Chapter 5

The Gate of Ancestry
Abraham and Ishmael—a Scriptural Reconstruction

It is very clear that the biblical narrative of Ishmael’s life in Genesis is incomplete, fragmentary, and episodic. There are only two sections dedicated to his life. One is about his birth (Chapter 16). The second is about Isaac’s birth by Sarah and the subsequent expulsion of Ishmael and his mother Hagar to the wilderness (Chapter 21). In between there is only one mention of Ishmael, relating to God’s promises to Abraham and his family and to the Covenant, which was marked by the circumcision of Abraham’s entire male household, including Ishmael (Chapter 17). The next time we hear about him is during Abraham’s funeral, when Ishmael and Isaac join together to mourn their father and bury him; and this is just a brief comment (Chapter 25).

What happened to Ishmael during the period between the biblical account relating to his exile, when Abraham was 100 years old, and the last account about the death of Abraham, when he was 175 years old? There is a gap of about 75 years, which is not accounted for in the Bible. Is there a reason for the curtain of silence? Are we to deduce that Abraham had no relations or contact whatsoever with his elder son, whom he obviously loved as any father would love his son?

The Bible is not a conventional history textbook. It selects from all the deeds and events of its protagonists only what it needs, primarily religious and educational material. The omission of that period in the story can only be explained by the shift of the narrative’s attention to Isaac, to whom Abraham “passed the torch” as his divinely sanctioned heir, and who now became the ancestor of the People of Israel. From this perspective, the rest
of Ishmael’s life is no longer relevant to the continuity of God’s covenant and, therefore, is unnecessary to be told. The great Jewish scholar and philosopher Maimonides suggested that Isaac became “essential” (iqār) and Ishmael became “unessential” (tafēl) in the story once God told Abraham to listen to his wife Sarah’s request to expel Hagar and Ishmael, and explained that “because your [spiritual] descendents will be through Isaac; and I will also make the son of the handmaid into a nation, because he is your [physical] descendent.”

Unfortunately, the consequence of this omission is the implied delegitimization of Ishmael, who is revered by Muslims as their spiritual ancestor and regarded by them as a direct progenitor of Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, the absence of the name Ishmael from the long list of personal names given today to Jewish children should come to us as no surprise. The historical Jewish-Muslim dispute and the contemporary Arab-Israeli conflict only helped to define Ishmael’s name as illegitimate for Jews.

But exceptions can be found in the long list of early rabbis, who carried the name Ishmael. One of them is Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha (90–135 CE), one of the greatest sages of the Talmud who formulated the Thirteen Principles of Torah Interpretation, one of the “Ten Martyrs” tortured to death by the Romans after the Bar-Kochba rebellion, and a grandson of the high priest of the same name. Why would a highly respected rabbinic family name their son after “a wild man whose hand will be against every one, and the hand of every one against him?” Why would they adopt Ishmael’s name, when the Zohar, one of the fundamental texts of Jewish mysticism, bashes him? It tells us that, from the day Isaac was born, as long as Ishmael was in Abraham’s house, he was called not by his name, but was called “son of Hagar,” because “in a place where gold exists, refuse is not mentioned.” Perhaps there is more to biblical Ishmael, the rejected son of Abraham, than we truly know? Is it possible that, in naming his child Ishmael, definitely an undesirable personal name, the son of the high priest wanted to make a statement?

Outline of Ishmael’s Life

The biblical narrative of Ishmael’s life can be divided into four periods:

A. Ishmael’s Birth to Hagar (Genesis, Chapter 16)
   1. Sarah is childless; Hagar is Sarah’s Egyptian maidservant (Genesis 16:1).
   2. Sarah offers Hagar to Abraham, hoping to obtain a child by her (Genesis 16:2).