

Syria, Egypt, Arabs - God's Plan in History and Prophecy (Genesis 25:12-18)

Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at GCBC on September 1st, 2013

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Please turn to Genesis 25 and today we'll see again that the Bible is more up to date than tomorrow's newspaper as we consider the current news in light of our current study of Scripture. God's Word has much to say of people we've read about in the newspaper this week or watched on TV; Syria, Egypt, Arabs, and God's plan. Scripture has something to say about the future of these people in the headlines, a future beyond tomorrow's news, beyond Israel, the OT has a lot to say about people from Syria (part of Assyria's kingdom in the time of the later prophets) and Egypt and Arabs in history and prophecy. God's Word is *inspired* (breathed out by God through human authors), it's *infallible* (it can't fail in its power or prophecies), it's *inerrant* (without errors), it's *infinitely sufficient* (giving all we need for life and godliness) and it is *inherently relevant*. I don't *make* the Bible relevant, it *is* relevant, more than any church or pastor tries to be.

Last Sunday after church I read the headlines in the *Sacramento Bee*: "In Syria, doctors attest to a war crime" and right next to it the rest of the page had this headline "Arrests in Egypt go beyond Islamists." This Sunday as I read the next passage in our verse-by-verse study through Genesis, we read same-sounding names 4,000 years earlier on the same page, in the same verse:

Gen 25:18 NASB *They settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of **Egypt** as one goes toward **Assyria**; he settled in defiance of all his relatives [some translations 'hostility/against kinsmen']*

Descendants of Ishmael who settled in Syria or ancient Assyria or Egyptian relatives of them, or nations in Arabian deserts in-between, have been often against, in defiance of, and in hostility toward their very own kinsmen. This past week news has been much about Syria's chemical warfare on their own kinsmen, killing hundreds of their own people (the civil war has claimed more than 100,000 lives of their own). Last month's headlines included the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt and its former dictator Mubarak who allegedly killed his own countrymen in 2011.

Weeks earlier the Islamist leader of Egypt, Mohammed Morsi, was ousted from power, and much hostility among kinsmen has resulted, including the Egyptian government apparently killing hundreds of its own civilians who were unarmed protestors, 500+ gunned down by their police in a single day. Muslims massacred many Christians last month in Egypt, destroyed church buildings, shot Christians in public, burned them alive, ran over their bodies with tanks then threw them in the Nile so their families can't give a burial.

Today 9/1/1968, Mohammed Atta was born in Egypt, one of the ringleaders of the 9/11 attack, the Egyptian hijacker who flew the plane into the North Tower in those replays you saw over and over again from every angle. This month marks the 12th anniversary of 9/11, and as we come to Gen 25:12-18 in our verse-by-verse study through the book of Genesis, our next text is on the origin of the Arabian peoples, where all but 2 of the hijackers were from (15 of the men were from Saudi Arabia, descendants of names in v. 13-15).

Last time we studied Father Abraham's many sons in v. 1-11. This week in God's providence and timing our next section is very timely in v. 12-18 as we look at the many sons of Ishmael

¹² Now these are **the records of the generations of Ishmael**, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's maid, bore to Abraham

This verse reminds us that Ishmael's mother was from Egypt and Ishmael's wife was also from Egypt according to Gen 21:21. Their kids are listed here:

¹³ and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar and Adbeel and Mibsam ¹⁴ and Mishma and Dumah and Massa, ¹⁵ Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah. ¹⁶ These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their camps; twelve princes according to their tribes. ¹⁷ These are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people. ¹⁸ They settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives.

Every time God's Word is opened and preached it speaks to individuals in ways beyond any pastor can plan, and today it speaks to nations as well and gives us a biblical perspective on what is happening in Egypt and in Syria. Today's perspective you're not going to hear on MSNBC or FoxNews or from your favorite talk show host. The analysts and talking heads talking over each other on TV don't know how this is going to end, but I do. God has told me what will happen with Syria and Egypt in specific detail. Not in a voice or vision but even more vividly in His Word He's told me and you. I don't know about America's future, but Assyria and Egypt and other Arab nations by name have a future in many OT prophets, often in the same verse.

I'm not claiming I know what will happen this year although I am confident our country can't solve these problems. I'm not a political or military expert and I'm not a prophet nor am I a son of a prophet (though my dad works for a non-profit mission and I also work for a non-profit organization). But the biblical prophets tell us what will happen with these 2 nations in the future. I don't know exactly when, but I know prophecies will be exactly fulfilled, and they may be some of the most astonishing words in all of God's Word.

