A Portrait of Yishmael

Introduction

Dearth of Details

Painting a portrait of Yishmael is a complex challenge, in large part because of the paucity of Biblical source material. Yishmael himself appears by name in five chapters in the Torah: Bereshit 16 tells of his birth and the events leading up to it, Bereshit 17 recounts Avraham's concern for Yishmael's future and his circumcision, Bereshit 25 notes Yishmael's role in burying Avraham and records his death and descendants,[1] and Bereshit 28 and 36 mention that his daughter[2] married Esav. However, none of these narratives reveal much about the nature of Yishmael's character.

Of course, the main story which could potentially shed light on Yishmael is the account of the banishing of Hagar and her son in Bereshit 21.[3] Fascinatingly, though, Yishmael is not mentioned by name even once in this entire chapter, but is rather repeatedly referred to as "הַיֶּלֶד" or "הַנַּעַר".[4] Moreover, in most of this story he is a passive character acted upon by others,[5] and never once do we hear him speak.[6] Thus, Biblical exegetes need to make the most of the small clues which the Torah does provide.

Ambiguous Phrases

There are two verses which are of critical import in evaluating Yishmael's character. The first of these is the description of Yishmael found in the forecast of Hashem's messenger to Hagar in Bereshit 16:

(י) וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַלְאַךְ ה׳ הַרְבָּה אַרְבֶּה אֶת זַרְעֵךְ וְלֹא יִסָּפֵר מֵרֹב. (יא) וַיֹּאמֶר לָהּ מַלְאַךְ ה׳ הִנָּךְ
הָרָה וְיֹלַדְתְּ בֵּן וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל כִּי שָׁמַע ה׳ אֶל עָנְיֵךְ. (יב) וְהוּא יִהְיֶה **פֶּרֶא אָדָם יָדוֹ בַכֹּל וְיַד
כֹּל בּוֹ** וְעַל פְּנֵי כָל אֶחָיו יִשְׁכֹּן.

> (10) And the angel of Hashem said to her, "I will greatly increase your offspring, and they will be too many too count." (11) And the angel of Hashem said to her, "You are pregnant and will bear a son, and you shall call his name Yishmael, because Hashem has heard your affliction. (12) And he will be a wild ass of a man, his hand on all, and the hand of all on him, and he will dwell alongside of all his brothers."

According to this verse, Yishmael is destined to be a "פֶּרֶא אָדָם" with "יָדוֹ בַכֹּל וְיַד כֹּל בּוֹ". But are these positive or negative epithets? On the one hand, the context is one of blessings and answered prayers, but on the other hand, the untamed wildness may hint to a violent nature and future.

The second text lies at the core of Bereshit 21:

(ח) וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַיִּגָּמַל וַיַּעַשׂ אַבְרָהָם מִשְׁתֶּה גָּדוֹל בְּיוֹם הִגָּמֵל אֶת יִצְחָק. (ט) וַתֵּרֶא שָׂרָה אֶת בֶּן
הָגָר הַמִּצְרִית אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְאַבְרָהָם **מְצַחֵק**. (י) וַתֹּאמֶר לְאַבְרָהָם גָּרֵשׁ הָאָמָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת בְּנָהּ כִּי
לֹא יִירַשׁ בֶּן הָאָמָה הַזֹּאת עִם בְּנִי עִם יִצְחָק. (יא) וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵי אַבְרָהָם עַל אוֹדֹת בְּנוֹ.
(יב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱ-לֹהִים אֶל אַבְרָהָם אַל יֵרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ עַל הַנַּעַר וְעַל אֲמָתֶךָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר תֹּאמַר אֵלֶיךָ שָׂרָה
שְׁמַע בְּקֹלָהּ כִּי בְיִצְחָק יִקָּרֵא לְךָ זָרַע. (יג) וְגַם אֶת בֶּן הָאָמָה לְגוֹי אֲשִׂימֶנּוּ כִּי זַרְעֲךָ הוּא.

