

CLARIFYING  
BAFFLING  
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER THREE

“ISHMAEL: A PEACE MAKER  
GENESIS 16:10 –12”

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### III

## ISHMAEL: A PEACE MAKER

### GENESIS 16:10–12

#### INTRODUCTION

וַיִּלְדֶּתָ בֵּן וְקָרָאתָ שְׁמוֹ יִשְׁמָעֵאל...  
הוּא יִהְיֶה פָרָא אָדָם  
יָדוֹ בְּכָל יָד כָּל בּוֹ  
וְעַל-פָּנָיו כָּל-אָחָיו יִשְׁכֵּן:

You 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)

The translations of Gen 16:10–12 and Gen 25:17–18, cited below, illustrate the widely divergent interpretations of the texts dealing with Ishmael's character and lifestyle. Traditional Jewish and Christian interpretations considered Ishmael to have been predestined to become an internecine fighter, as though he were some wild animal devouring his own kind. Ishmael's descendants were similarly destined to make raids against members of their extended family which would be scattered from the borders of Assyria to the borders of Egypt.

The translation presented in this study departs radically from these traditions. With the help of Arabic cognates a

number of Hebrew words can be recovered which permit (1) the angel's announcement to Hagar about Ishmael (16:10–12) to be read as absolutely good news for everyone, and permit (2) Ishmael's death-bed scene and family history (25:12–18) to speak of congenial family relationships, evidenced by Ishmael's embracing his brethren just before he died.

The attempt 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 פָּרָא "wild ass" is فَرَا (*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." Skinner (1930: 287) suggested translating פָּרָא אָדָם 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 conjectured that the עַל-פָּנָיו in 16:12 "seems to express the idea of defiance (as Jb 1:11 [עַל-פָּנָיו יְבָרְכֶךָ] "he will 'curse' thee to thy face"), though it is not easy to connect this with the verb [שָׁכַן] 'to dwell'."

Similarly, von Rad (1961: 189) noted, "He will be a real Bedouin, a 'wild ass of a man' (*pere*, 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 identified Ishmael’s being a פָּרָא with Joseph’s being a בֶּן פֶּרֶת in Gen 49:22, which he translated as “wild colt.”<sup>1</sup> Speiser called attention to the Akkadian *lullū-awēlu* “savage of a man” as being a parallel expression. Appealing to the עַל-פְּנֵי בֶן-הַשְּׂנוּאָה הַבְּכֹר “in disregard of the (older) son of the unloved wife,” in Deut 21:16, Speiser took the עַל-פְּנֵי (literally, “upon/against the face of”) in 16:18 to be an idiom meaning “in defiance/disregard of.”

However, the Hebrew פָּרָא can also be from the stem פִּירָא “fruit” which is the cognate of Syriac פִּרְאָ (pe<sup>3</sup>ra<sup>3</sup>) “fruit.” The usual spelling in Hebrew of “fruit” and “to bear fruit” is פְּרִי and פֶּרֶה. But in Hosea 13:15 יִפְרִיא “he will be fruitful, have progeny” appears, as though the stem could be פִּירָא as well as פֶּרֶה.<sup>2</sup> Instead of פָּרָא אָדָם meaning “wild ass human being” it may simply be another way of stating what appears unambiguously in Gen 17:20, “I will make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous (with the MT וְהִפְרִיתִי equal to וְהִפְרִיאֲתִי). He will be the father of twelve chiefs; and I will make him a great nation.”

### THE SEPTUAGINT TRANSLATION

καὶ τέξῃ υἱὸν καὶ καλέσεις τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰσμαῆλ  
 . . . οὗτος ἔσται ἄγροικος ἄνθρωπος  
 αἱ χεῖρες αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ πάντα  
 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 translation reflects a slightly different reading of the Hebrew. The phrase ἔσται ἄγροικος ἄνθρωπος, “he will be a countryman” (i.e. a rustic living in the wilderness) is obviously from a *Vorlage* reading ברא “country, forest, prairie” (BDB 141; Jastrow 188–189) for the MT פרא.<sup>3</sup> The Greek text made the land wild rather than Ishmael.

The option suggested by this variant in the Septuagint has generally gone unnoticed in the commentaries. If the *Vorlage* of the Septuagint had ברא, instead of the MT פרא, and were ברא the preferred reading, two Arabic cognates are of great interest. The first is بر (barra) “he was pious [towards his father or parents, and towards God . . . and was kind, or good and affectionate and gentle in behaviour, towards his kindred; and kind, or good, in his dealings with strangers” (Lane 1863: 175). The angel’s announcement to Hagar that her son would become ברא/בר may well have assured her that her son would show her due *filial piety* and manifest *godly devotion*. Such a prediction would have been a welcomed promise—compared to the bad news that her son would become a “wild ass” who would continually fight with his brothers.

