

THE EXPULSION OF HAGAR AND ISHMAEL

A Full Explanation

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Preface

The story of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael poses a number of questions. This monograph assumes that the reader is at least vaguely familiar with the story.

A book I recently read quoted the discovery of relevant ancient customs. While I do not agree with the writer's interpretation of our story in connection with those customs, I do believe that they serve as a background for an explanation. In this booklet I have expressed my answers as fully as possible.

There is no guarantee that the explanation given here is the correct one, it merely aims to give acceptable answers to these questions in the absence of anything better.

My great thanks to the Almighty for preserving me in health to old age and giving me help in all ways.

A.S.
ELi, 5775

Prologue

Sarah had no children. From various stories in the Bible we see that in those days it was a disgrace for a woman to be childless. Ten years after their arrival in Canaan, when Abraham was eighty-five and Sarah herself was seventy-five she suggested to her husband that he take one of her slaves, named Hagar, as a second wife and try to have a child from her, which Sarah could adopt.

Ancient laws and customs discovered by archaeologists on tablets in the region of Mesopotamia (today northern Iraq), which we will see help us a lot in our understanding, show that this was a not uncommon custom. In such a case, the slave woman became a wife of lower status, and whether a slave of the husband or, as in this case, of the wife, she still remained a slave, and so was the son she bore. Slavery in those days was socially accepted.

Hagar, seeing that she became pregnant, began to treat her mistress, Sarah, with contempt. Sarah angrily blamed Abraham, even saying 'May God judge between us'. He replied 'Here is your slave, take her and do what you want with her'. Thereupon Sarah began to torment Hagar to such an extent that she ran away and wandered around the desert.

A messenger ('angel') of God met her, and told her to go back and put up with the suffering, as she was about to give birth to a son who would become the head of a great nation. She did so, the son was born and called Ishmael, and Abraham was pleased that at last he had a son to succeed him.

Isaac and the Party

Fourteen years after the birth of Ishmael, Sarah at the age of ninety miraculously bore a son to Abraham, to whom he was more important than Ishmael as he was Sarah's son. They called him Isaac. When he was weaned, Abraham made a grand party.

Here we will digress a little. How long does it take to wean a child? Commentators quote a tradition that it takes two to three years, but this did not seem to me to fit facts. I decided to ask the wife of a friend of mine, a woman who has ten children (five boys and five girls) and who gives advice to pregnant women, how long it takes. Could there be a more reliable expert? She answered that it varies a lot. She pointed to one child: 'That one took two years, while that one (pointing to another) took only two months.' So we must disregard the tradition and say safely that at the time of the party Ishmael was between fourteen and seventeen years old. This has some relevance.

Abraham was on friendly terms with very important people. Aner, Eshkol and Mamre from Hebron would certainly have been invited to the party, and there is evidence (given in an appendix) that Abimelech, king of the Philistines, was present. This too we will see is not irrelevant.

As It Appears

On first reading we see things we do not like. At the party, Sarah suddenly notices Ishmael and turns to her husband with a most unjust demand. He is to throw out Hagar and her son so that Ishmael should not inherit along with her son Isaac.

Abraham is troubled by this. He is concerned about Ishmael who is after all his son. He does not seem worried about the idea of suddenly throwing out Hagar. Abraham believed strongly in justice. He had let Sarah have her revenge on Hagar when she was pregnant, it was her slave and he would not fight on the issue, but throwing out his own son was a different matter entirely.

Then God intervened, and told him, without explanation, to listen to Sarah and do what she said! Abraham should not worry about his son Ishmael or even about Hagar. He, God, would take care of them.

An instruction from God was not the same as a demand from his wife – it was to be obeyed without question. So next morning he got up early, gave Hagar food and water, and sent her and her son away.

Here we have great problems.

1. Ishmael was born at Sarah's instigation. How could she be so cruel as to want to throw out her adopted son just because she had one of her own?
2. How could she ask her husband to throw out his own son?
3. Why was Abraham not also concerned about Hagar? Having taken her as a wife he had some responsibility for her. Was it

right to throw her out because of Sarah's jealousy?

4. How could God intervene to justify Sarah?

5. Why did God suddenly intervene anyway? He did not later, for instance, intervene to tell Jacob not to deceive his father, but let events take their course and let Jacob take his punishment.

