

ISHMAEL, SON OF ABRAHAM

MOSHE REISS

In the first blessing of Abram, God told him that he will found *a great nation* that will be *a blessing* for the entire world (Gen. 12:2-3). Abram wondered how this can be, since he had no child. God assured him that because of his righteousnes he will indeed have an heir (15:4).

THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL

Sarai, Abram's wife, was barren. As was the custom in her society, she appointed her maidservant, an Egyptian woman named Hagar, to bear a child in her stead. A child thus born would count as the child of the wife. Abram agreed to this, and Hagar conceived. God had promised him a son from his own seed, and thus Abram could assume that this child would be the promised heir.

Complications, however, arose. Sarai meant to use her servant as a surrogate mother, but once Hagar was carrying Abram's heir, she ceased respecting her mistress. Now, Sarai, in addition to the frustration of being barren, had also to bear the insolence of her servant. Sarai treated Hagar so harshly that, despite her pregnancy, she ran away into the wilderness. An angel appeared to Hagar telling her to return, and consoling her with the promise that she will have a son, who was to be given the name "Ishmael." Abram thus was blessed with a son and an heir, but his wife had no part in it.

THE EXILE OF ISHMAEL

Thirteen years passed after Ishmael's birth. During that time, God gave Abram and Sarai new names; henceforth they will be known as Abraham and Sarah. He also instructed Abraham on the covenant of circumcision, and the first persons to be circumcised in accord with this covenant were Abraham and Ishmael.¹ Furthermore, God promised Abraham that Sarah too will bear a son, even though she is long past the age of childbearing. Abra-

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ham's immediate reaction was to ask God to protect Ishmael (17:18). He undoubtedly knew that when Sarah had a son of her own she would not allow Hagar and Ishmael a place in the household. God promised Abraham that Ishmael also will become the father of a nation.

In due course, Isaac was born. Sarah, as the official wife, mother and mistress of the family, wanted to insure that only her son, Isaac, will be his father's heir. Ishmael's behavior was discredited and Sarah demanded that he be exiled from the household along with his mother. Abraham, who loved his first-born son dearly, was greatly distressed and turned to God, Who assured him that Isaac will be the heir and Abraham should heed Sarah's appeal. God further promised Abraham that He will provide for Ishmael, who also will become the progenitor of a great nation. Thus assured of Ishmael's safety and well-being, Abraham sent Ishmael and his mother out of the household. What might Ishmael have thought of his father's consent to his exile? The Bible does not say. but there are many traditions and stories about Ishmael in rabbinic literature and to these we now turn.

ISHMAEL IN THE MIDRASH

The Midrash, composed many centuries after the narrative in Genesis, adds more stories about Ishmael, not found in the biblical record. In these stories, his relationship with Abraham continued after he was expelled from his father's household.

One of these stories has Ishmael present at the *Akeda* of his half-brother Isaac, probably the most dramatic and difficult event in Abraham's life. God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, the son of his old age, the son provided and blessed by God: *'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to yourself [lekh l'kha], to the land of Moriah and offer him up there as an offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you'* (22:1-2). In a midrash, Abraham responded to the phrase *your only son, whom you love* by saying that he has two "only sons" from different mothers, and loves them both. Only then did God add *your favored one, Isaac*. This midrash defines Abraham's love for both his sons. The *Akeda* becomes the second time that he is told to give up a beloved son.

When Abraham took Isaac to Moriah, he took two men along. Jewish tradition identifies them as Ishmael and Eliezer.² It is told that Abraham sent

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Eliezer to Ishmael's home, with the message to meet them on the road. It is not clear how old Ishmael and Isaac were at this time, although according to tradition Isaac was then an adult. In this contest, it is not likely that Abraham would have asked Ishmael to join them had they not kept up their relationship over the years. (That relationship may have been kept a secret from Sarah, as was the *Akeda*. After the *Akeda*, Abraham sent Ishmael home, rather than bring him into Sarah's presence.)

