

Banishment of Hagar and Yishmael

Introduction

Innocuous Laughter?

Chapter 21 opens with a description of the birth of Yitzchak and the celebration to mark his weaning. This happy scene is immediately spoiled when Sarah sees Yishmael "מִצְחָק" (lit. laughing) and commands Avraham to banish and disinherit his son:

(ט) וַתֵּרָא שָׂרָה אֶת בֶּן הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם מִצְחָק. (י) וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גֵּרֶשׁ הָאֲמָהָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת בְּנָהּ כִּי לֹא יִירָשׁ בֶּן הָאֲמָהָה הַזֹּאת עִם בְּנֵי עַם יִצְחָק.

(9) Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, **mocking**. (10) Therefore she said to Abraham, "Cast out this handmaid and her son! For the son of this handmaid will not be heir with my son, Isaac."

What is the nature of Yishmael's "צחוק" and why does it bother Sarah? Does it refer to innocent laughter and play or degrading mockery? Or, perhaps, is it a euphemism for more heinous deeds? If it was only innocent child's play, is it possible that the righteous Sarah would be ready to expel a son who had done no wrong? On the other hand, is it conceivable that a son brought up in Avraham's household would have committed crimes so terrible that he deserved expulsion?

Hashem's reaction

The ambiguity of the term "מִצְחָק" notwithstanding, Sarah's demand to banish Yishmael seems unduly harsh, and even Avraham at first appears disinclined to heed her words ("וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר מֵאֵד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אֹדֶת בְּנוֹ"). A reader, though, who might have expected Hashem to intervene and reprimand Sarah, is surprised to learn that Hashem does the exact opposite:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל אַבְרָהָם אַל יִרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל הַנְּעֹר וְעַל אֲמָתְךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה שְׁמָע בְּקוֹלָהּ כִּי בִיצְחָק יִקְרָא לָךְ זֶרַע.

God said to Abraham, "Do not let it be grievous in your sight because of the boy, and because of your handmaid. In all that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice. For from Isaac will your seed be called.

Hashem apparently finds no fault in Sarah, and He even directs Avraham to abide by her instructions. This Divine endorsement suggests that more is going on in this story than meets the eye and that a re-evaluation of the actions of both Yishmael and Sarah may be necessary.

Other Questions

Other aspects of the treatment of Hagar and Yishmael are also troubling:

- "גֵּרֶשׁ הָאֲמָהָה הַזֹּאת" – If Yishmael was the guilty party, why does Sarah demand that Hagar be banished as well?

- **Meager provisions?** The text shares that Avraham supplied Hagar with bread and a flask of water, which ran out in the wilderness, leaving Yishmael on the verge of death. Why did Avraham not supply Hagar and Yishmael with ample provisions for their journey?
- **Hashem's promises to Yishmael** – In the desert, Hashem intercedes to save Yishmael and pledges that he will become a great nation. If Hashem deemed Yishmael worthy of banishment, why does He simultaneously perform miracles for him and promise him greatness?

Banishment of Hagar and Yishmael

Exegetical Approaches

This page has not yet undergone editorial review

Overview

Sarah's harsh treatment of Yishmael has been understood in varying ways by exegetes. In light of Hashem's approval of the expulsion, most attempt to justify her deeds. Thus, Rashi, following many Midrashic sources, paints Yishmael as a wicked child, thereby necessitating his banishment to protect Yitzchak from his harmful influence. Abarbanel, in contrast, asserts that Sarah's actions related to the need to protect Yitzchak's inheritance. As he was the Divinely chosen heir, it was necessary to banish Yishmael so as to prevent any contesting of Yitzchak's rightful place. Finally, R. Avraham Saba is unique in condemning Sarah for her actions, presenting her as wanting to expel Yishmael over an imagined insult.

Yishmael's Evil Conduct

Sarah's actions were motivated by the wickedness of Yishmael and a desire to protect Yitzchak from his bad influence.

