistress, and the baby in the womb was given his name, *Ishmael*, "God Hears," with the promise that he would become a great though troubled nation. She returned and gave birth to Abraham's first-born.

Fourteen years later Isaac was born to Sarah. At the feast when Isaac was weaned, Sarah saw Ishmael playing with her son, or as some translations say, *mocking* Isaac. The human spirit mocks divine promise, again, as foreshadowed in Hagar's scorn for her barren mistress and in Cain's hatred of Abel. This time, Sarah objected strongly to the presence of Hagar and Ishmael, and even though Abraham was reluctant to do so, he had God's approval in putting them out of the household.

The New Testament legitimizes Sarah and Abraham's choice at this point by taking them as symbolic of the central Christian truth of salvation by grace alone. In Galatians Paul says that Hagar and Sarah represent two covenants, one from Mt. Sinai, the covenant of law that produces slavery, corresponding to the present Jerusalem (and Judaism), and one that corresponds to the Jerusalem from above that is free. We Christians, he writes, are children of this better covenant, of Sarah: "Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise" And he says, "At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the Spirit. It is the same now" (4:28).

This interpretation is part of an exhortation to Christians not to fall under the power of legalistic religion. "After beginning with the Spirit are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (3.3 N.I.V. 1984) And, "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace." (Gal. 5:4). Ishmael was a misstep by Abraham into human effort, a compromise. He represents self-effort in human religion, which is a crippling impurity in the Christian life, a departure from the heart of Christianity for many lukewarm denominations in Christian history, and the basic difference between most religions and real Christianity.

In human religion, guilty people try to keep the Law as they perceive it, but they reduce the Law to rules that humans can keep, and they then pride themselves on keeping those rules or feel guilty for their failure. Thus human religion is a mixture of pride and guilt. It violates the first and second commandments, because it is love of or trust in self, not God, and it falsely represents its man-made rules as the voice of God. It fails on the fourth commandment because it is religious *work.* In some cases it turns even "Keeping the Sabbath" into religious work.

Living by human effort rather than by faith is not confined to the religious but is the normal activity of every human being. We all have some perception of how we ought to act and some level of pride or

guilt about how we have done. This is the method by which we seek to justify ourselves. The obvious moral, political and religious positions wear their justifying effect on their sleeves, but many people simply follow a few simple laws and practice the "be nice" rule. They see humans as good, so justification is not a task at hand for them, and yet this optimistic view of themselves is itself their justifying method. The humanism in this method is a step toward having no law at all. Those who redefine the law to make it possible to keep are doing the same thing; to redefine the Law is in effect to remove it. This tells us how a secular liberal and a legalistic fundamentalist could have something in common.

Religions usually believe in "grace," but as a supplement to self-effort, which makes it not grace at all, but a lowering of the bar, an arrangement in which humanity is not too bad and God is not too demanding. He is also not too good, because he does not need to have mercy for those who purportedly earn salvation through their easy law. Islam praises the merciful Allah but also observes rules by which a person earns acceptance. This is the pattern in most religions: you do your best with the rules and trust God will be good enough to overlook your partial failure. In the secular, "be nice" religion, the bar is lowered enough that anyone automatically qualifies, at least in theory—genuine unconditional acceptance by others is more elusive than we admit.

In contrast, believers in grace sees *Torah* as totally demanding and humans as totally unable, so that God himself must satisfy his own requirement. But this is understood only in genuine Christianity, when and where it remains healthy.

Judaism is a special case on this issue. It operates as a legal religion on the surface, but *Torah* is not a formula for righteousness. It is the whole story of the Bible and all that it says about God and humanity. It includes the fact that Moses came down from the mountain to find his people dancing around an idol constructed of their own jewelry, their own little bits of goodness that were given to them by the Egyptians as they exited the land that symbolized human strength. Aaron said that he put the jewelry in the fire and this idol just popped out! (Ex. 32:24) Moses threw down the tablets of the Law and they broke. So the *Torah* understands that the Law is broken as soon as it is given and that humans rely on their own goodness and do not see their own complicity in this violation of the *Torah*.

Abraham's choice of Ishmael as a means to fulfill God's promise was his compromise with legal religion. When the promise of Isaac was renewed for him by God Abraham said, "Oh, that Ishmael might live in thy sight!" (Gen. 17:18) He wanted to do it himself. He was inclined to rely partly on his power and partly on God's, but that paralyzes faith, so it was necessary to send Ishmael and Hagar out of the household altogether. He had also to bring Isaac to the altar so that faith would be utterly in the power of God.

This is a story about the purification of faith, but that which was removed has a life of its own. Abraham's mixed motive gave symbolic birth to the process of human religion, which is a long-lived historical obstacle to the divine plan for salvation. But Ishmael is not just a symbol of religious work; he is a character in a story that leads into actual history. Upon their expulsion he and his mother went into the desert, and God rescued them and showed them the well that would sustain them. Ishmael grew up, and Hagar got an Egyptian wife for him. Later, Esau, the first-born son of Isaac who was similarly dispossessed by Jacob (*Israel*), married into the family of Ishmael. The Ishmaelites and the Edomites (of Esau) were among the enemies of the emerging nation of Israel. For instance, Haman, the villain in the story of Esther, was an Edomite. In historical times, the new religion of Islam saw the Arabs as heirs of Ishmael. It remembers through ritual at the *Hajj* how God showed Hagar the well. It also holds that Ishmael, not Isaac, was the son of Abraham nearly sacrificed at Mount Moriah—or at Mecca. The story has split into two stories, and the symbolic figures have risen up into political entities and real-life enemies.