6. What is all this about inheriting? It implies that Ishmael had a right to inherit and Abraham was asked to disinherit him. Why should Ishmael not inherit along with Isaac?

7. In what way does the status of Ishmael differ from that later of Jacob's sons Gad, Asher, Dan and Naphtali? Surely it was the same, yet apart from a slight difference with Reuben and Joseph, both sons of his 'full' wives, Jacob treated all his sons equally.

Abraham's reaction is understandable. He disapproved of Sarah's demand, but obeyed God's instruction without question. But Sarah's demand was apparently totally unreasonable, based on nasty jealousy and completely unjust. Far harder to accept is God's justification of it.

A Closer Look

Take a closer look at the text.

וַיִּגְדֵּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּגְמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֵּה גְדוּל בְּיוֹם הַגְּמֹל אֶת-יִצְחָק: וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת-בֶּן-הַגֵּר הַמִּצְרִי אֲשֶׁר-יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק: וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּר שָׂרָה הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת-בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בְּנֵי-הָאִמָּה הַזֹּאת עִם-בְּנֵי עַם-יִצְחָק: וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינָי אַבְרָהָם עַל אֹדֶת בְּנֵו: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ-הִים אֶל-אַבְרָהָם אֶל-יִרְעָ בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל-הַנָּעַר וְעַל-אִמָּתְךָ

We see from God's remark that Abraham was in fact concerned also about Hagar, but more particularly about his son and the demand to throw him out and even disinherit him.

Far more important, we see what led Sarah to make her demand. She saw Ishmael **מִצְחָק**, which for the moment we may translate as 'playing around'. But it means more than that, it implies sexual behaviour. Later when a different Abimelech looked into the window and saw Isaac **מִצְחָק** with Rebekah he immediately understood that she was his wife, not his sister. And when the Israelites celebrated in front of the Golden Calf, they ate and drank and got up **לְצַחֵק**, to start an orgy.

Sarah caught Ishmael 'playing around' with some girl or woman unspecified, at a party where important people like King Abimelech were present. His disgusting behaviour would even reflect badly on his father Abraham. Sarah was certainly not concerned about the inheritance, that was an excuse (which we will explain in the next chapter), she was concerned about the influence such a boy might have on her own son when he grew up. This was quite reasonable and understandable. At the same

time, she was considerate, she felt it necessary for Abraham to get rid of Ishmael (which could scarcely be done without at the same time getting rid of his mother), but did not want to tell him why. To inform him of his son's misbehaviour would upset him greatly and break his heart. So she invented the excuse of the inheritance.

Abraham of course was not pleased with the idea and would probably have refused to do what she wanted, with a big row.

But God stepped in, because he knew what Sarah knew and her husband did not know – Sarah was right, but would not tell tales. Abraham *from his own point of view* correctly saw Sarah as wrong and unjust. God accepted her reason for not telling tales, and likewise did not explain, but merely told Abraham that she understood better than him and he should do what she asked.

God's intervention was because from Abraham's own point of view he was right, but this was a special case. We find two other cases of divine intervention to justify.

One was with Phinehas. A man who commits any crime, even murder, is first brought to trial. Phinehas caught someone in the act and *killed him without trial*. Yes, normally this would be completely wrong, but God intervened to justify him, because this was a special exceptional case, and Phinehas acted correctly.

The other was on the Eighth Day of the Tabernacle. Moses had brought down laws that *he said* he had been given by God. The people accepted this, they were good laws anyway. Then *he said* God had told him to tell them to build a portable temple. That too was a good idea. But when he said that God had told him to appoint his own brother as High Priest, eyebrows may have been raised. The fire that emerged after Aaron had performed the duties showed that it was indeed God who had named the High Priest.

The Inheritance

Archaeological discoveries in the region of Mesopotamia (now called Irak) have shown that many things told in the stories of Genesis that seem very strange to us can be understood more clearly against a background of current practices, whether laws or customs. Tablets have been found and translated as being codes of laws (the most famous but not the only one being that of Hammurapi of Babylon), and others as being contracts in connection with marriages, business deals and so forth.