SOURCES: Various Tannaim in Tosefta, Sifre Devarim, and Bereshit Rabbah, Shemot Rabbah, Tanchuma, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, Rashi, R. Avraham b. HaRambam, Ramban, R. Yosef ibn Kaspi, R. D"Z Hoffmann¹

"מַצְחֵק" – Although all these sources assume that Yishmael's behavior was reprehensible, they disagree regarding what action is referred to by the term "מַצְחֵק":²

- **Cardinal sins** – According to most of these commentators, the word refers to one or more of the three cardinal sins:³ idolatry,⁴ murder,⁵ and illicit relations.⁶
- **Sin of speech** – Ramban and R. D"Z Hoffmann assert that Yishmael was mocking Yitzchak and the party, while Ibn Kaspi posits that he was poking fun at Sarah.⁷ In contrast, R. Avraham b. HaRambam maintains that Yishmael was more generally fooling around and speaking with a foul mouth.⁸

Banishment – According to this approach, the decision to banish Yishmael stemmed directly from his behavior and "מַצְחֵק":⁹

- **Spiritual protection** – According to most of these sources,¹⁰ Sarah believed that Yishmael needed to be expelled to ensure that Yitzchak did not learn from his negative ways. R. Avraham b. HaRambam explains that Sarah feared that she and Avraham might die while Yitzchak was still young, leaving him to grow up under the sole influence of Yishmael, with no contrasting role models.
- **Physical protection** – R. Levi, Rashi, and Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer all maintain that Yishmael had actually attempted to kill Yitzchak. As such, Yishmael's banishment was also necessary to physically protect Yitzchak.
- **Punishment** – In contrast, Ramban views the banishment as a punishment to Yishmael. He maintains that Sarah viewed Yishmael's actions as a forgetting of his rightful place as servant. Though this

normally would be deserving of death or corporal punishment, Sarah instead decided to expel him.

Disinheritance

- **Monetary inheritance** – According to most of these commentators, Yishmael's deeds made him unworthy of benefiting from Avraham's wealth. Alternatively, the disinheritance may have simply been a by-product of the expulsion.
- **Spiritual inheritance** – R. Avraham b. HaRambam, in contrast, maintains that Sarah was not referring to a monetary inheritance¹¹ but to a spiritual one. He asserts that Sarah's words "לא יִרְשׁ" are equivalent to the term "גֵּרֶשׁ", and simply meant that Yishmael should not live with and be raised by the family. While Yitzchak was to be educated to religious perfection, Yishmael was to leave and not join in such an upbringing.

Why is Avraham "upset about his son"? These commentators disagree on this point:¹²

- **Yishmael's behavior** – Shemot Rabbah and Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan)¹³ suggest that Avraham was upset that Yishmael had veered from the proper path.
- **Yishmael's banishment** – Rashi, R. Avraham b. HaRambam, Ramban, and R. D"Z Hoffmann, in contrast, maintain that Avraham was upset about the expulsion and fate of his son.¹⁴ Ramban suggests that Avraham's natural love for his son made it painful for him to banish him. Although Yishmael's actions were wrong, they were not so terrible to prevent his anguish.¹⁵ Alternatively, R. Avraham b. HaRambam claims that Avraham was unaware of Yishmael's true nature,¹⁶ while R. D"Z Hoffmann presents Avraham as hoping to educate Yishmael to become worthy of Hashem's promises.¹⁷

Why is also Hagar expelled? Ramban asserts that Hagar was sent away due to no fault of her own, but rather out of mercy toward Yishmael who could not have survived without his mother.

Why does Hashem side with Sarah? For the commentators who maintain that Yishmael was guilty of heinous crimes, Hashem's words are not surprising. Others¹⁸ would likely posit, as does R. Avraham b. HaRambam, that Hashem agreed with Sarah that Yishmael would be a negative influence on Yitzchak.

