

### The Promises Continue

As I have stated quite often in our commentary, there are times when the biblical narrative seems to confound us modern folks. The story of the birth of Isaac and the subsequent banishment of Hagar is yet another one of those. It begins quite joyfully with the birth of the promised son, Isaac. If you recall, Sarah laughed when informed of the impending birth of her miraculous son ([Genesis 18:12](#)) and again we see laughter entering into the narrative. The birth of Isaac is indeed a happy occasion, one filled with laughter for the proud parents.

Yet, as with many stories in the bible, the joy is tempered somewhat by the subsequent story of Hagar and her son Ishmael. Through no fault of her own or her son's, Hagar found herself cast out from the family of Abraham. On the one hand, modern readers invariably find this story a bit heartless and cruel. Hagar and her son had done no wrong. Indeed, Hagar - in bearing the child of Abraham - was being a good and dutiful maidservant to Sarah. As a reward for this obedience, she and her son were cast out. To add insult to injury, the Lord at first *appeared* to acquiesce to Sarah's demands and essentially told Abraham to "do what your wife tells you."

On another level it can be seen as a somewhat natural reaction on the part of a tribal "first wife" to secure a place for her own offspring in the second millennia before Christianity. Not wanting any competition for her son Isaac (the true heir of the promise) she decided to remove Ishmael, the only possible rival for the inheritance at the death of Abraham. Therefore, she chose to have Ishmael and his mother banished. However, we are not given this story to show how pre-Iron age tribal societies handled the thorny issues of inheritance in polygamous family units. Clearly, the Divine author has more in mind.

One can only truly appreciate this story by reading to the end of the passage under discussion that relates the final conversation the angel of the Lord had with Hagar:

*"And then went, and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away; for she said to herself, 'Let me not watch to see the child die.' As she sat opposite him, he began to cry. God heard the boy's cry, and God's messenger called to Hagar from heaven: 'What is the matter Hagar? Don't be afraid; God has heard the boy's cry in this plight of his. Arise, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand; for I will make him a great nation.'" [Genesis 21:16-18](#)*

The angel of the Lord speaks to a mother in the depths of her distress and reassures her that indeed her son will have a future and a great future for all that. It is not that Ishmael and his descendants will not have a story; it is simply that their story will not be a major part of *the* story - the story of Abraham, Isaac and the rest of the biblical patriarchs. The Lord does not abandon Hagar and her son but sets them on a path separate and distinct from the path that Abraham and his progeny will walk.

**The Catechism and Genesis**

*From its beginning until death human life is surrounded by their watchful care and intercession.*

*"Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life." Already here on earth the Christian life shares by faith in the blessed company of angels and men united in God.*

**Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 336**

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is one of the few stories that Christians, Jews and Muslims share in their respective sacred texts with one major exception. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the promise of the Lord flows from Abraham to Isaac and eventually to all the Jews. In the Quran and the Islamic tradition, the promise of the Lord flows through Ishmael and eventually to all his descendants, the Muslim Arabs. Despite these two drastically different end points, one thing is held in common among all the traditions. They all claim Abraham an ancestor indicating that for all the differences between Christians, Jews and Muslims (and, indeed, there are many, many important differences) our spiritual origins all begin in the same place. We all share Abraham, the first one to show constant faith and submission to the One God.

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