Before we get there, I want to look at this text and its original context, at the sons of Ishmael first geographically, then historically, then prophetically. In Genesis already several times God promised blessing to Abraham's children and that all the nations would be blessed with them, and these are a part of it.

An article called "Ishmael and the Bible" says it this way: 'God's interest in Arab peoples reaches back for four thousand years ... [but that article says Christians are often not interested in Arabs and often] Christian people are negative in their conclusions about Arabs. Arabs correctly assume that most Westerners are negative toward them, but they wrongly assume that the Bible and the God of the Christians are negative toward them... the Bible has [much positive] to say about the Arab people—their roots, their history, their place in Scripture, and their future. Getting a grasp on these things may change many attitudes toward Arabs, toward Arab/Israeli relations in the world of today, and toward the evangelization of Arab people.'¹

My prayer is any level of *prejudice* to Arabs would bow before Scripture, and that God would give you the heart of an *evangelist* every time you see someone of Middle Eastern descent.

I pray you would catch God's heart of blessing for these peoples and all the peoples of the earth through the gospel proclaimed to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). I pray we would wake up to the persecution our Christian brothers are going through in Egypt and that you would pray for them and people suffering in Syria, Africa, and Asia.

In v. 18 Asshur was old Hebrew name of Assyria in Mesopotamia which later expanded west and south in OT history (others say Asshur at this time was in Arabia, not the northern kingdom later known as Assyria. The main point of Genesis 25:12-18 in context is God fulfilling His promises and prophecies to Abraham about his son Ishmael

Turn first to Gen 16 for the first promise and prophecy fulfilled in Gen 25. In Gen 16:7, Hagar, the Egyptian concubine pregnant with Abraham's child, persecuted by Sarah, flees into the wilderness of Shur (same place in 25:18) and chapter 16, v. 7 says the Lord personally came to and spoke to Hagar, in the form of an angel or messenger. The Lord later known as Jesus speaks: ¹⁰ *Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count."*

That's the first promise or prophecy - that the descendants of her son would be greatly multiplied, too many to count. OT readers of Genesis 25 would recognize in the names and nations from Ishmael that was literally fulfilled. They would also recognize v. 11 has been literally fulfilled: ¹² *"He will be a wild donkey of a man [in their culture that was like saying he'll be wild mustang], His hand will be against everyone, And everyone's hand will be against him; And he will live to the east of all his brothers."*

Not only did Ishmael's family settle to the east and middle east, but to this day, his descendants have been against others and others against them and no peace treaties or Camp David accords can fully tame the spirits of many. But God also wants her to know He hears Ishmaelites who cry out to Him:

¹¹ *The angel of the LORD said to her further, "Behold, you are with child, And you will bear a son; And you shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has given heed to your affliction. [Ishmael=God hears / heeds / cares]*

When we think of descendants of Ishmael, his very name should remind us that God cares for them and hears them when they cry to Him in affliction.

17:20 *"As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.*

- God promises to bless Ishmael, not just Abraham's line through Isaac
- God promises to make Ishmael fruitful and multiply him like Abraham
- God promises to make Ishmael a great nation just like he would Israel
- God promises 12 princes, 12 rulers or tribes to come from Ishmaelites.

Before God blessed Abraham's grandson Jacob with 12 sons who later became 12 tribes of Israel, God first blesses Abraham's firstborn son Ishmael with 12 sons who became 12 tribes of Ishmael, also blessed

All of those promises to the number, to the letter, are fulfilled in Genesis 25 and beyond. Even to this day, God is still fulfilling His promises to Ishmael. Remember: outside the covenant line of Isaac that leads to Messiah, Jesus is and has always been giving blessing and grace to His multi-ethnic family, even saving from the Ishmaelites and later enemies of God and His people. If you think he's outside blessing, look at v. 20 *for Ishmael...I will bless him*

And look at Gen 21 where God begins to fulfill it when Ishmael almost dies

21:17 *God heard the lad crying* [remember that's what "Ishmael" means, 'God hears']; *and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is."*¹⁸ *"Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him..."*²⁰ *God was with the lad ...*

"God was with" Ishmael even as a boy. That's a special phrase not used very often in the Scripture, a phrase for God's special presence with a select few:

- 'God was with' Joseph as his brothers sold him into Egypt (Acts 7:9)
- 'God was with' Solomon and the godly king Asa (2 Chron 1:1, 15:9)
- 'God was with' Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 10:38) in the greatest way.
- No one else in Scripture was that special phrase 'God was with' him

In the end of v. 17, God says he has heard the voice of Ishmael, which often (if not always means) heard and responded in grace to His believing people. Other verses tell us God does not hear unbelievers in the sense of this word. Look at chapter 25, the text where we started, and the way v. 12 introduces the family of Ishmael is the same way Isaac, Abraham, Noah are spoken of. People outside God's plan aren't spoken of with that special formula in v. 12 and the Bible doesn't honor pagans by giving their age at death, but v. 7 honors Abraham by saying how old he was when he died, and Ishmael is also honored in v. 17 with the same language, how old Ishmael was when he died. God is honoring Ishmael with father Abraham and great Patriarchs.

In v. 9 Ishmael and Isaac are together in burying and honoring their father, and there's no hint of estrangement between them (as their later descendants would be). But the strongest indication of Ishmael's spiritual blessing is in the end of v. 17 which says that Ishmael "... *was gathered to his people.*" That phrase is only used of the most honored believers in early OT history.

A Jewish commentator writes: '*was gathered to his people...*indicat[es] faith in the afterlife. This cannot be speaking of his physical interment ... this is speaking of the immaterial [spiritual]...This phrase "*gathered to his people*" is used only ... of Abraham ... of Isaac ... of Jacob ... of Aaron ... of Moses'²

Martin Luther agreed: 'This text clearly points out the spiritual blessing of Ishmael, because Moses employs the same words that he employed above in his description of Abraham's death ... bearing witness that Ishmael lived in the true faith and in godliness, since he states that Ishmael was gathered to the people of the saints ... by *breathing his last* ... [another phrase in v. 17 only used of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the OT, Luther says Ishmael also] was carried into the bosom of ... Abraham and the other fathers went shortly before. ... On account of this testimony of Holy Scripture concerning Ishmael, therefore, we make him a saint and a great patriarch, although his descendants degenerated and were not like their father.'³

When we think of Ishmael (or his descendants today) we should remember his name means "God hears" (hears with grace). God heard Ishmael when he was crying out in the desert, needing salvation. God hears all Ishmaelites who cry out in faith, good news for us to tell them. How does all this apply to us?

- If the father of Arab peoples who later hated God's people, if he can be saved, anyone can be saved who has the faith of father Abraham!
- These peoples God multiplied fruitfully and exceedingly are a major part of our planet and God's plan. 1 out of every 5 or 6 people on earth might claim descent from Ishmael, and we need to know what the Word of God says about them and they need to know it as well.
- Yes, the Word of God prophesied hostility among later Ishmaelites, but it also gives hope, not in an Arab Spring, but an amazing Savior

Ishmael's family tree has a share in the family tree of Jesus, Savior for all the families of the earth to be blessed in Him, the greater son of Abraham. There is grace to all who will embrace the cross, not the crescent of Islam. Jesus is Savior for Arabs or Muslims who turn from Muhammad to Messiah

We need to look beyond this OT genealogy to a genealogy starting the NT. We need to move from the first book of the OT to the first book of the NT. Page 1, line 1 of the NT introduces Jesus-Messiah as "the son of Abraham" (Abraham is originally from the land we call Iraq which was then called Ur but later part of Assyrian-Babylonian kingdom). In Matt 1 in Messiah's line we see wives from the land we call Syria today that's been on the news. As you go through the genealogy, others in the Middle East or modern Muslim areas become part of Messiah's family of faith. Syrians are in Jesus' family!

The 2nd chapter of the NT says at the birth of Jesus "men from the East" are there to worship Him. The first worshippers of Jesus may have been Iraqis! The early church said they were from Northeast Arabia.⁴ And that same chapter, Matthew 2, says Jesus' family lived in Egypt till the death of Herod. Yes, Egypt, the same country all over the news last month, Egypt was the first homeland of Jesus before He lived in Galilee as a boy. And by Matthew 4, Syria, that other country all over the news last month, people from Syria heard news about Jesus and His grace as a Savior for all!

Matthew 4:24–25 (ESV) "*So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him ...*"

It then says He saw the crowds and preached to them the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 5-7. Mark 3:8 says people from Sidon (part of Syria in NT times) were among those who came to Jesus. Did you know Jesus' 1st sermon in Luke taught on God's grace to Syrians?