> (8) And the child grew up and was weaned, and Avraham made a great feast on the day that Yitzchak was weaned. (9) And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she has borne to Avraham, laughing (perhaps: mocking). (10) And she said to Avraham, "Banish this maidservant and her son, for the son of this slave-woman shall not inherit with my son, with Yitzchak." (11) The matter was very bad in Avraham's eyes on account of his son. (12) And God said to Avraham, "Do not let it be bad in your eyes over the lad and over your maidservant, all that Sarah says to you, listen to her voice, for from Yitzchak will your offspring be called. (13) And I will also make a nation of the son of the maidservant, because he is your offspring."

What is the meaning of the key phrase "מְצַחֵק" – is it innocuous laughter, mean-spirited mocking, or a euphemism for more depraved behavior? This ambiguity leads commentators to wonder about two additional questions:

- Is it conceivable that Avraham could have raised a son whose conduct was so heinous that it constituted grounds for expulsion?[7]
- Conversely, is it possible that Sarah was so petty that she wanted to banish a son who had done nothing wrong?[8]

Mixed Messages

In both of Chapters 16 and 21, it is clear that Sarah finds the actions of Hagar and her son to be odious. The attitudes of Hashem and Avraham, though, are far more equivocal. While, in Chapter 16, Avraham (perhaps reluctantly) permits Sarah to discipline Hagar, in Chapter 21 there is something which is "bad in his eyes".[9] Is this disfavor "עַל אוֹדֹת בְּנוֹ" regarding his son's conduct or Sarah's proposed punishment?

Even more perplexing is what to make of Hashem's reaction. While He enjoins Avraham in no uncertain terms to follow Sarah's instructions to the letter, He also pledges to watch over Yishmael. This promise is then promptly fulfilled only a few verses later when Heavenly intercession spares the lad from certain death, with the accompanying explanation of "כִּי שָׁמַע אֱ-לֹהִים אֶל קוֹל הַנַּעַר בַּאֲשֶׁר הוּא שָׁם". How should we understand Hashem's verdict regarding the son of Avraham and Hagar? Is Yishmael evil, deserving of banishment, and saved from death only because of Avraham, or does he have his own merits which earn him special Divine protection?

Eponymous Prototype of Islam?

The relationship between Biblical figures and the nations identified as their progeny is a bidirectional one. The character traits of ancestors are viewed as influencing their offspring, and the attributes of the descendants are often retrojected upon their forefathers. In Approaches, as we analyze the various portrayals of Yishmael through the centuries, we must examine whether the advent of Islam and the association of its adherents with Yishmael impacted some of the later perceptions of the Biblical character.[10]

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[1] His descendants, the "יִשְׁמְעֵאלִים", make a cameo appearance also in the story of the sale of Yosef (Bereshit 37:25,27-28, 39:1).

[2] While Bereshit 28:9 identifies Esav's wife as "מָחֲלַת", Bereshit 36:3 refers to her as "בָּשְׂמַת". See Esav's Wives for discussion of how many wives Esav had.

[3] For a full discussion of the story, see Banishment of Hagar and Yishmael.

[4] This omission is so striking that it led R. Menashe Wiener (Mikhlelet Herzog Yemei Iyyun BeTanakh 5770) to entertain the notion that Hagar was expelled together with a younger sibling of Yishmael (perhaps more aptly described as the "יֶלֶד" carried by Hagar; Yishmael was already at least sixteen years old), and that Yishmael himself remained in Avraham's home.

[5] In fact, his limited number of actions (with the exception of those in the addendum of Bereshit 21:19-21) are described merely through the eyes of other characters. 21:9 tells of what Sarah saw Yishmael do, and 21:17 speaks of how Hashem heard him cry.

[6] Yishmael's silence is noted by C. Bakhos, Ishmael on the Border (Albany, 2006): 14. The Torah tells of Yishmael laughing and crying (the text actually explicitly says only that Hagar cried and that God heard her son's voice), but not of any of his uttered words.

[7] See Radak and Ramban who both make this argument. Cf. Tanchuma which links Yishmael's sins to Avraham's lack of discipline.

[8] See the Biur who assumes that Sarah would never have exposed Hagar and Yishmael to the dangers of the wilderness unless there was a significant sin which had been committed.