To understand these contestants requires that we understand the spiritual process they represent. This is why Middle East conflict functions as revelation, simply because we will never understand it without understanding how human religion fights off the idea of grace.

ii. Religion as "Fear of Man"

The law-based quality of human religion is also its "horizontal" basis, its social judgment of righteousness. This highlights by contrast the transcendence that lies within biblical religion but is so difficult to preserve in practice. "Fear of man" is a phrase from Proverbs 29:25 used by Christians to describe the problem in which people care more for what others think of them than for God's approval. As such, it is an obstacle to spiritual growth. In human religion, one's apprehension of divine approval or disapproval comes through the experienced or imagined responses of others, including internalized parental voices. With respect to both pride and guilt, our works are "before men." What is thought to be fear of God is really fear of man.

It is not self-evident that a religion based on a set of rules is also a religion governed by the judgments of humans, but it is not difficult to show how this works. In the simplest terms, if righteousness is measured by rules, which are thought to be transcendent, then those rules must be interpreted by humans. And since the rules are thought possible to keep, these human interpretations must lower the bar far below the actual requirements of God. So human religion is people judging people regarding their success and failure in following a set of rules that are possible for humans to live up to. This is a violation of the second commandment, because a *likeness* of the will of God has been constructed by the human mind. The only "rule" that does not fall prey to this process is the requirement of God that we acknowledge our complete helpfulness and call upon his complete provision of undeserved salvation.

We can learn this better by dwelling a little while in a thought experiment that imagines the opposite: that there is a religion governed by rules, but these rules are determined by a single, universal God. Most people in a religion believe this about their own faith, but since there are major differences of doctrine and interpretation, there appears from the outside to be no vertical dimension. But imagine that there is a genuine vertical, and it is composed of well-defined rules, something like the ten commandments or Islam's five pillars.

Judaism and Islam both claim to be the revelation that God himself intended for the world, and Christianity tops this off by seeing itself as the full flowering of Judaism. All three groups bicker within themselves about who has most closely lined himself up with God's will, that is, about who has the best interpretation of the revelation. Per hypothesis, there could still be a best interpretation hiding in this crowd, or possibly all of them could be missing something and the best interpretation be yet to emerge. But in the meantime the secularists and relativists and religious pluralists are in their heyday, watching this circus of viewpoints.

Add to this the New Testament idea that "Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees," or, "You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," (Mt. 5:20,48) and the scramble for true religion becomes more intense. Instead of only hoping that one has chosen the best interpretation, the religious seeker can expend more effort to be sure that he has done so, because *best* means *most*, and righteousness becomes a matter of degree. This happens quite visibly in some forms of Judaism and Christianity, and it is the reason for the desperate actions coming out of Islamist extreme fundamentalism. We saw this process in chapter 7, in the story of the American Jew who sought for a year to find perfection in radical Islam.

To be fair we have to include the Buddhists and a few other religions where at least some of their adherents strive for the highest expression of the practice. And we have to allow that millions of others in all religions who are not extreme in their practice are nevertheless firmly planted in what they judge to be the *best* way to follow God, so that by simply resting in their daily routine they can see themselves at the top of the heap. Or, more inclusively, they can be assured that they are reasonably nice persons and that

God surely accepts all of us with our differences; in believing this, they think, they are acting better than most of those religionists elbowing their way to the front of the line.

Of course, all of the above has missed the point of Jesus' statements about being perfect. The scramble for superiority *is* the "righteousness" of the scribes and the Pharisees that Jesus said must be exceeded. There is no way to measure whether one has achieved the goal except by comparison to others. Even if there could be one correct grasp of God's requirement hiding among these many contestants, it would be unrecognizable, because the only measure we have while on Earth is by comparison to others. The legalistic pursuit of righteousness necessarily reduces to a comparison among humans of who is better. This then opens the door to smugness, at best, and to division that can become violent.

Continuing this thought experiment about legal religion, suppose that the genuine rules instituted by the true God were known by some, and that these people then communicated them to the whole world. Thus, God set up rules that can be kept by anyone who tries hard enough, and we are all agreed on what they are. So I am skimming over the problem of knowing who really holds this key and the problem of interpreting those rules; we are all agreed on very clear rules. This is the vision of radical Islam; and it has been the vision of Christianity in its chronically impure historical manifestations. Less aggressively and in a more cloistered way, it is the preoccupation of Rabbinic Judaism.

If this religious society could exist, it would measure out righteousness according to those rules, and some people would have it more than others. There would be an underclass, something like the "sinners" of Jewish society in Jesus' time. Those who were keeping the rules very well would know that they were more righteous than others, and even if they were very fatherly in their superiority it would smell of condemnation. "You are not as righteous as I, and you need to be more righteous, so you are not *okay*." Because of this risk, people fear such religious authority. We fear it in other societies that might want to impose their views on us, but even with global unity we would fear the condemnation that comes with this legal measuring out of divine approval.[1]

If this hypothetical God with his rules could communicate to each person individually how righteous he or she was, then the others could all just stand by without condemnation, like students in a class receiving their graded tests. But some would still be better than others. The only real fix for that problem is to have God say that everyone passes with flying colors, which is a popular view in humanistic pluralism, but it amounts to the removal of the Law altogether. So it appears that if you want to be *okay*, which is for better or worse the central impulse of the conscious human, you must either pretend there is no Law or pretend that you are among those that have best fulfilled it. We are seeing in the world today that surprising partnership of humanistic liberalism with religious fundamentalism.

