

SONS OF ADAM

Studies of Old Testament Characters in New Testament Light

by

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CHAPTER THREE

Hagar and Ishmael

IN THE LIBRARY of the Theological Seminary at New Brunswick, New Jersey, there is a marble statue of Hagar and Ishmael. It was placed there by Doctor John G. Lansing who was instrumental, under GOD, in the organization of The Arabian Mission in 1899. He was professor of Old Testament languages and inspired his students with love for Hebrew, not only, but for Arabia and the Arabs. Born in Damascus and conversant with Arabic literature, he spoke often of the neglected Peninsula and of the Prodigal Son of the Old Testament - Ishmael.

The tragic story of Hagar and Ishmael is indeed a strange episode in the life of Abraham the friend of GOD.

Hagar, the mother of the Arabian patriarch, seems to have occupied a prominent place in Abraham's household and appears to have brought to that position not only mental gifts but also an inward participation in the faith of the GOD of Abraham. She was probably added to the family of faith during Abraham's sojourn in Egypt and occupied the same position toward the female servants that Eliezer of Damascus did to the male servants.

It is when she was driven forth into the wilderness by the jealous harshness of Sarah that we have the first revelation of GOD regarding her seed.

"The angel of the Lord found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur." "And He said, Whence earnest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai."

“And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Return to thy mistress and submit thyself under her hands. And the angel of the Lord said unto her . . . I will multiply thy seed exceedingly that it shall not be numbered for multitude. And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Behold thou art with child, and shalt bear a son and shalt call his name Ishmael (*GOD will hear*); because the Lord hath heard thy affliction. And he will be a wild man, his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren. And she called the name of the Lord that spake unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after Him that seeth me.”

It is plain from the context that the angel of the Lord and the Lord Himself are here identified; it was the angel of the Lord, the angel of the covenant or the CHRIST of the Old Testament.

Why should this "**angel**" first appear to the Egyptian bondwoman?

Is it that the Lord always reveals Himself first to the poorest, most distressed and receptive hearts or was it the special office of the covenant angel to seek "**that which was lost**" from the patriarchal church at its very beginning?

Lange suggests in his commentary that:

“The Angel of the Lord, as the CHRIST who was to come through Isaac, had a peculiar reason for assisting Hagar since she for the sake of the future CHRIST is involved in this sorrow.”

In any case the special revelation and the special promise was given to Hagar not only, but to her seed. CHRIST, if we may so express it, outlines the future history and character of the Ishmaelites as well as their strength and glory; but He also gives them a spiritual promise in the God-given name, Ishmael (*God will hear*). Without this, the Theophany loses its true character. Ishmael, as the child of Abraham, could not be left undistinguishable among the heathen. It was for Abraham's sake that the revelation included the unborn child in its promises.

The fulfillment of the promise that Ishmael's seed should multiply exceedingly has never been more clearly stated than by the geographer Ritter:

"Arabia, whose population consists to a large extent of Ishmaelites, is a living fountain of men whose streams for thousands of years have poured themselves far and wide to the east and west. Before Mohammed its tribes were found in all border-Asia, in the East Indies as early as the middle ages; and in all North Africa it is the cradle of all the wandering hordes. Along the whole Indian ocean down to Molucca they had their settlements in the middle ages; they spread along the coast to Mozambique; their caravans crossed India to China, and in Europe they peopled Southern Spain and ruled it for seven hundred years."

Where there has been such clear fulfillment of the promise of natural increase, is there no ground that GOD will hear and give spiritual blessing also, and that Ishmael "**shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren**" in the new covenant of grace?

Thirteen years after the first promise to Ishmael we hear the promise renewed just after the institution of circumcision, the sign of the covenant of faith.

"And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might (even yet) live before Thee. And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee . . . "

What is the significance of Abraham's prayer for Ishmael? Is it probable that he merely asks for temporal prosperity and for length of life? This is the idea of some commentators, but none of them explain why the prayer asks that Ishmael may live **"before God."**

Keil and others, more correctly we think, regard the prayer of Abraham as arising out of his anxiety lest Ishmael should not have any part in the blessings of the covenant. The fact that the answer of GOD contains no denial of the prayer of Abraham is in favor of this interpretation.