[9] See also Bereshit 17:18 where Avraham's first reaction to the prophecy of the birth of Yitzchak is to plead before God: "לוּ יִשְׁמָעֵאל יִחְיֶה לְפָנֶיךָ".

[10] For the similar effects of the relationship between Esav and Rome, see A Portrait of Esav.

A Portrait of Yishmael

Exegetical Approaches

THIS TOPIC IS STILL BEING DEVELOPED AND UPDATED

Overview

The scarcity of information about Yishmael leads commentators to evaluate his character based on clues from those who interact with him, specifically Avraham and Sarah. In so doing, though, exegetes find themselves in a catch-22. On one hand, it seems inconceivable that Sarah would expel Yishmael had he been an innocent, righteous youth. On the other hand, it is equally troubling to suggest that Avraham could have raised a son that committed terrible crimes.

As a result, the commentators' characterizations of Yishmael run the gamut from innocent to evil. Some exegetes, like Radak, posit that Yishmael was a wholesome youth, and Tzeror HaMor even faults Sarah for banishing him. Rashi, following numerous Midrashim, goes to the opposite extreme, painting an utterly wicked Yishmael and interpreting the various stories in which he appears to match this image. Ramban attempts to strike a balance between the competing factors, depicting a negative, but not villainous Yishmael.

Neutral to Positive

Yishmael did not actively sin, and may even have had some merits.

SOURCES: Jubilees,[1] R. Simon in Bereshit Rabbah,[2] Ibn Ezra, Radak, Tzeror HaMor, Abarbanel

Prophecy to Hagar – "וְהוּא יִהְיֶה פֶּרֶא אָדָם" – These commentators all view the prophecy as either a positive or neutral characterization of the soon to be born Yishmael, but they differ in the details:

- **Free –** According to Ibn Ezra, "פֶּרֶא אָדָם" is a metaphor for a non-submissive person who is free from the yoke of others.[3] The angel told Hagar that Yishmael would be a powerful individual, victorious over his neighbors ("יָדוֹ בַכֹּל"), but simultaneously causing others to fight back ("וְיַד כֹּל בּוֹ").
- **Man of the wilderness –** Radak asserts that "פֶּרֶא אָדָם" refers to a man of the wilderness who, due to his nomadic lifestyle, will constantly be battling his neighbors ("יָדוֹ בַכֹּל וְיַד כֹּל בּוֹ"). However, he will not flee from them, but manage to dwell amongst them ("עַל פְּנֵי כָל אֶחָיו יִשְׁכֹּן").[4]
- **Man of civilization –** Abarbanel reads the opening words of the angel as a rhetorical question: "Will your son be a man of the wilderness?"[5] The angel is, thus, informing Hagar that Yishmael will live amongst men ("עַל פְּנֵי כָל אֶחָיו יִשְׁכֹּן"), intermingling and socializing with them ("יָדוֹ בַכֹּל"), rather than alone in the wilderness.[6]

Avraham's plea: "לוּ יִשְׁמָעֵאל יִחְיֶה לְפָנֶיךָ" – According to Abarbanel, Avraham is asking Hashem what will become of Yishmael once Yitzchak is born. He is worried about Yishmael's physical and spiritual well-being,[7] wondering whether Yishmael will die young (being replaced by Yitzchak)[8] and whether he will be part of Hashem's covenant. The question assumes that, in Avraham's eyes, there was no intrinsic disqualification which would have caused Yishmael to be automatically rejected.

"מְצַחֵק" – Most of these commentators[9] suggest that Yishmael was simply happily dancing,[10] playing, or laughing,[11] and that the word carries no derogatory connotation at all.

Why did Sarah want Yishmael expelled?

- According to Jubilees and Ibn Ezra, Sarah was simply jealous,[12] while the Tzeror HaMor asserts that she was insulted as she mistakenly thought that Yishmael was laughing at her.[13]
- Abarbanel contends that even before the incident Sarah was planning to expel Yishmael, fearing that otherwise he would claim rights to the inheritance. Seeing Yishmael being the center of attention simply confirmed her suspicions that the longer he stayed, the more difficult disinheriting him would become.