Within the context of this midrash, there may be questions about motives and feelings. Why did Abraham want Ishmael with him? Did he want his only other son beside him if Isaac were to be lost to him? Did he suppose that Ishmael might then become again the son of the promise?

What did Isaac think of Ishmael, the brother that his own mother considered to be illegitimate, unwanted and dangerous? Why did he suppose his father wanted him along at the coming sacrifice? Did he think his father saw Ishmael as a replacement for him?

According to a midrash, after the death of Sarah, Abraham went to visit Ishmael but found he was off hunting. Ishmael's Egyptian wife (chosen for him by his Egyptian mother) saw only an unknown old man and sent him away. Now, Abraham seemed utterly alone. Sarah was dead; Isaac was traumatized by the *Akeda*; Ishmael was not to be found at home; Ishmael's wife drove him off. Then Ishmael came home, his wife told him of the old man, and he realized that it was his father Abraham. He banished the Egyptian wife and took a Canaanite wife. He sent a message of apology to his father, and begged him to come visit again.³

Abraham, realizing that he must care for Isaac, whom he had damaged, called upon the loyal Eliezer to find among the family kin a capable wife to look after Isaac. After the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah, Abraham himself married Keturah. Why, at his age, did he want to marry again? Did he find it difficult to live with a weak son and a strong daughter-in-law? The midrash identifies Keturah with Hagar,⁴ and Rashi suggests that Isaac went to Hagar and asked her to marry his father, as a way to compensate her and Ishmael for what Sarah had done to them.⁵

In the last years of Abraham's life, it was Ishmael who took him into his household. In the Second-Century B.C.E. Book of Jubilees, Ishmael and

Isaac celebrate the festival of Pentecost together with their father (Chapter 22).

Rebekah was barren for 20 years before giving birth to the twins Esau and Jacob. Abraham lived another 15 years after their birth. We hear nothing of his relationship with these grandsons. Where was he while they were growing up? He was living with their uncle Ishmael!

Did Isaac visit his father after he had married Keturah/Hagar and lived with Ishmael? In the end, it is written of Abraham, *And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him* (25:9). A midrash explains the precedence of Isaac here as reflecting Ishmael's acknowledgement of Sarah's precedence over Hagar.⁶

Despite these midrashim, later Jewish tradition made Ishmael an evil person. However, this tradition came after the Seventh Century CE. Both Jews and Arabs considered Ishmael to be the ancestor of the Arabs. After the rise of Islam and the conquests of Jerusalem and most of the Middle East, Islam became a very powerful force, more powerful than Christianity and its European empires. As persecutors of the Jews, the Arabs became "Ishmael" as the Christians had become "Esau."⁷ This tradition, originating after the Muslim conquests, had nothing to do with Ishmael, son of Abraham, of the Bible or the Midrash.

NOTES

1. Is this the origin of the Jewish tradition that a boy comes of age at 13, the age later assigned for Bar Mitzvah? The word for circumcision in Arabic is *chatuna*, which also means a relationship with God. In Hebrew, a cognate word means "wedding." In Islamic culture, a man cannot marry until he has been circumcised.
2. Louis Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews* (Phila.: Jewish Publication Society, 1975) p. 129.
3. Ginzburg, pp. 123-125.
4. Genesis Rabbah 61:4, pp. 542-543.
5. Rashi on Genesis 24:62
6. Genesis Rabbah, 62:3, p. 552.
7. In Jewish tradition, Ishamel is not described in such evil terms as Esau. "Ishmael," unlike "Esau," was an acceptable name for Jews, and indeed Rabbi Ishmael was an important sage, mystic and colleague of Rabbi Akiba. Only after the Islamic conquest of Jerusalem did "Ishmael" cease to be acceptable as a Jewish name. On the reasons for post-biblical attitudes toward Esau, see the author's article "Archetypes in the Patriarchal Family," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, XXVIII:1, January, 2000, pp. 12-19.