In the prayer Abraham expresses his anticipation of an indefinite neglect of Ishmael which was painful to his parental heart. He asks for him, therefore, a life from GOD in the highest sense. Else what does the circumcision of Ishmael mean? The sealing or ratifying of the covenant of GOD with Abraham through Isaac's seed, embraces not only the seed of Isaac, but all those who in a wider sense are sharers of the covenant, Ishmael and his descendants. And however much the Arabs may have departed from the faith of Abraham, they have for all these centuries remained faithful to the sign of the old covenant by the rite of circumcision.

This is one of the most remarkable facts of history.

Circumcision is not once alluded to in the Koran, and Moslem writers offer no explanation for the omission. Yet the custom is universal in Arabia, and from them it passed over with other traditions to all the Moslem world.

The Moslem dates circumcision from Abraham and circumcise at a late period. The Arabs in **"the time of ignorance"** also practiced the rite; an uncircumcised person is unknown even among those Bedouins who know nothing of Islam save the name of the prophet.

"As for Ishmael I have heard thee."

For the third time we read of a special revelation to prove GOD's love for the son of the bondmaid. In the pathetic story of Hagar's expulsion, Ishmael is the central figure (Genesis 21:9-22). His mocking was its cause; for his sake it was grievous in Abraham's sight to expel them. To Ishmael again is there a special promise, **"because he is thy seed."** When the water is spent in the bottle and Hagar turns away from seeing the death of the child, it was not her weeping but the lad's prayer that brought deliverance from heaven. **"And the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad and hold him by thine hand; for I will make of him a great nation. And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the bottle with water and gave the lad drink. And God was with the lad."**

No less does this history show the moral beauty of Hagar's character, her tender mother-love and all the beautiful traits of a maternal solicitude than it does the repentance of Ishmael. GOD heard his voice; GOD forgave his sinful mocking; GOD confirmed His promise; GOD saved his life; GOD was with the lad. The Providence of GOD watched over Ishmael.

Long years afterwards he seems to have visited his father Abraham, for we read that when the patriarch died in a good old age **"his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah."**

No mention is made here of the sons of Keturah. And twice in the Bible the generations of Ishmael are recorded in full in order to bind together the prophecies of Genesis with the Messianic promises of Isaiah for the seed of Ishmael. [1]

The twelve princes, sons of Ishmael, whose names are recorded **"by their towns and their castles"** were undoubtedly the patriarchs of so many Arab tribes. Some of the names can be distinctly traced through history and others are easily identified with modern clans in Arabia.

Doughty calls Ishmael "the father of the North Arabian tribes" and specially records instances where they trace their descent back to the son of Hagar. The Koreish tribe of Mecca from which Mohammed traces his lineage, boasts that they are the true sons of Abraham through Ishmael. [2]

It is generally known that the sixtieth chapter of Isaiah is the gem of missionary prophecy in the Old Testament; but it does not occur to everyone that a large portion of it consists of special promises for Arabia.

"The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah (Sons of Kethrah, Genesis 25:1-5); all they from Sheba (South Arabia or Yemen) shall come; they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall show forth the praises of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together unto thee; the rams of Nebaioth shall minister unto thee: they shall come up with acceptance upon mine altar and I will glorify the house of my glory. Who are these that fly as a cloud and as doves to their windows?"

These verses, read in connection with the grand array of promises that precede them, leave no room for doubt that the sons of Ishmael have a large place in this coming glory of the Lord and the brightness of His rising. It has only been delayed by our neglect to evangelize Northern Arabia, but GOD will keep His promise yet and CHRIST shall see of the travail of His soul among the camel-drivers and shepherds of Arabia. And then shall be fulfilled that other promise significantly put in Isaiah 42 for this part of the peninsula:

"Sing unto the Lord a new song and His praise from the end of the earth . . . let the wilderness and the cities thereof lift up their voice, the villages that Kedar doth inhabit: let the inhabitants of the rock sing, let them shout from the top of the mountains."

It is all there with geographical accuracy and also up-to-date; **"cities in the wilderness,"** that is Nejd under its present government; Kedar forsaking the nomad tent and becoming villagers; and the rock dwellers of Medain Salih!

"And I will bring the blind by a way they knew not; I will lead them in paths that they have not known: I will make darkness light before them and crooked things straight."

The only proper name, the only geographical centre of the entire chapter is Kedar.

