

## Ishmael and Judah: Two Notes on Genesis

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There is an important resource for Biblical studies which is more available to evangelicals than more mainstream scholars. This resource is often overlooked, however, or at least vastly underused. I am speaking of the evangelical scholars' frequent access to and intimate contact with students of the anthropology of more primitive cultures. In our circles they are usually referred to as foreign missionaries. With Western culture changing more rapidly in its technological aspects, the appreciation and understanding of the simpler, less mechanized lifestyles of ancient times is becoming increasingly rare. A Medieval scholar recently complained of this malaise in the present scholarship of his period due to the fact that current scholars had grown up ignorant of the Bible and Christian doctrine and hence could no longer place Medieval Western culture into its proper context. The same is often true of the Old and New Testament worlds. The life of nomadic herdsmen or subsistence agriculturalists is so foreign to modern man that the attempt to place a story in its *Sitz im Leben* often leads to rather ridiculous conclusions. Missionaries serving among the modern remnants of primitive civilizations, however, often get glimpses into lifestyles much more akin to those of the patriarchs. While one must beware of simplistically drawing parallels or inventing precedents, I believe that often Biblical texts can be as judiciously illumined in this way as they are by rather strained linguistic arguments based on Eblaic, Akkadian or Ugaritic. I would illustrate my case by referring to two texts from Genesis that I came to understand in a new light during the six years I spent as a missionary in Zambia: a row of holes in the ground caused me to re-think the story of Ishmael, and a wooden stick made me

re-think the connection between Judah and his so-called "scepter."

### I. The Sending Away of Ishmael (Genesis 21: 8-13)

Discussions of this passage usually center in an attempt to define motives. Those who try to deal with the account as a historical event study the psychological interplay of Sarah and Hagar, of Ishmael and Isaac, of Abraham and his two wives. Those who attempt to demythologize the story consider the author's motives in telling it: Was he trying to give a historical basis to later ethnic rivalries? Was he moralizing on the problems of polygamy? While such questions provide plenty of room for creative historiography, one would do better to start with the story's cultural underpinnings.

The event happened at the celebration of the weaning of Isaac. There is abundant evidence for the fact that in ancient times a child was not weaned until he was several years old. Gerhard Pfeifer's 1972 study, "*Entwöhnung und Entwöhnungsfest im Alten Testament: der Schlüssel zu Jesaja 28:7-13?*," concludes that weaning in ancient Israel normally occurred around a child's third birthday.<sup>1</sup> Among the evidence he cites are the following: The Talmud mentions an 18-24 month weaning period (*Ketubot* 60a); the Koran fixes a two year minimum; in Hellenistic times there is Jewish evidence of three years of nursing (2 Maccabees 7:27). A period of three years is also mentioned in the story of Samuel (1 Sam. 1:24). Isaiah 28:9 implies a child's education

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<sup>1</sup>*Zeitschrift fuer die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (1972), 341-47.

begins immediately after weaning, thus suggesting an age of at least three years, whereas 2 Chronicles 31:16 suggests that boys of priestly families began to learn and perform their service in the temple at the age of three.

One might well add further evidence. In 1976 J. J. Finkelstein published several wet-nurse contracts from 18th-century B.C. Babylon. Three of the four cited are contracts for a period of three years.<sup>2</sup> Hellenistic Egyptian wet-nurse contracts often extended for two years or longer.<sup>3</sup> Soranus of Ephesus, a famous physician during the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian, in his *Gynecology* speaks of starting the weaning process “around the third or fourth half-year” and thereafter “stealthily and gradually” weaning the child<sup>4</sup>. While the exact time probably varied (and at some periods may have been considerably longer), three seems to have been typical. If then Isaac was about three years old, Ishmael was about 17 years old when this story took place (compare Gen. 16:16 with 21:5).

The time of weaning appears to have developed into a celebratory ceremony and feast, almost a rite of passage. While the unweaned boy was still a baby or infant (פֶּטִי, βρέφος), afterwards he was a child

<sup>2</sup> “Silip remim and Related Matters,” *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 25 (1976), 187-94. Finkelstein's Text C (= CT 47 No. 46) says, in part, “Huzalatum, the naditu of Shamash gave her daughter to Dubabatum and Buriya to be nursed. They received 4 shekels (to cover) food and clothing for a three-year period, and their heart is satisfied; they will enter no future claim.”

