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CHAPTER THREE

“AMBIGUITIES ABOUT
ABRAM AND ISHMAEL”

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III

AMBIGUITIES ABOUT ABRAM AND ISHMAEL

In the *Qurʾan*, in *Sura* 37:80–84, Noah and Abraham are mentioned in almost the same breath:

Peace be upon Noah among the worlds (peoples)! Thus do We regard those who do good. He was indeed of Our believing servants. . . . of his party was Abraham, when he came to the Lord with a submissive heart.

Whereas in the Biblical tradition Abraham’s monotheistic faith is assumed or insinuated, in the *Qurʾan* it is very clearly articulated:

He [Abraham] asked his father and his people: What is it that you worship? Do you falsely seek gods beside Allah? Or what do you think of the Lord of the worlds? . . . Then he went quietly to their gods and addressed them: Do you not eat? Why do you not speak? Then he struck them forcibly with his right hand. When the people learned of it they came to him running. He said to them: Do you worship that which you yourselves have carved out, whereas Allah has created you and your handiwork?”

Abraham’s kinfolk were ready to burn him alive for his verbal and physical abuse of their gods, but he was delivered by God. And having experienced their violence toward him, Abraham prayed: *rabbi, habu lî minasṣāliḥîna*, “Lord grant me righteous progeny (literally, “from the righteous,” noting that the *ṣāliḥ* “righteous, pious” used here is related to *ṣulḥ* meaning “reconciliation, peace”).

God answered Abraham’s prayer for a different kind of family than that of his family-of-origin with a birth announce-

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ment: “So We gave him glad tidings (*baššara* = בְּשָׂרָה = εὐαγγελίζω) of a gentle son (*ḡulamin ḥalīmin*).” This would be Ishmael, born of Hagar, Sarah’s handmaid, who was given to Abraham as a second wife.

Below I address in some detail the differences between the *Qurʾanic* statement that Ishmael would be *ḥalīm* “gentle, mild, patient,” over against the tradition in Gen 16:10, that Ishmael would be a “wild ass of a man.” But first a word about God’s covenant with Noah which bears upon Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, then a word about the varied interpretations of God’s covenant with Abraham, and finally some insights concerning Ishmael’s disposition.

THE COVENANT WITH NOAH

In forty plus years of teaching in Yokohama, Tokyo, Philadelphia, and Wynnwood, Pennsylvania I found that the mere mention of Noah’s name would trigger excited responses from seminarians about a universal flood and the rainbow which followed the flood—and the promise that God would never do it again. But when asked about the prohibition and the irrevocable penalty component of God’s covenant with Noah, most seminarians have responded with bewildered silence. Gen 9:6 went unnoticed or unaddressed in their Sunday school classrooms and in their church school curricula. Gen 9:6 is where God told Noah “*Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.*” With this stipulation, capital punishment was introduced to Noah and his progeny as the deterrent against humans killing fellow human beings. It was a succinct prohibition against (1) human sacrifice, (2) against murder, and (3) against warfare.

If Abraham was, as stated in the *Qurʾan*, in “Noah’s party” and was Noah’s “follower” (*šīʿat*) he would surely have been

aware of God's prohibition *of* and penalty *for* any human sacrifice. Thus, when Abraham was tested by God's call in a dream for him to sacrifice Ishmael (according to the *Qu'ran*, *Sura* 37:101–110), or in real life for him to sacrifice Isaac (according to Genesis 22), two lives were at risk—Abraham's own life, as well as his son's. Not only were Isaac and Ishmael, according to the different traditions, willing to cooperate with their father and be obedient unto death, but Abraham, too, was willing to die—for the covenant with Noah was in force and Abraham was no exception: "Abraham, if you slaughter/sacrifice a human being, you die also." It was just that simple. The truth revealed was that God did not want the blood of Isaac, or of Ishmael, or of Abraham. The covenant with Noah remained sacrosanct. Human sacrifices had become a sacrilege.

THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM

The covenant with Abraham, as found in Genesis 12, 15, and 17, reflects three different theological traditions, for which we can borrow the designations offered by the literary critics. Genesis 12 is "J," the Yahwistic tradition (so called because the deity is referred to by the holy name YHWH = Jehovah = *ʿAdonay* = LORD); Gen 15 is "E," the Elohist tradition (so called because the deity is referred to by the honorific plural noun *ʿElohîm* "God"); and Genesis 17 is "P," the Priestly tradition. There are three parts to each of these three traditions.

First is the announcement that Abraham's progeny will become as prolific as the dust of the earth, as the sands of the seashores, as the stars of the sky, and as the droplets of a fine drizzling rain (assuming the *raham* of *Abraham* is related to the Arabic *ruham* "drizzle," as suggested by Delitzsch in 1887). Secondly, Abraham's vast progeny will be *given* a

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place to live, either in the land of Canaan (in the Yahwistic and Priestly traditions) or in all the land between the Nile and the Euphrates (in the Elohist tradition). The third element in the Yahwist's tradition (12:3) was that "by you [Abraham] *all the families in the earth shall be blessed.*" But the third element in the Elohist's tradition (15:18–20) was that at least ten nations would be *dispossessed*, rather than being *blessed* by Abraham and his progeny. Here was the first hint of the bloodshed and ethnic cleansing of Canaanites which was to follow. The Priestly tradition was also silent about Abraham's progeny being a blessing for *all* the families on earth, having instead as its third element the requirement for male circumcision as a sign of the covenant and a permanent proof of one's ethnic identity.

A survey of the literature of the Pentateuch reveals (1) the increasing marginalization and violations of God's covenant with Noah which prohibited humans from killing other humans (as when Moses required the Levites to kill the members of their immediate families as part of their ordination rite [Exo 32:25–29, RSV]), and (2) the marginalization of the universalism of the Yahwist who understood that Abraham and his progeny were chosen (i.e., *drafted for service*, not *selected for privilege*). Once we leave the Yahwistic tradition in Genesis (12:1–4; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; and 28:14) the phrase "a blessing for all the families of the earth" does not appear again until Jer 4:2 and Acts 3:25.

The universalism was replaced by an increasing ethnocentrism, culminating in Deut 32:8 where, with the exclusion of Esau and exclusion of Ishmael, Jacob alone is recognized as "LORD's portion," as God's "allotted heritage." These theological revisions were one way in which some early Israelites exercised their right of religious freedom and thereby created security issues for themselves and their neighbors. In my opinion the covenant with Noah forbidding human bloodshed and the covenant with Abraham whereby

all the families of the earth were to be blessed were the prelude to the universalism found in the later revelation in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world . . .”

ISHMAEL: A GENTLEMAN OR A WILD MAN

The third ambiguity about the covenants with Noah and Abraham concerns Judaeo-Christian traditions about Ishmael, rooted in Genesis 16:10–12, which allegedly states, “You [Hagar] shall bear a son and call his name Ishmael. He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man; and every man’s hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen” (KJV, RSV).

Traditional Jewish and Christian interpretations considered Ishmael to have been predestined by God to be an internecine fighter, as though he were some wild animal devouring his own kind. Ishmael’s descendants were supposedly destined to make raids against members of their extended family which would be scattered from the borders of Assyria to the borders of Egypt. Thus, the ambiguities are at least two fold. First, if the shedding of human blood was really forbidden by God in his covenant with Noah, why would God predestine Abraham’s firstborn to be a wild killer? Secondly, if Abraham and his progeny were to be a servant people by whom all the families of the earth were to be blessed, how could this happen if half of Abraham’s progeny were wild ass warriors?

Attempts has been made by a number of commentators to turn Ishmael’s label “a wild ass of a man” into some sort of a compliment. The Arabic cognate of פָּרָה (*pere*) “wild ass” is فرأ (*fara*), about which is the saying “every kind a game is in the belly of the wild ass,” meaning “every animal is inferior to the wild ass,” as though the wild ass were a carnivore able to devour whatever it chooses (Lane 1877: 2357).