"לָחֶם וְחֶמֶת מַיִם" – were there sufficient provisions?

- **Meager Provisions** – Many of these commentators assume that Avraham only scantily provided for Yishmael, but they still maintain that the shortage of water was not his fault:
 - **Yishmael got sick** – According to Shemot Rabbah and Rashi, Avraham intentionally sent Yishmael away without any gold or silver since he was upset at his sinful ways. Rashi claims that, nonetheless, he had provided Hagar with ample food and drink. The water ran out only because Yishmael got sick and drank more than anticipated.
 - **Yishmael/Hagar punished** – According to Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) and Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, too, the water supply would have been sufficient,¹⁹ but as soon as Hagar entered the wilderness, she strayed after idolatry²⁰ and was therefore punished.²¹
 - **Avraham obeyed Hashem** – R. Avraham b. HaRambam asserts that Avraham's apparent stinginess should not be viewed as such but rather as obedience to the Divine command to listen to his wife. Moreover, Avraham trusted in Hashem's promise that he would not forsake Yishmael.
 - **Lessons from need** – R. D"Z Hoffmann uniquely suggests that Avraham intentionally sent Yishmael away with insufficient water. He recognized that Yishmael needed to learn through trials to look up to

Hashem. Perhaps the lack in the desert could teach him the lessons that he was unable to learn in the wealthy home of Avraham.

- **Properly provided** – In contrast to the other exegetes, Ibn Kaspi maintains that Avraham gave Hagar and Yishmael not only food, but also gold and silver. He disagrees that Hashem's directive to heed Sarah's words need entail leaving Yishmael empty-handed.²²

Why does Hashem save Yishmael? Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) emphasizes that Hashem saved Yishmael only for the sake of Avraham and his merits.²³

Was Sarah justified?

- Many of these sources justify Sarah's decision by painting a much blacker picture of Yishmael than a simple reading of the text would imply. Others do so by highlighting the threat he presented to Yitzchak's upbringing.²⁴
- R D"Z Hoffmann suggests that Sarah's actions were necessary, but nonetheless caused others pain. The Torah paints a very sympathetic portrait of Hagar and Yishmael to teach that despite the correctness of Sarah's actions, the banished pair are also worthy of mercy.

Yishmael after the expulsion

- R. Avraham b. HaRambam asserts that Yishmael's becoming an archer confirmed Sarah's evaluation of his negative character and her worries over how this might affect Yitzchak.
- Rashi and others present Yishmael as repenting at the end of his life.

Avraham's later relationship with Hagar and Yishmael – Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer presents Avraham as concerned about Yishmael's spiritual well-being even after the banishment,²⁵ and has Avraham remarry Hagar after Sarah's death.²⁶



Ensuring Yitzchak's Inheritance

Sarah acted to ensure that Yitzchak, rather than Yishmael, inherited Avraham's mantle and worldly possessions.

SOURCES: Rashbi's opinion in the Tosefta, Sifre Devarim, and Bereshit Rabbah,²⁷ Radak, Ralbag, Abarbanel, Sforno, Shadal

"מִצְחָק" – All of these commentators relate Sarah's concern over Yishmael's "צַחֻק" to the possibility of his inheriting, but they differ in their interpretations of the word "מִצְחָק" and the specifics of the incident:

- **Mockery** – R. Shimon b. Yochai,²⁸ Radak,²⁹ Ralbag, and Shadal³⁰ all portray Yishmael as scorning the concept that Yitzchak alone was to inherit. Sforno further depicts Yishmael as laughing and spreading rumors that Yitzchak was born of Avimelekh which would thereby disqualify him from inheriting.³¹
- **Playing** – Abarbanel, in contrast, understands "מִצְחָק" to mean play (מִשְׁחָק) and presents Yishmael as happily playing, while those around him try to please and serve him. This made Sarah realize that others treated Yishmael as equal in status to Yitzchak, and equally qualified to inherit.³² In contrast to the above sources, though, Abarbanel does not present Yishmael himself as making any such claims.