<sup>3</sup>Examples are given in translation by M. Lefkowitz and M. Font, eds., *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, (John Hopkins, 1982), 166-68. Further examples in *Aegyptische Urkunden aus den Koeniglichen Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, Griechische Urkunden* 4:1106-09.

<sup>4</sup> Transl. of O. Temkin, *Soranus' Gynecology*, (John Hopkins, 1956), 118.

(עֹלֵל, παιδίον).<sup>5</sup> If he was from a priestly family, he could now receive the priestly portion of sacrifices (2 Chron. 31:16). He would no longer remain sequestered with his mother or nurse-maid but would be allowed out into the world. After his weaning, Hannah immediately took the boy Samuel to live at the Temple (1 Sam. 1:24 ff.). After his weaning, Pharaoh's daughter was able to take Moses into the palace and adopt him (Exodus 2:10). The weaning would have been marked by a grand family celebration, especially when, as in the case of Isaac and Samuel, it was a first-born son who had safely reached this important milestone. In his Genesis commentary Martin Luther postulated that King Abimelech of Gerar, and Melchizedek were among Abraham's invited guests that day.

It was on this occasion then (there is no support for attempts to insert a time delay between vv.8 and 9) that Sarah saw the teenage Ishmael “mocking” (רָפָץ). The vague Hebrew expression, perhaps a play on Isaac's name, is given a more concrete interpretation in the LXX. παιζόντα μετὰ Ἰσαακ.<sup>6</sup> Leupold already noted that the Hebrew term is identical to Gen.26:8 where Abimelech saw Isaac “caressing” Rebekah. Hence some have seen homosexual overtones here. Others, such as the Targums, have interpreted the passage as indicating spiritual sin: Ishmael was “jesting in a foreign cult” or “entertaining himself with idolatry” or “sporting with an

<sup>5</sup>The word ἰνφαντης was used somewhat ambiguously. John of Alexandria in his commentary on Hippocrates says that the latter used the word “not only of those who are unweaned but also of children up to puberty” (cited in H. von Staden, *The Art of Medicine in Early Alexandria*, [Cambr. U. Press, 1989], 437).

<sup>6</sup>Westermann says that without a preposition it means *play* rather than *mock* (*Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, 339); Von Rad (*Genesis*, Rev. ed. [Westminster, 1972], 232), says it can mean either *playing* or *behaving wantonly*.

idol and bowing down to it.”<sup>7</sup> The same verb may well imply cultic activity in Exodus 32:6, where, after the making of the Golden Calf, the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up “to indulge in revelry” (רָצְחוּ, παύσειν). For those of us who see a seamless unity in Old and New Testament, Paul’s reference in Galatians 4:29 to Ishmael “persecuting” (ἔθρι, ὠκεῖν) Isaac is of greater importance. This would lead me to favor the more obvious interpretation, namely that the older boy was in some way verbally abusing his kid brother, perhaps for the irritation of Sarah. “What a laugh! Is this ‘laugh’ going to become a great nation?”

Sarah’s reaction was swift. Perhaps this was the final straw or the excuse she had been waiting for. Her rage against “that slave woman and her son” has been given a theological basis by some traditional interpreters, but the jealousy between two women competing for one man’s affection is the more natural view. This is still a common problem in polygamous societies today. An additional possibility is that Hagar herself had served as Isaac’s wet nurse (though this would have started a decade after she had weaned her own son Ishmael). If this were the case, the weaning would have been the first opportunity to get rid of the Egyptian and Isaac’s affection for his nurse may well have added fuel to Sarah’s flames of jealousy.<sup>8</sup>

The question that then arises, however, is this: “Did the Lord cave in to the request of a jealous wife?” The text even indicates that Abraham was disposed to ignore Sarah’s plea until the Lord intervened and commanded

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<sup>7</sup>The first two quotes are the text and a variant from Targum Neofiti, the third is from Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, both in the translations of the Liturgical Press edition.