Evaluation of Sarah – According to the Tzeror HaMor, Yishmael's actions did not warrant an expulsion and Sarah sinned in her actions.[14] Her descendants were later punished when Yishmael's progeny refused water to the Children of Israel,[15] resulting in many deaths. Radak, too, suggests that Sarah was deserving of rebuke, saying that Avraham kept quiet only for the sake of "household peace" (שלום בית).[16]

Why is Avraham "upset about his son"? Jubilees and Radak interpret that Avraham is upset about the notion of banishing a beloved son.[17] This reaction is completely understandable given that, according to them, Yishmael had done nothing to deserve expulsion. In addition, Radak asserts that Avraham loved him both because he was his firstborn and because "'בדרך טובה היה הולך, כי הוא גדל עמו ולמדהו דרך ה".[18] He claims that given that Avraham taught outsiders to follow in the path of Hashem, it is inconceivable that he did not do the same for his own child, Yishmael.

Why did Hashem side with Sarah? Radak and Abarbanel explain that Yitzchak alone was to inherit, as Hashem wanted the chosen line to emerge from Avraham and Sarah. Hashem, thus, agreed with Sarah that in order to ensure this and prevent any contesting of the inheritance, Yishmael needed to be expelled from the home.[19]

Hashem saves Yishmael

- **Deserving –** According to R. Simon in Bereshit Rabbah, Hashem listened to Yishmael and saved him on his own merits. R. Simon understands the phrase "בַּאֲשֶׁר הוּא שָׁם" to refer to Yishmael's present spiritual status.[20] Though his descendants were to oppress Israel, Yishmael himself was righteous and deserving of salvation.
- **Punishment to Sarah –** Tzeror HaMor suggests that it would have been better had Yishmael died from the lack of water, since then he would never have borne a nation who was to oppress the Israelites. Due to Sarah's actions, though, he was saved so that he could later punish Israel.

Yishmael after the expulsion – Radak points to Yishmael's achievements as an archer, and lauds him for teaching this skill to his descendants, the Children of Keidar.[21] He even suggests that this part of the story was written so that all can learn from Yishmael the importance of passing on skills to one's children.

Yishmael and Yitzchak – This position does not posit any active rivalry between the two brothers. Jubilees presents them as together visiting their father later in life, and Abarbanel claims that Avraham died peacefully because he saw "ישמעאל ויצחק שלמים ומוסכמים באהבה רבה".

Why is Yishmael made into a great nation? Although these commentators do not address the issue directly, they might suggest that Yishmael himself merited such a reward. Alternatively, this is part of

Hashem's promise to make Avraham himself into a great nation.

Yishmael's descendants

- **Neutral –** Ibn Ezra and Radak identify Yishmael's descendants with Arav and Midyan, both of whom live in the wilderness, and as such fulfill the original prophecy to Hagar.[22]
- **Negative –** Ibn Ezra additionally suggests that the fourth beast of Daniel's vision refers to Yishmael, who will prevail over many but ultimately be vanquished. Tzeror HaMor similarly identifies Yishmael's descendants with Israel's enemies, associating them with the people of Arav in Yeshayahu 21 who refuse Israel water.[23]

Mildly Negative

Yishmael had several negative traits, but he was not completely wicked.

SOURCES: R. Shimon b. Yochai, R. Saadia Gaon, R. Avraham b. HaRambam, Ramban, Sforno

Prophecy to Hagar – "וְהוּא יִהְיֶה פֶּרֶא אָדָם" – Both Ramban and Sforno[24] assert that already the prophecy to Hagar forecast some of Yishmael's negative character traits:

- **Militancy –** Ramban maintains that Yishmael was to become a "פֶּרֶא אָדָם", a militant person always ready to pounce on and devour others.[25] He sees in this a punishment to Avraham and Sarah who had sinned in their harsh treatment of Hagar.[26] They were given a measure for measure punishment, as Yishmael's descendants were to similarly oppress their offspring.
- **Donkey-like nature –** According to Sforno, the dual term "פֶּרֶא אָדָם" reflects the combination of what Yishmael inherited from each of his parents, a donkey-like nature from his mother,[27] and a more human side from his father, reflected in his repentance later in life.[28]

Avraham's plea: "לוּ יִשְׁמָעֵאל יִחְיֶה לְפָנֶיךָ" – According to Ramban, Avraham is praying for Yishmael's survival. Being informed that Yitzchak is to inherit alone makes Avraham wonder whether Yishmael is destined to die early. Although Yishmael might have faults, Avraham had always viewed him as the heir, and as his father, he was filled with love for him.