Disinheritance

- **Legal right** – According to this approach, Sarah had every right to claim Yitzchak as the sole heir³³ since he was born to the full wife, while Yishmael was the son of a maidservant.³⁴ Moreover, Hashem had told Avraham, "וְאֵת בְּרִיתִי אֶקִים אֵת יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד לְךָ שָׂרָה", marking Yitzchak as the chosen son. Thus, Sarah was not punishing Yishmael in stating that he would not inherit, but rather clarifying, while she was still alive, who was the true heir.
- **Measure for measure punishment** – According to Sforno, Sarah might be reacting to Yishmael's deeds in a measure for measure manner. Yishmael libeled Yitzchak in an attempt to inherit everything, so Sarah ensured that he himself did not inherit at all.

Banishment – It is not clear why the disinheritance needed to be accompanied by banishment:

- **Necessary clarification** – Most of these sources might suggest that this was simply the clearest way of ensuring that there be no competition after Avraham's death.³⁵
- **Freedom not expulsion** – It is also possible that Avraham did not actually expel Hagar and Yishmael, but simply released them from servitude. See R. Saadia who translates "וַיִּשְׁלַחָהּ" as "freed her".³⁶ He does not explain if this was also Sarah's intention when saying "גֵּרְשׁ הָאֵמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֵת בְּנָהּ",³⁷ or if Avraham freed the two on his own, thus abiding by Sarah's wish that they leave, but without the harshness of banishment.

Biblical parallels – The disinheritance and expulsion of Yishmael and Hagar can be viewed as parallel to Avraham's later sending away of the sons of his concubines in Bereshit 25. There, too, the context relates to the inheritance of Yitzchak,³⁸ and it is possible that in both stories, Avraham is simply acting to confirm Yitzchak's status as his sole heir.³⁹

Ancient Near Eastern parallels – Several Ancient Near Eastern laws may shed light on our story:

- The Code of Hammurabi states that if a father refers to the child of a maidservant as his own, that child has equal rights to the inheritance. If not, the child does not inherit, but upon the death of his father, he and his mother are released from servitude. It is possible that Sarah's actions are to be understood in light of these Ancient Near Eastern norms. Sarah asked Avraham to clarify, through Yishmael's expulsion, that he did not view him as a son, and thus that he had no rights to inherit.⁴⁰
- According to the Laws of Lipit Ishtar, if a man has children from a maidservant and he grants them freedom, they thereby forego any rights to the inheritance. In light of this, one might suggest that Sarah was asking Avraham to free (not banish) Hagar to thereby ensure that Yitzchak alone inherited.⁴¹

Why is Avraham "upset about his son"? According to this approach, Avraham was upset about banishing a beloved son. Since Yishmael's actions were not particularly wicked,⁴² although Avraham might have understood Sarah's desire that Yitzchak inherit, he still felt sorrow over Yishmael's fate. Radak even suggests that he would have rebuked Sarah had it not been for his desire to uphold household peace (שְׁלוֹם בֵּית).⁴³

Why is also Hagar expelled?

- **For Hagar's benefit** – Radak asserts that Sarah asked that also Hagar be expelled because she knew that a mother would never want to be separated from her son.
- **To ensure inheritance** – According to Abarbanel, Hagar needed to be banished from the home so that she would not be viewed as having equal wife status to Sarah. If she was considered a full wife, even if Yishmael was expelled, he would still inherit.⁴⁴

- **Punishment** – Sforno, in contrast, maintains that Yishmael had only libeled Yitzchak upon the advice of his mother, and so she was even more culpable than he.

Why does Hashem side with Sarah? Radak and Abarbanel explain that Hashem wanted the chosen line to emerge from Avraham and Sarah, as He explains to Avraham, "כִּי בִצְחָק יִקְרָא לְךָ זָרַע". He, thus, agreed that expulsion was necessary to prevent any contesting of the inheritance. Ralbag, though, posits that Hashem orchestrated the event to make sure that Yishmael could not negatively influence Yitzchak and thereby diminish his perfection.

