



Rejected and Loved

From Ishmael to
Hope for the Middle East



~ Laurens de Wit ~



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Enjoy reading.

What readers say...

This book is an absolute must for anyone who wants to learn more about the history of the Middle East. The writer knows better than anyone how to describe the ups and downs between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael. The reader is taken on an intense, confronting, open and honest journey in the trials of rejection and disappointment that the peoples of the Middle East have lived through and the signs of which are still visible every day. At the same time, this special story describes the Light that shines as a beacon of Hope for the nations. – Antoinette

The first part immediately appealed to me. The story of Ishmael gives many good insights into the drama that took place in the past. Laurens de Wit then takes you along in a very hopeful message for the Arabs, that at the same time gives us Western Christians a lot of homework – to allow the love of God for them into our hearts. Our often critical and contemptuous view of the descendants of Ishmael is challenged through God's word, spurring us on to look differently. This view will certainly contribute to a different peace than the one the world is trying to bring to the Middle East. – Piet

Very impressive and a beautiful way of telling the stories. – Peter

The message that the writer wants to convey is very clear and straightforward, and cannot be ignored. I love the unique story format of the book combined with diving deeper via the website. – Anita

I finished it in one go. – Hannah

*Rejected
and Loved*

From Ishmael to
Hope for the Middle East

Laurens de Wit

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Foreword

After the railway crossing barriers were closed, Kerem used to tell me, 'Change the signal to green.' Following his instructions, I would reach up to the shiny handle, grab the safety catch and turn the heavy arm downward. The chain would rattle, and half a mile away the red signal arm would move into the 'safe' position. Thus, I spent many an afternoon in the railroad crossing operating room with our Turkish tenant. After living several months in our home, Kerem brought his wife and children from Turkey. Immediately, I befriended his eldest son, who was my age. I enjoyed the hospitality and warmth of this Islamic family and spent many happy hours in the house that the Dutch Railroad Company had assigned to its immigrant employee.

Years later, I moved to the Middle East and became immersed in the Arab culture. Initially I felt unsafe, but the more I became acquainted with neighbors and colleagues, the more I enjoyed their hospitality and community life. My experience, however, did not fit the image I had from the Bible. I was familiar with the story of Hagar's encounter with the Angel of the Lord in Genesis chapter 16, where the Angel had told her that the infant in her womb would be like a stubborn, wild donkey, and always quarreling with others. Didn't the Bible expositors take this to be a reference to the aggressive and wild Arab nomads in the Middle East?

One day, as I carefully re-read the story, I wondered how Hagar would have understood the message from God. To my surprise I found out that, from her perspective, God pronounced great blessings over Ishmael.

This prompted me to research the Bible regarding Ishmael and his descendants and as a result, I discovered some intriguing concepts. For instance, from a certain point the Ishmaelites are no longer mentioned, but instead Arabs appear on the scene.

An in-depth study confirmed that the term "Arabs" refers to the descendants of Ishmael, not only in the Bible, but also in other historical records. Over time, more and more peoples were grouped with them, so that today it is difficult to determine which Arabs are to be seen as true descendants of Ishmael and which are not.

While studying all the prophecies about the nations surrounding Israel, I began to see a pattern regarding the Arabs. As a result, some prophetic utterances in the Old Testament became much clearer to me. I noticed that

several of these promises have not yet come true. Apparently, they are yet to be fulfilled!

I felt excited, yet hesitant, for I did not want to make arbitrary claims of things that no one had ever noticed before. Then some friends pointed me to others, such as the Lebanese scholar Tony Maalouf, who had discovered the same thing. In fact, already in 1847 a Jewish writer named Isaac Da Costa wrote a poem in which he looked forward to the fulfillment of these promises.

Would this not be an important message for the Arabs and for all who consider Ishmael's father Abraham to be their spiritual father? What would happen if the Christians were to realize that God loves the Muslims as much as He loves them? What if the Muslims discovered how important they are in God's eyes and that He still has a unique plan for them after they have put their trust in Jesus Christ? Imagine the Jews personally witnessing God's love and mercy, reaching out to the hearts of their neighbors with whom they often live in discord. Humanity might face a wonderful future. True peace could come to the Middle East. All may be able to see the loving-kindness of the all-wise God, even those who believe God doesn't care about the suffering in the world.

This led me to write down my discoveries and insights in a way that is easy to understand. I ended up with a textbook in story form, combining fact and fiction. Each chapter is marked with a balloon mentioning the Bible passage on which it is based. Thus, the reader can easily check what is Biblical and what is fictional. I also included genealogies and timelines to indicate the historical figures versus the fictitious ones. Finally, I have added some links to a website where many background articles and in-depth studies can be found on important or controversial topics.

I hope and pray that you will read this book with an open mind and encourage you to study the Bible passages as if you were reading them for the first time. Allow God to speak to you through his Word. The Holy Spirit will guide you concerning his plans for the descendants of Ishmael and the role He may have for you in the fulfillment of his plans.

I wholeheartedly agree with the words of Isaac Da Costa, who wrote, "Will these things really be so?" you ask, and I answer, "Maybe not exactly according to this interpretation, perhaps in a different order, maybe not separately, but simultaneously or soon after one another and flowing together. But it is also possible that many more glorious things are to be expected, than we find recorded here from the Scriptures."¹

I look forward to the unfolding of God's plan with all those who claim Abraham as their patriarch through Ishmael, Arabs and Muslims alike, and how this will impact the Jews, his chosen people.

Let us love them all with God's love. May his name be glorified.

Laurens de Wit

Word of thanks

First of all, I thank God the Father in heaven for opening my eyes to his great love for the Arabs, as recorded in the Bible. He inspired me to write down all the stories in this book. When I was wondering if a textbook in story form was wise, He led me to the conclusion that I should follow his example. His book, the Bible, doesn't follow the rules of one particular literary style either.

I also want to thank all who have stood behind me in the two years that I've been working on this book. I especially thank my wife who has always encouraged me, as well as those who have been thinking along with me and sacrificed many hours of their free time proofreading and giving me feedback. I would also like to thank the Arab men and women who have patiently helped me to properly articulate the mindset of Muslims. Finally, this English edition would not have come into existence without the tireless efforts of the translator and of Bill Stowe, Alan Pashkevich, Helen Cook and other proofreaders.

Dedicated to

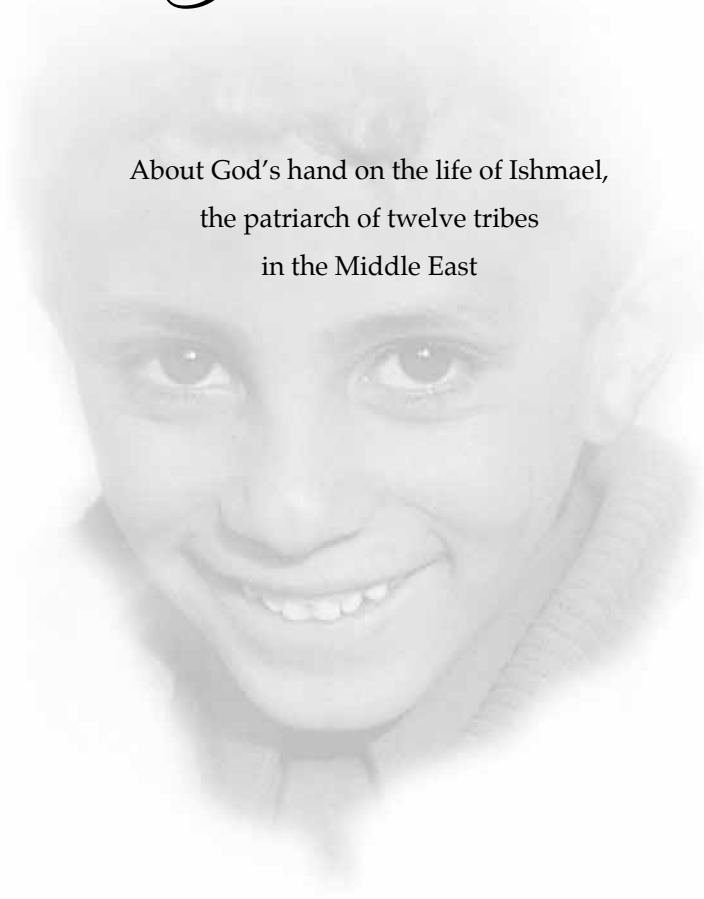
I dedicate this book to all my Arab friends who have embraced me. They gave me a love and appreciation for the Arab world and culture.

I also want to dedicate this book to all those who consider themselves to be sons and daughters of Ishmael. God knows your silent pain and grief over the rejection that you experience in many ways, especially in and from the West. God has a message of hope for you: you are valuable and loved. God even has a very special plan for your life. Put your trust in the Messiah and let him use you to be a blessing for many.

Part 1

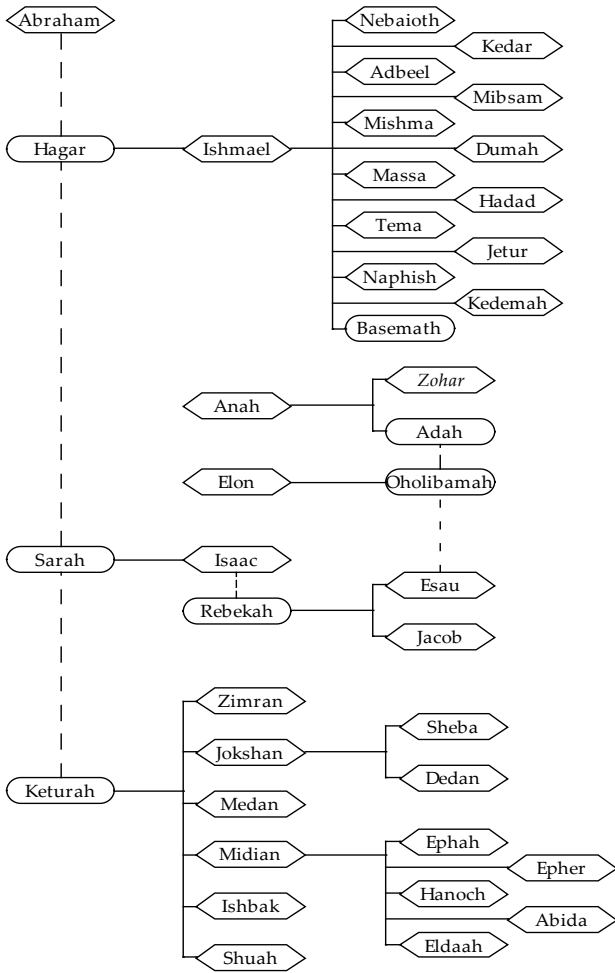
*The Beginning of
a Great People*

About God's hand on the life of Ishmael,
the patriarch of twelve tribes
in the Middle East



*"The LORD has listened to your affliction."
Genesis 16:11*

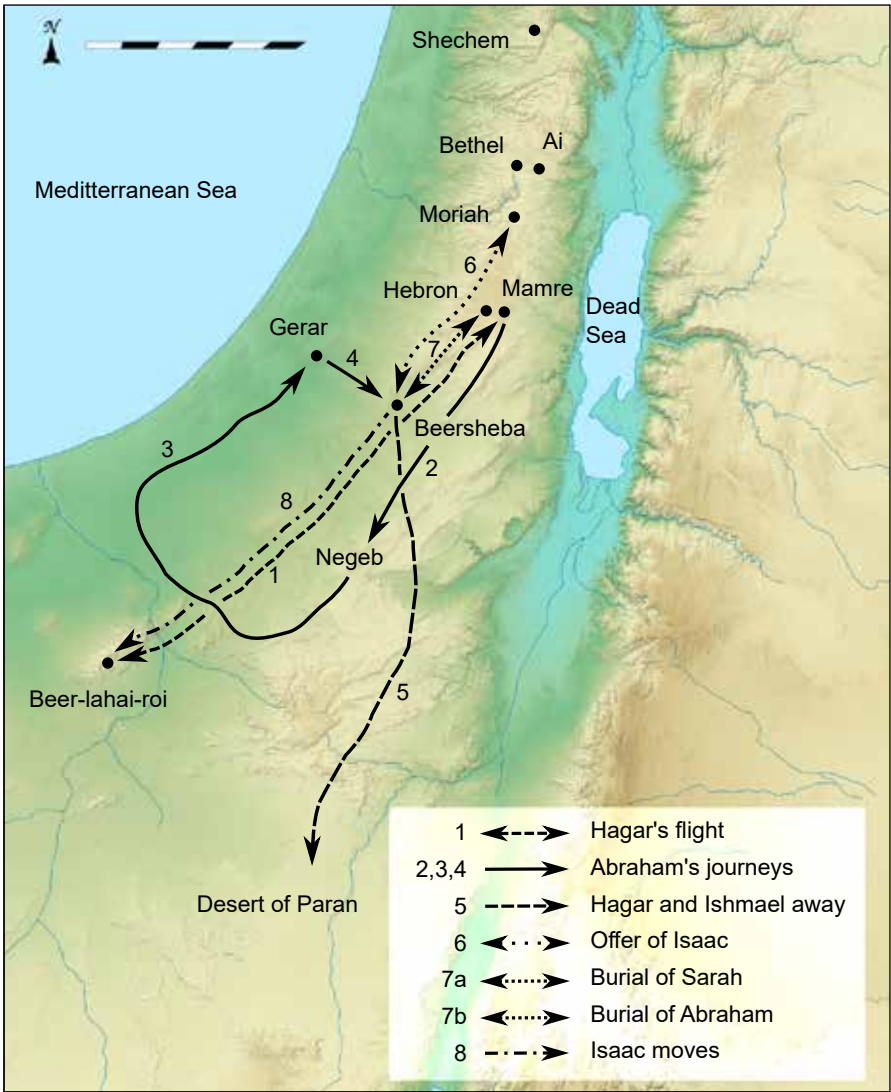
Abraham's children and grandchildren



Legend

- | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| | Biblical person - male | - - - - - | wedding tie |
| | Biblical person - female | ————— | descendant |
| | fictional person | | |

Family tree of Abraham's descendants



Several important locations in the life of the patriarch Abraham



For an animation clip of Abraham's travels, go to www.godlovesishmael.com/journeys

One day, four thousand years ago...



1 *The Word of God*

Bare mountains rise up on every side from the desolate landscape. Their shapes are rugged, having been carved out by numerous sandstorms. Here and there, scattered bushes appear between the cracks. The valley is decorated with large boulders as well as several acacia trees. Desert dust has turned the leaves on the trees to a yellowish-brownish color, causing them to appear lifeless. Only after one of the rare rain showers do the leaves wash clean and then for a few days they look fresh and green. On days like that, rainwater gushes down the mountain slopes, quickly turning into a swirling flashflood, yet disappearing within a matter of hours. Two full moons ago, the rainy season ended and now the entire valley looks barren. The dry carcass of a gazelle emphasizes the ominous atmosphere.

Trails mark the winding road connecting Canaan to Egypt. It is tranquil. The only thing that can be heard is the soft whisper of the warm wind. High above, silhouetted against the deep blue sky, an eagle circles in search of prey. Other than that one eagle, there is no trace of life in this sweltering heat. With the sun at its zenith, both man and beast have withdrawn to the shades during this part of the day.

Yet, a solitary person appears, dressed entirely in black. The enormous shadows cast by the surrounding rock formations accentuate the woman's insignificance as she struggles through the *wadi*.* Her head bent down on her chest and her eyes downcast, she tries to protect herself from the fine dust by covering her face with her veil. She looks worn out.

Why would a woman be there, all by herself on this trade route, which is normally only frequented by men and their caravans of camels and donkeys? She's not carrying anything, not even a water skin. She has nothing but the clothes on her back. There is no one with her, no one protecting her. All alone, she plods through the barren land, on her way to..., where could she be going?

Feelings of relief compete with utter desperation in her heart. *At least I am free*, she reasons with herself; *never again will I be terrorized or beaten by my mistress. At home, my father and brothers will protect me.* Mentally she counts the days she has been walking, and she estimates it must be about four days.

* A *wadi* is a dry riverbed.

Besides, if my master had wanted me back, his servants would have overtaken me on their speedy camels by now.

Her stomach grumbles with hunger and she wonders whether she will be able to reach her home. Since she escaped her mistress she has hardly found anything to eat, and she still has many days to go. But at this very moment it is thirst that plagues her most; her tongue feels thick and dry. The last time she had a drink was shortly before sunrise. *I must be close to the well, but where can it be?*

One mountain resembles the next; she has been here only once before. That was years ago, when she and her master traveled from Egypt to Canaan. While she trudges on, memories from that journey overwhelm her.

What a joy that had been! Filled with a sense of wonder having been freed from the cruel master in Egypt who used to beat her and who sometimes used to withhold food from her as a punishment. She had wondered so often how she would be able to take abuse like her parents had suffered. But her new master, with his funny foreign accent, had been so different, so kind. He had never hit her; he was hardly ever angry with any of his servants. He even treated the sheep and donkeys with respect, as if they were precious to him.

In the beginning she had been homesick. She had longed for her parents and her older brothers, but soon her new master's servants came to consider her as their sister. Her master had strictly forbidden them to mistreat any of the girls. She had felt very safe there.

After many bends in the dusty road, the woman finally notices a cluster of palm trees in the distance. The luscious foliage betrays the presence of a large spring, a sanctuary in the desert where travelers stop to drink, rest, and sometimes spend the night.

Fortunately, everything is quiet. At the previous oasis where she had slept, the men had pestered her. She had been so frightened. Her master had been a kind man, but the inhabitants of this strange land are evil. She can't trust any of them. She has heard numerous stories about the dangers lurking on these roads. She is vulnerable, especially as a woman on her own. Screaming for help would have been of no use; no one knows her, and no one would have even cared. She was but an insignificant slave, a human being without value.

Suddenly she realizes something. At the last well, just as one of the men grabbed her arm, a lion appeared out of nowhere! So quickly as a flash the men left her, busying themselves protecting their donkeys against the predator. The lion saved her life!

Relief sweeps over her when she spots a basket next to the well. Even though the water is low this time of year, she is able to draw enough water to

quench her thirst, as well as wash the dust off her face and hands. The cool water feels good on her hot skin. Only now does she realize how exhausted she is. Here, in the shade of the towering palms, is a good place to sit and rest a while. As she closes her eyes, she allows her thoughts to wander again.

Just a few months ago her life had been wonderful. She had been chosen to become the master's concubine. It had been the most beautiful day of her life. This was the best possible future for a slave girl like herself. If she were to have his child, and if that child were to be a son, he would inherit the master's wealth and she would cease to be a slave. Instead, she would be taken care of in her old age. Of course, she would have had to relinquish her son to her mistress, because Sarai was barren herself, but her master, the father of her son, would care for her every need. Even if her master were to die, her son would surely take care of her. What a wonderful future! Then she had become pregnant. She had been so excited that she had told everyone within hearing.

Unfortunately, along with the pregnancy, problems started. She was no longer a slave, but her mistress had thought quite differently about that. She put her to work doing the most mundane and humiliating tasks, just as if nothing had changed.