"מְצַחֵק" – All of these commentators understand the word to refer to scornful laughter or mockery:

- **Inheritance related –** R. Shimon B. Yochai portrays Yishmael as laughing at the concept of Yitzchak inheriting,[29] while Sforno has him suggest that Yitzchak was born of Avimelekh which would thereby disqualify him from inheriting.[30]
- **Degrading Yitzchak –** R. Saadia suggests that Yishmael was scornfully saying that Yitzchak would not survive to adulthood, while Ramban presents him as more simply poking fun at Yitzchak and the party made in his honor.
- **Foolish play –** According to R. Avraham b. HaRambam, Yishmael was acting foolishly, laughing, and speaking in an unbecoming manner.

Why did Sarah want Yishmael expelled?

- **Protect Yitzchak's character –** According to R. Avraham b. HaRambam, Sarah wanted to prevent Yitzchak from learning from the bad example set by Yishmael.[31] Sarah was not worried about his

sharing in a monetary inheritance, but about the two brothers inheriting identical values.[32]

- **Prevent Yishmael's inheritance –** Sforno asserts that since Hagar was trying to ensure through her son's libel that Yishmael inherit all, Sarah banished them so that they would not inherit at all.
- **Punishment –** Ramban maintains that Sarah viewed Yishmael's actions as a forgetting of his rightful place as servant. Though this normally would deserve death or corporal punishment, Sarah decided instead to expel Hagar and Yishmael.

Why is Avraham "upset about his son"? Ramban suggests that Avraham's natural love for his son made it painful for him to banish him. Although Yishmael's actions were wrong, and Avraham might have even understood Sarah's desire for the expulsion, they were not so terrible to prevent his anguish at the action. R. Avraham b. HaRambam further suggests that Avraham was oblivious to the true nature of his son, favoring him since he was the firstborn.[33]

Why did Hashem reject Yishmael? This approach might suggest that Yishmael was rejected due to both his maternal parentage and his lesser character. R. Avraham b. HaRambam adds that Hashem agreed with Sarah that Yishmael would be a negative influence, further justifying the banishment.

Hashem saves Yishmael – This position would probably suggest that, though the expulsion might have been justified, Yishmael's negative actions did not warrant a death sentence.[34]

Yishmael after the expulsion – R. Avraham b. HaRambam asserts that Yishmael's becoming an archer, or a man of war, confirmed Sarah's evaluation of his negative character and her worries over how this might affect Yitzchak.[35]

Why is Yishmael made into a great nation? Sforno asserts that this promise was a reward to Avraham.[36] Yishmael himself was not worthy of such grandeur.

Yishmael and Islam – R. Avraham b. HaRambam claims that the promise that Yishmael will become a great nation was fulfilled with the establishment of Islam. He points out how it is a second monotheistic religion, yet one which uprooted the Torah. The seeds of this religion lay already in Yishmael who believed in Hashem, having grown up in Avraham's household, but who was never on the path of Torah observance or on the spiritual level of his brother.[37]

Extremely Negative

Yishmael was evil, and he committed the most heinous of crimes, including the threesome of idolatry, murder, and illicit relations.

SOURCES: R. Akiva and other Sages, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, Rashi[38]

Prophecy to Hagar – "וְהוּא יִהְיֶה פֶּרֶא אָדָם" – According to Resh Lakish in Bereshit Rabbah and Rashi, the angel's words pointed to the wickedness of Yishmael's character. Rashi[39] asserts that he was to become a robber ("יָדוֹ בַכֹּל") who was to be hated and provoked by all ("וְיַד כֹּל בּוֹ").[40] Resh Lakish goes a step further, asserting that he would rob, not just possessions, but people's lives.[41]

Avraham's plea: "לוּ יִשְׁמָעֵאל יִחְיֶה לְפָנֶיךָ" – Rashi asserts that Avraham was praying for the spiritual well being of Yishmael, that he should live a life that is "before God".