"לָחֶם וְחֶמֶת מִיָּם" – were there sufficient provisions? Radak, Ralbag, and Sforno all assert that Avraham supplied Hagar and Yishmael with gold and silver in addition to the food and water. It was only because they got lost in the desert that the water supply ran out. Abarbanel, in contrast, maintains that, in obedience of the Divine command, Avraham did not give them any money, thinking that this would constitute part of an inheritance.⁴⁵

Why does Hashem save Yishmael? According to this position, Yishmael did nothing terrible enough to deserve death.⁴⁶

Prophecy to Hagar – Abarbanel claims that Hashem saw that Hagar had been ready to despair of her son, leave him, and perhaps even remarry. In such a case, Yishmael would return to his father, or Avraham would seek to protect him. Either way, Yitzchak's inheritance would once again be endangered. To prevent this, Hashem granted prophecy to Hagar to reassure her and endear Yishmael to her.

Aftermath – Abarbanel points to the burial of Avraham by both Yitzchak and Yishmael as evidence that at the end of Avraham's life, Yishmael did not harbor any enmity to his brother.



Jealousy or Perceived Insult

Sarah's attitude towards Yishmael stemmed either from personal jealousy or a mistaken impression that Yishmael had bad intentions.

SOURCES: Jubilees, Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni, R. Avraham Saba

"מִצְחָק" – According to all of these opinions, the word "מִצְחָק" has no negative connotations and the verse is simply saying that Yishmael was happily playing and/or laughing.⁴⁷

Disinheritance and banishment – According to Jubilees, Ibn Ezra, and Chizkuni, seeing Yishmael play and be the center of attention while Yitzchak was still too young to do the same made Sarah jealous. According to the Tzeror HaMor, in contrast, Sarah was insulted as she mistakenly thought that Yishmael's laughter was aimed at her.⁴⁸ These feelings led to her request that Yishmael be expelled.

Why is Avraham "upset about his son"? According to these commentators, Yishmael had done no wrong and Avraham was understandably upset about disinheriting and banishing his son.

Why is also Hagar expelled? These commentators do not address the issue, but they might suggest that Sarah's jealousy extended to the rival wife. Alternatively, Sarah recognized that it would be cruel to separate mother and son.

Why does Hashem side with Sarah? According to the Tzeror HaMor, Hashem did not agree that Yishmael's behavior at the party warranted expulsion, and He viewed Sarah's treatment of him and Hagar as sinful.⁴⁹ It is unclear, then, why Hashem would tell Avraham to heed Sarah's words. According to the Tzeror HaMor, this might have been the first step in Sarah's punishment; expelling Yishmael paved the way for his descendants to become an enemy nation.⁵⁰

"לָהֶם וְחֶמֶת מַיִם" – were there sufficient provisions? The Tzeror HaMor asserts that Sarah's descendants were punished when Yishmael's progeny refused water to the Children of Israel.⁵¹ Though he does not say so, R. Saba might view this as a measure for measure punishment for not providing Yishmael with enough water when sending him away.

Why does Hashem save Yishmael? According to the Tzeror HaMor, this was a punishment for Sarah. He suggests that it would have been better had Yishmael died from the lack of water, since then he would not have had descendants who would later oppress the Israelites. Due to Sarah's actions, though, he was saved so that he could later punish the nation.

¹ R. D"Z Hoffmann speaks about how Yishmael's presence endangered the righteous character of Yitzchak and also how it presented a threat to his inheritance, but he appears to find the first issue of greater import.

² See A Portrait of Yishmael for a discussion of other sources which consistently present Yishmael in a negative light.