After I had been a missionary in Arabia for seven years, it was my good fortune to meet an aged and learned Dutch clergyman who was deeply interested in the Arabian Mission. He took me to his small library and introduced me to one of the finest missionary poems in the wide world of literature, the epic of Hagar by the celebrated Dutch poet, Isaac Da Costa. A pupil of the great poet Bilderdijk, of Spanish-Portuguese Jewish descent, his poetry shows the elements of Dutch education, oriental passion, and love for the Word of the Lord.

Rabbi Mayer Kaiserling pays tribute to his character in a sketch of his life and work contributed to the Jewish Encyclopedia:

"However severely his religious views and efforts be censured, his character, no less than his genius, was respected by his contemporaries. Although he wrote much on missionary matters, he is distinguished from many other converts in that, to the end of his life, he felt only reverence and love for his former co-religionists, was deeply interested in their past history, and often took their part."

Soon after his conversion to Christianity Da Costa became one of the most active opponents of the prevailing rationalism. He was a theologian and a historian, but above all a poet; the uncrowned poet-laureate of Holland until the day of his death, April 28, 1860.

Into one hundred and sixty-eight rhymed couplets the genius of Da Costa has condensed the story of Ishmael and Islam in their origin and development. He has woven together the woof of Bible promise and the warp of Arabian history into one beautiful seamless garment of poetry.

To give a worthy rendering of the whole, or even of some, lofty stanzas would be hopeless. Parts of the poem yield to a sort of rendering in English which may, perhaps, be called a translation. At least, they are as literal as I could make them while adhering to the measure, form and stanzas of the original, while I lived in Bahrain, Arabia among the sons of Hagar.

Addressing Arabia, the poem opens:

"What marvels met thine eye, thou Orient desert Queen!
Eternal land of drought, of crags and rocks between
A shifty sea of sand, vast, limitless . . .
A sea of solitude, oppressive, comfortless .
Whose waves of sand and rock refresh no aching eye,
But leave earth barren 'neath a burning sky.
How oft beneath those skies the storm-winds thou hast seen.
Fiercer than oven-blast, hotter than mid-day beam,
Chainlike unfolding in their onward path,
Whilst knelt the caravan obedient to their wrath;

Until, storm-built and driven by the blast,
The simoon's awful chariot had rolled past.

* * * *

But in the solemn hour, recalled by poet's muse,
Silent the desert wastes. The rushing storm winds lose
Their faintest whisper. Solitude. Save one!
With bold, yet downcast eye, a woman walks alone.
Sorrow hath filled her soul."

Then follows the vision of Hagar and the promise of the Lord.

The second part tells of Ishmael's mocking, the exile, Hagar's prayer, and the renewed promise of GOD to her seed:

"Ishmael, thou shalt not die! The desert waste,
Which dared to boast itself thy grave, shall taste
And tell thy glory . . . "

Here the Bedouin life is sketched in a few matchless stanzas portraying the ship of the desert and the Arabian steed - the peculiar twofold treasure of the peninsula from time immemorial. (So much, in fact, is the horse identified with Arabia that Colonel Tweedie entitled his large and important volume of researches on Northern Arabia, *The Arabian Horse: His Country and His People!*)

Passing by the centuries of silence, the poet suddenly places before us the Saracen invasion and its onward sweep into North Africa and Spain:

. . . "They leap upon the lance, but lances wound them not;
A hemisphere at once falls to the Arab's lot.
And, as a new plowed field sown thick with summer hail
Pressed from the thunder cloud, so swift their nomad trail
Sweeps everywhere along . . .
The day of vengeance falls! The Koran and its sword!
Those half-truths, wrapped in fascinating lore
Your idols can confound, but not your GOD restore.
Yet conquer must that Christendom which sold
Her substance for a form; for glitter lost her gold,
And thus waxed weak. Egypt, once more obey
The nomad's law, like Hyksos rule in earlier day!
Proud Alexandria, bow! Yield, yield thy costly store.
Thy libraries of learning and their treasured lore,
With all thy boasted schools? The latest blood
Of old Numidia now lies reeking on the sod,
Nor Carthager, nor Vandal, can ward off the blow . . .