<sup>8</sup>I take the question in Genesis 21:7 “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children” as rhetorical, though it need not be. One would plead societal custom (the rich seldom nursed their own children) as the main evidence.

him to send the mother and child away. Nahum Sarna goes so far as to say that Jehovah was “acquiescing in ... an act of manifest inhumanity.”<sup>9</sup> Robert Davidson then follows Sarna in suggesting that Sarah’s command was motivated by legal considerations.<sup>10</sup> The 19th-century B.C. *Code of Lipit-Ishtar* offers some protection to the rights of children of slave wives by giving them a share in the family inheritance. However, “if the father granted freedom to the slave and her children, the children of the slave shall not divide the estate with the children of their master.”<sup>11</sup> If the parallel runs true, Sarah is thus forcing Abraham to disinherit Ishmael by granting him his freedom. Though this emancipation is not mentioned in the text, it may well be implied. Since, however, Jehovah later, when discussing polygamous rivalries, prohibits the taking away of the right of primogeniture from the son of an unloved wife (Deut. 21:15-17), one should doubt that he would sanction the disinheriting of a son here. And, in fact, God promises Abraham a substantial inheritance for Ishmael. In Gen. 25:5-6 we also read of Abraham’s giving gifts to sons of his concubines and sending them away. While both of these passages also raise the question of Hagar’s status -- wife or concubine? -- they do not solve the question of the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael, apparently without gifts!

If one takes Galatians 4 seriously, one must admit that God’s promises to Abraham and the question as to who will inherit them is still at the heart of this story. However, Sarna can hardly be right in saying that this legal issue is “the only possible justification for the action

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<sup>9</sup>N.H. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis: The Heritage of Biblical Israel*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 155.

<sup>10</sup>R. Davidson, *Genesis 12-50*, (Cambridge U. Press, 1979), 86; Sarna, *op. cit.*, 157.

<sup>11</sup>*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 160.

that subsequently took place?<sup>12</sup> Rather, in order to make real sense of this story, we need to add one more cultural factor which, to my knowledge, commentators have totally overlooked, and this brings us to the row of holes in the ground I mentioned at the outset -- holes waiting to be filled with the corpses of the young in the Lusaka cemetery. Infant mortality in Zambia, as in many countries, is still phenomenally high. As a result the gravediggers always have a row of 15 or 20 small graves excavated and ready for the next day's funerals. All the evidence from ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures would have us conclude that infant mortality was an ever-present specter.

Part of the celebration at the time of weaning was obviously a thanksgiving that the child had survived to his third birthday. The percentage of babies who succumbed to sickness while still sucklings was unquestionably high at all times in the ancient world. This would also fit well with an adoption becoming legal only after the child was weaned, as mentioned earlier.

While Claus Westermann is one of the few commentators to correctly note the importance of infant mortality for this story, he has drawn a false conclusion from it. He states, "The child survived this first and particularly dangerous stage of his life, and it could be expected now that he would continue on."<sup>13</sup> Just the reverse is true. Ancient cultures undoubtedly observed the fact that, except for the first few critical weeks after birth,<sup>14</sup> the most dangerous period for the health of children came in the years immediately following weaning. We are now able to describe quite accurately the

<sup>12</sup>Sarna, *op. cit.*, p.157.

<sup>13</sup>C. Westermann, *Genesis 12-26: A Commentary*, Augsburg Press (1985), 338-339.

<sup>14</sup>Could this be a contributing factor behind delaying the purification of the mother for three weeks or more?

immunological benefits of breast milk, how its high lactose content releases energy slowly and steadily into the blood stream, how it promotes the growth of *lactobacillus bifidus* bacteria which thwart severe diarrhea, and how it protects against certain common enteric pathogens more effectively than antibiotics.<sup>15</sup> Thus the curve of infant mortality due to disease normally remained lower before the weaning of the child than after, when the child no longer received these benefits. And just as the ancients had observed the connection between breast-feeding and the prevention of pregnancy (cf. Hos. 1:8), they must have observed that the post-weaning period was one of the most dangerous periods for a child. Soranus, for example, says the best season for weaning is the spring "which is relatively healthy because of the well-tempered climate; for weaning in the autumn is bad, for then the whole body, on account of the unevenness of the climate, is disposed to disease."<sup>16</sup>

Thus in Genesis 21 we see the happy occasion of thanksgiving that the young Isaac had, humanly speaking, "beat the odds" and survived until his weaning. At the same time, he was now entering upon a new and critical stage of his physical development, one fraught with its own obstacles. His battle for survival into adulthood was not over by a long shot.

With this setting firmly in mind one can appreciate the tensions of the story much better. The strapping 17-year-old's 'mocking' of the three-year-old weakling was certainly not innocent. Sarah had enough worries about her son's survival without having Ishmael and Hagar rub it in. Above all it is Abraham's position that is elucidated. The aged father who so long and desperately awaited male offspring now has a healthy 17-year-old and a promising three-year-old.