³ See A Portrait of Esav that some sources similarly attribute these same three crimes to Esav. However, R. Shimon b. Yochai in the Tosefta questions whether it is possible that a son raised in Avraham's household would engage in such actions. After all, Hashem says of Avraham: "כִּי יָדַעְתִּיו לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת בֵּיתוֹ" "אֲחֵרָיו וְשָׂמְרוּ דֶּרֶךְ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט".

⁴ See R. Akiva and the anonymous opinion in the Tosefta, Tanchuma, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), and Rashi. As evidence that the root "צחק" can be understood in this manner, R. Akiva points to Shemot 32:6, where the nation is "מצחק" before the Golden Calf.

⁵ See R. Yishmael in the Tosefta and Rashi. R. Levi in Bereshit Rabbah and Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer go further to present Yishmael as even attempting to kill Yitzchak himself. Support for this meaning is brought from the deadly "משחק" set up between the soldiers of Yoav and Avner in Shemuel II 2:14.

⁶ See R. Eliezer b. R. Yosi HaGelili in the Tosefta who points to the story of Mrs. Potiphar in Bereshit 39:17, where the root "צחק" suggests sexual activity.

⁷ Ibn Kaspi also raises the possibility that Yishmael was gambling (משחק בקוביא = "מצחק").

⁸ All three understand the word "מִצְחָק" somewhat literally to refer to scornful laughter.

⁹ Most of the sources would probably suggest that though the Torah does not say so explicitly, Sarah shared with Avraham that it was Yishmael's behavior which motivated her to expel him. It is possible that the Torah omits her words only because it assumes that the reader is already aware of her motivation from the preceding verse.

¹⁰ See Tosefta Sotah, Shemot Rabbah, R. Avraham b. HaRambam, Ibn Kaspi, and R. D"Z Hoffmann.

¹¹ Cf. R. Saadia below who asserts that Sarah had permission to banish her son, but not to keep him from getting a monetary inheritance.

¹² See Midrash Tannaim which already brings both approaches.

¹³ See also the first opinion brought by Rashi.

¹⁴ This is supported by Hashem's response which uses the same language of "אל ירע בעיניך על הנער ועל", but includes Hagar as well as Yishmael. Furthermore, Hashem reassures Avraham that Yishmael will be a great nation, addressing Avraham's concerns over his son's welfare rather than his behavior.

¹⁵ While the Midrashic sources, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), and Rashi posit that Yishmael committed cardinal sins, Ramban maintains that he simply mocked Sarah. As such, the varying interpretations of this verse are consistent with the exegetes' overall approaches.

¹⁶ Sarah had not wanted to hurt him by revealing it.

¹⁷ Cf. Why Bless Esav for a similar question regarding Yitzchak's attitude toward Esav.

¹⁸ R. Avraham b. HaRambam, Ramban, and Ibn Kaspi all portray Yishmael as much less wicked, and thus not so obviously deserving of expulsion.

¹⁹ According to Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, a mere flask of water would have sufficed due to Avraham's merits.

²⁰ They render the phrase "ונתת במדבר" metaphorically as meaning that Hagar wandered after idolatry.

²¹ Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) relates how both Hagar and Yishmael worshiped idols on their trek in the wilderness. It appears from the Targum that, as a punishment for this action, Yishmael came down with a fever which depleted their water supply. Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, in contrast, presents only Hagar as worshiping idolatry (and this is what causes their water to run out), while Yishmael himself prays to Hashem, the God of his father Avraham. Numerous scholars have noted that this likely reflects Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer's identification of Yishmael as the father of Islam, which he viewed as a monotheistic religion.

²² He points out that had Sarah told Avraham to jump into a fiery furnace, obviously he would not be obligated to do so. The Divine directive referred only to Sarah's request of banishment; when Hashem said "כל אשר תאמר אליך שרה שמע בקלה", He had not meant to listen to literally "all" of her requests.