"מְצַחֵק" – These commentators suggest that the word refers either to idolatry,[42] murder,[43] or illicit relations,[44] the three cardinal sins in Judaism.[45]

Why did Sarah want Yishmael expelled? Given such wicked behavior, it is not surprising that Sarah wanted Yishmael banished.

Why is Avraham "upset about his son"? According to Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), Avraham was upset about his son's idolatry, not at the request to expel him.[46]

Why did Hashem reject Yishmael? Yishmael's actions proved him unworthy of a place in Avraham's household and warranted his expulsion.

Hashem saves Yishmael – Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) emphasizes that Hashem saved Yishmael only for the sake of Avraham and his merits.[47]

Yishmael after the expulsion – Most of these sources assert that Yishmael repented later in life.[48] Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer depicts Avraham as checking up on his son, and leaving him messages to change certain behaviors, which Yishmael follows.[49]

Why is Yishmael made into a great nation? The Torah says that this was merely a fulfillment of Hashem's promise that Avraham would be the father of a multitude of nations, rather than a reward for Yishmael's behavior. Some of these commentators even attempt to diminish this promise. Thus, R. Yitzchak in Bereshit Rabbah and Rashi assert that Yishmael's twelve princes will be short-lived ("כענגים יכלו"),[50] and Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) says that he is destined to become a "nation of robbers".[51]

Yishmael's descendants – Rashi asserts that Yishmael's descendants plagued the Israelites later in history. As they were dying of thirst en route to exile in Babylonia, they begged their cousins for water but were refused.[52]

Yishmael and Islam – Some suggest that only pre-Islamic Midrashim present Yishmael as worshiping idols, as that was the common practice of the Arabs of that period.[53] Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer, on the other hand, was written in the Islamic era, and thus even while painting a negative portrait of Yishmael, it nonetheless depicts him as monotheistic.[54] Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer also provides a postscript to the Yishmael story containing an account of Avraham's subsequent visits to Yishmael. This account which closely parallels some Islamic traditions appears to also polemicize against them.[55]

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[1] Cf. the LXX 21:9 which renders: "When Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, who had been born to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac". Josephus (Antiquities 1:12:3), also makes no mention of any negative action of Yishmael.

[2] Other Tannaim and Amoraim in Bereshit Rabbah present very different and even diametrically opposite portraits of Yishmael – see the discussions below of the positions of R. Akiva and R. Shimon b. Yochai.

[3] Such a prophecy would be very encouraging to Hagar who was suffering from her servitude to Sarah.

[4] Compare R"Y Bekhor Shor who similarly connects Yishmael's future with the wilderness, but suggests that Yishmael will be a merchant who travels through the desert, buying and selling his wares ("יָדוֹ בַכֹּל וְיַד כֹּל בּוֹ"). This interpretation is likely rooted in the mention of a Yishmaelite caravan in the sale of Yosef in Bereshit 37.

[5] Abarbanel agrees with Radak's understanding of the phrase "פֶּרֶא אָדָם" but, due to his novel punctuation, comes to an opposite conclusion of what the prophecy says about Yishmael's abode. For other cases where Abarbanel suggests to read a verse as a question ("בתמיה"), see R. Yitzchak Abarbanel.

[6] He points out that the context of the prophecy is an attempt to make Hagar return to Avraham. The angel thus tells her that her son's future lies in civilized land, amongst people, and not in the wilderness where she presently finds herself.

[7] Cf. Rashi and Ramban who each adopt one of these two possibilities.

[8] See Ramban who has Avraham wonder if the reason Yitzchak is to inherit all is because Yishmael is to die before Avraham.

[9] Radak is the lone exception. He suggests that Yishmael was laughing at Yitzchak for having been born to such old parents. However, Radak apparently does not consider this laughter particularly negative, as immediately thereafter he says of Yishmael: "'ובדרך טובה היה מהלך, כי הוא גדל עמו ולמדהו דרך ה". Yishmael's laughter, though not laudable, would nonetheless be quite normal in youthful bantering.