The breakdown of this thought experiment and of the world-wide search after righteousness is that all these attempts get their bearings by the judgments of men and ultimately offer up nothing but comparative righteousness. None of them could really be the right one, if all they offer are different way to be better. Deliverance from this messy and discouraging milieu requires that there be a genuine Transcendence that rises up out of all these comparisons and stands above them. It is not one of the contestants, but it is an idea that some of them understand at least a little. It is the teaching of Jesus about being perfect, but now understood not as inspiration to religious effort, but as the message of human impotence. Jesus did not say they should try harder at religion, but that they must repent of all such self-effort. The *instruction* that is *Torah* is that humans are fully dependent upon the mercy of God and can do nothing to earn his favor.

---

[1]In families we have this problem, but we also have unconditional acceptance, and the latter, like healthy religion, teaches rules but transcends them, too, because acceptance is not based upon keeping them.

Judaism contains this message of dependency but has not fully embraced it, while Christianity makes it an essential ingredient, but then lets it slip away in practice. Islam, along with many other religions, does not recognize this message at all and is fully invested in the project of human religion.

Consider how one becomes a Muslim. He or she must affirm the *Shahada*, the statement that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet, bearing witness to it publicly. The other Pillars of Islam, Prayer, Charity, fasting at Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca, are laid out plainly before the new convert, and then he or she begins to learn the details about religious practice and lifestyle expectations. Now consider how one becomes a Christian. On the surface there are great variations, but the essence is that one comes to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and died to cover humans' sins, and he or she asks God for forgiveness on that basis. Then the Christian, too, begins to learn what is expected in religious practice and lifestyle.

Either of these can begin as a fairly mechanical process, the Muslim's affirmation of *Shahada*, or the Christian's "sinner's prayer"; and in either case undertaking the new requirements can be a matter of making a list. Also in either case, those requirements can diverge widely, depending on what Islamic or Christian group one has been adopted by. And in both cases there is usually a pleasant experience of having joined a group that is sincerely interested in your welfare.

Here the dangers appear: the particular interpretations of the religious requirements depend on which group one is in, and one gets approval from conforming to the group expectations. The pleasantness of fellowship reinforces compliance with that group, but disapproval and guilt from within build up when compliance is too difficult. Messages from a different group may interfere with the approval one gets from one's own. Some beginners may have to give up and go elsewhere if they cannot keep their fellow religious aspirants happy with the lifestyle they are able to lead. Fellowship may be shattered. Many of us can picture all too clearly the misery that can ensue.

To this point, we are still looking at both Muslims and Christians. But imagine that in both cases a mature representative of the faith is consulted. The Christian will hear that he took a wrong turn very early and does not yet understand what was in his initiation with the sinner's prayer. He called upon God to accept him unconditionally on the basis of God's righteousness, not his own. Then there were guidelines to how to live, including moral results that can be expected. But these never became the conditions of righteousness. They are instead the results of *imputed* righteousness, its fruit. So whatever failure these aspirants experience should not cause guilt but bring them back to the same message, gratefully receiving forgiveness and a righteousness that cannot be earned. In fact, a person's failures serve the purpose of humbling him so he is better able to enjoy the free gift of righteousness. He will be encouraged to "rest" in the perfect provision of God.

This corrected Christian resting in his faith will not thereby gain for himself approval from others, except incidentally, if it gives him victory over his visible failings. Depending on his church environment, taking grace very seriously may alienate him further from human approval. Such is the battle everywhere between legal religion and faith. But he will experience personal peace of mind, because in embracing the grace message he has seen his weakness and dependence and switched his trust onto the goodness that transcends him, in place of the goodness he hoped to stir up within himself.

This way out is not available to the Muslim. Allah is compassionate, all merciful, "oft returning," and yet the ball remains in the court of the human soul who is trying to be righteous by learning and correctly applying the rules. There is nothing in the *Shahada* that the troubled Muslim has failed to understand, because all he agreed to was that Allah is the one God and Muhammad has expressed the requirements of God. If the guidance he is getting is correct, then he must just try harder.

He has the problem, also, of wondering if he is hearing the right voices. Humans are delivering to him an interpretation of the requirements and are approving of him according to his compliance. Possibly he should join another group, in order to be sure he is doing it right. If he does, he will get approval from them and will probably disapprove of his former group, as well as being shunned by them.

Some may say that the Christian, too, will need to decide if the message he has heard is the correct one, especially since his fellowship may be tugging in the opposite direction. Given the mix of grace and legalism in Christianity, this may be true. But I will argue that the message expressed above is the essence of Christianity, recognized as such by the tradition as a whole, despite many departures from it. In this essential perspective, the failures of the Christian and those of the Muslim are alike, to wit, trying to be good and failing, with guilt as a result. But success for the Christian is to see through that exercise in futile religion, while success for the Muslim is to continue that battle, perhaps to succeed, with the risk of pride, and with the danger that success will always be measured by some group's particular interpretation of what Muhammad revealed.