²³ Rashi is somewhat inconsistent in his understanding as he points to the Midrash which claims that Hashem saved Yishmael on his own merits, because of his present righteous state ("באשר הוא שם"). Yet, according to Rashi, Yishmael's present spiritual state was one of wickedness.

²⁴ Though Ramban justifies Sarah in our chapter, in Chapter 16 when she similarly mistreats Hagar, he views her conduct as sinful. The difference in attitude is easily explained by the fact that only in Chapter 21 does Hashem condone Sarah's behavior.

²⁵ It tells of Avraham visiting his son and checking on his wives. When he finds the conduct of one wife not befitting, he lets Yishmael know, and Yishmael acts on his advice to choose a new spouse.

²⁶ See also Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), Bereshit Rabbah, Tanchuma, and Rashi. They all associate Keturah with Hagar. For a full discussion of the identification and marriage, see Avraham's Many Wives.

²⁷ R. Saadia is not explicit and simply says that Yishmael was laughing and saying that Yitzchak would die before him. This might suggest that Yishmael was laughing because he believed that Yitzchak would never live to inherit.

²⁸ R. Shimon b. Yochai in the Tosefta presents Yishmael as confident in his status as firstborn. In the version in the Sifre Devarim, he depicts Yishmael as not just laughing, but rather actively arguing with Yitzchak over the inheritance. Ramban questions this variation, arguing that it does not fit with the chronology of the verses, since the chapter assumes a very young Yitzchak. A toddler would not be arguing with his older brother over such matters. See, though, both Abarbanel and Shadal who raise the possibility that the mockery/fighting was not on the day of the party itself but at some point afterwards when Yitzchak was a little older.

- ²⁹ Radak portrays Yishmael as mocking Yitzchak, a child of elderly parents. Sarah understood this mockery to stem from the fact that Yishmael viewed himself as on equal footing with Yitzchak, thinking that he had the same rights to inherit. It is not clear from Radak, though, if this is the real motivation for Yishmael's actions.
- ³⁰ Shadal presents Yishmael as mocking all the pomp and ceremony surrounding Yitzchak, thinking that Avraham and Sarah would die before he grew up, leaving Yishmael to inherit all. Cf. R. Saadia who depicts Yishmael taunting Yitzchak that he would never survive to adulthood.
- ³¹ According to this approach, Sarah's words "כָּל הַשָּׁמַע יִצְחָק לִי" are understandable.
- ³² Abarbanel contends that even before the incident Sarah feared that Yishmael would claim rights to the inheritance. Seeing him being the center of attention simply confirmed her suspicions that the longer he stayed, the more difficult disinheriting him would become.
- ³³ Cf. R. Saadia who claims, in contrast, that Sarah had no authority to disinherit Yishmael, only to distance him from home. He, thus, reinterprets "לא יֵרֶשׁ" to mean "he will not dwell", pointing to Yeshayahu 34:11, "וַיֵּרְשׁוּהָ קִצָּת וְקִפּוּד וְנִשְׁוּף וְעֶרֶב יִשְׁכְּנוּ בָּהּ", where the word is parallel to "יִשְׁכְּנוּ". See R. Avraham b. HaRambam above who also equates the disinheriting and banishment.
- ³⁴ Avraham and Sarah's decision stands in contrast to that of Yaakov, who decided not to differentiate between the sons of his concubines and those of his real wives.
- ³⁵ See, for instance, Abarbanel who claims that the longer Yishmael remained in the house and was treated as a full son, the harder it would be to clarify that he had no rights to the inheritance. See also below that, according to the norms of the Ancient Near East (as stated in the Code of Hammurabi 170-171), if a father treated a maidservant's child as his own, that child could inherit after his death, but if he did not treat them as such, they could not. If so, Sarah might have been asking Avraham to do a deed which would make it explicit that he did not view Yishmael as a son, thereby clarifying to all that he had no rights to inherit.
- ³⁶ The piel form of "שלח" means to release or free. See this usage in the context of freeing slaves in Devarim 15.
- ³⁷ See R"E Samet, who suggests that this was indeed Sarah's intent. He points to the Code of Hammurabi 171 which stipulates that if the child of a maidservant is not to inherit, the freedom of the maidservant and her children is assured upon the master's death. He suggests that Sarah and Avraham were following the norms of their time and that as soon as Sarah decided that Yishmael was not to inherit, she released Hagar from slave status. As evidence that the root "גרשׁ" can also mean "free", he points to Shemot 6:1 where the word is parallel to the root "שלח" and both refer to Paroh's freeing of the Nation of Israel. See also below that, according to the Laws of Lipit Ishtar, a maidservant and child who are granted freedom do not have any inheritance rights.
- ³⁸ The text contrasts Yitzchak's inheriting all with Avraham's giving of gifts to the sons of the concubines and sending them away from Yitzchak while he was still alive.
- ³⁹ Abarbanel reads the action differently, though he also connects it to Chapter 21. He suggests that Avraham married the concubines only so that he could bear more children and then send them away, thereby demonstrating to Yishmael that it was nothing personal that led to his banishment (but rather that Hashem had ordained that Yitzchak alone inherit). He hoped that this would alleviate Yishmael's anger and prevent fighting between him and Yitzchak, whom he would otherwise naturally despise. According to Abarbanel, Avraham was successful, as proven by the fact that Yitzchak and Yishmael together bury Avraham.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Y. Roth-Rotem's *סיפור גירוש ישמעאל*, and "האכספוזיציה בסיפור גירוש ישמעאל" in Beit Mikra 43 (1998): 113-124, and more recently, R"E. Samet, who similarly defends Sarah.