[10] This is the rendering of Jubilees.

[11] See Ibn Ezra, "מצחק כי כן מנהג כל נער". Abarbanel similarly depicts him happily playing ("שהי' משתעשע בבית") as everyone around tried to please and serve him.

[12] The Biur questions this read, finding it inconceivable that the righteous Sarah would possibly banish Hagar and Yishmael and place their lives in danger simply out of petty jealousy. See, though, below, that Tzeror HaMor asserts that this was indeed considered a sin and that Sarah was punished for her actions.

[13] 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.

[14] He assumes that the original harsh treatment of Hagar in chapter 16 was similarly sinful, and blames both Avraham and Sarah for their part. Avraham should never have agreed to take Hagar as a wife in the first place nor allow Sarah's treatment of her afterwards. Yishmael's birth itself served as a punishment, for his descendants were to bring destruction to Israel.

Tzeror HaMor's reading is likely influenced by Radak and/or Ramban who similarly view Sarah's conduct in Chapter 16 as sinful. Ramban differs, though, in that he justifies the banishment of Yishmael in Chapter 21 (as this was done with Divine consent).

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

[16] 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.

[17] Cf. Bereshit Rabbah 53:12.

[18] See above that, according to Radak, Avraham would have rebuked Sarah for her request had it not been that he wanted to preserve household peace.

[19] The expulsion, thus, had nothing to do with the specific actions of Yishmael.

[20] See also Rosh HaShanah 16b.

[21] They are later described as archers – see Yeshayahu 21:17.

[22] It is interesting that of the commentators who adopt a neutral to positive approach toward Yishmael, almost all did not live in Muslim countries.

[23] This is based on the midrashic interpretation of the verse. See the discussion above that this later oppression is a punishment for Sarah's original oppression of Hagar. Tzeror HaMor could have also posited that this was a measure for measure punishment of Avraham who did not adequately supply Hagar and Yishmael with water for their journey.

[24] R. Saadia reads the angel's words much more neutrally, suggesting that Yishmael is to grow to be a man of the wilderness, yet one who will still maintain contact with people and civilization ("יָדוֹ בַכֹּל וְיַד כֹּל בּוֹ"), marrying and doing business with them.

[25] It is unclear from Ramban whether he thinks it is Yishmael himself, or his descendants, who will take on this character trait and oppress others. In the first part of his comments he suggests that the phrase "פֶּרֶא אָדָם" refers to Yishmael, but later he understands it to refer to his offspring.

[26] Cf. Radak and the Tzeror HaMor above.

[27] In the continuation of his comments, Sforno softens his tone, suggesting that this implies a nomadic existence in the wilderness.

[28] Sforno points to the discussion in Bava Batra 16b.

[29] In the version in the Sifre Devarim, R. Shimon b. Yochai presents 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.

[30] Both of these commentators relate "מְצַחֵק" to inheritance, as this is the subject of both Sarah's words to Avraham and Hashem's instructions to Avraham.

[31] He asserts that Sarah worried that, due to their advanced age, she and Avraham might die while Yitzchak was still young, leaving Yishmael to raise him.

[32] See also R. Saadia who asserts that Sarah had permission to banish her son, but not to keep him from getting a monetary inheritance. Though he does not say so explicitly, he might agree with R. Avraham b. HaRambam's assessment of Sarah's motives.

[33] He asserts that Sarah alone noted his negative character but hid the truth from her husband knowing that it would pain him.

[34] Both R. Avraham b. HaRambam and Ramban reject the midrashic understanding of the phrase "בַּאֲשֶׁר הוּא שָׁם" which suggests that Yishmael was righteous, probably because they view Yishmael in a negative light.

[35] Ramban and Sforno suggest that at the end of his life, Yishmael repented from his sins and died a righteous person.

[36] Ramban similarly claims that this promise was made since Yishmael was Avraham's seed, but he does not state that Yishmael alone would not have been worthy.

[37] R. Avraham's portrait of Yishmael likely reflects his ambivalence toward Islam.