<sup>15</sup>For the medical evidence cf. *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding*<sup>4</sup>, LaLeche League International (Franklin Park, IL, 1987), 35, 250, 342-43, 351.

<sup>16</sup>O. Temkin, transl., *op. cit.*, 118.

But now he is told to send away the teenager. No wonder he was so distressed. Was he to put his family's destiny and the fulfillment of God's promises totally on this one child who was just entering upon the dangerous years of childhood? Would it not be an act of sanctified wisdom to keep Ishmael waiting in the wings, just in case?

And it is for this reason alone that God concurs with Sarah's request. Abraham was to put his trust, his hope, and his faith in Isaac alone. He was not to make his own contingency plans as he had done 18 years earlier in conceiving Ishmael. No longer was he to make plans based on human reason, or using St. Paul's terminology, "according to the flesh." The child of the slave woman had to be sent away so that Abraham would learn to trust Jehovah and his promises alone.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the story of the sending away of Hagar is seen also as another in the series of tests which God uses to strengthen Abraham's faith. Called to a strange land, given a land possessed by others, made to wait far past the normal age of bearing children, and now called to put his future onto this one frail three-year-old. He had stumbled at times along the way, as when he agreed to use Hagar to father a child, but God slowly led him on. In the future lay the supreme test on Mt. Moriah. The sending away of Ishmael must be seen as part of the training exercises for that event, not, as Sarna did, as a divine act of "manifest inhumanity."

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<sup>17</sup>This still leaves the question of why the rich Abraham sent them away with only a bit of food and water. Was Abraham to blame? Did the proud and now angry Hagar refuse to accept any more from the man who was turning them out? The story of their survival in the wilderness and what it can tell us of Ishmael's age and character also need further study.

## II. The "Scepter" of Judah (Genesis 49:10a)

Jacob's prophecy concerning Judah runs for nine lines in the Hebrew text (vv.2-27 contain a total of 44 lines) and one could certainly assemble nine weighty tomes of commentary on it. In point of fact, however, only v.10b has been extensively discussed. While there is certainly justice in concentrating on this great Messianic prophecy, I believe the first half of the verse is the key to understanding the message of the prophecy in its true context.

Westermann and others have graphed the prophecies of Jacob to show its recurring attributes: puns, animal metaphors and the leveling of praise or blame towards the 12 sons.<sup>18</sup> Westermann notes in the latter regard that whereas the list begins with Reuben and Simeon and Levi (the latter two dealt with jointly) all of whom are dealt with in terms of "crime and punishment," the latter eight brothers all receive praise or blame in various degrees. The prophecy concerning Judah stands between these two groups and is placed by Westermann in the latter category, receiving praise. I hope to show, however, that Judah stands as a connecting link between the two groups, its prophecy speaking in terms, not of "crime and punishment, but rather "crime and forgiveness."

The crux of v.10a is the interpretation of the two synonymous nouns שֶׁבֶט and מִחֶקֶק. A long tradition of interpretation, one that is also certainly plausible in light of Ezek. 21:10ff., has translated these as sticks belonging to kings. This tradition runs through the LXX<sup>19</sup>, and continues down through the Targums ending in our traditional English translation of *scepter*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>C. Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*, p.242.

<sup>19</sup>It uses the words ἄρχων and ἡγουμενός.

<sup>20</sup>Targum Onkelos is typical: "The ruler shall never depart from the house of Judah, nor the scribe from his children's children for evermore,

Westermann points out, however, that the words' basic meanings are stick, staff or club and that they can equally mean a commander's staff or marshal's staff in contexts that have no connection with kingship as such. In addition מִשְׁבֵּט is used of a shepherd's staff (Lev. 27:32), of clubs used as weapons (Ex. 21:20), and of a simple spear or javelin (2 Sam. 18:14). The idea of authority or power possessed by the rod-bearer grew out of these various meanings which are found some 50 times in the Old Testament; hence מִשְׁבֵּט comes to be used another 150 times in the meaning of *tribe*, i.e., the people under the authority of the rod-bearer.

The second word, מְחֹקֵק, occurs a total of seven times in the canonical Hebrew scriptures, three times meaning "ruler" and four times meaning "ruler's staff."<sup>21</sup> The two words are used in parallel of military rulers in Judges 5:14, and from that passage Westermann concludes, "It is certain, therefore, that the meaning in Genesis 49:10 must be the marshal's or commander's staff," and he cites W.F. Albright, H.J. Zobeland, and H.J. Kittel in support.<sup>22</sup> I humbly beg to differ.