All Africa's at stake, and Europe shares her woe.
They've mounted high Gibraltar, lovely Spain
Lies just beyond . . . 'tis Christian but in name;
The fierce West - Goth sees all his temples sacked
Till turns the tide of time by greater Power backed.
Alas! Still ebbs the flood. No Pyrenees can bar
The eagle's lofty flight nor stay the scimitar.
Awake, ye north winds, and drive back the horde
Barbarian; Karel, rise, thou Martel, break their sword!
GOD's hand makes true Thy name. Regain our loss
And save from Crescent rule the lands that love the
Cross . . . "

Next, we have in the poem a full-length portrait of the prophet, Mohammed, the greatest of the sons of Hagar. These stanzas defy translation because of their beauty and idiom and marvellous condensation. There is often a volume of thought in a single line, and nowhere do I know of a more just, generous, and yet critically truthful delineation of Mohammed's character.

The seventh division of the poem opens, as do all the others, by addressing Hagar. But this time as the bondmaid; Ishmael in subjection to Isaac; the Cross rising triumphant above the Crescent:

"Mother of Ishmael! The word that GOD hath spoken
Never hath failed the least, nor was His promise broken.
Whether in judgment threatened or as blessing given;
Whether for time and earth or for eternal heaven,
To Esau or to Jacob . . .

The patriarch prayed to GOD, while bowing in the dust:
'Oh that before thee Ishmael might live!' - His prayer, his trust.
Nor was that prayer despised, that promise left alone
Without fulfillment. For the days shall come
When Ishmael shall bow his haughty, chieftain head
Before that Greatest Chief of Isaac's royal seed.

Thou, favored Solomon, hast first fulfillment seen
Of Hagar's promise, when came suppliant Sheba's queen.
Next Araby the blest brought Bethlehem's newborn King,
Her myrrh and spices, gold and offering.

Again at Pentecost they came, first-fruits of harvest vast;
When, to adore the name of JESUS, at the last
To Zion's glorious hill the nation's joy to share
The scattered flocks of Kedar all are gathered there,
Nebajoth, Hefa, Midian . . .

Then Israel shall know Whose heart their hardness broke,
Whose side they pierced, Whose curse they dared invoke.
And then, while at His feet they mourn His bitter death,
Receive His pardon . . .

Before Whose same white throne Gentile and Jew shall meet
With Parthian, Roman, Greek, the far North and the South,
From Mississippi's source to Ganges' giant mouth,
And every tongue and tribe shall join in one new song,
Redemption! Peace on earth and good-will unto men . . .

The purpose of all ages unto all ages sure. Amen.
Glory unto the Father! Glory the Lamb, once slain,
Spotless for human guilt, exalted now to reign!
And to the Holy Ghost, life-giver, whose refreshing
Makes all earth's deserts bloom with living showers of blessing!

* * * *

"Mother of Ishmael! I see thee yet once more,
Thee, under burning skies and on a wave-less shore!
Thou comfortless, soul storm-tossed, tempest-shaken,
Heart full of anguish and of hope forsaken,
Thou, too, didst find at last GOD's glory all thy stay!

He came. He spake to thee. He made thy night His day.
As then, so now. Return to Sarah's tent
And Abraham's GOD, and better covenant,
And sing with Mary, through her Saviour free,
'GOD of my life, Thou hast looked down on me.' "

Hagar is not referred to in the Koran by name, although Ishmael her son is mentioned several times. In Surah IV:161 it is said of him that he received revelations; in Surah XIX:55 he is called a messenger and a prophet; and in Surah XI:119 he, along with Abraham, is commanded to purify the holy house at Mecca.

The traditions are more explicit. According to the Moslem story, Ishmael helped his father Abraham build the temple at Mecca.

When the work was completed, Abraham abandoned the boy with his mother in a barren country.

Afflicted by thirst, Hagar ran to and fro between the hills al-Safa and al-Narwa looking for water. Gabriel called to her and the result was the spring of Zarnzam. The sacred waters of this miraculous spring are now used by the pilgrims.

A PRAYER FOR ARABIA

We beseech Thee, O GOD, that Ishmael might live before Thee; so that this prayer of Abraham, after all these centuries, might find fulfillment in the full triumph of Thy Gospel throughout Arabia, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

1 Genesis 25:11-18, and 1 Chronicles 1:28.

2 *Travels in Arabia*. Vol. 1:56, 229; Vol. 11:355.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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