These were not merely ‘before the giving of the Torah’ and therefore subsequently displaced. Some were considered objectionable and therefore rejected by the Torah, some were modified, and others that were not considered objectionable were tacitly accepted by the Torah and even taken for granted. Typical are the seven-day celebration after a marriage and the thirty-day period of mourning.

One such is the custom or law that the firstborn son receives a double portion in inheritance. The Torah does NOT tell us this as a new law, but simply accepts it, merely telling us that the father cannot change it through favouritism, presumably because some other systems of law allowed it.

The laws discovered that are relevant here include the following. A man has a wife but no children, so he takes a slave-girl as a second wife and she gives him a son. He either recognises this son as his legitimate heir, who then has full right of inheritance, or he does not, in which case the son goes free in return for losing the inheritance. (So we see that he was born as

a slave.) Assuming that he is recognised, and his first wife then has a son, this second one acquires the status of first-born and the right to a double portion of inheritance, which the slave-woman's son loses, but without losing his right of inheritance altogether. The details just given may vary from one set of laws to another, but we get the general idea. The main point that concerns us is the exchange of inheritance for freedom.

Jacob legitimised all his sons, and did not regard them as slaves. Abraham was asked to delegitimise Ishmael as his heir.

We find in the Talmud, based on traditions, similarities between a man divorcing his wife and freeing a slave. The latter was considered normally forbidden, but legally possible, and the same Aramaic word, גַּט, is used for a document of divorce and for a document freeing a slave.

In Hebrew we find two verbs used for divorce: גָּרַשׁ and שָׁלַח. (The piel form! Do not confuse the kal form שָׁלַח which means to send.) The former normally also means to drive out, but the latter often means simply to release, as in the request to Pharaoh אֶת עַמִּי שָׁלַח 'release my people'. It seems that when using these words they did not really make a difference, as we do, between releasing and driving out.

Now we return to the Party. Sarah was concerned about the possible bad influence of Ishmael on her son, but could not tell Abraham what she had seen, her reason. So she had to find an excuse, and used the legal form – 'Set him (and his mother) free, drive them out, so that he should lose his right to inheritance.' Her real reason was the reverse – that he might lose his right to inheritance as an excuse for driving him out! We can now make sense of her words and see everything in a different light.

Epilogue

Hagar wandered around the desert with her son until all the water she had been given was finished. There was nothing left to do but wait for death from dehydration, which she felt would hit her son before herself. So she put him down under a bush, sat down at a distance (the distance of a bowshot) ‘so that I should not watch the boy die’ and began to cry.

The whole story is told in the weekly portion of *Vayera*, and it is interesting to contrast her behaviour with that of the Shunamite woman in the corresponding weekly *haftarah*. There the boy was sent home ill to his mother, who took him and held him on her lap, where he stayed all morning till in the end he died.

Ishmael cried, and Hagar was told that God had heard his cry – *his* cry, not hers. Then ‘God opened her eyes’ and she saw a well. My father explained to me that the well was there all the time, but she did not see it because she did not want to see it. She was wallowing in self-pity, whereas Ishmael’s cry of thirst was genuine. Finally she took him back to her native country, Egypt, and found a wife for him there.

Though not mentioned, it appears that after Sarah’s death there was a reconciliation between Ishmael and his father Abraham, and he bore no ill-will to his brother Isaac. When Abraham died he helped Isaac to bury him in the Machpelah cave.

[Incidentally, it is clearly a son’s duty to bury his father, contrary to an abominable Cabbalistic doctrine used in Jerusalem by the burial societies in trying to prevent this, insisting that ‘a son does not attend his father’s funeral’, which I personally refused to comply with.]

Appendix

How do we know that Abimelech was at the party?

We are told what Sarah saw, and then digress to follow the adventures of Hagar and Ishmael. Then we are told ‘At that time Abimelech said to Abraham’ after which Abimelech ‘returned home’. There is however no mention of his coming in the first place, so ‘at that time’ he was already there, and the story is reverting to the party, after the digression.

Mesopotamian laws quoted:

From the Code of Hammurapi and that of Lipit-Ishtar who preceded him. Information on these can be found in an encyclopaedia or on the internet. There is no point in quoting sources to which the reader does not have access.

Use of the words אִמָּה and שִׁפְחָה.

These two words are interchangeable synonyms, used as the feminine of עֶבֶד, meaning a (female) slave, and not a handmaid, which is נַעֲרָה.