I am not suggesting that Islam has no essence. Its requirements are well defined, which is its selling point, and there is a remarkable global cohesiveness. It is, of course, subject to severe division, as we will examine shortly. But the point here is not that interpretations differ so much, but that the seeker must get his or her approval from the group itself, whatever its particular interpretations of the requirements may be. The vertical connection, which could sustain the struggler even while the brothers and sisters are frowning, is absent, because there has been no breakthrough to the realization of human impotence and divine provision, which means there is no experience of God's love.

iii. Religious Division

Horizontal religion leads to division. People think that removal of transcendence will allow for unity, since the obvious source of division is disagreements about which view of transcendence is correct. But in fact religions in genuine contact with the transcendent will of God would be unified, and where revival springs up barriers are torn down. We just do not see much of this. Instead, we see many religions that think they have the real article, and then the problem is that humans are trying to make that judgment and judging others for their errors in making it. And when there is pretty good agreement on what is required, then there is the question of who is doing it more thoroughly, and groups are formed which pride themselves on their successes in this respect. This is why I said, in Chapter 7, the *ummah* seeks unity but reaps division.

Remember that the Players in my Middle East analysis are all priding themselves on having seen the problem most clearly, so if people can sustain themselves psychologically by belonging to the right political group, then the practices of religion are even more motivating and sustaining. But the reward often comes from believing that one belongs to the right group and that the other groups are the problem, which means we have transfer of blame and division. So religious division is the politicized result of the comparisons in horizontal religion. That is, we make comparisons of righteousness among ourselves, and we also form groups to support ourselves in the assurance that we are on the right side of the issues.

Islam has not embarrassed itself in the manner of Christianity, which has hundreds of denominations grouped into dozens of major traditions with irreconcilable differences. But the big division that does exist, the Sunni and Shi'a divide, is very revealing. It shows that we always need an enemy, because our sensed righteousness depends on seeing someone else as having it wrong. We do not need dozens of religions or denominations or nations, just *two*, enough to provide an *us* and a *them*. Baptists and Methodists in a small town can enjoy having each other as bad guys, and the global East and West of the Cold War got similar rewards from their division.

Islam has a global identity and in places a mixed population of Shi'a and Sunni, but their differences cause unceasing violence. Before the recent war, Iraq had a Shi'ite majority under the control of a Sunni government, and as the U.S. withdrew in late 2011 dozens of bombings peppered the landscape, and the Shi'a President was trying to apprehend and arrest the Sunni Vice-President. Sectarian violence is the greatest fear of the people in this hopefully democratic nation, but as long as the felt rightness of one group is dependent upon the perceived wrongness of the other, then, to feel more righteous, people will dedicate themselves to the struggle, and there will be division.

Sunni and Shi'a , like Catholic and Protestant of the past, could be considered the paradigm case of how right and wrong are purely relative to each other. At one level, this is just an us-them contest for righteousness, and this drive produces fundamentalism and fanaticism on both sides. But even though they are paired off psychologically in this way, this pair contains significant differences that make them far from interchangeable. The Sunni-Shi'a division is a reiteration of how Islam itself relates to Judaism and the West, because the identity of the Shi'ites, "*the faction*" is that they represent the leader who *should have* run the Islam world. Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, *should have* taken over when Muhammad died, as Ishmael *should have* been the heir of Abraham, and Esau *should have* gotten the birthright of his father Isaac. Even Cain *should have* had his offering accepted by God. It is this sense of having been left out of what was fully deserved that puts all these cases together, and this feeling, deeply rooted in human experience, is what Middle East conflict is leading us to see about ourselves. Shi'a accentuates within Islam what Islam demonstrates in its relationship with the world at large.

Ali was the fourth of the "Rightly Guided Caliphs" in what Sunni Muslims see as the golden age of Islam, but he was assassinated, and his son, Imam Husayn, seeking to gain the leadership, was killed in a massacre that Shi'a Muslims have long commemorated in the holiday of *Ashura*. There was then a succession of Imams over a period of almost 200 years, but the last of these, as the "Twelver" form of Shi'a has it, disappeared as a child and has gone into occultation. He has become a Messiah figure, expected to return. Thus after the massacre of Husayn and the dying out of early Shi'a leadership there has been no political-religious leadership vying for power on behalf of the Shi'a; there has just been demographic separation and the belief among the Shi'a that things should have gone differently than they did. In place of competition for power there is the commemoration of defeat. But this produces conflict. Early in 2012 a bomb attack in Pakistan killed 18 Shi'ite Muslims during their remembrance of the death of Imam Husayn. The news account said that the majority Sunni in Pakistan often attack the processions of the Shi'a , whom they consider to be apostates.[2]

Remembering a defeat seems a strange reason for a holiday and a major faction in Islam, but there are a few other examples, like the Serbs and their attachment to Kosovo, where the Turks defeated them 500 years ago, or perhaps the refrain, "Remember the Alamo." Holocaust remembrance is important to the identity of Israel, but for the most part the nation does not wring its hands about this but instead takes the podium to teach the world about the importance of avoiding such a horror in the future. One could claim that Christianity remembers defeat with its cross or crucifix, and that the tradition institutionalizes and sanctifies the message so successfully that we never see it for what it is. But with the resurrection included, the idea of the cross is not defeat, and it is not something that should not have happened. It was man at his worst but God at his best, as Christian see it. Those who blame the Jews for killing Christ are missing the message entirely.