Secondly, if the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the Septuagint had ברא and if it was the original reading, the Arabic cognate بر (bara) “free, secure, safe, free from disease, distress or debt”

(Lane 1863: 178–179) could provide further insight into what may well have been a *double entendre* in the original tradition. 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.

The Septuagint translators can be faulted for reading their text in light of the reality in their time. Because the Ishmaelites occupied the eastern **מִדְבָּר** “desert” they simply read the **בְּרָא** / **בַּר** as the well attested synonym of **מִדְבָּר**, rather than the more rare **בְּרָא** / **בַּר** “filial piety” and “free.”

#### INSIGHTS FROM ARABIC COGNATES

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*).<sup>4</sup>

(McDaniel)

The above translation recognizes the MT **פָּרָא** as the cognate of the Arabic verb **فَرَعَ** (*fara<sup>c</sup>a*) “he intervened, he made peace, or effected a reconciliation” and noun **مِفْرَع** (*mifra<sup>c</sup>*) “one who interposes as a restrainer between persons [at variance] and makes peace or effects a reconciliation between them” (Lane 1877: 2378, 2380; Hava 1915: 558). For the well attested interchange of the **פָּ** and the **פַּ** (which suggests that the MT **פָּרָא** could equal **פַּרַע** “peacemaker”), the following examples are noteworthy:<sup>5</sup>

|          |     |        |                                  |
|----------|-----|--------|----------------------------------|
| אָגַם    | and | עָגַם  | “to be sad”                      |
| אוּר     | and | עוּר   | “to turn”                        |
| נָאֵל    | and | נָעַל  | “to pollute”                     |
| תָּאָב   | and | תָּעַב | “to abhor”                       |
| נָמָא    | and | נָמַע  | “to suck”                        |
| פְּתָאִם | and | פְּתַע | “a moment.” <sup>6</sup>         |
| פְּרוּעַ | and | פְּרָא | “wild growth, wild” <sup>7</sup> |

Moreover, given the interchange of א and ה, the Arabic فوه (*faruha*) “he was skillful” and فاره (*fârih*) “skillful, beautiful, comely, agile, strong” (Lane 1877: 2390) would also be a contextually attractive alternative for the פרא “wild ass.”

Support for reading the פרא as a by-form of פרע “peacemaker” comes from the Arabic أدم (*ʿadama*) “he effected a reconciliation between them; brought them together, made them sociable, or familiar with one another . . . or to induce love and agreement between them” (Castell 1669: 41; Lane 1863: 35).<sup>8</sup> Were פרא “peacemaker” the intended meaning, the אדם “reconciler” could have been added as a clarifying gloss. Or the redundant פרא “peacemaker” and אדם “reconciler” could have been used together for emphasis.

Moreover, the Arabic أدام (*ʿidâm*) “the aider, and manager of the affairs . . . and right order of the affairs of his people,” as well as أدامة (*ʿadamat*) “the chief or provost of his people . . . the exemplar, or object of imitation, of his people or family, by means of whom they are known” (Lane 1863: 36) could well be the cognate of the אדם in this passage.<sup>9</sup>

The phrase יָדוֹ בְּכֹל יָדָא כָּל בּוֹ 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. There is no need to interpret this phrase as evidence of widespread hostility in Ishmael’s or Abraham’s extended family<sup>10</sup>—unless the narrative is interpreted in order to accommodate later historical developments or legitimate current Near Eastern hostilities. Were the hand movement one of hostile intent, the preposition of choice would have been עַל “against,” not בְּ “in.” The “hand-in-hand” here may not be quite the same as a Western “handshake” or a “high-five,” but it certainly can be the equivalent of תָּקַע כַּף, “to clap the hand” of someone as a ratifying gesture of agreement.

#### REARRANGING GENESIS 25:17–18

After naming the twelve sons of Ishmael in Gen 25:13–15, the MT of 25:16 provided a summary statement:

*These are the sons of Ishmael  
and these are their names,  
by their villages and by their encampments,  
twelve princes according to their tribes.*

The next statement should be the one found in MT 25:18a:

*They [the sons of Ishmael] dwelt from Havilah  
(as) you go to Assyria, as far as Shur  
which is just before Egypt.*

Having thus dealt with the Ishmaelites (in what is now 25:12–16 and 25:18a), the narrator then focused on Ishmael himself in 25:17a, 18b, and 17b, as follows:

*These are the years of the life of Ishmael,  
a hundred and thirty-seven years.  
He embraced all his brethren,<sup>11</sup>  
then breathed his last and died,  
and was gathered to his kindred.*

The phrase **עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־אֶחָיו נָפַל** in 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** “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**.