Well, she had decided that she wasn't going to take it any longer. There were plenty of other slaves to do her job; she refused to be treated like them. After all, she was now the master's wife, only second to Sarai. With this position came certain rights and she was determined to enjoy her life a bit more, just like her wealthy owners. At first, the master had defended her, but in his weakness for his first wife he had relented. "My wife Sarai is your mistress," he had stated. Since the master's word is law, Sarai could do whatever she wanted towards her.

From that day on her life was chaotic and then became out of control. So she had decided that she would return to her parents' house in Egypt. Anything was better than the daily pain of humiliation.

"Hagar," a quiet, firm voice speaks.

The woman looks up, alarmed; she had not heard anyone approach. *Who is this? How does he know my name? What does he want?* Facing her is a stranger. She doesn't recognize him; neither does she remember his voice. His dark brown eyes are friendly yet piercing. It is as if he knows exactly what she feels and thinks.

"Servant of Sarai, where have you come from?"²

How does he know this? Hagar is frightened and wants to run away from him, since strange men are usually not to be trusted. At the same time she is excited, as this man is different. He radiates a sense of peace, which reminds her of her master. She answers his question, and then, without hesitation,

she tells him the whole story from beginning to end. She tells him about her promotion, and about the growing tension between her and Sarai. "Sarai yelled at me time and time again, 'you will do exactly as I say; you are my servant!' Every time those words hurt me deeper and deeper. I have always been a faithful servant. But now that I am expecting a baby, she still doesn't want to relieve me of the heavy household duties. And she continuously mistreats me."

As Hagar shares her painful experiences with the stranger, her muscles tense and her cheeks flush with renewed anger. "And then there was an accident," she continues, "I was tired, and the kettle was heavy; it slipped out of my hands. Boiling water splashed over the side and burned Sarai's foot."

Recounting the events of that day, Hagar realizes that it wasn't entirely by accident. Deep in her heart she had often hoped that something awful would happen to Sarai, and in her anger and frustration Hagar had handled the kettle rather roughly. "Sarai was furious! She ranted and raved, and then..."

Hagar points at her left cheek and neck. Her skin is scarlet and full of large blisters. She feels the pain of rejection again and bursts into tears. The stranger looks at her full of understanding and compassion. It is as if he bears her pain. Sobbing, Hagar blurts out, "Why did Sarai have to throw scalding water in my face? I didn't hurt her on purpose. I couldn't take it anymore, so I fled."

The man speaks again. He neither encourages her, nor passes judgment. Instead, he calmly asks her, "Where are you going, Hagar?"

"I am on my way to my parents' house in Egypt. They are the slaves of a wealthy businessman. I used to work for him as well. Perhaps he will take me back. And if not, I will find somewhere else to work."

The stranger listens attentively. When Hagar has finished speaking, he says to her, "Return to your mistress."³

What? Immediately, she feels disdain. *You can't be serious!* But he is serious.

"Submit to her," he continues. Just the thought of it fills her heart with terror. *Return to that horrible woman? Never!* With clenched fists and tightened lips, she endeavors to contain her rage and quickly turns her head away to avoid his confronting gaze. She would like to shout at him, "Are you out of your mind?" But his words have such authority, that she doesn't dare contradict him.

After she lets his words sink in a little, Hagar ventures a quick glance at his face. Looking into his eyes she senses an inexplicable peace, which melts the anger and bitterness in her heart. Could it be that this is the best way for her and her unborn child?

"I will surely multiply your offspring", the stranger continues, "so that they cannot be numbered for multitude."⁴

Hagar is visibly confused. *What does he mean? How can he do such a thing? Is he proposing to marry me?* Her face relaxes, but she represses a smile, not only because her burned face still hurts, but also because she doesn't want to laugh at him. *What a peculiar man,* she can't help thinking. To make sure that she is not dreaming she takes a deep breath. The fresh air, the smell of greenery and flowering plants surrounding the spring are enough to convince her. *This is not a dream! This is for real!*

Meanwhile, the man keeps talking with quiet confidence. "You are pregnant and shall bear a son."⁵

But... but how does he know that I will have a son. Wouldn't it be just as possible for me to have a daughter? Then joy overtakes her confusion. Wonderful, a son! To have a son is the greatest desire of every woman, and her firstborn will be a son! It is almost too good to be true. She would like to dance for joy. But at the same time doubt creeps into her heart. Can she trust the words of this stranger? *But he knew my name and even whose slave I was.* She continues to listen eagerly, for he isn't finished speaking yet.

"You shall name him Ishmael," he says, "because the Lord has listened to your affliction."⁶

Little by little, Hagar starts to remember the stories her master Abram used to tell; stories about his God and how He had instructed him to move to an unknown place, how he had listened, and how this God had taken care of him. She used to watch Abram build altars for this God. Back home, she had only known about the Egyptian gods. Since these were very powerful deities, she had remained faithful to them. But the words of this man sound so like the way Abram used to speak about God. This stranger speaks with the same convincing certainty and yet it all seems so impossible. After all, she is Hagar, only a worthless slave. As a child she had heard that all too often, and isn't that exactly what Sarai has been telling her lately?

Is the God of Abram interested in me then, a slave girl? Has he really heard about my suffering, about my difficulties with my mistress? This is what the stranger says. And such a beautiful name. Hagar can't imagine a more perfect name for her son. Ishmael – "God hears". Could it be possible that God has heard her silent pleas?

In the quiet of her heart she had often wished that she could meet Abram's God. Suddenly, it dawns on her. This is it! She is meeting Abram's God, face to face! At once she sees how easy it was for her to share her burdens with him. His gentle appearance exudes confidence and she feels completely safe.

The man hasn't finished yet. "He shall be a wild donkey of a man; his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."⁷

In her mind Hagar pictures the wild donkeys near the water wells. She has seen them often, and even more often has she wished to be as free as they are. Abram was a wealthy man, with lots of donkeys, but they were not free to roam wherever they wanted. They had to obey their master. Hagar felt the same way, as if she was some kind of animal, who deserved a scolding or a beating when disobedient. She had tolerated more than enough of this and so had fled from the tyranny of Sarai.

This man promises that her son will be free. It would be a miracle indeed! She had hoped for just such a promise when she became Abram's concubine. But that dream had been shattered when she decided to flee, back to her parental home, where her parents were slaves, where her grandparents and all her other relatives were slaves. *A wild donkey*... freedom... the words reverberate through her head.*

As she turns to thank the man for his great encouragement, he is nowhere to be found. Hagar climbs a high rock and peers into the distance in every direction, but to no avail. He has disappeared without a trace, just like his appearance earlier, suddenly and silently.

Hagar then fully realizes who this stranger must have been. He couldn't have been a mere man. He was an appearance of God himself. Only God himself could have known who she was. Only He could have told her about her offspring. Only He could have known that she is expecting a boy.

How does God want me to respond to him? Hagar muses. Then she remembers Abram and how he communicates with God. He would often go for a walk during the twilight hours of the evening and talk out loud. It had almost looked funny to her, as if he were talking to himself, and yet it had been such a familiar sight that she had become quite used to it. Perhaps she should give it a try.

Slightly uncomfortable, yet deeply grateful she utters, "You are the God who sees me."

At that very moment, her heart overflows with gladness and the last trace of fear vanishes. The baby inside her womb stirs. Hurriedly she follows the same tracks of the dusty road she had trodden. She still can see the vague prints of her footsteps. What a change has come over her. God has seen her plight. Now all will be well.

* More information about the wild donkey can be found at www.godlovesishmael.com/donkey.



2 *God's Greatness Visible*

The soft blue shimmer of the moon covers the mountains and changes the appearance of the brook down below into a thin silvery snake. Apart from the shrill squeaks of some bats, the only other familiar sound is the soothing crackling of nearby wood fires. Camels and sheep are sleeping peacefully near to darkly silhouetted Bedouin tents.

Only one person can't get to sleep. Abram has been tossing and turning all night, and he can't stop himself from thinking about the events of the previous day. It had started as an ordinary day. At the crack of dawn he got up from his bed for his morning stroll. When he returned for breakfast, the servants were anxiously running back and forth. He had ordered them to calm down and asked for an explanation for all the ruckus they were causing.

"Hagar is gone," they told him. "All her clothes are still in the tent, but we can't find her anywhere."

"Oh well, she will turn up sooner or later," he had responded confidently.

But when the sun was overhead and the scent of fresh baked bread for the midday meal wafted throughout the encampment, Hagar had still not returned. It wasn't until then that Abram started to worry, and he sent some of his menservants out to search the surroundings. They returned at sunset without Hagar. Sarai had then recounted in detail the incident of the day before. At that moment it dawned on Abram that Hagar must have run away and now he can't stop thinking about it.

Finally he gets up and without a sound, he goes out of the tent. He walks towards his favorite spot, a place where he can be at peace when there are too many distractions in the encampment. Trying not to disturb the silence of the early morning hours, he carefully avoids the loose rocks scattered on the way to the top of the hill. Thanks to the bright moonlight, he can see exactly where he is going and the climb is easy. As he reclines on a protruding rock, his trained eyes scan the valley below. *If only Hagar would come back. She is carrying the child of God's promise.*

While he meditates upon the time that God spoke so powerfully to him, Abram looks up and watches the twinkling stars in the cloudless sky. It had been many summers ago, but God's words have been engraved in his mind ever since. "Look up at the sky and count the stars — if indeed you can count them. So shall your offspring be."⁸

Abram had believed God. After all, hadn't God also taken him out of Ur, guided him to this foreign land, and provided for all his needs? Abram

had greatly rejoiced when he found out that Hagar was with child. But now she is gone. Softly he prays, "Lord God, please bring Hagar back. I want to trust you to fulfill your promises."

Abram unwittingly begins to count the stars. As he lifts his eyes to the sky, slowly peace settles back in his heart. God is good. He will surely do as He promised; this Abram knows.

The next few days seem to drag. All kinds of thoughts take hold of Abram's mind. He should have never told Sarai that she could treat Hagar any way she pleased. Sarai might be his wife, but Hagar was carrying his child. He feels ashamed of giving in to the whims of his own wife. He, the leader of his clan, who is not afraid to fight against kings, had been afraid to displease Sarai.

It is now clear to him that Hagar has run away because of Sarai. Abram is consumed by negative thoughts. *Why would Hagar ever come back? She has been so mistreated by her mistress. The desert is a dangerous place. Perhaps some predator has killed her, or maybe one of the surrounding tribes has taken her hostage.*

Every time such thoughts enter his mind, Abram purposely focuses his attention on the God who made him that personal promise. *Hagar must come back, for He has promised that my offspring would be too numerous to count.*

In the evening, as the setting sun drapes the mountains in an orange-red hue, Abram enjoys the cool breeze, while he rests under a large tree. A young servant comes running toward him. He is yelling something, but Abram can't quite understand what it is about. It is impolite to shout at the master, also from far away, so the young man must have something of great importance to report. Slightly irritated at having to break up the conversation with some of the other men, Abram listens intently. Finally, he gets it. The boy cries that Hagar is coming!

Abram cannot quite believe it, but his heart is beating faster.

After a few minutes, a lone female figure appears around the bend. Immediately Abram gets up and walks as fast as he can to meet her. He warmly embraces her with both relief and love.

That same evening all the older servants are invited into the tent of meeting. As hot drinks are served in tiny earthenware cups, steam rises and becomes visible in the flickering light of the campfire in front of the tent. The buzz of dozens of voices is indicative of the general excitement over Hagar's return. The tent fills with people, and as soon as everyone has found a place on the ground to sit, Abram speaks. "Today is a day of celebration," he begins, "for the lost sheep has returned home."

Then he directs his attention to the woman next to him. "We are all glad that you have returned to us, Hagar."

Everyone nods with approval. "I will now give you an opportunity to share with us what has happened to you."

Hagar looks at Abram with gratitude as she gets ready to speak. Except for the rustling of some of the animals that are trying to get comfortable on the straw spread out for them, the entire place is hushed in anticipation of Hagar's story. She tells them all about her flight, how frightened she was traveling alone, about how some men had bothered her and how seemingly out of nowhere a lion had appeared to distract the villains. She continues by describing her wondrous meeting with the stranger who called her by name and who knew where she had come from.

When Abram hears her talk about the stranger, his heart skips a beat. *I remember someone who spoke just like that; where was that again? Who could that have been?*

"He told me that I would become the mother of a great nation," Hagar continues.

"Not true, I am that mother!" Sarai interrupts her sharply.

Abram glances at his wife. Calmly, yet resolutely he admonishes her to be quiet. It was her fault that Hagar had run away. Now Abram will make sure that that is not going to happen again. Sarai is clearly alarmed by her husband's reaction, and she knows that it is better to shut her mouth.

Because of Sarai's interruption, Abram has forgotten what he heard last. "Can you please say that again?" he asks Hagar.

"From this child a great nation will come," she repeats.

When Abram hears these words he realizes why this strange man had seemed so familiar to him. He talked to Hagar in the same way God had spoken to him soon after he arrived in Canaan. God had promised him just the same thing: that his offspring would become a great nation. Abram concludes that it was God himself who had spoken with Hagar as well. The Lord is going to be true to his promises after all. Almost instantaneously Abram exclaims, "Praise be to the Lord, the Lord God Almighty."

During the weeks that follow, life in the Bedouin camp returns to normal. Hagar has stopped boasting about her pregnancy. Whenever Sarai sets her to a task, she does it without complaining.

Hagar hasn't shared everything the stranger told her. If Sarai knew the whole truth, she would certainly take advantage of her. No, Sarai is not to know that the man has instructed her to obey her mistress. That part she keeps to herself.

Hagar does submit and complies obediently. In the beginning it had been so difficult. Sarai would mock her and send her on all sorts of useless

and trivial errands. Hagar had to keep a stiff upper lip. But whenever she focused on those promises, she felt an inexplicable power in controlling her emotions.

Gradually, Sarai changes. Abram has reprimanded her, saying she ought to be thankful that Hagar is back and that she should be gentler. At first that was easier said than done, but Sarai tries. In time, she notices a change in Hagar. No longer does she brag about her pregnancy. As she starts to look forward to the birth of her son, Sarai decides that it is better to put the pain of the past behind her. Even if he didn't come from her own womb, this child will be her son. With his birth the stigma and shame of her barrenness will be erased.

A few months later, the birth pains announce the coming of the baby. Hagar is thrilled at the thought of holding her little one in her arms. On the one hand she is deeply convinced that it will be a boy. God had clearly said so. On the other hand, she can't help but wonder. *What if it is a girl after all? What will my master then say? Remarkable that one can be so doubtful, even after such an extraordinary encounter with God. Would others have doubts like that too? Afraid he will label her an unbeliever, she doesn't dare tell Abram about her conflicting thoughts. Fortunately, she doesn't have to wait long for the answer.*

When Abram cradles his baby boy in his arms, his face beams with joy and his eyes are filled with tears. God is so good. How many years has he been waiting for this moment? This is his first-born, his heir, and the one who will bear his name. This is the son through whom God will give many descendants. God has kept his promise. As Abram's heart overflows with gratitude, he decides to organize a grand feast to celebrate this special occasion. Besides his relatives and his servants, Abram also invites his friends in Canaan. He wants to let everyone know that God has removed the shame of being childless. While his brothers, Nahor and Haran, had had children years ago, he, Abram, servant of the Lord Most High, had remained childless. But God has reversed his fate and fulfilled his promise.

Indeed, this is not just any son. Abram remembers every detail of what Hagar had shared on the evening of her return to the camp. "He shall make me the mother of a great nation." Hagar had even come back with a name for the boy. Every word she spoke that night has been carved into his memory.

Especially what Hagar said about Ishmael's future affects Abram greatly. "Ishmael will be a wild donkey of a man."

It resonates beautifully with what God had told him, Abram, as well. "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and

mistreated there.”⁹ At that time these were disturbing words, evoking feelings of fear and sadness in Abram. His offspring will suffer immensely. Oh, he would do anything to prevent that. But God has providentially confirmed through Hagar that Ishmael will be a wild donkey of a man. Abram thinks about the herds he has seen on his journey from Ur to Canaan. Those wild beasts kept their distance from men. He had not even attempted to catch a few. It was a beautiful sight to see them roam around in freedom and some of his donkeys had become restless when they heard the wild ones’ bray. Who knows, had they not been tied up so well, they might have run away to freedom too.

This is what God will give Ishmael: freedom. A time of slavery may be coming, but one day his descendants will be free.

One by one, Abram’s neighbors and friends arrive at the camp to congratulate him on the birth of his son. Proudly he tells them about Hagar’s meeting with the stranger. Some of them have heard the story before, but it continues to fascinate them, undoubtedly because the prediction of a son has come true.

“And then the man said to her, ‘You shall name him Ishmael’, so that is his name,” Abram explains.

The company turns very quiet. Ishmael! What a splendid name! Abram certainly serves a peculiar god, so different from all the other gods they worship in Canaan. They bring them sacrifices, and when they ask their gods, the rains sometimes come. Sometimes the gods defeat their enemies, after the people perform rituals, but they never speak. They have never spoken at all. On the other hand, Abram’s God has instructed him to come to this land. He has even told him what to name his son, a name with a beautiful meaning, “God hears.”

They also remember how, with his small band of armed men, Abram had fought five powerful enemy kings to free his nephew Lot. When he had asked them to join him in battle, they had responded, “You are out of your mind, we cannot possibly fight that many armies.”

Abram had responded confidently that God would be with him and give him success. In the end only three of his best friends had accompanied him, and they accomplished the impossible.

With only a few hundred men Abram defeated all five of the hostile kings and their mighty armies. What kind of god is Abram’s God?

Ishmael is hardly ever sick and grows quickly. While crawling around in the tent, he finds all sorts of interesting things to put into his little mouth. His parents often laugh at his antics. It is just so cute when he has a mustache of dirt, sticking to the drool from his nose. During the first few years of his life,

Ishmael remains in Hagar's care. She nurses him and whenever needed she makes him new clothes. But as soon as Ishmael is weaned, he will sleep in Sarai's tent; after all he is legally her son. Sarai is Abram's spouse, while she, Hagar, is only a concubine.

All too soon Ishmael's third birthday arrives, which means he is ready to be weaned. Abram celebrates this first milestone in his little son's life with a feast for all his servants. Everyone is delighted to have an afternoon off, although the men in Abram's household are the ones who will enjoy the celebration party the most. The women are required to make drinks, prepare refreshments of fruit and nuts, and wash the dirty dishes afterwards.

When Ishmael turns six, playtime is over. The time has come to learn to carry responsibilities by doing his chores. Ishmael doesn't mind. On the contrary, he has looked forward to this day with great anticipation. Finally, he will be allowed to join Father when he goes to market to trade for goats or sheep. Father has even given him a few little lambs to care for. Ishmael savors his childhood. He turns out to be a healthy and studious boy, and everyone in the camp admires him.

One day, Ishmael discovers something curious about himself. "Mama, why is the color of my skin darker than yours or dad's," he asks.