These interpretations, pointing to a military or kingly ruling by Judah, arose from an attempt to integrate 10a with 10b and the following verses. Higher critics, dating the composition of this chapter to a much later period, have seen the kingly references as examples of later propaganda designed to strengthen Davidic family claims to the throne. Evangelicals simply see 10a as part of the prophecy of the kingly Messiah to come. Again, however, if one takes the historical context seriously, the shepherd's staff or tribal prince's staff are

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until the Messiah comes, to whom belongs the Kingdom, and him shall the nations obey."

<sup>21</sup>Interestingly, in three of those four passages, it is referring to Judah (Ps. 60:7 and 108:8, besides the passage under discussion).

<sup>22</sup>Westermann, *op. cit.*, 230.

much more likely interpretations of these two words.

The fact that "Bedouin sheikhs and headmen of villages are said still to carry such insignias of authority" was noted by Skinner.<sup>23</sup> Von Rad noted that decorated sticks "were also honorary symbols of tribal princes who, when they were seated in council, held them between their feet in front of them."<sup>24</sup> Von Rad curtly dismisses this interpretation, however, as not fitting his later dating of the passage. Davidson sees the "between his feet" as a euphemism for procreation.<sup>25</sup> While the latter is doubtful, it is true that tribal rulers from time immemorial have carried decorated staffs to indicate their authority over a village, clan, or tribe. Such staffs were also used in ancient Israel as the story of the budding of Aaron's staff shows (Num. 17:1ff.) Such sticks are still carried routinely by village headmen and tribal chieftains in Zambia, which suggests cause for reconsideration of this passage.

Commentators overlook the fact that we know Judah himself carried such a stick. In the story concerning Tamar in Genesis 38, Judah's distinctive staff along with his cylinder seal and cord were the deposits he left with the supposed prostitute until he could return with full payment. The word used here is מִשְׁבֵּטָה, a virtual synonym of מִשְׁבֵּט. In the Old Testament it is used 60 times of a *staff* and 175 times of a *tribe*. In Isaiah 14:5, מִשְׁבֵּטָה and מִשְׁבֵּט are used in parallel. In the context of the Tamar story, the only stick that could serve as a deposit for as valuable a commodity as a young goat would be the stick that symbolized Judah's authority as tribal chief, his "tribal scepter," if you will. And that stick had to be

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<sup>23</sup>p.520.

<sup>24</sup>Von Rad, *op. cit.* 424. He then cites Micah 7:14 and Numbers 21:18 both of which mention the use of staffs by tribal leaders, but neither of which speak of councils or the technique of holding the rods.

<sup>25</sup>Davidson, *op. cit.*, 304.

uniquely decorated or carved in order to be used, like the cylinder seal, as a means of identification. One would say today, Tamar kept Judah's I.D. card.

If this then is the stick mentioned by Jacob, why is it mentioned in his prophecy? Jacob's message might be paraphrased as follows: "Remember, my son, when you gave away your staff? Your maker does. He knows the evil as well as the good in your past. Yet despite that past sin, the Lord God's promises remain sure. You and your descendants will keep the ruler's staff, not because of your personal worthiness but because of his boundless grace. And eventually, the one will come from your descendants to whom it really belongs, the ruler par excellence, the ruler over all nations."

Thinking of Westermann's schema, the prophecy is neither "crime and punishment" nor praise or blame. It is sin and forgiveness -- pointing to the sinful past of Judah (as Jacob had done with Reuben, Simeon, and Levi) yet pointing forward to he who would wash away all such stains. Thus it stands as the center and focus between the preceding "crime and punishment" and the following "praise and blame" sections. Jacob gave a clear biblical preaching of Law and Gospel.

One could further note that the three sins mentioned specifically in the early verses of Genesis 49 are all mentioned in the narrative of Genesis 27-50. (Reuben in 35:22, Simeon and Levi in 34:25 ff., and now Judah in 37). One might then wonder whether the author has not included them in the narrative precisely in order to illuminate the prophecy of Jacob. If so, Jacob's prophecies in Genesis 49 would take on new importance in understanding the author's method and purpose of composition; it would provide one of the key documents around which the narrative has been constructed, a text which the narrative sets out to elucidate.

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