The translation proposed here, “he *embraced* all his brothers,” recognizes that **נָפַל עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־אֶחָיו**, “he fell upon the face of all his brothers,” is essentially the same idiom as that found in Gen 45:14, **וַיִּפֹּל עַל־צַוְאָרְיוֹ בְּנֵימִן־אָחָיו**, “and he embraced Benjamin his brother,” and exactly the same as that in Gen 50:1 **וַיִּפֹּל יוֹסֵף עַל־פְּנֵי אָבִיו** “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 could be lexographically correct, but otherwise ridiculous. Ishmael can surely be extended the same courtesy given to Joseph when the **עַל־פְּנֵי כָל־אֶחָיו נָפַל** of 25:18b is simply recognized as

the same idiom for an affectionate embrace— but with an inverted word order probably for emphasis.<sup>12</sup>

### CONCLUSION

The angel's word to Hagar that Ishmael would be a **פרא אדם** may not have been understood by Hagar as meaning “an onager man” or “wild ass human being.” It certainly did not mean that to the Septuagint translators. Serious exegesis of the Greek and Hebrew texts of Gen 16:10–12 requires careful consideration of a number Hebrew roots and definitions, most of which have survived as cognates in classical Arabic. These include:

- **ברא** “forest, wilderness, country”
- **בר** “filial piety, kind to strangers, devotion to God”
- **ברא** “free, secure, safe”
- **פרא** “to bear fruit, to have progeny”
- **פרע** “a peacemaker”
- **פרה** “beautiful, strong, comely, agile”
- **אדם** “a reconciler, mediator”
- **אדם** “a chief or provost of his people”
- **שכן** “quiet, calm, tranquil, peaceful”

Eight of these nine words carry explicitly positive meanings and would have been well received by any expectant mother as a good omen for her child. Only **ברא** “wilderness” would be a neutral term; and only **פרא** “onager” would have had definite negative connotations. Setting aside the three definitions above which are suggested by the Septuagintal variant, it seems quite likely that the angel's words to Hagar included

a *double entendre* and carried multiple layers of meaning. Ishmael would be *prolific* (פָּרָא) and become the *chief* and *provost* (אָדָם) of his tribe, setting the example as a *peace-maker* (פָּרָא = פָּרַע) and *reconciler* (אָדָם).

As reconstructed (25:18b followed by 17:b), Ishmael “*embraced all his brethren, then breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his kindred,*” which suggests that Ishmael had been able to maintain peace among his tribes during his lifetime, which, no doubt, required some conciliatory efforts.

What happened after Ishmael’s death is a different story, and the post-Ishmael enmities which arose in Abraham’s extended family contributed to those translations of Gen 16: 10–12 and 25:17–18 which were controlled by that history, so as to assert that the inter-tribal violence was mandated from heaven. Quite to the contrary, the brief excerpts about Ishmael may have been designed to reshape that history of violence by hailing Ishmael as the exemplar of peace and reconciliation.

By enlarging the lexicons of standard Biblical (Judean) Hebrew through a study of Arabic cognates, it becomes a little easier to understand just what the angel said to Hagar and what it was that the narrator actually said about Ishmael. Far from being negative, derogatory, or inflammatory, the words about Ishmael and the Ishmaelites in Genesis were laudatory and compatible with the divine promise to Abraham that, through his progeny, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3).<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1. Speiser related “the whole verse to fauna and not, with tradition, to flora.” Support for his argument comes from the Arabic بنات صعدة (*banātu ṣaʿdata*) “wild asses” (Lane 1872: 1688) which is the exact equivalent of the בְּנֹת צֵדָה in Gen 49: 22.
2. The Septuagint of Hos 16:12 reads διαστειλεῖ “division,” which reflects a *Vorlage* with יִפְרֵא for the MT יִפְרִיא (Wolfe 1974: 222). Compare the translation of Anderson and Freedman (1989: 625, 640), “He became the wild one among his brothers.” They parsed יִפְרִיא “to be wild” as an elative *Hiphʿil* denominative of פֵּרָא “ass,” thereby disassociating it from פְּרִיא / פְּרִי “progeny, fruit.”
3. For the confusion of פ and ב, see Delitzsch 1920: 115, §118. The Arabic cognate of בַּר “wilderness” is بَر (barr) “desert(s), waste(s), uncultivated land without herbage or water” (Lane 1863: 176–177). Assuming the *Vorlage* had בֵּרָא, it was read as a by-form of בַּרְר, similar to the by-forms of עֵי and לֵי stems cited by Gesenius (GKC §77<sup>c</sup>). Note also the occurrence of בַּר in Psa 2:11, discussed below in Chapter XIV.
4. The יִשְׁכֵן is the cognate of Arabic سَكَن (*sakana*) “he dwelt” and “he became calm, unruffled, peaceful” (Lane 1872: 1392–1393; Wehr 1979: 487–488). In Gen 33:10 seeing one's “face” is associated with being in one's “favor.”
5. The quiescence and/or the assimilation of the ע is well attested in the name of the Phoenician goddess *Tanit / Tannit*, who was also known as <sup>c</sup>*Anat* (עַנַּת). The name *Tanit / Tannit* (תַּנַּת) was probably spelled originally תַּעַנַּת, from the stem עוֹן “to save,” to which was added a feminine ת suffix and a ת nominal prefix. Following the addition of the ת noun prefix, the ע was assimilated and \**ta<sup>c</sup>nt*