Christ's 1st sermon in Galilee was based on Isaiah 61 and He said He is its fulfillment (preaching the gospel, liberty to captives, oppressed peoples [like many are in Syria today]) and then He illustrates His sermon with God's OT grace to a widow in Sidon (Syria – see lower left) and the Syrian army general Naaman who the Lord cleansed (see Luke chapter 4:24-28).

In Tyre and Sidon (land of Syria in NT times) Jesus began to fulfill Isaiah 61 among them. Jesus gave special grace to Syrian (Syro-Phoenician native) woman by healing and delivering her daughter from Satan's power and kingdom (like Isaiah 61 prophesied, see Mark 7:24-29). Jesus said she had great faith (see Matthew 15:24-28), indicating saving faith of a great quality. That Syrian girl released from the spiritual blinding and bonding chains of Satan, could sing as we sang earlier "my chains are gone, I've been set free ... amazing grace that saved a wretch like me ... twas blind but now I see"

Damascus (where chemical weapons have blinded and burned and killed hundreds in the last 2 weeks), this city of Damascus was a place of grace for Saul when God blinded him but then made him see His amazing grace (Acts 9)

Where did Paul go after his conversion? Arabia. Galatians 1:15-18 "*when God ... was pleased to reveal His Son in me so that I might preach Him among the Gentiles ... I went away to Arabia, and returned once more to Damascus. Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem ...*"

Paul's first 3 years as a Christian were spent in Arabia and Syria, and it's likely that Arabs were first to hear Paul's testimony, a preacher to Gentiles.

At the northern border of Syria, long before the civil wars in modern Syria, Antioch was where the Prince of Peace was preached in the Middle East. The name 'Christian' first began in these very lands (Acts 11:26)

By Acts 15 there were multiple churches in Syria. Acts 15:41 says Paul with Silas "*was travelling through Syria...strengthening the churches*"

Jesus had travelled through Syria and lived in Egypt. What about Egypt? Tradition tells us Mark the Evangelist planted the first church in Egypt in the first century. But Egyptians became part of the NT church even earlier.

In Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost there's Jewish converts (called Proselytes) who heard the Jewish disciples miraculously speak their tongues: "... *residents of Mesopotamia* [that's ancient Assyria, part of modern Iraq], ... **Egypt** ... *both Jews and proselytes, ... and Arabs—we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.*" (Acts 2:9-11)

Peter preaches the gospel of Jesus as Messiah to them in their own tongue (the Arabs would have heard it *Isa al-Masih* in Acts 2, v. 36), and Peter says everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved. He calls on them to repent, and 3,000 did. Arabs were part of the NT church since day one

What about the last days? Jesus said they'll have a vital role on the last day. Jesus said the Queen of Sheba (bottom circle) and the people of Nineveh (in ancient Assyria, top middle) who also repented at the preaching of Jonah will rise up on judgment day to condemn those who didn't repent at the preaching of Jesus' gospel (Luke 11:31-32)

The Queen of Sheba had crossed the entire Arabian Desert to Jerusalem "*concerning the name of Yahweh, she came*" and said "*Blessed be Yahweh ... because of Yahweh's eternal love for Israel ...*" (1 Kings 10:1, 9 NIV)

Not everyone in Arab lands today talks of the Lord's eternal love *for Israel*, but that Arabian Queen did and blessed the Lord's covenant name Yahweh, and she'll condemn you if you don't.

My friend, if you haven't repented at the preaching of Jesus yet, OT Arab believers will condemn you that day. The Proverbs 31 woman has a husband who rises up and calls her blessed, but this 1 Kings 10 woman will rise up and call the unrepentant cursed! If you're unsaved, your greatest enemy isn't Arab terrorists, it's God and His wrath. But my friend, if God gave grace to pagan Nineveh, He has grace for you if you repent at the preaching of Jesus, turn from your sins to Jesus as Lord.

From the southernmost Arabs to the northernmost Assyrians, in the OT God gives His grace, even to Nineveh in the upper northwest capital of Assyria where God sends Jonah as a missionary. For Jews to hear of pagan Assyrian Nineveh converting to Yahweh would sound to them like a whale of a tale, a story harder to believe than Jonah's other big fish story. But it happened in pagan ancient Assyria and there's amazing grace for modern Syria as well!