See, though, Y. Fleishman, "גרש את האמה הזאת ואת בנה: מדוע צווה אברהם לשמע בקול שרה", Beit Mikra 44 (1999): 142-162, who questions this reading of the law and its application. He points out that the text implies that Yishmael had already been viewed by Avraham as a son, and that once filial status is granted, it is not so easily removed.

⁴¹ See N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, (New York, 1966): 155-157, who develops this idea. Y. Fleishman in the article cited above, questions this application of the law, asserting that the Code refers only to a maidservant and her son, while Hagar had concubine status and Yishmael was considered a full son.

⁴² See Radak who asserts that Avraham loved Yishmael both because he was his firstborn and because "בדרך טובה היה הולך, כי הוא גדל עמו ולמדו דרך ה'". Cf. *Why Bless Esav?* for similar positions regarding Yitzchak's attitude toward Esav.

⁴³ See Radak Bereshit 16:6 where he similarly says that Sarah sinned in her treatment of Hagar and that Avraham did not rebuke her for the sake of peace.

⁴⁴ According to Abarbanel, until the birth of Yitzchak, Sarah had assumed that Yishmael would inherit. As such, she allowed Hagar to stay in the house as if she were a full wife, and did not mind that everyone treated Yishmael as a full son. However, after Yitzchak was born, she realized that she had to do something to change the status quo and everyone's perceptions of who was the rightful heir.

⁴⁵ He, too, maintains that Avraham had really provided ample water and that it only ran out after Hagar and Yishmael got lost.

⁴⁶ Ralbag, nonetheless, asserts that Hashem listened to him only because of Avraham.

⁴⁷ For sources which consistently paint a positive picture of Yishmael, see *A Portrait of Yishmael*.

⁴⁸ He suggests that the elderly in general are very sensitive to people's laughter, assuming that they might be the subject. Thus, too, Sarah, in her old age, concluded that Yishmael was making fun of her.

⁴⁹ See his similar evaluation of Sarah's oppressive behavior towards Hagar in Chapter 16. Cf. Radak and Ramban there.

⁵⁰ Sarah was given freedom to sin, but also to suffer the consequences of her actions.

⁵¹ See Yeshayahu 21:13-18 and the Tanchuma's understanding of these verses.

