Ishmael Encyclopedia Article

Ishmael

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Ishmael

ISHMAEL, or, in Hebrew, Yishmaʿeʾl; eldest son of Abraham. Ishmael's mother was Hagar, an Egyptian slave girl whom Sarah gave to Abraham because of her own infertility; in accordance with Mesopotamian law, the offspring of such a union would be credited to Sarah (*Gn.* 16:2). The name *Yishmaʿeʾl* is known from various ancient Semitic cultures and means "God has hearkened," suggesting that a child so named was regarded as the fulfillment of a divine promise.

Ishmael was circumcised at the age of thirteen by Abraham and expelled with his mother at the instigation of Sarah, who wanted to ensure that Isaac would be Abraham's heir (*Gn.* 21). In the New Testament, Paul uses this incident to symbolize the relationship between Judaism, the older but now rejected tradition, and Christianity (*Gal.* 4:21–31).

In the *Genesis* account, God blessed Ishmael, promising that he would be the founder of a great nation and a "wild ass of a man" always at odds with others (*Gn.* 16:12). He is credited with twelve sons, described as "princes according to their tribes" (*Gn.* 25:16), representing perhaps an ancient confederacy. The Ishmaelites, vagrant traders closely related to the Midianites, were apparently regarded as his descendants. The fact that Ishmael's wife and mother are both said to have been Egyptian suggests close ties between the Ishmaelites and Egypt. According to *Genesis* 25:17, Ishmael lived to the age of 137.

Islamic tradition tends to ascribe a larger role to Ishmael than does the Bible. He is considered a prophet and, according to certain theologians, the offspring whom Abraham was commanded to sacrifice (although *sūrah* 37:99–111 of the Qurʾān never names that son). Like his father Abraham, Ishmael too played an important role in making Mecca a religious center (2:127–129). Judaism has generally regarded him as wicked, although repentance is also ascribed to him. According to some rabbinic traditions, his two wives were Aisha and Fatima, whose names are the same as those of Muḥammad's wife and daughter. Both Judaism and Islam see him as the ancestor of Arab peoples.

Bibliography

A survey of the Bible's patriarchal narratives can be found in Nahum M. Sarna's *Understanding Genesis* (New York, 1966). Postbiblical traditions, with reference to Christian and Islamic views, are collected in Louis Ginzberg's exhaustive *Legends of the Jews*, 2d ed., 2 vols., translated by Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin (Philadelphia, 2003).