By making the wild ass the “king of the wastelands” it was supposedly equal to the lion’s being the “king of the jungle.”

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Skinner (1930: 287) suggested translating פְּרָא אָדָם (*perē^o ʾādām*) as “the wild ass of humanity” and, in light of Job 39: 5–8 (“who has let the wild ass go free . . .”) and Jer 2:24 (“a wild ass used to the wilderness . . .”), commented: “It is a fine image of the free intractable Bedouin character which is to be manifest in Ishmael’s descendants.” Skinner also conjectured that the עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-אָחָיו (*ʿal pēnê kōl ʿehayw* = “upon the faces of all his brothers”) in Gen 16:12 “seems to express the idea of defiance.”

Similarly, von Rad (1961: 189) noted, “He will be a real Bedouin, a ‘wild ass of a man’ (*perē^o*, zebra), i.e., free and wild (cf. Job 39.5–8), eagerly spending his life in a war of all against all—a worthy son of his rebellious and proud mother!” Speiser (1964: 117–118) translated “He shall be a wild colt of a man, His hands against everyone, And everyone’s hand against him; And in the face of all his kin he shall camp.” Speiser then identified Ishmael’s being a פְּרָא (*perē^o*) with Joseph’s being a בֶּן פֶּרֶת (*bēn porat*) “a fruitful bough” in Gen 49:22, which he translated as “wild colt” and called attention to the Akkadian *lullū-awēlu* “savage of a man” as being a parallel expression.

However, the Hebrew פְּרָא (*pr^o*) can also be from the stem פִּירָא (*pērā^o*) “fruit.” The usual spelling in Hebrew of “fruit” and “to bear fruit” is פְּרִי (*pērī*) and פָּרָה (*pārāh*). But in Hosea 13:15 יִפְרִיא (*yapri^o*) “he will be fruitful, he will have progeny” appears, as though the stem could be פְּרָא (*pr^o*) as well as פָּרָה (*prh*). Instead of פְּרָא אָדָם (*perē^o ʾādām*) meaning “wild ass man” it may simply be another way of stating what appears unambiguously in Gen 17:20, “I will make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous. He will be the father of twelve chieftains; and I will make him a great nation.” (Ordinarily, this would have been written as *ʾādām pōre^o*, rather than the inverted *pōre^o ʾādām*.)

The Greek Septuagint of Genesis 16:11–12 reads in part as follows:

ἰδοὺ σὺ ἐν γαστρὶ ἔχεις καὶ τέξῃ υἷόν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰσμαηλ . . . οὗτος ἔσται ἄγροικος ἄνθρωπος αἱ χεῖρες αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ πάντας καὶ αἱ χεῖρες πάντων ἐπ’ αὐτόν καὶ κατὰ πρόσωπον πάντων τῶν ἀδελφῶν αὐτοῦ κατοικήσει

You shall bear a son and call
his name Ishmael . . . He shall be a *countryman*,
his hands on all, and the hands of all on him,
and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.

This Greek text reflects a slightly different reading of the Hebrew. The phrase “he will be a country man” (i.e. a rustic living in the wilderness) is obviously from a *Vorlage* reading **בַּרְא** (*bārāʾ*) “country, forest, prairie” for the **פֶּרֶא** (*pereʾ*) of the Masoretic text. The Greek text made the land wild rather than making Ishmael wild.

The options suggested by this variant in the Septuagint have generally gone unnoticed. If the *Vorlage* of the Septuagint had **בַּרְא** (*bārāʾ*), instead of **פֶּרֶא** (*pereʾ*), the Arabic cognate **بَرَا** (*baraʾ*) “free, secure, safe, free from disease, distress or debt” needs to come into focus. For the slave woman to be promised that her son would be *free* would have been great news, helping her make her own bondage bearable.

By using the language of Ishmael to interpret statements in Hebrew about Ishmael (i.e., by appealing to Arabic cognates of Biblical Hebrew as scholars have done for centuries), I propose the following translation of Gen 16:11–12,

You shall bear a son; you shall call his name Ishmael . . .
He shall be a peacemaker, a reconciler—
his hand in everyone’s
and the hand of everyone in his;
and in the favor of all his brothers
he will dwell (*in tranquility*).¹

This translation recognizes the **פֶּרֶא** (*prʾ*) here as the cognate of the Arabic verb **فَرَعَ** (*faraʿa*) “he intervened, he made

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peace, or effected a reconciliation” and noun **مفزع** (*mifra^c*) “makes peace or effects a reconciliation between people.” For the well attested interchange of the ³*aleph* (א) and the ^c*ayin* (ע)—which suggests that the **פרא** (*pr³*) could equal the **פרע** (*pr^c*) “peacemaker”—the following examples are noteworthy:

אָגַם	and	עָגַם	“to be sad”	(<i>āgam</i> and <i>āgam^c</i>)
אָד	and	עָד	“to turn”	(<i>ūd</i> and <i>ūd^c</i>)
גָּאַל	and	גָּעַל	“to pollute”	(<i>gā³al</i> and <i>gā^cal</i>)
תָּאַב	and	תָּעַב	“to abhor”	(<i>tā³ab</i> and <i>tā^cab</i>)
גָּמָא	and	גָּמַע	“to suck”	(<i>gāmā³</i> and <i>gāma^c</i>)
פְּתָאָם	and	פְּתַע	“a moment.” ²	(<i>pit³om</i> and <i>peta^c</i>)
פְּרָא	and	פְּרֹעַ	“wild” ³	(<i>pere³</i> and <i>perûa^c</i>)

Support for reading the **פרא** (*pr³*) as a by-form of the **פרע** (*pr^c*) “peacemaker” comes from an Arabic cognate of **אדם** (*ādām*), namely, **أدم** (*ādama*) “he effected a reconciliation between them; brought them together, made them sociable, or familiar with one another . . . and induced love and agreement between them.” The combination of **פרא** (*porē³*) “peacemaker” and **אדם** (*odēm*) “reconciler” makes for an emphatic equivalence to Abraham’s request in *Sura* 37:100, noted above, “Lord grant me righteous progeny,” noting that the word *ṣalih* “righteous, pious” is related to *ṣulḥ* “reconciliation” and “peace.”

The phrase **יָדוֹ בְּכָל יָד וְיָד בְּכָל יָד** (*yadô bakkol wēyad kol bô*) in Gen 16:12, when taken literally (“his [Ishmael’s] hand *in* everyone’s and the hand of everyone *in* his”), further supports the idea of Hagar’s being given the good news that Ishmael would become a congenial person active in reconciliation and peace.

The phrase **עַל-פְּנֵי כָל-אָחָיו נָפַל** (*al pñê kôl ʿeḥayw nāpāl*) in Gen 25:18b has been variously translated. Speiser

(1964: 187) rendered it, “and each made forays against his various kinsmen.” The *Torah* translation read the MT נָפַל (nāpāl) “he fell” as a plural and settled for “they [the Ishmaelites] made raids against all their kinsmen.” The NRSV kept the singular and opted for “he [Ishmael] settled down along side of all his people,” with a footnote option for “down in opposition to” for the עַל־פְּנֵי (°al pēnē) “upon the faces.”

The translation proposed here, “he embraced all his brothers,” recognizes that נָפַל עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־אָחָיו (nāpāl °al pēnē kōl °ehayw), “he fell upon the face of all his brothers,” is essentially the same idiom as that found in Gen 45:14,

וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוְאֵרֵי בְנֵי־מִן־אָחָיו
wayyipol °al ṣawwē°rē binyāmin °ahîw
“and he embraced Benjamin his brother”

and exactly the same as that in Gen 50:1

וַיִּפֹּל יוֹסֵף עַל־פְּנֵי אָבִיו
wayyipol yōsep °al penē °abîw
“Joseph embraced his father.”

Were these phrases taken literally (“he fell upon the neck/face of his brother/father”) it would mean that “Joseph assaulted his brother/father.” Such a translation would be lexicographically correct, but otherwise ridiculous. Ishmael can surely be extended the same courtesy given to Joseph when the נָפַל עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־אָחָיו (°al pēnē kōl °ehāyw nāpāl) of 25: 18b is simply recognized as the same idiom for an affectionate embrace—but with an inverted word order probably used for emphasis.⁴

CONCLUSION

The angel’s word to Hagar that Ishmael would be a פְּרָא אָדָם (pr° °dm) is unfortunately ambiguous. Serious exegesis of the Greek and Hebrew texts of Gen 16:10–12 requires careful consideration of a number Hebrew roots and defini-

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tions, most of which have survived as cognates in classical Arabic. These include:

- **בְּרָא** (*br^o*) “forest, wilderness, country”
- **בְּרָא** (*br^o*) “free, secure, safe”
- **פָּרָא** (*pr^o*) “to bear fruit, to have progeny”
- **פָּרַע** (*pr^e*) “a peacemaker”
- **אַדָּם** (*^odm*) “a reconciler, mediator”
- **שָׁכַן** (*škn*) “quiet, calm, tranquil, peaceful”

Five of these six words carry explicitly positive meanings and would have been well received by any expectant mother as a good omen for her child. Only **בְּרָא** (*bārā^o*) “wilderness” would be a neutral term; and only **פָּרָא** (*per^e*) “wild ass” would have had definite negative connotations. Setting aside the two definitions which are suggested by the Septuagintal variant, it seems quite likely that the angel’s words to Hagar included two word plays: (1) Ishmael would be *prolific* (*pōrē^o*) and a *peacemaker* (*pōrē^o* = *pōrē^e*) and (2) a *reconciler* (*^odēm*) and a “gentleman” (*^odām*). Far from being negative, derogatory, or inflammatory, the words about Ishmael and the Ishmaelites in Genesis were laudatory and fully compatible with the divine promise to Abraham that through *all* his progeny “*all* the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3); and they are fully compatible with God’s covenant stipulation to Noah that all human beings are uniquely in the image of God. Consequently, human life is *sacred* and the killing of humans by humans is *anathema*.

NOTES

1. The **יִשְׁכֹּן** (*yiškon*) is the cognate of Arabic **سكن** (*sakana*), which means not only “he inhabited, or dwelt, or abode,” but also “he became still, quiet, calm, tranquilized unruffled, peaceful” (Lane 1872: 1392–1393; Wehr 1979: 487–488).

2. Examples of the interchange of א (*aleph*) and ע (*ayin*) in Arabic include (1) أَرْض (*ʿaraḍa*) “he asked for, or petitioned for, a thing he wanted” and عَرْض (*ʿaraḍa*) “he asked for, or petitioned for, a thing he wanted” (Lane 1863: 48; 1874: 2005) and (2) أْفْرَة (*ʿafurrat*) and عْفْرَة (*ʿafurrat*) “the beginning, or first part of the heat . . . or the vehemence thereof” (Lane 1877: 2356).

3. Jastrow 1213 “savage, cruel” (where *Midrash Rabbah* on Gen 16:12, “‘a savage among men’ in its literal sense, for all other plunder goods, but he [Edom-Rome] captures souls,” was cited); and Jastrow 1221 “wild, wild hair, neglected condition.”

4. The Septuagint’s κατὰ πρόσωπον πάντων τῶν ἀδελφῶν αὐτοῦ κατώκησεν, “he dwelt before all his brothers,” reflects a *Vorlage* with זָבַל (*zābal*) “to dwell” (so translated in the KJV of Gen 30:20) for the נָפַל (*nāpal*) “to fall” of the Masoretic text.