became *ta(n)nt*, which, with the anaptyctic vowel, became *tannit* (like \**ba<sup>ˁ</sup>l* > *ba<sup>ˁ</sup>al* > בל). In the El Hofra texts באל appears for בעל “lord” (see Berthier and Charlier, 1955, text 13:2).

6. Examples of the interchange of א and ע in Arabic include (1) أرض (*arada*) “he asked for, or petitioned for, a thing he wanted” and عرض (*arada*) “he asked for, or petitioned for, a thing he wanted” (Lane 1863: 48; 1874: 2005) and (2) أفرق (*afurrat*) and عفرة (*afurrat*) “*the beginning, or first part of the heat . . . or the vehemence thereof*” (Lane 1877: 2356).

7. Jastrow 1213 and 1221, who cited *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.”

8. Even the title בן אדם, always rendered “the son of man,” may well mean “a reconciler.” In this case, the question which Jesus asked his disciples in Matt 16: 13 was originally not, “Who do men say that the Son of Man is?” but “who do men say *the reconciler* was?” This makes the disciples response (“some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets”) much more intelligible. Elijah was viewed in Mal 4:6 as the great reconciler “turning the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers.” The prophets, as illustrated by Ezekiel who was called בן אדם repeatedly, were agents of reconciliation rather than messianic figures who were entitled “Son of Man,” as the title was employed in the inter-testamental literature (for which see Klausner [1956]: 229–231, 291–292, 358–360).

9. The Hebrew אדם “provost, commander” can be found in the Shem Tob Hebrew Gospel of Matthew (from around 1400 A.D.) in 8:9 where the Roman centurion said to Jesus

ואני אדם חוטא ויש לי ממשלת  
תחת ידי פירושים ופרשים ורוכבים

Although Howard (1995: 32–33) translated this as “I am a sinful man and I have authority under the Pharisees and [I have] horses and riders . . . ,” the text really means, “I am a provost/centurion (אדם), a nobleman (חוטא); and I have authority! Under my power are mounted-horsemen (פירושים = *celerēs*), equestrians (פרשים = *equites*), charioteers (רוכבים = *currus*) . . . .”

The חוטא does not mean “sinner” but is the cognate of Arabic حوط (*hawîṭ/hayyîṭ*) “a man who guards, protects, or defends” and the Aramaic חטי “nobleman, one who lives in luxury” (Castell 1669: 1156; Lane 1865: 671; Jastrow 448).

10. Contra Ringgren (1974: 190) who stated succinctly “Ishmael will be an enemy to his brothers (i.e., other tribes) (Gen. 9:25).”

11. See Ringgren (1974: 190) for a discussion on the use of אח for one’s kinsmen or fellow tribesmen.

12. The Septuagint’s κατὰ πρόσωπον πάντων τῶν ἀδελφῶν αὐτοῦ κατ᾽ἀκῆσει, “he dwelt before all his brothers,” reflects a *Vorlage* with זבל “to dwell” (so translated in the KJV of Gen 30:20) for the MT נפל “to fall.”

13. The name Esau (עשו) can also be clarified by Arabic. It is probably a metathetic variant of שוע which would be the cognate سوغ (*sawǧ*), used in the phrases (1) هو أسوغ أخاه (1) (*hū ʾaswāǧa ʾḥâhu*) which can mean either “he was born with his brother” [which fits Esau] or “he was born after his brother” [in which case it could only fit Jacob], and (2) أسوغه مالاً (*sawwāǧhu mâlin*) “he made property allowable, lawful, or free to him” (Lane 1872: 1468), which fits well Esau’s selling his birthright to Jacob.