[38] This appears to be Rashi's main position. However, Rashi (21:17) does cite the opinion of R. Simon in Bereshit Rabbah that Yishmael was righteous. Rashi's supercommentaries note the contradiction in Rashi. Cf. R. Saadia Gaon above.

[39] See also Rashi Bereshit 21:20. Rashi is following Tanchuma. See also Mekhilta BaChodesh 5 and Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) Bereshit 21:13.

[40] Abarbanel questions this approach from the context. If the angel was trying to encourage Hagar to return home, how would a negative prophecy regarding her son help? He writes: "איך יגיד העתידות האלה המלאך להגר ובזה אין בשורה מוצאת".

[41] He also makes a play on the words "כֹּל בּוֹ", suggesting that it be read "כלבו", equating him with a dog, both of whom eat carcasses. See also HaRekhasim Levik'ah who reads the prophecy quite negatively as well. He asserts that the phrase "פֶּרֶא אָדָם" is not a description of a type of person (in which case the adjective would have followed and not preceded the noun), but rather a description of a "פֶּרֶא", a donkey. Yishmael is more donkey than man.

[42] See R. Akiva, the anonymous opinion in Tosefta, 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.

Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) presents Yishmael as worshiping both idols and Hashem (some versions omit this detail) It also relates how both Hagar and Yishmael worshiped idols on their trek in the wilderness (it renders the phrase "וַתֵּתַע בְּמִדְבַּר" metaphorically to mean that she wandered after idolatry), and it appears from the Targum that, as a punishment for this action, Yishmael came down with a fever which depleted their water supply.

It is noteworthy that Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 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 (again in contrast to Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) which has Hagar praying to the idolatrous god of her father). Numerous scholars have noted that this likely reflects Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer's identification of Yishmael as the father of Islam (see below), which he viewed as a monotheistic religion.

[43] See R. Yishmael in Tosefta Sotah and Rashi. Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer speaks not just in general of spilling blood, but has Yishmael 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.

[44] See R. Eliezer the son of R. Yose HaGelili who points to the story of Mrs. Potiphar in Bereshit 39:17, where the root "צחק" suggests sexual behavior.

[45] Some sources similarly attribute these same three crimes to Esav. See A Portrait of Esav.

[46] See also Tanchuma Shemot 1. Rashi also cites such a possibility, but he prefers the option that Avraham was upset over sending Yishmael away (thereby losing any chance to have a positive influence on him).

[47] See above that Rashi is somewhat inconsistent in his understanding as he points to the Midrash which claims that Hashem saved Yishmael on his own merits, for his present righteous state ("בַּאֲשֶׁר הוּא שָׁם"). Yet, according to Rashi, Yishmael's present spiritual state was one of wickedness.

[48] Cf. Tanchuma which has Esav coming to Yishmael to learn more wicked deeds.

[49] The Midrash has Avraham hint to him that his wife, who refused Avraham hospitality, was unworthy and that he should find another. Yishmael takes the hint and remarries.

[50] This interpretation is a play on the additional and much rarer meaning of "נְשִׂיאִם" as clouds found in Yirmeyahu 10:13, 51:16, Tehillim 135:7, and Mishlei 25:14.

[51] Cf. Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) that asserts that the bull sacrifices brought by the twelve princes during the Consecration of the Altar were an attempt to merit the destruction of the twelve princes of Yishmael.

[52] See Tanchuma Yitro 5.

[53] See R. Hayward, "Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Anti-Islamic Polemic", JSS 34:1 (1989): 77-93. Hayward contends that the fact that Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) (in contrast to Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer) depicts Yishmael as idolatrous argues in favor of an earlier date for the Targum. He suggests that the mention of Aisha and Fatima in Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) to Bereshit 21:21 is a later interpolation.

[54] See the note above which contrasts the stances of Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) and Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer on this issue.

[55] For a summary of some of the scholarship which analyzes the differences between Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer and the Islamic traditions, see C. Bakhos, Ishmael on the Border (Albany, 2006): 109-116. Most pointedly, Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer emphasizes that on both of his visits, Avraham did not even descend from his camel. This stands in stark contrast to Muslim claims that a stone in the Kaba, Maqam Ibrahim, contains Avraham's footprints, and that Avraham built the Kaba with Yishmael.