"That's an amazing story, my son," Sarai answers. She has been expecting this question for some time already, and this is a good moment to talk to him about it. "You are my legitimate son, and yet I didn't bear you," she says.

As Ishmael looks at his mother with growing curiosity, she explains that Hagar gave birth to him. But before she can finish, Ishmael jumps up with a guileless "OK" and runs off to continue playing with his friends. He feels safe in Sarai's love and his curiosity has been satisfied. It is time for Ishmael and his peers to practice throwing pebbles. Every shepherd needs to be an expert stone thrower to keep the sheep from straying and, when he is older, he wants to be able to show the animals who is boss.

3 A Painful Surprise

"Ishmael!" a man calls out from a distance, his voice echoing against the mountainsides.

The tall youth turns towards the direction of the sound and shouts back, "What's going on?" Meanwhile his eyes survey the landscape for the owner of the voice.

"Your father needs you."

Now Ishmael recognizes the voice of Eliezer, his father's most trusted servant. *That's odd. Why would Father call me? We haven't been out with the sheep for very long, and it is not time for lunch yet! Did something bad happen?* Quickly, Ishmael pulls up his long tunic and tucks the pleats behind his belt. Then he runs over the rocks and loose stones to Eliezer. Breathing heavily Ishmael reaches him and asks, "What's the matter, Eliezer?"

Eliezer shrugs. "The master only said that he needs you."

Immediately, the boy runs off again. With his long, muscular legs, he jumps from rock to rock, skillfully avoiding all obstacles. As he races home, all kinds of thoughts enter his mind. *No special guests have arrived, and no accident has happened. Father said to me this morning, "See you tonight, my son." So, it is impossible that he forgot an appointment. Still, there is something serious, otherwise my father would have never sent for me. Even Eliezer doesn't know what's going on.*

A little while later Ishmael reaches the camp. Abram is waiting for him in his tent. His son removes his sandals, walks across the intricately woven rugs, and kisses his father on the forehead. "What has happened, Father?" Ishmael sounds worried. His father is ninety-nine years old; he looks pale. Something horrible must have occurred.

"Come and sit with me, my son," Abram says as he gestures invitingly. Ishmael squats next to the old man, all the while watching him carefully. When he is seated, Abram begins, "Do you remember how your mother met the Lord near the well?"

Ishmael nods heartily. He remembers it well; in fact, he knows the story by heart, every word, and every detail of it.

"You recall how I heard God's voice, while I was still living in the land of my birth?"

"Yes, of course, the Voice who told you to ..."

Abram motions his son to silence. "Good", he continues, "this morning that same Voice spoke to me again."

"What did He say?" Ishmael asks expectantly. When that Voice speaks,

usually something good follows; he knows that from his parents. But if it truly were that same Voice, why does Father seem so tense?

Abram clears his throat and goes on, "God has promised me once again that I will have numerous descendants."

"Father, that is wonderful. This is the third time that God has made you this promise. Surely, it will come true. Don't worry about me at all. The Lord will bless me and keep me."

Abram motions for the boy to be quiet. "The promise is different, my son." As he speaks, a tear rolls down his cheek and into his beard. Ishmael badly wants to comfort his father, but he knows he must listen first.

"God has told me that I shall be the father of more than one people. Again, He promised me that this land, where we now dwell, will belong to my descendants. Now, God wants to affirm his covenant with me in a unique way." Ishmael can't really understand his father. Why be so glum with such a glorious future? He almost voices his thoughts to Abram, but then controls himself and continues to listen.

Abram explains to him what God is asking from them to seal the covenant. Ishmael shivers when he hears about the circumcision.* As a young man he is very conscious about his manhood. He knows how sensitive that part of the body is. Not too long ago, he accidentally bruised himself right there, and he had hurt for hours.

"When will you do this, Father?" he asks. He hopes that it will be in a few days' time as tomorrow he is planning to have a camel jumping competition with some of his friends. It is a popular game, where several camels are placed next to one another. The one who can jump over the most camels is the winner. Ishmael is tall and agile. He stands a good chance of winning. It is a way for him to bring honor to his family. His father is a well-respected man in the community and he, Ishmael, wants to show that he truly is his father's son.

Once again, Abram admonishes Ishmael to be silent. "There is more; you are going to have a little brother."

"Oh, Father, that is just marvelous. I have often longed to have a brother."

Abram looks at his son and smiles. "You're a good boy; I am proud of you."

Then he becomes silent again, searching for the right words to say. He doesn't want to hurt his son, and yet he must tell him. "God has told me what to name your brother, just as He told your mother what to name you. His name will be Isaac."

* More information about the history can be found at www.godlovesishmael.com/circumcision.

Still Abram hasn't told Ishmael everything. Silently he prays, "Lord, I don't want to hurt my son. I don't want him to feel rejected. Please help me to find the right words."

Ishmael senses that his father is keeping something from him. Until now he has only told him good news. There is really nothing to be upset about. "Father, why are you distressed? Why don't you just tell me what's on your mind? I know that you love me and I love you."

Ishmael's kind words reassure Abram. "Yes, indeed, I love you very much my son. That is why it is difficult for me to share with you what God has told me. I asked him if there was any other way, but He said that it is his plan."

Ishmael eyes his father with compassion. He forces a tiny smile to show Abram that he is not worried.

"God said that Isaac ... that he ..." Abram hesitates. His throat is dry. He faces his son. Tears sting his big brown eyes. The lines in his forehead seem deeper than ever. Disheartened he utters, "God is making the covenant with Isaac, not with you."

Dismayed, Ishmael looks down at his feet. He had expected anything but this. This can't be true. His father must have misunderstood. He wants to scream and yell, but a young man may never raise his voice against his father. It would be shameful if he did so. Ishmael controls himself, but he is filled with worrying. *I am the firstborn; the covenant is mine. It is impossible for the covenant to be made with a younger brother. Didn't God promise my mother that I would become the father of a great nation?*

Ishmael is angry and voices his thoughts to his father. He reminds Abram of all that he remembers from his parents' previous meetings with God. Then he questions Abram, "Father, are you sure that this is from God?"

Abram feels torn inside. Hasn't he been wondering the same thing? He strives to trust God at his word. Ishmael is right. All the promises could just as easily refer to his life. Hadn't Abram prayed for the return of Hagar for just this reason? Everything had pointed to that. Yet, Abram feels a real peace; in the words that God spoke today he has recognized the voice of his Creator.

He thinks back to the time when he and Sarai had discussed the plan. "The Lord has caused me to be barren, and now that my monthly cycles have ceased, I shall never have a child," she had told him. All this time God could have given them a child. Abram had waited for a miracle for ten years, but God had not opened Sarai's womb. Apparently, God had a different plan in mind with regards to his promises.

When Sarai suggested that Abram take Hagar as a concubine to father children, it had seemed like a plausible and even a godly idea. Abram didn't need to think very long about it. He hadn't wasted any time to take Hagar

as his wife. At the time it had seemed like a perfect plan. All the pieces had fitted together and God had blessed their union with a son. If this hadn't been God's intention, wouldn't He have prevented Hagar from getting pregnant? No, surely God had meant for Ishmael to be born!

Abram reaches for his son's hand and reaffirms his love for him. "Ishmael, you are and will always remain my firstborn. There is nothing in the world that can change that. I have asked God to bless you and He has promised me He will." Abram ponders whether he should tell Ishmael all that God has revealed to him. He notices his son's anxiousness for what might be coming next. He is such a fine young man; thirteen years old already. If he knows the whole story, he will probably be able to deal with this better, and hopefully not turn his back on God in his anger.

So Abram continues, "God will bless you richly. He will give you twelve sons, and each one of them will be a prince. You will become a great and mighty people."

While he speaks, he remembers the exact words the Lord spoke to him that morning. At the time he hadn't grasped the significance of those words, but now he can see it clearly. They were powerful words and a confirmation of God's love for Ishmael. "These are the words God spoke to me," Abram continues, "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold I have blessed him."¹⁰

Bewildered Ishmael looks at his father. What is he trying to say?

Abram sees the questioning in his eyes and explains what he himself has only just come to understand. "My son, do you remember what God told your mother after she had run away from home?"

Ishmael nods.

"God doesn't want to bless you just because I asked him to. Fourteen years ago He already decided to bless you." As soon as he has spoken these words, Abram is overwhelmed by a deep sense of gratitude. God deeply cares about the fate of his son. Suddenly another notion enters his mind. *The way in which God intervened when Hagar fled was not only the result of my prayers. He showed himself to Hagar as a man of flesh and blood. Never did anyone behold him so clearly. There must be a deeper meaning to all of this.* Abram can't imagine what it could possibly mean, but it spurs him on to encourage his son further. Fully convicted, Abram resumes, "God has a specific plan for your life, Ishmael, and I know He will accomplish it. I understand that you are disappointed now, but be assured that God will do as He promised. He loves you dearly."

"And what about the promise of the land?" Ishmael asks.

"I don't know, my son, but God will take care of you. He has cared for me and provided for all our needs during these twenty-five years that I have sojourned in this strange land. One way or another, God will give you what you need, and will provide a place for you to live."

Following those words, Ishmael moves closer to his father and lays his head on his shoulder. His prickly beard and warm breath are comforting to him. Though the news has been disquieting, he rests assured in his father's love.

They stay, arms round each other for a while, each engrossed in their own thoughts. Then Abram speaks again. "As I mentioned before, as part of the covenant, God has set me a task. This is the main reason I called for you straightaway." Ishmael stretches his stiff limbs as he sits up. "Every man and boy must be circumcised. We will do this tomorrow, but I wanted you to hear it from me first, before all the servants know."

Ishmael frowns. He is disappointed. First his father tells him that he will not inherit the land. Now the camel jump competition will have to be canceled, too. It seems to him that God doesn't really care about him.

Abram notices the scour on his son's face and says, "Remember this, my son, through this circumcision we become part of the covenant."

When Ishmael hears this, he is visibly relieved. He is part of the covenant after all. He still doesn't understand all of it, but the anger he feels toward God has subsided a little. God has not completely rejected him.

In the meantime the savory aroma of roasting meat seeps into the tent. Ishmael smells it and his stomach growls in response. It is lunchtime.

One by one the men enter the tent of meeting. Abram reclines on a straw filled pillow at the far end, facing the entrance. Right next to him is Eliezer, his trusted right-hand man. Steaming teacups are placed on large copper trays in the center of the tent. Every man takes a cup and finds a place along the sides. The eldest and more esteemed men are seated nearest to Abram. As the men sip from the tiny cups, there is a buzz of excitement in the air. It is uncommon to be gathered in such a way on a normal workday. Under normal circumstances the men gather here on the seventh day, but that is still two days away. Something must have happened, but nobody knows what. No guests have arrived either. All they know, is that Abram called for Ishmael quite unexpectedly, and now they are very curious to see why the master has summoned them.

Abram addresses them and tells them about God's promises. While he is still speaking, most of the men allow their thoughts to wander. They have heard all this before; no longer are they fascinated. Some of them even begin to doze off. After a delicious lunch, followed by sweet tea, they are overcome with sleepiness. The hot, stifled air that penetrates the tent is not helping them. When Abram starts to speak about his meeting with God that very morning, all are suddenly wide awake. They sit up straight and try to absorb every word. God has spoken to Abram once again! None of them has ever met with any of their gods, but apparently their master has a special

gift. And when his God speaks, it is time to pay attention. Abram has reminded them often enough, why it is that he is so wealthy, why his sheep or camels are rarely stolen, and why few of them get sick and die. The God that Abram serves must be a good God. The servants are glad to serve Abram.

“Each one of you has experienced the presence of God,” Abram states, “God has entered into a covenant with me and all of you reap the blessings of this covenant.” The men agree. “This morning God has set a task before me as part of the covenant.” As Abram explains what this entails, the group collectively shudders. To cut off a part of that very sensitive part of the body must be very painful. Would they really have to go through with this to be part of the covenant God has made with Abram? The married servants worry about something entirely different. Would they still be able to have marital relations with their wives? No one has ever heard of circumcision. They have no idea how it will affect their manhood. Perhaps they won’t be able to have children anymore.

Abram had struggled with some of those same questions. “I know that some of you are fearful. Don’t worry. God has promised me a son. Even after circumcision I will still be virile, able to perform.” The men roar with laughter. “What’s learned in the cradle, lasts till the tomb!” one of the recently married servants shouts out.

Abram joins wholeheartedly in the mirth. Then he continues, “If this is the case for me, it will be the same for you.” He sounds reasonable.

Some of the men are already convinced by Abram’s words and they accept the task awaiting them. Others are fearful of the pain and are still worried about the risks. One of the servants, seated close to Eliezer, bends towards him and asks him quietly what will happen if they refuse to be circumcised. Eliezer doesn’t know the answer to this question and turns to Abram. “What if you don’t want to be circumcised? What then?”

As Abram surveys the circle of men, he knows that many of them are pondering the same question. This is a difficult moment. How can he convince his men that God wants to show them his great love, while all they can think about is the pain and fear? He thinks back to the events in the garden of Eden. Even though this gathering is an odd assortment of slaves, servants, and relatives from various areas, each one of them knows their ancestor was Adam. Some of them have come with Abram all the way from Ur, others from as far as Haran and Egypt, and still others are from right here, from Canaan.

“A few weeks ago, on the day of rest, I told you, how God created the first man. He placed him in a beautiful garden where everything was perfect. God gave him, Adam, the choice between life and death. We all know what choice he made. Today you too have a choice. Obey God and you will live. Disobey God and you will die; you will not be a part of this covenant. I

will send that person away, as he can no longer be a part of this household.”

Eliezer nods approvingly. He knows Abram better than anyone else in the room and he also knows that Abram doesn't say these things to be offensive or to hurt anybody. On the contrary, he wants the very best for each of these young men. The same is true for what he has just said.

After a few more questions, Abram gives orders for the tent of the night watchmen on the outskirts of the camp to be prepared. One question is on everyone's mind. Who will go under the knife first?

A little while later, one of the servants reports that everything has been prepared. Abram gets up and gestures to his son. Ishmael reaches for his father's outstretched hand and feels the sweat on it. Hand in hand they make their way to the tent. The moment is tense for all, even for his strong and wise father.

Before Ishmael realizes what is happening, it is done. His foreskin has been removed. If his father hadn't been such a quiet rock and if he didn't love him so much, Ishmael would probably have gone and hidden. But he wanted to be brave and he repressed his fears. Now that it is over with, he does feel some pain, but it is not as bad as he thought it would be. He marvels at the warm peace in his heart, a peace that is stronger than the physical pain. *I am part of the covenant too*, he senses deeply in his soul.

After all the men in the camp have been circumcised, Abram too takes his turn. Eliezer, his most trusted servant, must do the procedure. No one knows Abram as well as Eliezer and over the years they have been through a lot together. Eliezer would prefer for someone else to do this job, but he understands why Abram chose him. After it is done, he speaks emphatically, “Master A b r a h a m, may the Lord your God bless you and make you the father of many nations.”

Abraham smiles. Eliezer had paid close attention to Abraham's explanation that afternoon. “May God bless you and keep you and your offspring, Eliezer,” he answers.

While Abraham is resting in his tent to recover, he tries to digest everything that has occurred. As of now, he has a new name, given to him by God himself. That name will be a continuous testimony to God's covenant with him; a covenant by which God has promised to make him the father of many nations. He will even have a son by his own precious wife Sarai, to whom God has given the beautiful name Sarah. The covenant also means that God will bless Ishmael. Although Abraham is in quite a bit of pain, he rejoices. From a grateful heart, he whispers, “Lord, You are good.”

4 Wise Lessons

"Ishmael, hurry up! Don't you see it is going to rain? I don't want everything to get soaked." The boy walks over to his mother's tent. Resistance is growing inside him. Ever since she has become pregnant, her attitude towards him has changed. Before that, she used to spoil him and he could do no wrong, but now...!

Why doesn't she call one of the menservants to do her bidding? Ishmael is irritated. He knows very well that it is not appropriate for a manservant to enter the women's quarters, especially when the women are not wearing their headscarves. It is one of his father's rules in the camp. He wants to prevent the young men who work for him from being tempted by the women's beauty. That is why his father upholds a high moral standard.

Although Ishmael respects his father for doing so, he is sure that his mother is taking advantage of the situation. Why does he have to do the work of a servant, with so many slaves around? Isn't he the master's only son? Soon he will be the camp's leader. Abraham has already started to teach him how to breed livestock, how to negotiate prices, how to maintain trade relationships within the different markets, and how to determine the right price of cattle. That kind of work is his future, not the menial chores of a slave. *She is just too lazy to put on her headscarf,* Ishmael concludes. As her son, he can see his mother with her hair uncovered, which is a privilege for family members only. For anyone outside of the family, they are only allowed to see the faces of the other women.

Besides, this is not the first time that Sarah has called him to do a chore for her. He has complained about it, too, and his father promised him to speak to Sarah about it, but nothing has changed so far. It is a shame that Sarah is pulling all the strings in the camp. His father competes effortlessly with the kings of the surrounding nations. They treat him as an equal; he is a strong and well-respected man in the entire community. Yet, when it comes to Sarah, he is weak. *When I am grown up, my wife will do as I say,* Ishmael resolves. *It is utter nonsense for my mother to order me around just because she is expecting a baby.*

As he nears the tent, Ishmael kicks a rock against a copper vessel on the side of the tent. Immediately Sarah shrieks, "For crying out loud, be careful! You are always destroying things."

"No need to exaggerate," Ishmael answers, irritated. "Nothing happened. Besides, that pot is already well and truly dented." *Ridiculous, the*

way she fusses over everything. Fixing his dark eyes upon her, he tells her that she doesn't need to boss him around.

Sarah responds with a fierce look.

Ishmael notices her beautiful eyes with long lashes. Those eyes used to comfort him. They spoke of love and happiness. Now they only speak of rejection and condemnation. Trying to ignore the pain, Ishmael turns away. As the first raindrops start to fall, he unties the rolled-up goat hair canvas and lets it fall, enclosing the side of the tent. When he has finished, he waits in vain for a sign of appreciation from his mother for this humble slave deed, but there is only silence.

"Father, I can't take the way Mother treats me anymore," Ishmael says in a quivering voice. He knows his father esteems her highly and he is ever so worried about criticizing her openly. His father could easily become vexed with him. But today, it was the straw that broke the camel's back and he needs to get it off his chest. Night has fallen, and all the servants have gone to their tents. Ishmael is counting on his father's attention without any interruptions.

Abraham looks compassionately at his son. "What happened, my boy?"

Ishmael recounts the events of that afternoon. When he is done, his father asks him, "Is there anything else?" Ishmael relaxes considerably as he continues to relate more and more incidents of feeling rejected by Sarah. Occasionally, he looks up at his father. The only light comes from the flickering wood fire at the entrance of the tent, and Ishmael is not able to see his father's face very well. Is he laughing at him, or does it only seem like that?

"Son, that is a lot for you to deal with," Abraham responds and then he continues, "Do you understand why this is happening?"

"Because she hates me!" Ishmael bursts out. He hadn't meant to come across so strongly, but that's the way he feels.

Abraham puts his arm around his son, and pulls him towards himself. "Let me explain something to you about women," he begins. Then he tells him that women often feel unwell and a little depressed when they are expecting, causing them to be short-fused and irritable, though they don't mean to be. "It is important for us, as men, to be patient and tolerate their rude comments; especially when they are with child," he adds. "Your birth mother went through the same thing. She even ran away from home during her pregnancy."

Ishmael has never looked at it this way. He is glad to be able to speak openly with his father about these things.

"There is something else, my son," Abraham continues. "Your mother and I have weathered a great struggle in our life." Ishmael turns his head

and looks at his father questioningly. "Do you remember the time that God spoke to me about the birth of Isaac?"

"Wasn't it at the same time He told you about the circumcision?"

"Indeed," his father confirms. "When you asked me if I was certain whether this was from God or not, I made it clear to you that I was convinced. But what I didn't tell you, is what your mother and I were dealing with at that time."

Abraham peers into his son's eyes to gauge how much he should tell him about the pain he and Sarah had endured. Ishmael candidly looks at his father, expectancy seen in his brown eyes. He is an open-minded young man, and Abraham decides to teach him a new life lesson.

"As you know, there comes a time in the life of an animal that it is no longer able to have offspring. The same thing goes for humans."

"Do you mean that women who had children before, will at some point in their life no longer be able to bear children?"

"That's right, my boy," Abraham smiles. He enjoys seeing Ishmael's quick insight. "For your mother it was the case when she reached a certain age too. Since God did not bless her with children when she was young, we knew then that she would never have a child of her own. This has always been deeply hurtful for your mother. Every time she visited other women, they would look down on her. Sometimes the shame was unbearable for her. Men will never truly understand what infertility means for a woman. In a sense, it is a denial of their femininity. Your mother silently bore this rejection all these years ... without becoming bitter over it."

"But Father, can't a man be infertile too?" Ishmael asks. "When we tried to mate the ewes with the spotted nose ram nothing happened. But when we mated them with a different male the ewes did conceive."

"They did indeed; you are a smart boy!" Abraham winks at his son approvingly.

Ishmael blushes a little, clearly enjoying the compliment. "That is the reason why we finally decided that I should take Hagar, your biological mother, as my wife. After all, God had promised me many descendants. You already know what happened next."

"Yes, I was born," Ishmael laughs.

"Exactly. To me that was enough confirmation that I was a healthy man, and that it was your mother who was infertile. This was hard for her to take on board. To add insult to injury, when Hagar started to show off about her pregnancy to her ... well, perhaps you can imagine how difficult this must have been for Mother."

Ishmael has never heard this side of the story. As he listens to Abraham speaking, he feels more compassion towards his mother, Sarah. At the same time, he still feels the pain over what happened today. "Since she is

now expecting a baby herself, she really shouldn't be that sad and angry anymore."

"You are right, but do you at least understand that this pregnancy is quite the miracle for Mama and me?"

Ishmael nods affirmatively.

"When the Lord first told me, I laughed. I could not believe it," Abraham continues. "Only when the Lord appeared to me a second time did I know for certain that your mother would conceive."

"When was that?" Ishmael inquires.

"Do you remember when the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed a few months ago?"

As if he could ever forget that disaster! He had been deeply moved by the enormous clouds of smoke. He had urged his father to flee. Luckily, the fire had stopped raging just in time. It probably hadn't spread because of the arid landscape they lived in.

"The day before the great fire the Lord visited us," Abraham goes on. "He told us about the destruction of those cities."

Ishmael nods again. He remembers well those three peculiar men in shining white robes. He also remembers his father explaining that one of them had spoken as if he were God himself.

"The Lord told me other things as well; things you were too young to understand," Abraham continues. "He promised that Mama would bear a son. Even she heard him say this. At first, she laughed at him, just like I did the first time I heard. Just think about what I said before."

Ishmael tries to get his brain round all this new information. Imagine an old ewe that has never been successfully mated suddenly starts lambing. That has never happened.

Abraham continues his story. "Then the Lord said to me, 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?'"¹¹ At first Mama still doubted, but after she saw the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah, she became convinced too. We thanked God together for his promises and we committed ourselves to trust his word, and, as you know now, his promise has been fulfilled!"

"Father, as glad as I am to hear all of this, I still don't understand why Mama is so impatient with me. Shouldn't she be filled with joy instead?"

"Mother is definitely happy about her pregnancy, but she doesn't want to show that to you. Because you are not the son of the promise, she finds it difficult to be joyful around you. She just doesn't want to emphasize her happiness in your presence. Besides that, she is concerned about this pregnancy. What if she slips and falls and ...?"

Abraham stops mid-sentence with emotion. Ishmael is sensitive to his father's struggle. He has many more questions he wants to ask, but he has learned to be patient. His father doesn't keep secrets from him and, when

the time is right, he will tell him. While Ishmael waits for further conversation, his eyes rest on the old man who is staring into the smoldering fire in front of the tent. His lips move as if he is speaking with someone.

“God, your name be praised,” Abraham’s voice suddenly resonates.

Ishmael realizes whom his father is talking to.

Abraham looks at his son and says, “We must always continue to trust God, every single day of our lives. Hold on to that, my boy, and all will be well.”



5 *A Sad Feast*

Fortunately, things are going well, Ishmael thinks. Could it be because of what Father explained to me? Or did Mama change perhaps? Or is God helping us? He doesn't quite know why, but these last few weeks the relationship between his mother and him has been more relaxed. But at this very moment he is not allowed to even see her. The women's quarters are buzzing with activity as the maidservants are running to and fro. "It is almost time for Isaac to be born," Hagar informs him.

Ishmael is lost in his own thoughts. He finds it strange that she calls this baby by his name. Why wouldn't she wait until she knows whether it will be a boy or a girl? Even if it is a boy, it is normal not to name him until the eighth day, when he is circumcised according to the new covenant. While listening carefully for the first sound of a crying baby announcing the birth, Ishmael continues his musings. What is God's plan for his little brother? And what does God want from him? Didn't he also receive his name directly from God? Ishmael can't fully comprehend, but he senses something special will happen in the future.

Suddenly he hears the wail of a new-born baby. His little brother! For a moment Ishmael wishes he were a girl so that he could go into the women's tent and see his brother, but he will have to be patient.

After what seems like an eternity, Hagar comes out of the tent. "Isaac is perfect and completely healthy!" she calls out happily.

Ishmael sighs with relief and exclaims the same thing he has often heard his father say, "God be praised!"

During the first few weeks after Isaac's birth everyone is happy and excited, but when the weeks turn into months the tension between Ishmael and his mother increases again. Ishmael is not allowed to hold or cuddle his little brother as much as he would like to. Sarah is worried that something will happen to Isaac, and as a result she tries to shield him as much as possible. Ishmael is annoyed by her over protectiveness and withdraws.

To Sarah, Ishmael seems careless, and this confirms her fears. She feels misunderstood over her concerns and this weighs upon her heavily. To protect herself, she becomes more and more detached from her older son. In turn, Ishmael becomes more and more frustrated as he feels her love for him diminish. He starts to avoid Sarah and is drawn more to Hagar, his birth mother.

On Isaac's first birthday, Ishmael is reminded of the years before God had spoken about Isaac. What a difference a few years can make. He was his mother's only son, and she had pampered him constantly. While his friends had to help at home with all sorts of chores, he had always been allowed to play and do as he pleased. He was never bored, for there was always something going on in the camp. The large flocks needed a lot of care, especially during lambing and shearing seasons. Father often received important guests as he had many friends, but he also welcomed travelers and strangers into his tents for a meal or for a rest. On market days Father used to allow him to go to town with some of the menservants. They would sell some of the animals and return with fresh vegetables and other necessities. Those had been the best days of his life. Ishmael would wake up at the crack of dawn, at the same time as the menservants. When the first sunbeams peeked into the valley they left the camp, riding on donkeys. The trip through the mountains was always exciting with surprises around almost every corner. Once they reached the town, the hustle and bustle of people offering their wares for sale provided an environment of endless excitement for a young boy. The traders spread out their goods on carpets and blankets under small pieces of tent cloth that provided shade. There were stalls with bowls, jugs, baskets, and other household items, as well as a varied assortment of farming tools. Fresh vegetables and sweet juicy fruits were available at other stalls. The sweet aroma of freshly cut wood permeated from the stalls of table and crate sellers and in another part of the market, the air was heavy with the scent of cinnamon, mint, and other spices.

Every time Ishmael went to the market with the men, he was allowed one purchase for himself. He couldn't get anything expensive or dangerous, of course; nonetheless, he had gathered quite a selection of goods with which he could play the game of bartering and selling just like the grown-ups did. Finally, at the marketplace he would hear all the latest news. Even though the servants had heard these stories as well, he was given permission to recount them to his father. After lunch he, Ishmael, was the one who was invited to sit with his father and relay all that he had experienced. He always felt very special as he told his father what he had learned and done.

No, Ishmael never had a reason to be bored. And even though he wasn't obliged to do any real work, he enjoyed watching the servants, and he often tried to copy them. Sometimes they would laugh at him as he chased runaway goats. Ishmael would then try to run his fastest. He was an excellent runner on the flat paths, but the rocky mountain slopes were a different story. One time he stumbled and hit his head roughly on a rock. Blood was everywhere. Sarah insisted on taking care of him herself. None of the slave girls could touch him, not even Hagar.

As Ishmael recalls the incident, an agonizing pain grips him. At that time, his mother had been willing to do anything for him, and Hagar was but standing on the sidelines. Now it seems the roles have reversed. His mother now keeps her distance and he feels safer with Hagar.

He remembers his father's guests, and their compliments, as they remarked to Abraham, "What a clever young man. Your son will be an excellent successor." That had made him happy, but now Ishmael is confused. On the one hand, he is the firstborn son who will take his father's place when he grows up. He has learned so much and his father has started to delegate small responsibilities to him. On the other hand, God has said that his half-brother Isaac will inherit the land where they currently live and that through him all people in the world will be blessed. Amazingly, Isaac has been born, so God must have a plan with his brother indeed.

Where does that leave him, Ishmael? What is God's plan for his life? What will happen to him now that Sarah's attitude towards him has changed again? When she was expecting Isaac, her relationship with Ishmael had already changed. After Isaac's birth, things had improved for a while, but now, she treats him with increased hostility. Pregnancy can no longer be blamed. Suddenly, a thought enters his mind like a dark cloud. *Instead of treating me like a son, she treats me like a slave! Instead of seeing me as her son, she sees me as her property!* Immediately, Ishmael is consumed with anger, and he tries to think of ways to retaliate.

Then another thought enters his mind. Is he imagining things? It is as if a soft, still voice speaks in his heart, "You will not be a slave, but a free man." Those words remind him of his mother's counsel. "You will be a wild donkey of a man," she had taught him. That was God's promise, given to him before his birth. Ishmael senses an incomprehensible peace in his heart and releases his anger.

As time goes on and the rhythm of rainy and dry seasons marks the passing of years, another milestone is reached for Abraham and his family. While the sun rays reach over the mountain tops, the camp slowly comes to life and people get ready for the special day.

"Good morning," Ishmael greets his father as he enters the men's quarters, "How are you?"

"To God be the glory, my son, I am well," Abraham responds with a smile on his face.

"You are looking tired this morning; did something happen last night?"

"No, all was calm and quiet."

"Yes, but you didn't sleep well, did you?"

Abraham appreciates Ishmael's perceptiveness. The boy senses imme-

diately when something is wrong and Abraham recognizes himself in the boy. Thanks to his own discernment he has been able to solve many a conflict throughout his life.

"I did have a restless night," Abraham confides, "I was troubled by a disturbing dream."

"Are you worried about something, Father?" Ishmael questions him. "Isn't everything ready for the feast? Perhaps I can help you with some of the final details."

"I don't know, my son. These dreams seem to come when I am facing trouble. I sense a premonition from God, like a warning. But He hasn't given me any further insight. Come on, let us go and have breakfast."

Cheerfully, Ishmael accompanies his father as they walk towards the circle of men who are already squatting on the ground. They take their places among them, right in front of the steaming dishes of fried eggs and baskets with freshly baked flatbread.

That same afternoon it happens. The feast is a great success. Everyone is in high spirits when Abraham relates for the umpteenth time the story of the three visitors, and how one of them had promised that Sarah would bear a child. Even though his friends have heard it multiple times, the story of the miraculously divine meeting remains fascinating to them. The promise made to Sarah continues to impress them tremendously. It was already miraculous that both Abraham and Sarah were still very healthy in their advanced age, but Sarah's pregnancy was unmistakably the result of Divine intervention by the God Abraham worships. Imagine, a ninety-year old woman giving birth. This was unheard of, but the living proof is in their midst.

Isaac sits quietly next to his mother in the women's tent, surrounded by chattering and giggling womenfolk. They have all come to celebrate with Sarah that her son has been weaned and enters a new phase in his life. Many babies don't survive the first three vulnerable years of their lives, but Isaac has remained healthy throughout his early childhood years. That's even more remarkable since his mother, though still looking attractive, is an extremely elderly woman.

Proudly, Sarah looks around the tent as she chronicles in detail the miracle of her pregnancy, after God had promised her a son. She then explains the things He has declared concerning Isaac's future. The women are a captivated audience, but Isaac is starting to get bored and runs off on his short, chubby legs towards the entrance of the tent. Several women kiss him on the forehead. He is such a delightful little boy! "This is my husband's heir; Isaac will inherit all my husband's possessions," Sarah divulges enthusiastically, "and all the people on earth will be blessed through him."

Coincidentally, at that very moment Ishmael passes by the women's tent. He has left the company of the men to relieve himself outside the camp. Just while he walks past, he picks up Sarah's last words. Ishmael feels as if he has been stabbed in the back. *What a terrible woman*, he thinks. He can't help but linger and listen to the rest of the conversation. "What about Ishmael? What will he inherit?" he overhears one of the women ask.

"Oh, well, he is the son of a slave girl. He should be grateful if he receives a present," Sarah answers.

With that, Sarah confirms what Ishmael has felt for a long time: she doesn't care for him anymore. At the same time, he notices Isaac bouncing out of the tent. *It is all because of him that I am now unhappy*. Jealousy takes hold of him. Then he hears the women bestowing all their affection and attention upon Isaac. In a fit of rage he kicks his little brother in the stomach. Isaac falls backwards, hits his head hard on the ground and begins to scream.

Later that evening, after nightfall and when everyone is ready to go to bed, Abraham and Sarah reminisce about the day's events. They rejoice about the attention they received from their friends. Abraham shares with Sarah the wonderful opportunity he had to tell them about God's greatness. "Some of our neighbors brought friends from another region. They had heard about us and couldn't believe it. For us to be so old, and yet to be given a child, a remarkably healthy baby, without defect or handicap. They had all wanted to hear how such a wonderful thing could have happened; for they knew this was impossible without the help of the gods. Then I told them about God, the Creator of heaven and earth."

Sarah smiles at her husband. How he loves God. Sometimes she wishes she had that same kind of love, that same kind of unshakeable trust. But the world is rough and one has to stand up for oneself, otherwise things can go badly wrong. That is her conviction. That is why she has this urgent need to tell her husband something.

Sarah waits patiently until Abraham has told her everything. When he has finished talking, he turns to her. "What is wrong? How come you are so quiet after having received such an amazing day from God's hand."

Sarah swallows. In her mind she's had this conversation with her husband many times. Yet she has a hard time broaching the subject. Overcome by her emotions, she blurts out, "Abraham, my love, there is something that has been bothering me for a long time."

"Just tell me; you know I love you."

Sarah bursts out crying. She is not that sad, she's more angry than anything, and she is well aware that her husband has a weakness for her tears.

Immediately Abraham pulls her tightly in his embrace.

"Ishmael hurt Isaac again," she continues, "and it keeps getting worse."

Abraham had heard about the incident and understands that the tension between his wife and Ishmael has increased greatly. His son has always treated him courteously and respectfully, but lately Ishmael's attitude towards Isaac has changed. Abraham can understand him. His son is a teenager and pushes the limits. Besides, he now frequently leaves the camp with some of the servants and sees how the families of the surrounding peoples treat their little children. Those kids endure much more than Isaac.

Sobbing, Sarah continues, "I don't want him to seriously injure Isaac. We have to protect the son God has given us!"

Abraham fully agrees, but he also doesn't think it is such a big deal. Ishmael will outgrow this phase soon enough. On the other hand, this is not the first incident, and things are getting worse.

Through her tears, Sarah peers at her husband. She knows he is deep in thought. "We can't take the risk," she persists. "That is why there is only one way out of this. Ishmael and Hagar have to leave." Well then, she said it. Sarah feels relieved. Finally she has mustered the courage to say what she has wanted to say for a long time. She looks at her husband intently. In the pale light of the oil lamp she notices the deep wrinkles on his forehead. As his eyes meet hers, they flicker dangerously. Sarah knows that whenever Abraham faces injustice he responds with indignation.

Abraham keeps himself under control, but his voice shakes when he responds with resolve. "That will never happen! Ishmael is my first-born son, and he was the first one to be circumcised." A bit calmer, he continues, "Make sure to treat him kindly. The boy needs your love."

Sarah attempts to defend herself, but realizes all too well that her husband is determined to keep Ishmael with him. Sometimes she can charm Abraham into doing what she wants him to do, but this time it doesn't work.

A little later, Abraham blows out the oil lamp and pulls the woolen blanket over himself.

Lying in the dark, Sarah quietly asks God to change her husband's mind. Soon after that she sinks into a deep sleep.

Abraham remains wide-awake next to her. Sarah's words have greatly disturbed him. He feels stuck between a rock and a hard place. He dearly loves his older son, but he also doesn't want his younger son to get hurt. What should he do? While stretched out on his bed mat, snug under the warm covers, he reflects on the previous night's dream. Again, he is beset by the same restlessness he felt when he woke up that morning. In his heart, he cries out, "God, please intervene! Help Sarah and Ishmael, so that we may all live together in peace."



6 *Living Water*

As the darkness of the night gives way to the early dawn, Abraham turns over under his blanket. He has hardly slept. God spoke to him in the middle of the night and his words keep milling through his head. "Do what Sarah has asked you to do" and "I shall make the son of your maidservant into a great nation."

Troubling thoughts run through his mind. How can God ask him to send his son away? How can He give him a son and then take him away? Why can't God just answer his prayer? Then everything would be fine. God is not being fair. Isn't it hard enough on Ishmael that Isaac is the son of the promise and not he? Now he must be sent away as well? That is a double rejection!

After hours of wrestling with his emotions, Abraham is still angry with God. He has tried to let go of Ishmael and leave him in God's hands, but in moments like these he just can't reconcile God's character with that of a loving Father. What devoted father would send his son away? God is the chief example of care. Often Abraham has watched how the donkeys show tender loving care for their foals. Even tiny birds feed their little ones with utmost care and protect them from all possible predators. The entire creation teaches how important and beautiful it is to care for one's children. In the same way, Abraham loves his son very much. He is proud of his clever and sensitive Ishmael. He tries to ignore the thought of sending him away. However, God's voice couldn't have been any clearer.

While Abraham is still struggling, he lifts his eyes and focuses on the tent cloth above him. Some of the knots in the fabric remind him of his circumcision. He had been lying on the floor then too and had concentrated on the texture of the tent cloth to distract himself from the pain. Abraham allows his thoughts to wander to that occasion. The circumcision had been a giant leap of faith. At that time no one knew what the consequences were going to be.

However, God has clearly blessed our obedience, Abraham realizes suddenly. He hadn't lost his manhood in any way and Sarah had conceived, just as God had promised. If God took care of us then, He will take care of us now. It is as if Abraham received an answer to his question with this thought. Deep inside he knows that God's way is the best way, and Abraham resolves to obey God, in spite of the harrowing pain. Instantly, he gets up from his bed and wakes Ishmael to let him know what God has said.

As the first sunbeams peek over the mountaintops and light up the valley below, the maidservant and her son leave the encampment. Hagar lets her tears flow freely. She is heart-broken. Her future is in shambles. *Once a slave, always a slave*, she thinks to herself. *God had promised all these wonderful things, but nothing came of it. Everything is hopeless. Abraham has not even given us a single thing. He is so immensely rich and yet he sent us off with only a water skin and a lump of bread. He could at least have given us a donkey to ride on, or some money to build a new life elsewhere. What a self-centered man! Claiming that God himself spoke to him! Well, if his God demands such things, I don't really care anymore.* She continues down the road in anger. Going where? It doesn't really matter anymore. Deep inside she wishes to die. What a miserable life! However, the footsteps behind her remind her of her son. He still needs her.

Hagar feels conflicted. Her mother's heart wants to give her son the best future, but her sense of justice tells her that he is the cause of her misery. If only he had behaved better, this all could have been prevented. They would have had a good life with Abraham. To be quite honest, she had not at all expected that her master would have resorted to this. Sending your own son away - what sort of father has ever done such a thing? "Abraham is nothing but a hypocrite!" Hagar exclaims to her son, "While he claims that he loves you and that it hurts him to send you away, he bans you from his presence at the same time. He doesn't practice what he preaches!"

Ishmael shares in the pain his mother experiences in her heart. His eyes burn in grief. He wants to be strong and not cry, and he tries hard to hold back his tears. *I should have never kicked Isaac. Then we wouldn't be in this situation now. How foolish of me not to exert more self-control. But Sarah was so mean-spirited. Anyone would have reacted the same way I did. Only then do Hagar's words sink in. His father a hypocrite? How does she come to that conclusion?* Ishmael doesn't really understand either why his father has sent him away, but he holds on to the positive image of his dad. "Mum, father truly loves me, I'm sure about that. He will regret what he has done and then he will send his servants after us to bring us back."

"Do you really think so? Of course not!" Hagar replies sharply. "As you know, I ran away when I was expecting you. When I returned, he told me that he had sent out men to search for me. Well, if that were really true, they would surely have found me." As Hagar speaks, she realizes that she is not entirely honest. For the first two days, she had purposely avoided the main road and had tramped across the mountain paths. The menservants had told her later how much time they had spent looking for her and she had been pleased to hear that.

While Hagar thinks about that, the meeting with that extraordinary man comes back to mind. At the well, God had given her such precious promises. Ishmael was supposed to become a great nation and a free man,

enjoying his freedom just like the wild donkeys all around them. Ishmael's birth heralded blissful years during which Sarah finally treated her kindly. Even though she had remained a servant, her workload had been lightened and she was allowed to nurse Ishmael. She had been so thankful that God had spoken to her and really glad that she had obeyed his voice and returned to her mistress.

"Mama," Ishmael breaks the silence, "How is it possible that God first promised you that I will become a great nation and then to reject us? Did I lose that promise because of my jealousy of Isaac?"

"I don't know, Ishmael. It is a mystery to me as well. Can you believe what Abraham said to me this morning? According to him, last night God promised him again that He would make you into a great nation." Doubt resonates in her voice. She doesn't trust Abraham anymore. How could he just send them away like that? And since God commanded him to do so, she no longer trusts God either. She feels abandoned by both of them and decides that from now on she will take her destiny into her own hands. "Ishmael, forget about your father's God," she goes on. "It makes no sense to serve this God; He does as He wills. One day He loves you, the next day He rejects you."

Ishmael doesn't agree with his mother, but he wisely keeps his mouth shut. It would not do any good to contradict her just now.

Together they head south, every step taking them further away from all they have known and trusted. With the sun at its peak, Ishmael's stomach starts to rumble. At the top of a hill he notices a wild fig tree and he suggests, "Mama, I will pick us some fruit; it will be more nourishing than just bread."

"That's a good idea, my son; let me help you," she answers as she clambers up the steep incline behind him. The tree is heavy with rich red-purple figs. Birds have obviously already feasted on some of the fruits. Soon Hagar and her son enjoy the delicious bounty as well. Without giving it much thought, Ishmael continues to eat, and when all the ripe figs are gone, he picks the unripe ones. Hagar watches him, and warns, "Watch out, those white ones can make you sick."

"Oh, Mama, who knows when we shall find something else to eat? I am just so hungry."

Hagar knows this will easily turn into a senseless discussion and she lets him be. In the end, Ishmael has eaten so much that his stomach starts to hurt. This is a clear sign for him to stop.

After drinking some water and resting a bit, they continue down the road southwards. A few hours later, Ishmael's stomach hurts even more. All of a sudden, he feels the urge to relieve himself. Pulling up his long tunic he quickly squats behind a large rock. Then he carefully cleans himself with a

small stone, but there is no relief. The cramps increase in severity and soon Ishmael has a serious case of diarrhea. He continues to walk with great difficulty. Meanwhile the sun has disappeared behind the mountains and it will soon be dark. Together they try to find shelter for the night.

Ishmael's throat is parched. He picks up the water skin and opens it. "Be careful not to drink much," says Hagar, "that is all we have. We don't know when we shall find another well."

"But Mama, I have to drink, otherwise I will get worse," Ishmael defends himself.

"What if we run out of water? Then I won't be able to go on, and then I won't be able to care for you either." Hagar responds worriedly.

"Don't worry. God will take care of us. He promised," Ishmael retorts confidently while taking a few swigs.

"How conceited you are; just like your father. You do just what you want to do and then say that God will take care of everything."

Ishmael is annoyed. Why is his mother always so negative? "You told me yourself that my name was to be Ishmael. It still means, 'God hears', whether you believe that or not."

Hagar had not thought about that for a while. "That's true," she reluctantly admits, but then adds, "Still, we have to do our utmost; otherwise God is not obliged to do anything for us. I even had to return to Sarah while she was still mistreating me."

Ishmael doesn't feel like contradicting his mother; he is too exhausted and too sick. A little while later, they both fall asleep under the stars.

The next morning Hagar and her son continue on their journey. Ishmael had not had a good night. The dysentery kept him up a lot of the time and the abdominal cramps continue to plague him. His skin feels hot with fever. He hobbles behind his mother as she searches for a well. There is not a drop of water left in the skin with which to alleviate his burning thirst. Finally, Ishmael can no longer put one foot in front of the other and he collapses.

Hagar looks back. "Ishmael, please, don't give up," she begs. Ishmael doesn't reply. He moans softly. Hagar is frightened. What can she do now? "Help! Help!" she cries. Her voice echoes a few times between the barren rocks and then fades away into a dead silence. No answer. After a while, Hagar gives up. It is useless to keep calling for help. They are all alone in the desert. Panic sets in. She has just enough strength to help Ishmael out of the sun. She bends down next to him, wraps his limp arm around her shoulders, and carefully drags him underneath a large bush where she lays him down in the shade.

Ishmael's whimpering becomes fainter. He seems to be saying something from time to time, but Hagar isn't sure. She thinks she can discern

some words such as 'God', and 'father', and 'promised'. His face is so pale and he seems to be delirious.

Hagar fears the worst. Her eyes brim with tears as she realizes that her son is dying. She doesn't want to endure this trial up close. "Poor boy, why should your life end like this?" she whispers as she plants a farewell kiss on his forehead. Weeping she walks away and sits down at a little distance, waiting for the moaning to stop forever. *I should have stopped him from eating the unripe figs. No, it's Abraham's fault. He sent us away! But that was because of Sarah, that malicious woman! But no, it is really all God's fault. If only Isaac hadn't been born...*

Suddenly Hagar hears a voice. Someone is calling her name. The voice sounds familiar. Bewildered, Hagar looks around but sees no one. "What is troubling you?" the same voice resounds. The sound seems to come from above, but the desert is flat here. Only in the distance can one discern the outlines of the mountains through a haze of dust. Hagar lifts her gaze and notices a cloud straight above her. The cloud seems to be whiter and more radiant than any other cloud in the sky. *I have heard that voice before.* At once she remembers. It is the voice of the stranger at the well who told her she would bear a son. *But where is he now? Has he hidden himself behind the cloud?*

"Lord, there is no water and Ishmael is dying", she answers. "I am at the end of my rope. It is all over."

The voice Hagar heard so many years ago reverberates powerfully and convincingly from heaven. "Fear not for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is."¹²

Hagar is reminded of the beautiful meaning of Ishmael's name. It is true: God hears. Even when she couldn't understand Ishmael's soft moaning, God had heard him. The voice continues, "Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation."¹³ At those words, hope fills Hagar's heart. *God has not deserted me after all.* Almost immediately she is again gripped by fear and doubt. *What difference does it make now? Why give the boy false hope? There is no water anywhere around here and neither are there any rain clouds.* Her thoughts waver between hope and despair, between trust and distrust.

Hagar feels the weariness of her body and her parched mouth and cracked lips remind her of her own thirst. If they both die, their suffering will end. On the other hand, God has promised her a wonderful future, with the honor of becoming the mother of an entire people. Her soul struggles bitterly within her. In the end she decides to give God a chance. "I don't know how this will ever come true, but I want to trust you. I want to trust that you will keep your promises, even though it doesn't make sense to me," she prays silently.

Again she places her son's arm over her shoulder and carefully lifts him up. As she straightens up she notices a hole in the ground. *It looks like a well!* She lies Ishmael down on the ground and quickly runs towards it. When she peers down, she can hardly believe her eyes. It is indeed a spring with clear, fresh water. How could she not have seen it earlier? The well is not deep at all and she easily scoops up the water with her cupped hands. She quickly tries a few sips. Oh, how deliciously refreshing, not at all brackish or bitter. She can't recall a time when she has tasted sweeter water.

Within minutes Hagar has filled the water skin and she returns to Ishmael. As he tastes the refreshing liquid, he opens his eyes and smiles at his mother. It is as if he says, "You see, Mama, God really does hear and He keeps his promises."



7 Immanuel - God with them

Ishmael recovers remarkably quickly and the very next day he and Hagar continue on their journey. "Where are we going, Mama?" Ishmael wants to know.

Hagar is taken aback by the question. At first, she had been taken up with the thoughts of having been sent away from Abraham. After that terrible rejection, she never wanted to see him again; neither does she want to be reminded of him. That is why she wants to stay as far away from his shepherds as possible. She explains her plans to her young son.

When his mother finishes talking, Ishmael asks, "Would they really come all this way into the desert?"

"No, I don't think so; we don't need to go much further," she answers. *How wonderful that Ishmael is such a mature young man*, she thinks to herself. "What do you think we should do next?"

"Well, the water from this well is very sweet. If we can find food, we can stay here for a long time."

"That's true," Hagar agrees. "You know what, let's search the surroundings for fruit trees."

"Perhaps I can catch a hare, or a wild donkey," Ishmael adds.

Hagar bursts into laughter.

"What? Did I say something wrong?"

"Not at all, but when you mentioned the wild donkey, it made me think of what God said about you, my son."

Ishmael laughs too. After the encounter with God, who spoke to them from the air, they both feel more at ease. God has proven that He has not rejected them. He even answered Ishmael's simple prayer when he was delirious with fever. The knowledge that God sees and hears everything fills them with hope for the future.

One day, Ishmael rushes towards the tent. "Look at what I caught today, Mama!" he exclaims with excitement. Breathless he shows his mother the splendid catch.

"Great! That is amazing!" Hagar exclaims. "You are an excellent hunter!" Filled with pride, Ishmael basks in the approval of his mother. He is happy to see her respond so positively.

These past few months in the desert, they have had to work hard to carve out an existence from nothing. Fortunately, Ishmael had learned a lot from his father about the wildlife. Recognizing their tracks in the sand, he

could easily see which animals had frequented the spot and in what direction he would be able to find them. From the dryness of the animal droppings, he could tell when the animals had been there and how far they would have gone. From the gnawed tree branches and shrubs, he could pick up whether they were adult animals or young.

After a while, he had finally gathered enough animal skins for his mother to make a tent. This was a welcome shelter from the scorching day-time sun as well as a protection from the cold desert nights. Together they had made all sorts of wooden utensils and the area around the well was beginning to look like a little encampment. Additionally, Ishmael had made bows and arrows. When he thinks back to the first set he ever made, he laughs. Compared to the bow and arrow he has now, that first one was child's play. And the difference in results is obvious. For the first time in his life he shot a gazelle. Because they are so skittish, you must shoot them from a great distance, and because they are such fast runners, they are gone before you know it. *But today my arrow was faster*, Ishmael muses with a smile on his face. With his mother's help, he constructs a tripod from long slender branches. To hang the lifeless animal from its hind legs. A little while later, the meat is roasting on a stick above the fire. As Hagar turns the spit, she remarks, "You know, it is really amazing how you have learned to hunt so rapidly. I have seen many boys grow up, in Egypt as well as in Canaan, but I never saw anyone learn to hunt as fast as you have."

"Well, I do think my catch was pretty significant today. But isn't it normal to improve over time?"

"That's true, but as fast as you have learned ..." Hagar doesn't finish her sentence because she thinks of God's promise to her. Ishmael will become a great nation. "I think God must be helping you," she concludes.

"That's quite possible. I regularly ask him to help me," Ishmael responds shyly.

"Well, my boy, He does. May his name be praised!"

Months turn into years. Hagar and Ishmael have moved to another region. One year there had hardly been any rainfall. The trees had stopped bearing fruit and the animals had moved away. In order to find enough food to survive they had decided to go to another area and have ended up in the wilderness of Paran on the east side of the Red Sea.

Ishmael is now a grown man and his mother thinks it is about time for him to get married.

"Well, Mama, I don't want a wife from the tribes where we live; they don't care either about God or his commandments. I want to stay faithful to God."

"I understand, my boy, but where are we going to find you a bride? Your father's relatives live too far away. It is impossible for us to go there. Besides, I doubt that any of your father's brothers would give you a daughter as a bride after your father sent you away."

"I would also be happy with a girl born in my father's household. She would know what it means to worship the God of heaven and earth and she would encourage me to stay faithful to him even through the difficult times."

"I understand that that's important to you, but then you would be marrying a slave-girl and that would mean you voluntarily tie yourself to the world of slaves. I am just so glad that you've got a different future ahead of you now." As Hagar speaks these words, she suddenly realizes something that has been in her thoughts before, but only now does reality set in. She exclaims, "Ishmael, you are truly free, and so am I! When Abraham sent us away, he set us free. This is amazing! Never before have I understood it in this way!" Hagar's face radiates.

"God be praised. It really wasn't such a bad thing then that he sent us away without any gift", Ishmael adds enthusiastically, "He could have sold you instead, but he didn't do that." When Ishmael utters these words, a lump rises in his throat, and he has to swallow a few times. He has always believed that his father was a good man, even though his mother had been right about the fact that he had not asked them to return to him. It was as if he had completely forgotten about them, but the words he had spoken at their farewell had been sincere. "I love you, my son, and will always love you. Remember that," he had said.

Ishmael treasures those words in his heart like a promise, and whenever he experiences rejection, he recalls them. In the meantime, the painful memories from the past no longer haunt him. When he was dying, it was God himself who rescued him and this has left a deep impression on him. Afterwards many other wondrous things had occurred, and as a result Ishmael feels safe and at peace.

"... in Egypt. What do you think about that?" Ishmael is brought back from his thoughts. "I'm sorry, what did you just say? I was thinking of something else."

Hagar repeats her idea. "I still have relatives who could help me. Surely, I would be able to find you a proper wife in Egypt. What do you think?"

Ishmael finds it a difficult subject to talk about. "Aren't all your relatives slaves as well? What good would that be to me?" he asks his mother.

Hagar eyes him mournfully. She would love for him to have a sweet and pretty wife, and she herself is not getting any younger. One day, she will no longer be able to cook, clean, and do all the other chores around the camp on her own. "I have an idea!" she exclaims suddenly. "You have already

amassed quite a collection of skins. If you sell them, you will have enough money for a dowry for the daughter of a slave owner.”

Ishmael’s eyes light up. He hadn’t thought of that before. Besides, an Egyptian woman would fit well. His mother had been born and raised in Egypt and he is half Egyptian, after all. Excitedly they plan for Hagar to travel to her homeland. Ishmael stays behind to take care of their chickens and two goats.

After a few months, Hagar returns with a sweet girl. With her strong build she is well suited for the Bedouin way of life. After the wedding ceremony, Ishmael thanks his mother for finding him a bride. He is surprised at how quickly his wife adapts to life in the desert. His mother clearly picked the right woman for him.

Hagar hides her son’s words in her heart and for the first time in many years she feels completely at peace. Life in the desert is not easy, and she must work very hard. Yet, they experience a measure of prosperity. “Ishmael,” she whispers as she looks deep and long into his eyes, “I believe God’s blessing to Abraham is upon us.”

“Of course, Mama,” comes the confident response, “don’t you remember what Father asked God when He promised him another son?”

Hagar makes a clicking sound in the back of her throat, indicating she doesn’t know what he means and gives him a puzzled look.

“God told Father, ‘Behold, I have blessed him.’¹⁴ So my entire life, ever since I was born, I have been blessed by God,” Ishmael explains. He has hardly finished speaking, before something else occurs to him. “No doubt this is why I didn’t die, when you thought I would, when I was so sick.” Suddenly, it dawns on him that all these years in the desert God has protected him too. Since then he hadn’t been really ill, nor had he been attacked by a lion, while others had been mauled or even killed by predators. Several situations throughout his life come to mind in which he now clearly sees God’s hand of protection. Tears well up in his eyes. “God is with us, Mama. He loves us.” He tries hard to hold back the tears, but Hagar sees them and she cries too. She still has a lot of unanswered questions, but she also must admit that God is truly with them.

Whenever Ishmael goes to the market to trade goods for grain and other necessities, he meets traveling merchants. Sometimes they have news about his father.

This is how he found out that his father had moved to the same area where he and Hagar had first lived. That’s where his father had quarreled with Abimelech, King of the Philistines. Ishmael was very surprised when he heard about it. He couldn’t remember any time that his father had been

at odds with anyone. He had always been such a humble and generous person. Once, there had been much tension between the shepherds of Father's flocks and those of his older nephew, Lot. His father had been remarkably generous. As Lot's uncle, Abraham had every right to choose first, but he had left the decision to his nephew, who had proceeded to take the better piece of land for himself. If only Ishmael had been in charge, then surely things would have ended differently. Fortunately, it seems that his father was able to resolve the conflict with the Philistine king wisely as well. By giving Abimelech a sizable gift, he had gained favor with him, and they had made a treaty. Ishmael thinks his father has been rather generous by giving him seven valuable lambs, in addition to all the sheep, goats, and cows. *I, his firstborn son, did not receive anything, while he just spoiled that foreign king.* Ishmael realizes that his father is a foreigner, living in the land of the Philistines by the grace of their king. Still, at times like this he feels the wound of rejection raw in his heart. He then quickly reasons that at least his mother is no longer a slave, but a free woman.

Sometime later, Ishmael picks up a very strange story. Rumor has it that his father had wanted to kill Isaac. "He did it in obedience to God," it was said. Ishmael doesn't understand it at all. It seems that God had later stopped his father from doing it and that's a good thing, too, since Ishmael secretly hopes to meet his half-brother one day. He then decides that when Isaac's parents have passed away, he will visit him and ask him what exactly happened.

Nine months after the wedding there is cause for celebration. Ishmael's wife delivers a beautiful strong baby and it's even a boy!

Ishmael understands that this too is a blessing from God. He thinks back to the conversations he used to have with his father in front of the tent after sunset. It had been repeated often. "You will father twelve princes, my son, this is what God has promised me. The Lord will bless you richly. Be assured that He loves you." Ishmael knows these words by heart and now experiences the fulfillment of them. His first prince has been born.

When Ishmael thinks about a name, his mother suggests, "Why not Terah, after your grandfather?"

"That is a beautiful name, Mama, but I would rather honor God and thank him for his blessings."

"Then why don't you call him Noah. It means 'rest', and God has now given you rest."

"That's a great name as well, but I also want to express something of the promise given to me by God. Something that points to the numerous descendants he spoke about."

Ishmael looks at his mother and notices she is in deep thought. Then she shakes her head. She can't think of any name that adequately reflects that thought.

"I know!" Ishmael suddenly exclaims. "I will call him Nebaioth; 'fruitfulness' articulates exactly what I want to say." Ishmael first looks at his mother and then at his wife.

All the time she has been quietly listening to their conversation. She understands that the bond between mother and son is stronger than between a wife and her husband.

Both nod approvingly. Hagar thinks quietly to herself, *Sarah can't do any better than this, with her only son. She may laugh because she received a child at an advanced age, but the promise of the twelve tribes is for Ishmael. Nebaioth is proof that Ishmael is the fertile one.*

When the new-born baby is eight days old, Ishmael does what he has seen his father do to the sons of the servants in his household. With a razor-sharp stone he carefully cuts away Nebaioth's foreskin. He wants his children to remain part of God's covenant with his father. This will always remind them that their Creator will continue to be with them as He has been with him.

8 *Reconciliation between Patriarchs*

Dust clouds rising in the distance announce a visitor. A man riding a camel approaches the camp. His clothes as well as the way he rides the animal, betray that he is from a different tribe. As he peers at this stranger, Ishmael tries to guess where he might be from but he just can't place him. Somewhat hesitatingly, the man follows the path to the watering hole in front of the encampment. Even before he reaches the well, Ishmael sends his youngest son to welcome him. Enthusiastically, Kedemah runs barefoot towards the visitor. After greeting him, he runs back to his father just as fast and calls out, panting, "Daddy, I can't understand him."

"Ok my son, let me go and see what he wants." Ishmael gets up and goes out of the tent. Meanwhile, the man has dismounted and is now watering his camel. As Ishmael approaches him, he is startled. The man looks so familiar. He looks like Eliezer! What a surprise! But what does he want? An old wound opens as pains of his father's rejection resurface. The scene springs back into his mind. After saying farewell, his father had immediately turned around and walked away. Ishmael's last memory of him was his back and the long white strands of hair fluttering in the wind. He hadn't waved or walked along for a short distance, as he always did with visitors. No, Abraham hadn't shown any respect during their parting. Eliezer had waved goodbye and called after him, "Go in peace!" Not his father. No, he had completely dismissed and rejected him. Ishmael feels a lump in his throat, but he controls himself. He doesn't want to show his emotions; it would be a sign of weakness. After all, he is a strong desert dweller now and has a large household for himself. With his twelve sons, not to mention all the sheep, donkeys, and camels, he has become a respectable man.

As the guest approaches him, Ishmael is sure. This is indeed Eliezer! The callous on his forehead gives away his frequent bowing and touching the ground with his face. He has learned this from Abraham, who often humbles himself in front of his Creator and kneels to the ground to worship him.

Eliezer greets him and says, "Peace be with you."

"Peace be with you, too. Welcome to my humble home," Ishmael replies, while shaking his hand. He pretends not to recognize Eliezer.

Eliezer hesitates for a moment but then he says, "I bring you greetings from my master, Abraham."

At the sound of his father's name, Ishmael blinks a few times to hide the pain. Should he pretend to be someone else or should he confirm to Eliezer

that he is in fact, Ishmael? Eliezer's wrinkled face looks so kind and friendly. Ishmael remembers how he used to play tricks on him. Eliezer had put up with a lot when he was a young boy. Sometimes his father's head servant had even been the target of his mischief, but Eliezer had never really got angry with him. He truly was a kind man. The realization that he can't really blame Eliezer for anything breaks the ice between them. He puts his left hand on Eliezer's shoulder and kisses him on both cheeks.

The old man's eyes fill with tears as he draws Ishmael into a tight embrace. After Eliezer has dried his eyes with his dusty headscarf, he turns to the boy next to Ishmael and shakes his hand as well.

"This is my youngest son, Kedemah," Ishmael explains.

Eliezer looks at him wonderingly and asks, "How many sons do you have?"

"God has blessed me with twelve sons."

"Praise be to God, to him be all honor!" Eliezer proclaims. "He is faithful to those who serve him. Do you remember what God promised your father?"

Ishmael remembers that very well and confirms that God indeed has been true to his promises. As the conversation proceeds, Ishmael begins to relax and enjoy the visit of his old friend.

In the evening, after sunset, when the stars adorn the heavens, Eliezer knows the moment has come to reveal the purpose of his visit. He reclines by the campfire with Ishmael, his sons, and his mother, Hagar. Because Eliezer speaks in a different dialect, Ishmael occasionally explains to his sons what he is saying. They have already learned from their grandmother that their guest is originally from far away Damascus and that he has worked many years for their grandfather. They can't get enough of the fascinating stories about their ancestors. Their father hardly ever talks about his past. He has taught them about the God their grandfather worships but rarely about their grandfather himself.

Eliezer tells the family about Sarah's death and about the land Abraham purchased from the Hittites. In detail, he relays how God led him to the right wife for Isaac.

Ishmael nods. He understands God's hand in these events. Then there is a silence.

Eliezer looks Ishmael in the eyes and silently asks God for wisdom. Then he says, "Your father misses you."

Ishmael's heart skips a beat. He can barely contain himself.

Eliezer notices the tension in his face. "He sent me to you to tell you that," he continues.

Ishmael can't believe it. *My father rejected me so long ago. And now all of a*

sudden he misses me? Must be because Sarah has passed away. Now he is sad and needs me to comfort him. Well, that's never going to happen. He should have come to me himself. Ishmael glances at his mother and the hardened look in her eyes confirms his own feelings. "That's too bad for him," Ishmael replies. His words sound cold compared to Eliezer's gentle voice.

He was prepared for this answer and continues, "Your father is sorry for the hurt he gave you." Then he turns to Hagar and says, "He also apologizes to you for the way he treated you both."

"Well, if he is that sorry, why didn't he come himself?" Ishmael retorts sharply. "When we said 'goodbye' he didn't even wave at me. He treats all his guests with the utmost respect but he chased us away like a pack of wild dogs."

Eliezer remains calm. "I know how you feel, Ishmael," he says. "You feel forsaken and rejected by your father. To be sent away like that must have been extremely painful. I was surprised myself at the time, but the fact that he didn't wave at you had nothing to do with you but rather it was the heart-wrenching pain he felt at having to bid you farewell. Don't you remember how he personally, placed the water jug on your mother's shoulder, instead of getting one of the servants to do it? In doing so he was paying you respect. I am sure your father wanted the best for you. He often prayed for you and I could see how much he missed you."

"Well, he could have sent us word before this. We are only a four-day journey away from him!" Ishmael lashes out.

"Ishmael, your father did not act on his own volition. He sought to do the will of the Creator. I can't fully understand it but I can see that God guides him. Do you know that, before you were born, I was going to inherit everything from your father?"

Ishmael looks at him puzzled. He doesn't quite understand. "So, he rejected you too?"

"No," Eliezer replies, "I have not been rejected. At first, I thought I might have been but later I realized God has a plan that I can't fathom." Eliezer notices that Ishmael begins to relax and he continues, "Even Isaac felt rejected at times. At one point your father was going to sacrifice him. Your father was fully convinced that God was asking him to do this."

"Yes, I heard about that," Ishmael replies with a look of disdain. "Such a bizarre story. I could hardly believe it. So it really happened?"

"Yes, but your father sincerely believed that God would raise Isaac from the dead." Before he continues, Eliezer allows some time for his words to sink in. Then he says, "Now he hopes to see you again, too."

"What does Isaac think about nearly being slaughtered?" Ishmael asks, carefully avoiding a direct answer to Eliezer's invitation.

"Isaac has matured and his trust in your father has grown. Even his

faith in God has deepened through that experience. I am starting to see similar faith in him as your father," Eliezer explains. "As a matter of fact, not only your father, but also Isaac would like to meet you. You are his only brother and, except for the stories he has heard about you, he has no memories of you."

Those words touch Ishmael deeply: his own brother wants to see him. "It is late now and time to go rest," he decides. "I will let you know in the morning if I will go with you to meet Abraham."

That night Ishmael dreams peacefully. It is the gentle push that helps him make his decision.

Meanwhile, Abraham eagerly awaits Eliezer's return. Every afternoon he reclines under the large tamarisk tree that he planted on the edge of the camp. From there he gazes across the sloping landscape with his experienced eye. Now that Sarah is gone, he feels free to meet his firstborn son again. When he had discussed the idea with Isaac, he had agreed enthusiastically. That meant that there was no longer any reason not to invite Ishmael.

Finally Abraham sees his servant appear in the distance. Eliezer is still far off but Abraham recognizes him from the way he rides his camel. His heart starts to beat faster. Eliezer is not alone! Immediately Abraham gets up and as fast as his old legs can carry him, he rushes towards the approaching party. When Ishmael sees the old man running at them, tears well up in his eyes.

Nebaioth, who is riding next to him, is embarrassed. His father had always impressed upon him and his brothers never to cry in public, as that is a sign of weakness. He is very proud of his father who has built a life for himself and his family out of nothing. How can he then care so much about this elderly man who abandoned him when he was still a boy?

But Ishmael's heart has melted and he skillfully makes his camel kneel down quickly. Father and son embrace each other straightaway and both weep. After wiping away his tears, Abraham greets the young man next to Ishmael. "Nebaioth, this is your grandfather, Abraham," Ishmael explains needlessly.

Nebaioth politely shakes his grandfather's hand, but that is not good enough for Abraham. The old man pulls his grandson into his arms and hugs him tightly. On the one hand Nebaioth is upset about the past, but on the other hand he experiences a warmth and peace from his grandfather such as he has never felt before. Together they walk to the camp and sit down in the shade of the large tamarisk tree.

As the daylight slowly retracts from the valley and the grounds and tents are enveloped in the fast-growing shadows, Isaac returns home. The large

circle of children near the tree reveals that his father must have interesting visitors. *Ah, maybe Eliezer is back*, is the first thought that comes to mind. He quickens his pace and tries to distinguish who all the different people are.

One of the children looks towards him and then calls out something which he can't understand. Immediately a stranger gets up from the circle of men and comes towards him.

Strange, he looks just like my father. At first Isaac is surprised but then he realizes who this is. This is his brother, his only brother! He sees the tears in his brother's eyes and feels a great sense of relief. "Ishmael, welcome! A thousand times welcome!" he calls out while affectionately kissing him on both cheeks. He greets Nebaioth with the same enthusiasm, but Ishmael's son still acts slightly reserved with these new people, although inside he feels strangely relaxed. He is glad to get to know his grandfather and uncle. He has never met a relative from either his father or mother's side before. He remembers how he used to feel a little envious of his peers who received attention from their grandfathers.

That day marks a new beginning in the relationship between the relatives. Unfortunately, all too soon Ishmael must return to his family and livestock. At their parting, he promises his father and brother that he will visit them again. "You must bring your entire family next time," Isaac states emphatically.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, as my sons are responsible for the livestock; it is work that I can't leave to my servants," Ishmael indicates. "When danger comes, the workers tend to think of themselves first and they easily forget about the sheep and goats."

Isaac hadn't thought of that. Then he realizes how difficult it must have been before for his own father, before he had sons to whom he could entrust such responsibilities.

On the way back Nebaioth has many questions for his father. He wants to know what exactly happened between his grandfather and grandmother. Ishmael explains in detail the reasons why Abraham had sent him away.

"Father, I just don't understand. It seems to me that Grandfather is a very kind man, and yet he was so cruel to you and Grandmother Hagar."

"I don't understand either, Nebaioth, but I do know it has a lot to do with God the Creator. Grandfather was being obedient to him."

"Well, I don't really want anything to do with a God who demands such cruelty from his people."

"Nebaioth, I understand how you feel. Sometimes I find it difficult to accept as well. In the meantime, I have experienced enough with God to see that He is with me and that He loves me."

"Really, like what?" Nebaioth asks coldly. He is clearly struggling with

the rejection, which has had an effect on him in that he missed out on being a grandson. He didn't have a grandfather to tell him stories about times long ago. No one to go to when you can't talk to your parents, no one to listen to your own adventures.

Patently, Ishmael answers his son's question. "When the water ran out, I really thought I was going to die. I had a high fever and was unable to walk because I had become so weak. Only by leaning on Grandmother Hagar's slender body was I able to stumble along for a while. Wherever we looked, there was no water to be found anywhere. Grandmother finally laid me down in the shade of some bushes and moved away from me so that I wouldn't see her tears as she wept. At that very moment, I thought about the meaning of my name."

"God hears," Nebaioth interrupts slightly annoyed. "You told me that many times."

"Indeed, my son," Ishmael continues. "Then I called upon God with all my strength, 'If you are truly alive, save us!' Suddenly a voice rang out from heaven. I couldn't see anyone but Grandmother recognized the voice. It was the stranger whom she had met years before. I am sure it was God's voice for He hears and He speaks. Even Grandfather heard him speak many times."

As Nebaioth listens to his father's story, something transpires in his heart. The pain and anger give way to different feelings, something new. He senses the same sincerity in his father's words as his Grandfather's. By the time Ishmael has finished the story, Nebaioth has learned an important lesson. God's ways are unfathomable but He gives us enough evidence of his love and blessings for us to be able to trust in him. The Lord is good and loves those He created.

9 A Puzzle Solved

"Mibsam, Kedar, and Adbeel, you will come with me," says Ishmael. The men are happy that it is finally their turn to go. Ever since Nebaioth returned from the visit to his grandfather, they have been looking forward to meeting him as well. Meanwhile, almost a year has passed, a year of waiting, until their father deemed the time to be right. Occasionally they would ask him about it, but they knew that, if they would pester him too much, it would have the opposite effect. Finally, it seems their patience is rewarded. The other brothers in the tent are somewhat jealous.

"When can I go?" Kedemah asks. He is the youngest and not the least bit shy about asking his father for a favor.

"One day it will be your turn," his father replies.

"But you said that Grandfather is one hundred and forty-five years old!" Kedemah protests, "we have never even heard about anyone living that long. Surely, he will die soon."

"Ha-ha, don't worry about that," Ishmael laughs. "Do you know how long your great-grandfather Terah lived?" Kedemah doesn't know. Ishmael looks around the circle to see if any of the others know. He winks at Nebaioth, who has personally heard the answer from his grandfather's mouth.

Speaking slowly and emphatically, Nebaioth responds, "Grandfather's father lived two hundred and five years."

Kedemah looks perplexed. "How is it possible for someone to live that long?" he wants to know. "Grandfather's wife, Sarah, died a long time ago and even she was very old."

"It has to do with Creator," Nebaioth explains, and then he proceeds to tell them all the things he learned about God from his grandfather.

Listening to the conversation that follows between the brothers, Ishmael realizes how much Nebaioth has benefited from seeing his grandfather. He should really give each one of his sons that same opportunity. On the other hand, he must be practical and think about the livestock that needs to be cared for in his absence.

"Alright, if Nebaioth is ready to look after the camp with the help of your six younger brothers, I can allow Mishma and Dumah to come with us as well."

Nebaioth heartily grants his brothers this trip and nods his head in approval. A few days later, a caravan of camels and their riders are on their way to Beersheba.

After a three-day journey, Ishmael sees the old familiar tamarisk tree in the distance. Fortunately the tents are still there, which means that his father hasn't moved yet. As he comes nearer, he sees his father seated under the large tree. It's easy to recognize him by his long, white hair, and it doesn't take long before Abraham spots him, too. Quickly he rises to his feet and greets his beloved son. "It is such an honor to see you again, Ishmael," he says joyfully.

"It is I who am honored by meeting you again, Father," Ishmael responds. Then he introduces the sons who are with him to their grandfather. Filled with pride, Abraham greets each one and gives them a warm embrace. A little while later they all sit down in a circle under the tree. Scattered around are some square rocks. Abraham has ordered two of his servants to bring the guests goat hair blankets, one each. They drape one part over the rock and spread the rest out on the ground. This way they turn the rock into a pillow, creating a comfortable spot for every guest. Now the men can relax from their arduous journey on the camel backs. When the tea is being served, Ishmael hears a baby cry. He turns his head in the direction of the sound and notices it coming from Abraham and Isaac's tents. "Father, blessed are you, now that Isaac has become a father as well." For a moment Abram looks at him in puzzlement, but then he understands what Ishmael said. "Indeed, I am blessed, my son, but not in the way you think. The baby you hear is my son." Then it is Ishmael's turn to be surprised. His sons have their ears wide open. *What is Grandfather saying? Has he had another child? That's impossible! He's far too old for that!*

Grandfather gets up, walks towards the tent and returns with a beautiful baby boy in his arms. "I remarried and this is Zimran; he is only six weeks old."

This is not at all what Ishmael had expected, but he does think it is quite amusing that his father is still so vigorous. Then his thoughts go back to the conversation they had at home. "Boys, now you can see with your own eyes: Grandfather is a strong man and still has many years ahead of him."

Abraham smiles. "To be honest, I was a little surprised myself at being a father again but God has kept me in good health and I am really enjoying it." The men in the circle chuckle. They secretly hope that they will grow old in the same way, enjoying intimacy with their wives for a long time to come.

"What about Isaac?" Ishmael asks, "How is he?"

"Not so good," Abraham responds. He has been married for many years now, but for some reason God still hasn't blessed him with a son."

Ishmael notices the hesitation in his father's voice. He realizes the struggle Abraham faces. The son he sent away has been richly blessed with twelve sons, while the miracle son remains childless. "Father, I will pray for him, I promise."

"Thank you, my son. I really appreciate that," Abraham replies. "I believe with my whole heart that God will honor his promises through Isaac; I just don't understand why it has to take so long."

The five young men, Kedar, Adbeel, Mibsam, Mishma, and Dumah, listen breathlessly to the conversation between their father and grandfather. Grandfather's steadfast faith in the Creator deeply moves them.

"One day," Grandfather continues, "God will fulfill his promise to Isaac and bless him with many sons, just like He has done for you."

Ishmael agrees. He decides to let Isaac know that he will pray for him.

During breakfast the next morning the plans for the day are discussed. "Father, this afternoon I would like to show Ishmael around a bit," Isaac offers.

Abraham senses that his two sons need to spend some time together. "Absolutely, that's fine. Actually, while you guys do that, I will entertain Kedar and his brothers with some of my stories," Abraham suggests. With a twinkle in his eye he looks at both of his sons and continues, "Stories that you have heard many times before. "

Frankly, Ishmael never tires of his father's stories, but he also wants to spend time alone with his brother. He happily agrees with his father's suggestion. As for his sons, they can hardly wait to hear more from their grandfather.

After lunch and a short nap, Ishmael and Isaac go to the hills. They have been looking forward to time alone as brothers. Since there is no real privacy in and around the campsite, it is better to go for a walk if you want to speak confidentially. The only people outside the camp are the shepherds, but they mostly keep to themselves. When the two brothers are well out of range of the camp, Ishmael carefully broaches the sensitive subject. "I am sorry, Isaac, that you are not yet a father."

"God is good," Isaac replies.

Ishmael picks up the coldness in his voice and probes a little further, "How are you coping with that?"

Isaac senses his brother's concern and begins to be more open with him. "It is not easy, Ishmael, especially after all the miracles my father experienced and after all God's promises. The people around us have expectations of us. At first they were impressed with our God, but now they regularly mock him. Father says that he is used to their taunts and that I shouldn't let it affect me, but actually, whenever a visitor jokes about it, or when I hear the people in the market speak about our God with disdain, it hurts." Isaac controls himself, but Ishmael feels his brother's pain.

"Sometimes, I can't understand God either," he admits. When Father sent my mother and me away, I was furious with him. I never wanted to

see him again and wished he were dead. Then, as I lay dying in the desert, I called on the Lord and He saved me.”

Isaac eyes his brother curiously and wants to know, “How did you deal with your feelings of rejection?”

“To be honest, I continued to hold a grudge against Father until Eliezer came to see me last year. He told me about his own feelings of rejection, but he also shared with me how he had come to have peace about it.”

“Yes, I know, Eliezer told me,” Isaac remembers. “He trusts God, just like our father.”

“That’s exactly what happened to me,” Ishmael adds. “My life hasn’t been all that easy, and I have experienced my share of painful moments. At the same time I have been able to see God’s hand in so much of it.” Seeing that Isaac is eager to learn how, Ishmael continues, “After God saved me from death in the desert, He helped me build a life for myself and my family in a relatively short time. It wasn’t until later, however, that I saw God’s blessing upon my life. Never again did I fall seriously ill and God has given me twelve healthy sons. I became an accomplished hunter, and by selling hides I have managed to build up quite a flock. So far, I have not been robbed by any of the other desert dwellers, and I’ve never been attacked by a lion. Well, the area where I live is probably too dry and desolate for lions anyway,” he jokes.

“You are truly a man of the wilderness,” Isaac laughs as he gives his brother a friendly jab in the ribs.

“By the way, what exactly happened when you were to be slaughtered?” Ishmael wants to know. “I heard this bizarre story. Did Father really try to sacrifice you on an altar?”

“Actually, Ishmael, it was the most amazing miracle I have ever seen.”

“So, it really happened?!” Ishmael exclaims in surprise. He looks at his brother in disbelief.

“I know it is a strange story, but God had indeed given the order to Father to do it.”

“What about you? Were you not frightened when Father tied you up?”

“Of course, I was. I was scared to death!” Isaac confirms, “but he kept reassuring me, reminding me that nothing is impossible for God. That day I experienced how true that is.”

“You are indeed alive and well, and sitting right here next to me,” Ishmael laughs happily. “But tell me, how did it come about?”

“The moment Father got hold of the knife, a voice came from heaven, saying, ‘Abraham, do not lay your hand on the boy’¹⁵.”

“Unbelievable! You heard the voice from heaven, too?” Ishmael is overcome with emotion and seems nailed to the ground. “I had the same experience, brother.”

"You're not kidding!" Isaac cries.

"Really. After my mother had said her farewells to me, while I lay dying, she heard the voice of a man. There was no one there, only a white cloud above us."

"That's incredible!" Isaac cries out amazed. "When I was tied up on the altar, it seemed to me that this heavenly voice came from a cloud as well." Both brothers sense an intimate kind of bond as they enthusiastically fill each other in on the details of their individual experiences.

"Listen, Isaac, I believe that God will bless you with a family of your own," Ishmael says. "I don't always understand his ways, but I will continue to pray until God's promise to you is fulfilled as well."

Isaac looks his older brother in the eye and feels proud of him. "Thank you, I really appreciate that. I will also continue to pray with great expectation. Surely, God has a plan for both of our lives."

Ishmael nods in agreement, and with a strange certitude in his voice he says, "God is pleased when we trust him, even if we don't understand his ways."

These are the last words on the subject. Isaac peers at the setting sun and realizes it will soon be dark. "Let's go and see how your sons are faring," he suggests. "Perhaps Father has fallen asleep and now they are bored."

Ishmael bursts out laughing and grabs his brother's hand. "You know very well that Father will only stop talking when he breathes his last!" he exclaims.

Laughing together, the brothers walk back to the camp and there they find Ishmael's sons engrossed in the stories their grandfather is telling them.

Following this visit, the whole family enjoys several happy years. At least once a year Ishmael goes to visit his father and his brothers. The family continues to grow and Abraham has five more sons with his wife Keturah. Then, after a long wait of twenty years, Isaac finally becomes a father as well. God has given him a double blessing in the form of twins. When the two boys grow up, Ishmael is amazed at the difference in their characters. While Esau's temperament reflects the adventurous side of Abraham, Jacob seems to have inherited his grandfather's sensitivity. Strangely, Isaac has no more children after the twin boys. To Ishmael that shows even more how much he has been blessed by God, having received twelve sons. One day he mentions this to his father. Abraham wisely replies, "God always fulfills his promises; it is up to him to decide how and when."

One day, one of Abraham's servants shows up unexpectedly at Ishmael's camp. Ishmael recognizes him as one of Eliezer's sons and knows that he is a trustworthy messenger. "Your father wants to see you urgently" the man says.

Ishmael immediately makes the necessary arrangements and that very day he accompanies the servant to see Abraham together with his first-born son Nebaioth.

As soon as they arrive, Ishmael hurries to the tent where his father is resting. Abraham struggles to sit up to greet his son. "I am glad you have come quickly," he begins weakly. "There is something important I need to tell you."

Ishmael realizes that his father's health has declined to the point of death. He is surprised that there is still something that has to be discussed between them. "What is it Father? Did we not resolve everything between us a long time ago?"

"This is true, my son. And yet, there is something I need to make amends for." Abraham notices the confusion in Ishmael's eyes. "A long time ago, I sent you away empty-handed, but today I want to fill your hands," Abraham continues.

"You don't have to do this, Father. I have all that I need," Ishmael responds.

"It is what I desire and thus it will happen," Abraham persists. "I have given all of Keturah's sons a share of my possessions, and you will receive your share as well." With great difficulty and using all of his strength, Abraham speaks the words. This message is important to him.

Ishmael, meanwhile, is deeply concerned about his father. Though he knows that the day is approaching when he will have to say farewell, he truly wishes for his father to live longer.

"Ishmael, my son, be blessed and be a blessing," his father continues. "God has a special plan for your life. He will surely use you and your offspring to bring glory to his name."

"Yes, Father, I believe so too."

"Do you remember how you prayed for Isaac?" Abraham says. "God has answered your prayers and blessed Isaac with two precious sons. He will surely make Isaac's offspring into a great people, just like He is doing for you. Continue to bless your brother, and you will be blessed as well."

"I will certainly do so, Father," Ishmael promises.

Abraham concludes, "Never forget that it was God himself who has given you your beautiful name. He hears you."

"I know, Father, I have experienced this firsthand," Ishmael affirms.

Abraham is visibly satisfied with his answer and he slowly leans back on to the soft pillows. Then Ishmael kisses his father on the forehead and leaves him to rest. That same night Abraham falls asleep peacefully, never to wake again.

Isaac and Ishmael now make some decisions together, but first they take time to properly mourn their father's death. They reminisce about the

miracles Abraham experienced throughout his lifetime, some of which they themselves have witnessed. This helps them process the loss. Their father truly was a man of God and a powerful example of a life, lived by faith.

As soon as the sun starts to warm the earth, Ishmael and Isaac arrange for the body to be preserved and prepared for burial according to the latest knowledge from Egypt. The next day, both brothers prepare for a long journey. Isaac has promised to bury his father in the same grave as their mother on their own plot of land in the mountains of Mamre. Because the road is too difficult for carts, several servants carry the body on a litter. The fifteen-year-old twins, Esau and Jacob, would love to join the funeral procession but Isaac does not allow them to. They need to stay behind to take care of their mother.

As the funeral procession leaves, the two sons walk in front, immediately followed by the pallbearers. At the rear of the procession are those carrying supplies for the journey.

As they walk, Ishmael muses about the things God told him regarding his future. He will be wild donkey, a free man. In a sense, the death of his father has opened a new kind of freedom for him. As the first-born son, he is now the elder in the family. That would normally make him responsible for all his younger brothers and their families, as well as for the older widows. Now Isaac carries that responsibility, while he himself is free to determine his own future. Ishmael hopes that, when life is back to normal, Isaac will not reject him. Time will tell.



10 *Wise Counsel*

After the funeral, the brothers ride their donkeys leisurely back home. Ishmael accompanies Isaac to his encampment in Beersheba. From there he will continue to the desert of Paran, where his own family is awaiting him anxiously.

"I will miss you, Ishmael."

"I will miss you even more," Ishmael replies. Silence envelopes the two brothers as they reflect on the future.

"I wish we could live together," Ishmael breaks the silence.

"I do as well," Isaac reacts, "but I'm afraid that there won't be enough food to feed both of our flocks. I don't see a solution for that, but perhaps we can move closer together."

"Yes, I don't see why not. I have thought about it many times, and I think it would be good to move elsewhere, but we will have to be careful not to be in each other's way, otherwise history will repeat itself," Isaac chuckles.

"What do you mean?" Ishmael acts surprised. Then he remembers the incident with cousin Lot, and after all, forewarned is fore armed.

Isaac looks at his brother; he is proud of him. Because Keturah's sons are a lot younger, he doesn't have much in common with them. Ishmael, on the other hand, is his big, strong older brother. He has proven himself by surviving in the harsh desert. In fact, he didn't just survive; he became very fruitful. Suddenly Isaac has an idea. "Ishmael, isn't there a sweet water well, not too far away from where you live?"

"I don't think you'll find a well similar to Beersheba," Ishmael responds.

"I was thinking of the well Lachai-Roi, where your mother met with the Lord. Not too long ago I went there with some of my flocks."

"That's odd, I didn't even think about that," Ishmael reacts enthusiastically. "I am pretty sure that one has sweet water all year around."

"I wouldn't expect differently," laughs Isaac, "God himself used that well to save you. That place is blessed. How far is that away from you?"

"Well, on a fast camel you can easily make it in one day." Ishmael replies cheerfully. The thought alone that his brother might move closer to him fills him with joy.

"That would be great!" Isaac exclaims. "We could see each other every new moon. I really enjoy seeing your children and I would also like to get to know your grandchildren better."

"Then perhaps I can be useful to Esau and Jacob as well, in case they

need advice from their uncle." Winking, Ishmael adds, "and keep an eye on them at the same time."

"You're quite a character!" Isaac blurts out laughingly. "Spoken just like a first-born son!"

"I believe you are right, Isaac, but I don't want to meddle in your affairs," Ishmael reassures him. Happy about their new plans the brothers continue on their way.

Suddenly Isaac becomes quiet. He is overwhelmed by fear. What if Ishmael wants to get rid of him, to obtain Father's inheritance? Jacob and Esau would not be strong enough to stand up against their uncle. "How do you feel about the situation now?" Isaac asks his older brother.

"What situation are you talking about?"

"Well, the time when father sent you and your mother away to please my mother." Isaac purposely leaves out God's part in that event. He wants to know how Ishmael feels about it from a human viewpoint.

"I thought your mother was a terrible person, and in the end I even hated her. She continually criticized my mother and me and at the same time always thought quite highly of herself, typically a beautiful, but spoiled and pampered woman."

Isaac is taken aback by his brother's words. As Ishmael expresses his remaining feelings of bitterness, Isaac realizes that he has correctly assumed his brother is still troubled by the past. Carefully he probes a little deeper, "But wasn't it Father who sent you away in the end?"

"For a long time I was angry with him as well," Ishmael explains. "Even when many years later Eliezer came to ask me to visit him, I didn't want to go at first.

"Why then did you do it after all?"

"Eliezer was very soft spoken, and he reminded me of Father. His gentleness and patience in dealing with problems made me love him even more. So on the one hand I was furious, but on the other, something inside me longed to see him. When Eliezer said that you missed me, too, and wanted to see me, it touched me deeply."

On hearing these words from his half-brother's mouth, Isaac feels a lump in his throat. Ishmael really loves him. How comforting it is to know that.

"You were my only brother and I still feel the same way about you," Ishmael continues. "I was confronted with a great dilemma, but that night I had a dream which instilled peace in me, so the next morning I decided to go with Eliezer."

Isaac sighs with relief. Clearly, Ishmael has chosen to accept Father, as well as everything that has happened in the past. No one had talked him in

to it. Isaac steers his donkey next to his brother's and grabs his hand. "I am so glad you did that," he says, and then he adds, "You are very much like Father."

Ishmael feels a little embarrassed, but happy as well. "Thank you," he whispers.

Two months later, Ishmael travels with several of his sons to the well of Lachai-Roi, and a warm reunion between brothers and cousins takes place. That night, Isaac and Ishmael exchange the latest news.

Nearby, their sons are enjoying each other's company, though only Esau is actually having fun with his cousins. His brother, Jacob, quietly watches from a distance, feeling jealous. Esau is well-built, strong and is often the center of attention with his wild tales about hunting adventures, while he, the quiet Jacob, knows more about cooking than anything else. His father is a little ashamed of him. Not that he has ever said so in so many words, but Jacob senses it. His father always tells others in detail about Esau's exploits but he hardly ever mentions Jacob. The only one who really cares about him is his mother; at least, that's how Jacob feels about it.

His mother often compliments him. She is also the one who continually reminds him that God has a special plan for his life. Her words often comfort him. "One day Esau will serve you, even though he is the oldest. You will be a great nation." That's what God had told his mother when they were born. How this will ever take place is a complete mystery to Jacob, however. Esau has great leadership qualities and doesn't flinch at anything. In contrast, he is shy and prefers to stay within the safety of the camp. These are Jacob's daydreams about his life. *I wish that one day I could get my own back on Esau.* In his mind, he contrives all sorts of scenarios to trick his brother. He then notices his father and Uncle Ishmael get up from the thick animal hides where they had been sitting. It is time to go to sleep.

Not long after that, Jacob sees the opportunity of a lifetime. Esau has just returned from hunting and is worn out. He has carried a massive dead ibex on his shoulders. It was a superb but heavy catch. He would much rather have left the animal behind to bring home on a donkey, but he didn't want to take the risk of a lion or some other predator making off with it. After stringing the dead animal up in a safe place, Esau drags himself round to the kitchen tent. "Hey Mom, any food ready for a hungry bear?" he calls out. There is no answer. Esau hears the crackling of a fire and trudges around the tent to the front entrance, where he notices Jacob busy stirring in a big pot of soup. The savory aroma wafts gently from the cooking pot making his mouth water and his tummy rumble. "Quick! Give me some of that red stew you are making," he orders his brother.

Jacob looks up from the cooking pot and scrutinizes his sweaty and exhausted brother. *He may be the master of the outdoors, I can't change that; but this is my domain.* "We will eat shortly. You can wait," he replies curtly.

"I'm so hungry, I'm practically fainting. Come on, now, don't be so childish," Esau reacts impatiently.

When Jacob hears the word 'fainting', he gets an idea. With a scornful voice he says, "Okay then, I'll give you some of the stew... if you sell me your birthright."

Without giving it a second thought, Esau replies, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?¹⁶ Be my guest. Now give me the stew."

Aha! I've got him now, Jacob thinks, as he feels the power over his brother growing. Even though Esau is much stronger physically, Jacob has now skillfully succeeded in making his brother do what he wants. *But what if Esau later denies that he sold him his birthright? There is no one here to witness it.* Then Jacob has an idea. With his heart pounding in his throat, he says, "Swear to me by the name of the living God that you are selling me your birthright." Never before had Jacob felt so full of courage.

"I swear," Esau answers right away.

Jacob can't believe his ears, but he is not quite satisfied yet. "Swear by the name of the living God," he insists.

Then it is as if Esau hears a still small voice deep inside, *'don't do it; this is not right.'* At the same time, the hunger pangs are stronger than ever, and he says, "Oh well, what use is my birthright, if I am about to die?" Again, the voice inside tries to stop him, but he ignores it. "I swear by the name of the God of heaven and earth. Now, give me the stew!"

Without a moment to lose, Jacob fills a bowl with the steaming red lentil stew and hands it to his brother. *But what if Esau changes his mind?* So, quickly he hands him a freshly baked flatbread as well.

Esau devours the meal. He dips the bread in the soup and gobbles it up, almost burning his tongue. When the contents of the dish have cooled off a bit, he quickly slurps the rest and then disappears again.

Jacob stands, shaking by the cooking pot. He can hardly believe what just happened. For once, he, the weak, has overcome his strong twin brother.

One day, while Isaac is enjoying the coolness of the evening outside his tent, Esau joins him. "Father, I would like to get married," he says.

"That's great, my son," answers Isaac. "I believe you are ready."

"That's just what I was thinking. Weren't you forty years old yourself when you married Mother?"

"That's right," Isaac confirms, "and who would you like to marry?"

"I know a beautiful girl who would suit me well, Father. She is the sister of my friend, Zohar, from Mamre."

“And where is she from, my son?”

“She is the daughter of Anah, the Hittite.”

When Isaac hears that she is a Hittite, he frowns. His own father had emphatically warned him not to marry the people of the land. “My son, this is not a good idea. Have you forgotten why Grandfather brought your mother to me all the way from Paddan-Aram?”

“But Father, her family is very influential. This is a great opportunity for us to strengthen our position in the land,” Esau objects. He has carefully thought about how he would word his request beforehand, and now he is ready to argue his case with his father. “Look at all the problems we have faced with the Philistines, Father. When we lived in Gerar, they would fill our wells with sand. If we make an alliance with the Hittites, the Philistines will no longer be in a position to harm us.” Esau goes on and on, pursuing his case. He senses his father’s reluctance and realizes he needs to do all he can to try to convince his father that Adah is the best choice. “You also made an agreement with the Philistines, which resulted in peace. What if the Hittites decide they want to take the land that Grandfather bought a long time ago?”

Isaac never really thought about that. But even though the people of Canaan might deceive him, for they do not fear God, he has been through enough to know that God himself will look after him.

“Esau, your arguments sound very convincing. Yet, I still don’t believe this would be a wise move,” Isaac decides, “but I will give it some thought.”

Later that evening Isaac tells Rebecca about Esau’s plans. Rebecca is appalled. “A Hittite woman in our family? Over my dead body! I have seen how filthy they are. Can you imagine her cooking us a meal? We would all get sick!”

“It wouldn’t be hard to re-educate her. Personally, I am more worried about their immoral ways of living. They don’t even trust each other; how are we to trust them?”

“I have an idea,” Rebecca says, “Why don’t you get Ishmael speak to him about it? I know Esau respects his uncle.”

Isaac thinks that’s a great idea and decides to discuss the matter with Ishmael the next time they meet.

When Ishmael visits them again, Isaac takes him aside and explains the delicate situation to him. “No problem,” his brother answers reassuringly, “leave him to me.”

That afternoon Ishmael suggests to Esau that they go hunting the next day. Esau is thrilled; his uncle is an experienced hunter. When he tells his father about the plan for the following day, Isaac sighs with relief. *Everything is going to be all right.*

The next day, while they are out in the fields, Esau excitedly brings up the subject of his forthcoming marriage. "Uncle Ishmael, I have found a beautiful bride," he blurts out, and with passion tells him the reasons why.

"What does your father think about it?" Ishmael wants to know.

Esau's excitement turns to frustration. "He isn't happy about it. Perhaps he is too old to understand. Please, could you talk to him? You understand about life in the desert better than he does."

Ishmael affirms that he has indeed learned to survive in the desert as a lone wanderer. "But above all, it is God who gives success."

"But Uncle Ishmael, God didn't give us common sense for nothing; we need to use our brains."

"True, but why would you think the Hittites would want to make an alliance with you?" he asks Esau.

"Well, I think they feel inferior because of our wealth and influence. An alliance with us would reassure them that we wish them no harm."

"That's a clever thought, Esau, but these people do not care about God or about his commandments. Don't you realize that when you marry Adah, she can also claim part of your inheritance?"

Esau admits he hasn't thought about that. "But didn't the Philistines respect the agreement Grandfather made with them? As far as I know, they never took any land away from him. The people here in Canaan aren't that bad!"

"Esau, I urgently advise you not to go through with this marriage. Nothing but problems will come from it."

At those words, Esau looks down in disappointment. He had been so hopeful that his uncle would help him. Now it turns out to be the opposite. Even this man, who has learned to survive in the wilderness, disagrees with his plans. *They just don't understand what a smart move it would be to make an alliance with the Hittites through marriage*, Esau thinks. What motivates him even more is Adah's beauty. There are not many women like her, so he cannot let this chance pass by. Also, he would gain respect in the community because of her. He has often heard the stories about the privileges his grandfather received because his grandmother was so stunningly beautiful. Besides, isn't it every man's desire to marry a gorgeous woman?

Thinking about why he wants to marry Adah, Esau becomes more and more convinced within himself that this is the right thing to do. Perhaps his father and his uncle don't think it's a wise decision, but what do they know? Times have changed. Things are no longer the way they were forty years ago. One has to adapt to the time one lives in and because his father is wealthier than his grandfather ever was, an alliance is sensible.

On the other hand, Esau can't help but respect his uncle's views. He has seen many times that what Ishmael said, has turned out to be true. Indeed,

it is impossible to foresee all the consequences of this marriage. Suddenly, a new thought comes to mind. *King Abimelech expelled Father because we own so many animals. Perhaps other kings in the land will do the same, and we will end up living in the desert again. That would be unacceptable. After all, God has promised us this land.* That's the decisive argument. Now it is completely clear that Adah is the right woman for him. As soon as the opportunity presents itself, he visits Zohar's father. They agree on the dowry and only one week later, Esau marries Adah ... without the consent or blessing of his own father.

Once Adah has moved into his tent, Esau discovers and fully enjoys the pleasures of married life. But during the few days each month his wife is unclean, Esau is not able to touch her and must control himself. That doesn't suit him at all and he thinks about solutions to his problem. Of course, he could follow the ways of the men in Canaan and sleep with other women, but that doesn't feel right. He knows very well that that's against God's will. Suddenly, he has a brilliant idea. *What if I take a second wife? That way one of the two should always be available to me; it would be easier to avoid committing adultery.* Esau doesn't need to think about it for very long. The next day he consults with his friend Zohar, who instantly recommends a suitable second bride for him.

One month later, Esau marries Oholibama, the daughter of the Hittite, Elon. The dowry had been enormous, but what does that matter? His father has plenty of camels and sheep, and doesn't a large part of the flock belong to him anyway? He only must share his father's inheritance with Jacob. In contrast, Uncle Ishmael's sons will have to divide their father's possessions between twelve.

As is the custom, after the marriage Esau continues to live with his parents. Both Adah and Oholibama have been raised with worshipping idols and their families have given them beautiful new statues of their gods as wedding gifts. Their mothers have taught them the importance of passing on the traditions of their religion to the next generation. They meticulously follow all the rules as they faithfully worship the carved images of their gods.

Soon tensions between the two women and their mother-in-law escalate, as the women share all the household chores. Rebecca is greatly upset when she sees them offering the best food to their little stone gods. Only God the Creator is worthy of the best they have to offer. Besides, the young women do not even respect the God of Esau's grandfather Abraham. Even Isaac becomes irritated with their behavior. Esau may be his favorite son, but he is sick and tired of all the quarrelling. How he longs for the peaceful days before Esau's marriages.

11 *Family Problems*

Two elderly men are sitting on a mountain edge, enjoying the view across the desert plains. In the valley below lies the encampment of the younger of the two. The tents and the cultivated fields resemble a piece of mosaic art. Squares of black goat hair alternating with patches of bright green are surrounded by an undulating carpet of sand and stones that reaches far into the distance. The laughter of playing children, blended with the voices of chattering women, rises from the valley. A lazy sun creeps along the blue skies towards the horizon, dousing the landscape in a balmy glow. The afternoon is ending and the radiant orb has already lost most of its intense heat. The light breeze makes the little plateau a good place for the men to relax. From a small bowl they pick sunflower seeds, which they skillfully crack open between their teeth. Occasionally one of them spits out some of the shells, which now litter the ground around their feet.

"What do you think about all of this?" Isaac asks his beloved half-brother.

Ishmael stares straight ahead. He has just learned about Isaac's family problems. Esau's wives are extremely stubborn. Added to that, instead of honoring and respecting his parents, Esau often takes their side. His attitude is diametrically opposed to Isaac and Rebecca's customs and values. He appears to be under a type of spiritual influence, which has blinded him to their ways of thinking. Isaac is tremendously bothered by the problems. It has taken much effort to teach the two young women respect for people and animals, but they refuse to honor their Creator. Instead, they stubbornly continue to worship their own carved idols. Ishmael is grieved that Esau has disregarded his advice. How is he to help Isaac now? While he is still mulling over the things he has just learned, Isaac continues, "I have thought of sending him and his wives away..."

"What? You can't be serious?" Ishmael interrupts. Immediately he sits up straight. "May God forgive you for harboring such thoughts!"

"...but because I have seen your pain and our father's, I couldn't go through with it," Isaac continues.

"Oh, thank goodness." Ishmael lets out a sigh of relief and leans back against the rocky outcrop. He doesn't want his nephew to experience the same pain he went through. "We can be thankful that the Hittites haven't caused any problems yet," Ishmael points out. "When Esau came to me for advice, I warned him that they have their own reasons to marry their daughters to him."

"Thankfully, God protects us," Isaac shares. "They hardly ever harass us. The animals are doing well and we are seldom robbed."

"Yes, indeed, God is with you and blesses you immensely," Ishmael agrees.

"Yet the dowries for Ishmael's brides were exorbitant. They cost me an arm and a leg. I can only hope Jacob doesn't have similar plans."

"Speaking of Jacob; isn't it about time for him to get married too? He must be over fifty now?"

"That's true, but I definitely don't want him to marry a Canaanite woman," Isaac adds emphatically.

"What about my daughter Mahalath? I wouldn't mind him marrying her," Ishmael offers spontaneously.

Isaac laughs heartily. "That's not a bad idea, really, but because God has specifically declared that He desires to bless the world through my offspring, I don't want to create confusion. What if it caused a quarrel between our children and grandchildren?"

Ishmael doesn't want that to happen either and he quickly abandons the idea.

"I would love Esau to be more devoted to our God and Creator. It seems that faith is of little importance to him," Isaac continues. "He talks a good talk, but in the meantime, he allows his wives to do whatever they please."

"Continue to pray for them, Isaac. And even when you doubt whether God hears you, remember my name and the well that's here beneath us. God sees and hears the cry of your heart." This is the best advice Ishmael can think to give his brother at this difficult time.

The memory of God's faithfulness in humanly impossible situations encourages Isaac. Wasn't that the reason he went to live close by the well after his father's death and hasn't God blessed him abundantly throughout his life?

"Recently something fascinating happened to me," Ishmael continues. Enough has been said about the problems regarding Esau; now he wants to lighten his brother's mood. Captivated by Ishmael's anecdotes, Isaac relaxes. At the hilarious culmination of the tales, he bursts into laughter. If the camp had been entirely silent, one could have heard the sound of the two men reverberate throughout the valley. The brothers are glad for this and every other opportunity they get to spend together.

"Uncle Isaac, please, come quickly," a man gasps as he rushes into the tent, interrupting Esau's conversation with Isaac. Although his eyesight is gone, Isaac immediately recognizes his nephew's voice. "What's the matter, Kedar? Why are you in such a hurry?"

"Father has weakened a lot over the past few days, and he feels the

end is near. He wants to say his last goodbye to you." Isaac understands the gravity of the situation, and he immediately orders his servants to prepare the camels for Esau and himself. Esau was busy bragging about his latest hunting exploits, but as soon as he hears the news, he jumps up and helps his father to his feet. Walking out together, Isaac instructs his older son, "Esau, you are coming with me. Tell your mother, I will be gone for a week. Also, tell Jacob he will be responsible for the camp and the animals." Esau immediately does as he is told and then helps his aging father onto his camel.

A little while later, Kedar and his uncle and cousin head towards Paran where Ishmael lives. With every step, the camels toss up fine desert sand and soon the travel party disappears behind a cloud of dust.

"They're here," Nebaioth whispers. Ishmael's weary eyes light up when he hears that his brother has arrived, and with great effort he tries to pull himself up on the bed.

"Father, lie back down. You are too weak," Mibsam admonishes him.

Ishmael disregards his son's words, and uses the last bit of strength left in him to push himself into an upright position. Quickly, Mibsam supports his back with a comfortable straw-filled cushion. Now Ishmael can see the entrance to his tent perfectly.

A moment later, Nebaioth leads the visitors into his father's tent while holding his uncle's hand.

"Peace be with you," Isaac says as he shakes hands with his brother and kisses him.

"Peace be with you, too, my brother," Ishmael replies. "Thanks be to God for your safe travels."

Mibsam, who is seated close to his father, swiftly gets up to make a place for his uncle. Leaning heavily on Esau, Isaac carefully bends his stiff knees to recline on the pillow provided by Mibsam. It takes a while for him to get comfortably seated next to his beloved brother.

One of Nebaioth's sons carries in a wooden tray with four cups of steaming hot tea. He puts the tray in front of Isaac and politely offers him a cup. Isaac is glad for the hot drink and as he sips loudly, he turns towards Ishmael. After the usual exchange of pleasantries, the conversation changes to deeper issues. "Do you remember how I used to think you look like father?" Isaac asks.

"Yes, I do. Why?"

"Now that you are older, even your voice sounds like his."

"Well, I can say the same about you," Ishmael answers. A cautious smile appears on his deeply lined face. Immediately the pain in his worn-out body flares up again, reminding him that the end is approaching. He winces and

after it passes he continues weakly, "I am glad you have come, Isaac. I will miss you."

Isaac inclines his ear to Ishmael's face so that he can hear him and answers, "I will miss you, too, brother. But one day soon, we shall see each other again. This is my certain hope."

"That hope is mine, too, just like Father taught us." Although Ishmael's voice is barely audible, the conviction of his heart rings out. "Do you remember how he often used to tell us that true life is not here on earth but in the hereafter?"

"Definitely," Isaac confirms, "that's why I still live in a tent, as then I'm always reminded that life on earth is temporary."

"Isaac, you are an amazing example to all of us. I hope that our families will always keep this close connection."

"As surely as God the Creator lives, I will commit myself to that, my brother," Isaac promises.

Esau and the others present are witnesses to Isaac's promise to Ishmael.

After a while Isaac notices his brother drifting off to sleep. He takes his weathered hand into his own hands and remains quietly seated next to him.

Two days later, Ishmael breathes his last. All the neighboring nomadic tribes and their chieftains attend the funeral. Ishmael has become known as a powerful man and because his twelve sons have their own large families, the clan has become a force to be reckoned with in the surrounding areas.

For seven days Isaac, Esau, and the rest of the family continue mourning. Finally, it is time to return home. When they say goodbye to each other, Isaac reassures all his nephews that they are always welcome in his camp. Esau confirms his father's words, "Yes, please come anytime. We will be honored by your visit."

"You are also most welcome here, Uncle," Nebaioth, the new clan leader, answers. "And whenever there is a need, do not shy away from asking us for help. We will always be there for you."

When Isaac arrives home, he mourns the loss of his brother for many more weeks. He feels very lonely. His parents died many years ago and he has little in common with his younger brothers. It's not to say that Zimran and the others are not kind; they are just so much younger than he is. They were born after he got married and are from a different generation. There is no one left now who went through the same ups and downs of life that shaped him into the man he is.

"Ishmael often understood me without me having to say anything," Isaac shares with his sons. "We have gone through so much together."

Puzzled, Jacob asks his aged father, "Didn't Grandfather send him away when you were only three years old?"

"That's true," Isaac sighs, "yet we have so much in common."

"You told me once that you both met with God."

"Indeed," Isaac confirms, "Those were powerful experiences. It happened to both of us when we were near to death. Nobody ever faced a crisis like ours."

"But I thought that Grandfather knew for sure that, after the sacrifice, you would be coming down the mountain with him?" Esau says. "So you were not really about to die, were you?"

Isaac looks at his son. The deep lines in his forehead testify to a troubled life. "I can assure you that I really felt like I was going to die then. After my father had tied my hands and feet with rope, I was terrified. Then he held the knife..." Isaac chokes back a tear when he thinks about that time. How rejected he had felt. He instantly remembers that Ishmael experienced a similar fear when he lay dying in the desert.

"Your uncle really was an amazing man," he continues. We both experienced what it is like for a man to be sentenced to death by his father. My fear only lasted a moment, but for Uncle Ishmael life in the desert was a daily battle against death. Grandfather cut me loose as soon as God provided a way out, then we were able to sacrifice the ram that took my place."

For a moment the two young men are silent; their father's words have made a deep impression on them. Then Isaac continues, "Thankfully, God blessed him by giving him many heirs, just like He promised Grandfather He would do."

"Didn't God promise us the same thing?" Jacob asks. "Grandfather often told me about that when he was still alive."

"Yes, he did," Isaac confirms, "that too is something Ishmael and I have in common."

Esau prefers not to talk about that. He knows that Jacob is the son of the covenant, not himself. Then he asks, "Is there anything else you had in common with Uncle Ishmael?"

"Even before we were born, God gave us our names," Isaac shares. "In the entire history of mankind that has never happened before."

"Is that so? Didn't God also give Grandfather and Grandmother their names?" Esau reacts in a matter-of-fact way.

"The difference is that they were elderly when God gave them a new name. God gave us our names before we were born," Isaac explains. "Besides, in both cases God sent a unique messenger to announce our names to our mothers."

"In fact, who was that?" Jacob inquires.

"It's hard to describe him," Isaac replies. "Sometimes He appeared to me in human form, while at other times He was invisible. He would always

say, 'This is my will' or 'I shall do this', just as if He were God himself. And yet, no one has ever seen God, except Adam and Eve when they were still living in the garden of Eden."

Jacob is fascinated and deep in his heart he would like to meet that man. At that moment he has no idea that many years later his wish will be granted. One day he will even wrestle with him.

"Yes, your uncle was an amazing man," Isaac concludes. As he utters this, another thought about Ishmael's uniqueness comes to mind. "Don't forget that he was the first one to be circumcised. He was before me, and not only myself, but you too," Isaac adds with a chuckle.

A question occurs to Jacob. "By the way, how do you see this, Father? Does that mean that Uncle Ishmael is part of the covenant God made with you and Grandfather?"

Esau pricks up his ears. He wants to hear about this. He has been circumcised, too, and he would really like to understand what this means with regards to his relationship with Jacob.

Isaac stares straight ahead, searching for the right words. Finally, he breaks the silence. "That's a good question but difficult to answer, my son. I don't quite understand it myself, but I can clearly see God was with Ishmael and He is blessing his children and grandchildren." Then Isaac turns to Jacob, "God has a unique plan for you and for your offspring, but everyone who is circumcised can expect God's presence and protection." As he says this, Isaac worries about the adverse influence of Esau's wives upon his eldest son. He realizes that Esau tends to think that circumcision itself has made him right with God. Even though circumcision is important, as an act of obedience to God, there is more to it than that. He adds, "Above all, God asks that we walk with him. Whoever loves God Almighty with all his heart belongs to him. God will bless him with long life, just like he did for your grandfather and your Uncle Ishmael. "

"So what about circumcision then? Why is it so important?" Jacob asks his father with curiosity.

"God desires a personal relationship with every person on earth. He told Grandfather that it is his plan to bless all people on earth through him," Isaac explains. "Circumcision is only the outward sign of inner devotion to him."

Jacob nods; he understands.

Esau sighs deeply and says, "It's not easy to please God." To him, serving God feels more like a duty than a joy. There are so many things God doesn't want you to do; life is so much easier if you don't have to reckon with him so much.

Isaac knows how his son struggles and it makes him sad. "*Lord, help me to put Esau back on the right track,*" he prays softly. Then he answers his

son, speaking emphatically. "Forgiveness, Esau, forgiveness is the road to a clean heart. Forgive those who have treated you wrong and receive God's forgiveness for your own wrongdoings; only then will you find joy in serving God. Your Uncle Ishmael forgave Grandfather for rejecting him and after that found joy in the restored relationship. God also rewarded him with the friendship and intimate brotherly love he and I were able to share for a long time. Follow your uncle's example and everything will turn out well."

Looking Back

Have you been touched by Ishmael's life? