

Isaac or Ishmael?

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I. Introduction

Selamat datang! Welcome to Indonesia! May Allah bless you and grant you wisdom during your stay and workshop in Indonesia.

Indonesia used to be known for religious tolerance and harmony. In Indonesia we have *Pancasila*, our state ideology that has been upheld as the framework that unites our pluralistic nation. I said “used to” because it is so unfortunate that during the last decade or so we have witnessed some of the most terrible tragedies that could have befallen to a nation in this modern era—religious extremism and religious fanaticism that have put Christians and Muslims against each other and torn our nation apart. We have to humbly acknowledge that we, the people of Indonesia—both Christians and Muslims—have often failed to live up to the expectation of a model community.

Now, I greeted you with a prayer and hope that Allah bless you during this workshop. Some of you may be wondering: isn’t “Allah” the God of Islam, the God of Muslims or the Muslim God? Some say that we should not use that name when we address our God, the Father of Jesus Christ.

II. Christians and Muslims in Indonesia

Let me introduce you first to the religious map of Indonesia. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world and Islam is the religion of the majority of our people. Christianity is a strong minority with some enclaves of Christian majority. These Christians live in enclaves, so much so that some of them might never have encountered a Muslim in their life. Other than that, I have to say that we Christians share many things in common with our Muslim sisters and brothers. For example, we use the name “Allah”, an Arabic term, to translate the word “God” in English. We also use common terms like “nabi”, “imam”, “rasul”, “Alkitab”, for “prophets”, “priest”, “apostle” and “the Bible”, respectively. We acknowledge many similarities between biblical stories and those in the Holy Qur’an. There are also many Christians who live together with Muslims not only in the same neighborhood but also with each other as members of the same families since some of them profess Christianity or Islam.

However, these similarities may conceal a wide gulf between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia, a gulf which might have played some role in the inter-communal, and the so-called inter-social conflicts between these two communities of faith. According to the Indonesian Bishops Council, between September 1969 and March 2006, some 950 churches in Jakarta and its surrounding areas have been destroyed or burnt down, while in 2007

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alone there were 18 cases of churches being attacked, vandalized, or forced to close their activities.²

It is very easy to put the blame on the other side, while ignoring the possibility that this conflict eventually goes back to the colonial past of the two communities. Our past has taught us to interpret who we are and how we stand *vis-à-vis* the Muslims. Many Christians have a difficult, bitter or at the least, uneasy relationship with Muslims. The same can be said for the other party.

I know a young woman whose father, a member of a Christian enclave, was converted to Islam because he married a Muslim woman many years ago. It was a conversion by convenience—not conviction—because it was required by the Islamic law that a man should convert to Islam when he marries a Muslim woman, since he would be the “imam” or priest in the family. Quite understandably, his decision to leave his faith and embrace the faith of his wife caused bitterness within his family. This man passed away several years ago. And now his eldest daughter is planning to marry a young man, a son of a Christian minister. The young man has said that he would not convert to Islam; nevertheless, he would not insist that his fiancée convert to Christianity. He wanted her to make her own decision. So, the woman has decided to convert to Christianity. Some people say, “The score now is 1:1,” as if you were watching a football match!

For many Christians, Muslims are targets of conversion, or to say the least, they are strangers or distant acquaintance. Many Christians have Muslim neighbors next-door, but not many would like to know anything about Islam other than the fact that Muslims pray five times a day because you can hear their calls to prayer every day from the mosques nearby. You know that they fast during the month of Ramadhan, and they celebrate their Eid festival afterwards. They may go to Mecca—if they have enough money—for the hajj pilgrimage but what they do exactly there may be unclear. And if you want to go deeper in your relationship with a Muslim that would often be perceived as compromising either your faith or that of your partner. That is why many Christians are hesitant to get involved with their Muslim neighbors.

I have said earlier that the relationship between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia is strongly affected by our interpretation of who we are, which in turn is influenced by our understanding of our faith, and our reading of the Bible.

III. Isaac or Ishmael?

I would like to quote an example from our reading of the Bible, which might influence our understanding of who we are. Let us turn to Galatians 4:21-31. The context of this letter is the struggle between Jewish Christians and those coming from non-Jewish background. Jewish Christians, who are known as Judaizers, insist that Christians who come from non-Jewish background should be required to perform all Jewish rituals first before they can become Christians. Thus, the Judaizers insist that they should be circumcised first, and

² “Indonesian Worship Law Proposal would Change Little”, in <http://www.persecution.org/suffering/newsdetail.php?newscode=1791>, accessed March 9, 2008.

that they keep the Jewish rituals and all the commandments that are kept by Jews.

Paul, however, refused this approach. Non-Jewish Christians should not be required to perform all Jewish rituals. They can come directly to Christ without going through the Jewish door. In Galatians 4 Paul argues that we are descendants of Sarah, true heirs of the promise that God had given to Abraham many years ago.

The Judaizers, those people who insist that Christians must keep the Torah in order that they can be counted as justified, are the descendants of Hagar of Sinai, of the Land of the Arabs.

Sarah versus Hagar. Sarah is the person who has been entrusted with God's promise of liberation, while Hagar is the person who was born a slave, and has therefore been destined to continue living in bondage. That is why we Christians claim to have been set free from the law, while the Judaizers, who are actually Jewish-Christians, are called the descendants of Hagar.

Paul does say in vs. 24 that his description is an allegory. In that sense, it is not a revelation from God, but simply his own making. So, have we ever thought that his description or argument could be faulty? Have we ever suspected that Paul has gone too far in using Sarah and Hagar to push his argument against the Judaizers?

As I have mentioned earlier, the Judaizers are those Jewish Christians who believe that in order that a person can be a Christian she or he must be required to keep the Jewish laws. So, in the eyes of the Judaizers, if someone keeps the Jewish law and keeps them faithfully to the point that insisting that others who want to join their community should be required to perform the same rituals that they have been doing, how could that person be called a descendant of Hagar and Ishmael? That person must actually be called the descendant of Isaac, an Israelite, a Jewish person! Paul's argument in this passage must have sounded offensive to the Jews (and those Jewish Christians). On the contrary, to the Judaizers (and the Jews), those Christians who are not required to keep the law should be accurately called the descendants of Hagar and Ishmael!

If this is how we read the Bible, then we are faced with a problem: are we to live as free people or as people who are in bondage? Are we descendants of Isaac or Ishmael? If Christians should call themselves descendants of Isaac, then how about the Arab Christians? Are they of Isaac or of Ishmael? If they claim to be descendants of Isaac—at least spiritually—how could they take the bombings, terrors, and all the sufferings that they have endured for the last 60 years or so at the hand of Israel?

At this point please don't misunderstand me. I am not saying that we should reverse the statement that Paul makes in the Letter to the Galatians. Not at all. Here I am simply trying to show you that our biblical interpretation can be complicated, especially when we take into account the problems that we face today. When we identify ourselves with Sarah, Isaac and Israel, and by doing so we reject Hagar and Ishmael (and the Arabs), we are ignoring the fact that the present state of Israel has committed many terrible things that we cannot simply condone. This is the problem when we ignore Hagar and her son Ishmael and their

descendants, the Arabs, and say that they have no part in God's covenant.

This brings us to the question of Abraham's household and his offering as told in Genesis 21-22. In Genesis 21:9, the story says that Ishmael "mocked" Isaac.³ Some commentators say that the root word for "laughing" and "mocking" is the same, and that

Ishmael was being a mocker, a category of person which God despises in both the Old and New Testaments (Acts 2, Psalm 51, Passion Narratives, etc.). God's enemies mock Him and His Holy Community. Thus, Ishmael mocking Isaac was in fact blasphemous. This action is what caused him and his mother to be expelled from the Holy Community. In other words, this is church discipline in action [Matthew 18].

I don't want to go too far into the argument regarding Abraham and Sarah's decision to expel Hagar and Ishmael. But what is interesting is that the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible translates it as "playing" and not mocking. This is also the position taken by the Indonesian Bible Society in their translation, which puts Sarah in a much weaker position in expelling Hagar and her son. Did she do it simply because she was jealous of Ishmael that he would one day inherit 2/3 of Abraham's property, leaving only a meager share for Isaac, her son?

This brings us to the story of Abraham's sacrificing his son as God had commanded him to do. In Genesis 22:2 it is said that God demanded Abraham to take his son, "his only son, Isaac", to the land of Moriah, to be sacrificed. The question that I would like to raise here is: why did God have to specify to Abraham that it was Isaac that he should bring? If Isaac is truly his "only son", then God would not have to go into detail to mention Isaac's name. Or, could it be that Abraham still regarded Ishmael as his "only son"? Or, could it be possible that someone had inserted this phrase "his only son, Isaac" in a later time in order to confirm the claim of the Israelites that they were the true and only heirs of God's covenant?

Now, let us turn to the reading of this story by our Muslim sisters and brothers. To them, there is no doubt that it was Ishmael who was sacrificed by Abraham in the land of Moriah (or rather in Mecca). That is why Muslims celebrate the Eid'ul Adha, a commemoration of Abraham's sacrificing Ishmael. This has often become a point of argument or debate between Christians and Muslims. Many Christians would argue that Arabs and Muslims

³ In Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, it is said that "She saw him *playing with Isaac*, so the LXX., and, in play, *mocking him*." Ishmael was fourteen years older than Isaac; and, when children are together, the elder should be careful and tender of the younger: but it argued a very base and sordid disposition in Ishmael to be abusive to a child that was no way a match for him. Note 1. God takes notice of what children say and do in their play, and will reckon with them if they say or do amiss, though their parents do not. 2. Mocking is a great sin, and very provoking to God. 3. There is a rooted remaining enmity in the seed of the serpent against the seed of the woman. The children of promise must expect to be mocked. This is persecution, which those that will live godly life must count upon. 4. None are rejected and cast out from God but those who have first deserved it. Ishmael is continued in Abraham's family till he becomes a disturbance, grief, and scandal to it.

have falsified the story. This in turn has caused Christians and Muslims to accuse each other of falsifying their stories simply to justify their own existence.

My question here is whose version of the story is the correct one? Could it be possible that the Arabs and Muslims claim this story to be their own and to be the basis of the formation of their people in the same way that Jews claim it as the basis of the formation of their people? Could it be that both nations—Israelite and Arab—took this story and modified it according to their own need?

Many Christians may find it difficult to accept this interpretation because they believe that Isaac and Israel are the only heirs of God's covenant. They disregard or simply put aside the fact that God also includes Ishmael into God's covenant, which we find in Genesis 21:17-20. When we forget that God also blesses Ishmael and his descendants, we will fail to see that God also works in them and among them. This is one problem in our biblical interpretation that I think is commonly found among Christians in Indonesia. We tend to take it for granted that our interpretation is the correct one and that of others is wrong. This kind of attitude has often hindered us from constructing a dialogue and a close and amicable relationship with our Muslim sisters and brothers. When we realize how we inherit our reading and interpretation of the Bible from our colonial past, we will be able to think more critically about ourselves, our faith, and our relationship with our neighbors. This becomes even more crucial when we realize that Christians and Muslims, being the sons and daughters of Abraham, have a lot to share with each other, rather than fighting against one another. There are so many things that we can do together—regardless of our faith and traditions—in order to build a more just and whole society.

IV. Concluding Remarks

This is a humble attempt to deconstruct the story of Isaac and Ishmael, which I hope will help us see the importance of reading our Bible critically and how it shapes our faith and our identity and the way we relate with others who may not share the same faith in Christ. I hope this humble attempt would open some new avenues in our effort to build a common understanding especially based on our common Abrahamic heritage.