Turn to Isaiah 19 in closing because you've go to see it or you won't believe it. I told you I know what will happen to Assyria and Egypt in the last days, and it's because Isaiah tells us.

Isaiah 19:1 The oracle concerning Egypt. Behold, the LORD is riding on a swift cloud and is about to come to Egypt; The idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence, And the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.² "So I will incite Egyptians against Egyptians; And they will each fight against his brother and each against his neighbor, City against city *and* kingdom against kingdom ..."⁴ "Moreover, I will deliver the Egyptians into the hand of a cruel master, And a mighty king will rule over them," declares the Lord GOD of hosts.

But v. 18 speaks of the last days: *In that day five cities in the land of Egypt will be speaking the language of Canaan and swearing allegiance to the LORD of hosts; one will be called the City of Destruction.*¹⁹ *In that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a pillar to the LORD near its border.*²⁰ *It will become a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; for they will cry to the LORD because of oppressors, and He will send them a Savior and a Champion, and He will deliver them.*²¹ *Thus the LORD will make Himself known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day. They will even worship with sacrifice and offering, and will make a vow to the LORD and perform it.*²² *The LORD will strike Egypt, striking but healing; so they will return to the LORD, and He will respond to them and will heal them.*²³ *In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.*²⁴ *In that day Israel will be the third party with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth,*²⁵ *whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance."*

Apparently entire cities in Egypt will one day swear allegiance to the Lord of hosts (v. 18).

The end of v. 20 says God will send them a “Savior” (Heb. *Yeshua*=Jesus) and He will deliver or save them from their oppressors. This will happen. v. 22 says Egypt (apparently as a nation or the majority of its cities/people) will turn to the Lord, and v. 23 says Assyria will join worshipping Yeshua.

Israel will convert to Christianity and finally be the blessing God promised she would be in Genesis, and even arch-enemies Egypt and Assyria will be part of a 3-way Christian Coalition. John Calvin and Matthew Henry and others from various traditions agree this has never happened in history but it will (I don’t know how or when but it will, v. 1 suggests at the 2nd coming and the millennial kingdom to come if I understand Bible prophecy rightly).

A couple chapters earlier, Isaiah 17:3 (ESV) “... *the remnant of Syria will be like the glory of the children of Israel, declares the LORD of hosts.*”

Scripture has good news for Syrians, Egyptians, Arabs, for us to tell them! The Koran doesn’t offer them assurance but Christ’s gospel can and does! Shariah law can’t save but sovereign grace can. Isaiah 19 says it will in the end

These peoples who think the West is against them, and think Christianity is against them, need to hear from us that from the beginning of the Hebrew and Christian Bible, God has shown amazing grace to Ishmael and his kin.

May this encourage you if you think your unsaved friends or family are so far lost they could never be saved. If God can save these, He can save any! So let’s proclaim this good news to them, and pray as we watch the news.

And let’s watch for the 2nd coming where King Jesus fulfills Ps 72: “*desert tribes will bow before him ... All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him. He will rule from sea to sea ... to the ends of the earth.*”

Our government and media debates U.S. intervention in Syria with congressional approval for our president, but we can be sure there is going to be an intervention in the future, by the Commander-in-Chief of the Universe, who needs no approval and will seek none! There is going to be a regime change in Syria and Egypt some day. Amen? Every knee will bow from Assad to Obama to Mubarrak to Muhammad and here’s what Ps 72 says about a new regime of Isa-al-Masih, Jesus-Messiah:

He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor... In his days the righteous will flourish ... till the moon is no more [righteousness is not flourishing now as we see on the news, but it will then in the end] ... he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence, for precious is their blood in his sight. Long may he live! ... May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed through him, and they will call him blessed. Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.

¹ Kenneth C. Fleming, "Ishmael and the Bible," *Emmaus Journal*, 13:2 (Winter 2004), p. 221-222.

² Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary: The Book of Genesis*, 1st ed. (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2008), 392.

³ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 4: Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 21-25*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 4 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 329-331.

⁴ 'If, as many scholars believe, the Magi from the East were from northern Arabia, then Ishmaelites may have been among the first to worship the newborn King in Bethlehem. They brought the Arabian products of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Clement of Rome said that they saw the star in "the regions of the east, that is, in the vicinity of Arabia" (1 Clem. 25:1). Early church Fathers agreed, including Justin Martyr and Tertullian.' Fleming, "Ishmael and the Bible," p. 234-35.