Shi'a Islam is penitential in style and even toys with the notion of vicarious atonement. But Imam Husayn is not the Messiah and not God. All Muslims believe they are saved by keeping the rules, what-

---

[2] *Al Jezeera* mobile, Jan. 16, 2012.

ever esoteric attachments they may have to a figure like the Imam. And, sadly, those who may believe that Imam Husayn gives them special status will also believe that they are better than those who have failed to turn to him. Their particular kind of salvation will yet again be the basis of their party spirit.

Now, I can hear the more alert of my skeptical readers (should any remain) rustling in their seats just now: Is it not true that Christians have their "particular salvations" and use them as weapons against whatever infidels they feel most in need of being superior to? Yes, it is all too true. But my point is that human religion, in all its flavors, including many in the biblical tradition, acts in this way, because legalistic righteousness can only be conceived as being better than someone else, and that this is the basis of party spirit and schism.

In the case of Shi'a Islam, this *should-have-been* remembrance is a manifestation of the Ishmael Factor, operating within Islam as a way of accentuating how Islam stands in relation to the powers of the world, toward powers greater than itself, and, ultimately, toward Power itself. That relationship, I am arguing, is a revelation of how humanity stands in relation to Transcendence.

My general point about division is that human religion has us comparing ourselves to one another and justifying ourselves by comparison. Thus any kind of division will work for us simply by splitting the world into good guys and bad guys, with reversible value judgments. But it is interesting that this special relationship between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims appears *inside* the general *us-them* pattern. The psychological force of self-justification works in both directions, but at the same time the Sunni represent wrongful power, as Mecca did to the new *ummah* at Yathrib (Medina), as Isaac did to Ishmael, and as Israel and the West do now to the Palestinians and the Arab world. Facing this power as the *desperado*, Shi'a is the more dangerous of the two sects, perhaps, although Bin Laden was a Sunni. The Shi'ite theocracy of Iran has theological reasons—messianic expectations—for destabilizing the world to usher in the *Mahdi*, the twelfth Imam. Such volatility puts the world at risk. Knowing the cause of it is essential to the self-knowledge that the Middle East crisis is forcing upon the defensive human race.

iv. Religious Struggle and Jihad

A surprising thing about Israel and the Jews is that they have been blamed for almost everything in the world, and they have untold opportunities to blame other people groups for their sufferings, and yet they are not sucked into the "blame game," as I was using that phrase in the beginning of this book. Now, this needs qualification, because Jews do have their pity parties and their supersensitive issues. Bitterness and self-pity affect them, because they are human beings, and Israelis have been accused of justifying harsh policy by their victim status. They do build memorials to the holocaust, which is a kind of national victim syndrome. But these are creative endeavors with moral purpose, unlike the protestations that take the place of responsible action elsewhere. Somehow, victimhood is not their national identity.

Why do Jews not fall into the trap? I propose that humans usually pass to other humans the blame that really lands on God. We all have our sense of things not having turned out as they should, as with the Ishmael Factor shown above in the Shi'a form of Islam. But we normally will not admit we are blaming God, and instead we project the blame onto other people. This is also how we deal with guilt. We sense our guilt in resisting the will of God—the futility of centering values on our own survival—but we do not admit it as such. Instead, we see ourselves as innocent and blame our troubles on circumstances brought on by other people, including special groups that we demonize and, for some among us, world business or the government, which both represent the maleficence of power.

But the Jews are different: it somehow has their lot, as the Chosen People, to go right to God with the problem. Their starting point in guilt and the blaming of God is the same, but they do not transfer the guilt to others so readily. Their tradition leads them to take their complaint to where the buck stops, to the Ruler of the universe. As humans and largely humanists, the Jews participate in Cain's protest: *We will be wanderers, stranded between earth and heaven!* But politically they have not passed the problem on to others, so they have not become Ishmael. Instead, they carry on their long conversation with God about the dubious aspects of being "chosen."

This is possible because the biblical tradition encourages humans to talk it out forcefully with God, as opposed to the more common practice of denying that there is a problem. Humans can try very hard to be good by faking compliance, but that keeps them in the realm of human religion, justifying themselves. In place of this dishonesty, the Bible encourages an honest interaction with God about one's troubles. This happens most clearly in the book of Job and also in the biographies of Abraham, Moses, David, and some prophets. We see it in popular form in the ironic prayers of Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof." And there is a story about Jews in a death camp putting God on trial for his crime of allowing the holocaust. A search of literature would show us mountains of material on this theme.

The heart of the theodicy problem comes out in Bible's book of Job, where Job, a righteous man, is shorn of all his goods and loved ones, and then his health, as a test of pure faith. God had pointed out to Satan how upright his servant Job was, and Satan said in effect, "Of course he is righteous, if you reward him for it." So God agreed to let Satan destroy everything but Job's life, and very quickly he is reduced to nothing. (Job 1 and 2) Then begins his long complaint, with bad advice from some dubious friends, wisdom from a younger man, Elihu, and then the conversation with God himself, in which we find that even this upright man has some serious repenting to do. God is represented in this dialogue as the unstoppable power behind all nature, and Job's response is to submit himself to that power.

The scenario for this message is set by the conditions of human life as seen in my chapter about consciousness. Once conscious, the human animal cannot escape the fact that his own survival is impossible. He must perish, unless his values and identity can change so he values Being itself (or *Himself*), not any particular outcome with regard to his natural attempt to survive. This means that God cannot be for humanity a means to our own ends, but must be an end in himself, the only End, really, the ultimate Purpose of it all. Thus Job ends with, "I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted." Knowing that is his repentance, and this is his worship.

The real life backdrop for this message is the long history of anti-Semitism, with its horrendous culmination in the holocaust—which is not yet the end of it. In responding to this terrible event, the Jews have depended upon their liberty to talk things over with God, in all the ways that a person can do that. But here is a big difference between the Jews and the Muslims. The Jews—and the Christians, too, when healthy—deal openly with God about the difficulty of believing in him under such testing, while the Muslims do not allow that discussion. I take this first from the classic educational video, "The Long Search," a BBC production with Ronald Eyre as explorer of the world religions and narrator. In the Islam segment, "No God but God," he asks a Muslim leader whether perhaps it is unfair that the *Qur'an* is written in Arabic, which most of the world cannot read. The man responds with a smile that a good Muslim will not allow himself to call God unfair.

I have heard that many times because I use the video in my World Religion course, and recently I heard the same idea again on PBS television. In a piece called "Story of God," with Robert Winston, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are shown side by side. After the multifaceted witness of Judaism to God's nature, and then the more cohesive but still variegated witness of the Christian sources, the pure voice of Islam comes on the screen with clarity. And quickly the film gives the Islamic take on Job, which for the Jews and Christians is the textbook of believers' struggle. Winston says that Islam uses bib-

lical narrative but with different conclusions about the man-God relationship. "A Muslim, for example, would never dream of demanding justice from God." A Muslim scholar then explains that the story of Job is in the *Qur'an*, but "none of the arguments, the debates, the questioning that you have in the Bible are mentioned in the Qur'an at all." As he tells it—again, with a smile—Job simply *submits* to God, which is the meaning of "Islam."

Job submits to God in the biblical interpretation, too, but not without a long conversation playing out the relationship between an all powerful God and the human who is seeking out the true meaning of justice. In that encounter we learn that God is all powerful and can do no wrong, which Job affirmed at the start, but also that human attempts to explain suffering fall short. Job's friends imply that he could have avoided this suffering if he had not sinned in some undisclosed way. They are rebuked for this by Elihu, the young man who ventures to respond to them and Job, and they are rebuked by God. Job knew they were wrong, but his remonstrances to that effect are also in error. The correction by Elihu, and then God's roar of an answer, show that in answering those friends Job was playing into their error. The deeper repentance that is required transcends both their accusation and his self-defense.

This story can be taken as a treatment of the problem of horizontal righteousness. When Job begins to argue with his friends, his misguided advisors, he says sarcastically,"No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you." (12:2); and when Elihu jumps in to set everyone straight, he tells them they have not answered Job, "Lest you say, 'We have found wisdom'; God may vanquish him, not man."[3] He then goes on to argue that Job is wrong, indeed, but not in the way that his religious interlocutors are seeing it. God's truth is rising above the human perception of truth.

The danger of the position advanced by Job's friends is that we will think we can manipulate God by figuring out his requirements and keeping them. This is the foible of human religion. Job spends much energy denying that he deserves this treatment, but in the process he, too, implies that since he has not sinned things should not have gone badly. Accusation leads to defensiveness. God's answer blows away both arguments and simply shows his power, wiping out the whole human attempt to determine when suffering is or is not deserved. This is the extreme offense of "Jacob I loved, and Esau I hated," which humbles and breaks the human will that is trying to make sense of things from the starting point of human power and rightness.

It is not only in correction that the vertical connection is being advanced here over the social and horizontal; there is also the fact that Job has throughout his complaint assumed that he is a person of value who can hope to stand face to face with God in knowledge of what is good. He has much repenting to do, but there is also the messianic hope in chapter 19—the famous line from Handel's "Messiah": "I know that my redeemer liveth." Further on in Elihu's speech, in Job 32:23-26, this hope appears again, that ultimately God will stand in for him and become his righteousness.

The dangerous alternative to this is that the human spirit remains in its fortified position, thinking that if we do right according to the perceived will of God, then we will not suffer, and if anyone does suffer, then there must be guilt. That position is itself as guilty as Job's self-righteous defenses against it. The whole paradigm must be obliterated. Otherwise, humans have no contact with the vertical, and they live within their religious assurances and their pride or their guilt.[4] They relate to a set of rules. They say,

---

[3]NKJV 32:13. The quotation marks are slightly different here than with the RSV, so that it is Elihu, not Job's friends, who says that God will vanquish him. That fits my point about the "vertical" contact that is missing in their accusations but being restored by Elihu.

[4]Immediately after Job's glimpse of the Redeemer in chapter 19, Zophar gives a dreadful view of what we might call "terminal guilt," a view of wicked humanity without redemption. The reader may want to read Job 20.

in the words of Exodus, "Let Moses speak to us, but let not God speak to us, lest we die." Job's calling was to see God face to face, which is a kind of death, but to then be resurrected.

Job is a difficult text and a message hard to swallow, but the biblical tradition encourages humans to struggle through it and be brought to the place where Job arrived, worshiping the all-powerful God. Since it ends with submission, a tempting shortcut is to not even have the conversation, which means to not challenge God at all, and then humans can pride themselves on being obedient. Islam has taken that route.

When this kind of struggle is not allowed, because it violates religious expectations, then Islamists cannot blame God. They cannot take up with him the difficult question of why he has not given them favor, why they have been a weakened culture in their own region for a number of centuries, why Israel is succeeding in building a nation in their midst. More accurately, they can take up this question only after the manner of Job's friends, looking for the guilt that explains it all.[5] They cannot look directly at the fact that God has chosen to let this happen, which seems unfair, because they cannot call God unfair. This means they must pass the blame to other humans, so we have *jihad*.

Muslim's with their troubles could be like the Jews accosting God about the horror of the holocaust, but they strongly disapprove of such boldness. Without that liberty, they must hide their disagreement with God and pass the blame to other humans, for which the Jews make the perfect target. This is not a small thing, when we consider what a big part of human history has been affected by the shifting of blame by one group onto another group. If there is any kind of historical resolution to these conflicts, it would be in centering all our complaints on God, and then working it out with him. This is where the biblical tradition, especially its Jewish facet, is leading us.

Since "struggle" is the meaning of *jihad*, both as religious struggle for righteousness and as a political movement, it would be crazy to say that Islam does not believe in it. The question is how we are using the word "struggle." And since "Islam" means submission or the peace that comes with submission, and Christians and Jews also believe in submission, there are different kinds of "submission," too. But Islam out of its kind of submissiveness does not allow the questioning struggle that is a feature of healthy Christianity and a chief quality of the Jewish experience.

The biblical pilgrimage requires honest discovery of one's inadequacy and God's sufficiency. Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden and begin history in an alienated condition, so it is a miracle when anyone escapes the darkness of his own consciousness. But Islam does not teach that humans are by nature unable to learn and obey, rather that Adam was able to hear clearly the instructions of God. It is possible to be "rightly guided." There is no noetic effect of sin, as Luther or Calvin would have it. This is the humanism hiding in Islam. So when Muhammad delivered his *Recitation*, humans could know clearly what to do, and a society could be formed on the clear knowledge of God's expectations. But Christians consider it a miracle when anyone does connect with God, and when believers gradually begin to glimpse the meaning of holiness.

So Islam and Christianity see struggle differently. Muslims see it as the attempt to establish the righteous life, while Christians see struggle as the pruning in which they learn see more and more that the

---

[5]See Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* pp. 25 and 176-178. As Ottoman power was slipping, Muslims blamed it partly on having departed from the golden age of Islamic practice, which is the kind of answer Job's friends gave. At present, Lewis sees the Arabs divided on whether to blame their decline on abandonment of religion and tradition or on the religious tradition itself. And he sees the "blame game" as a seriously dysfunctional response.

righteous life is not their own doing. For the Jews, the religious struggle may be like that of Islam, with premature closure upon a set of rules. But in a larger, historical sense the deepest kind of struggle is central to their identity. It is, indeed, their name, "Israel," given to Jacob after he wrestled with the angel of God: "He who has struggled with God and man and has prevailed."

v. Thrown to the Lions

The December 31, 2011 edition of *The Economist* included an article called "Christians and lions." It did not explain the reference to lions, and it occurred to me as I read it that most young Americans, lacking any background in world history, would not know about Christians being thrown to the lions, as happened in the Roman coliseum in the early centuries of the new Christian era—except perhaps as a meme preserved in old movies or the names of bands. (There is of course a new book showing that the Christians greatly exaggerated their sufferings, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*, by Candida Moss. It is reviewed bluntly by Ephraim Radner in *First Things*, May 2013.[6]) Nor will many young Americans know how often Christians are dying today and how many have died in the past century, because of resistance to their faith.

It is newsworthy that *The Economist* even had this story, because the press, sensitive as it is to issues of human rights, manages to skip over the frequent violation of the rights of Christians in many countries. One needs to read the Christian press to stay informed in this area. But in this article we hear about trouble that Christians endure from Islamic authorities in Africa and the Middle East, including the recent decimation of the Iraqi Christian population, from Hindu nationalists, from Communists in Vietnam and China, and from both Jews and Palestinians in the Promised Land. Then *Commentary* came out in February 2012 with an article called "The Worldwide Attack on Christians,"[7] and *First Things* followed in March with "In Defense of Religious Freedom," in which one section, "Religious Freedom in Peril," details the persecution of Christians in communist countries and Islamic ones, and their losses of liberty in the liberal democracies of North America and Europe.[8] So this oldest of stories is back in the news.

These problems are still the fruit of Abraham's wrong choice—or of Cain's. A person who trusts his or her natural strength will scorn the person who waits on divine promise, and when the truth draws too near he will strike out, as Cain did to Abel. Paul writes in Galatians,"But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now." (4:29) So it was 2000 years ago, and so it is now.

Paul is referring to Ishmael and Isaac, respectively, the "flesh" and the "Spirit,"and explaining why Hagar and Ishmael had to be put out of the house of Abraham, because they represent the covenant of law, which leads to slavery. He says that law-based religionists, living "in the flesh," tend always to persecute those who walk "in the spirit," which is to say, those who trust in the salvation of Messiah.

The pattern shows throughout history and more so in the past century than ever before. Those walking "in the flesh" include the proud kings of ancient biblical history in their dealings with the Hebrews and Israelites, although we do see the Israelites in a position of power for some time at the start

---

[6]Candida R. Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

[7]David Aikman, "The Worldwide Attack on Christians," *Commentary* 133, no. 2 (February 2012): 37–41.

[8]Evangelicals and Christians Together, "In Defense of Religious Freedom," *First Things*, no. 221 (March 2012): 32–33.

of the first millennium bce. The Greeks especially were humanists with scorn for Jewish religion, and the Romans were proud to bring Israel to what seemed to be her end. Briefly we see the proud religious authorities of Judaism plotting against Jesus, and then pursuing his upstart followers, as did Paul, himself. And then when Christianity takes power we see many examples of established and legalistic religion authority killing those who rise up as revivalists. We also see Christianity taking on the self-righteousness in which anti-Semitism thrives, so that Christians are killing Jews for reasons they do not understand, showing how the flesh hates the spirit. The defensive human spirit hates the message that would disrobe and unveil it.

More recently, secular forms of humanism get into the story, and we see Romanticism breeding anti-Semitism and a fair amount of scorn for Christianity, too. But when the fully secular kind of humanism comes to political power, then Communism does battle with religion in general, but especially with those who preach the Gospel. And now Liberalism, as a form of humanism, is scorning biblical religion and morality in general, but especially the conservative Christian movement. Other religions that were thought benign, like Hinduism, have sprouted thorns and turned hostile toward Christianity. All of these have in common that they trust in the potential goodness of humanity and despise the message of impotence and salvation by grace alone.

Islam is now the most visible form of this hatred by human religion and humanism of the Gospel. As the *Economist* piece mentions, some Jews in Israel are becoming fierce and even dangerous to Christians in their severely religionist stance, but the world of Islam is the main example. I read recently of a law in which Christian messages are allowed as long as they do not "shake the faith of a Muslim." But of course the Gospel does shake the faith of every person, religious or secular, who trusts in his own efforts to be okay. There is no way it can disarm itself in this respect, and this is the conflict that the world is being forced to understand. It is the battle of the human spirit against Transcendence. It is the human *jihad*.

The right that is thought to be under attack by Christians is the right to be wrong without anyone saying differently, the freedom of one's own "space" that is afforded by relativism and pluralism. In fact, transcendent truth and an exclusivist gospel *do* deny to humans that kind of freedom, because that is what Truth does. It excludes ideas. It pulls things together and heals, too, but not without excluding wrong ideas. But because exclusion of wrong ideas is resisted, Christians are losing their religious freedoms like no other group today.

Understanding how human religion operates helps us see what is happening in the Middle East, and it answers the question raised as this book began, "What are they trying to say?" We have seen the horizontal, social basis of religious approval, the tendency toward division, and the suppression of honest struggling, with its result that blame is shifted to the "infidels" and we have *jihad* as it is known today. And as part of this we see that human religion leads to persecution of those who violate its humanistic presuppositions, mainly Christians, but the Jews as well—for the sake of their identity in *Torah*, which contains the truth about this problem.

In the vehicle of human religion we have the particular fuel known as the Ishmael Factor, the very human objection to the audacious idea that there could be an *unchosen* people. How could there be a *chosen* people? Well, if they held a favored message there could be. But how could one message be correct? How could I be wrong? How could Abel's way be correct and not Cain's? How could Isaac be chosen and not Ishmael, and how could God say, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated?" How could divine initiative take precedence over human strength? Very broadly taken, how could a human being, driving by the only lights nature has given him, be held accountable for being wrong?

Ishmael represents Abraham's compromise with human religion, but in his own right—literally, in *his own rightness and power*—he represents the complaint against Abraham and God in their rejection of him. And his name means that *God Hears* this complaint. This seems to mean that God is on his side, and yet the story is much more complicated than that, as we will see in the next chapter.

In the text, Ishmael has little to say, and I have in fact written a long book on a Bible character who has no speaking part. We know the story through his mother. Her part in the chapter below will be to fill one large hole in my theory. To link the liberal Excusers with the fundamentalist Attackers has been problematic, because even though it is an empirical fact, it goes against all our expectations. So I have been saying that both are opposed to the transcendent will of God in all its forms, one through secularism and the other through religion. But that means one group that believes in transcendent standards is all the while resisting them, and that needs to be both shown and explained.

It can be shown very quickly: they do not accept *Torah*, neither in its Jewish form, including the historical expectations, nor in its deeper, Christian form, which reveals human wrongheadedness and impotence and the divine provision that is offered. My phrase "alternative transcendence," used so far about eleven times, has been a place-holder for the explanation of how fundamentalists can be resisting transcendence. I hope that readers are impatient with the phrase and ready to see exactly what Hagar has been doing.

See "Hagar's New Religion" on the Richstone.org site, Zionism.htm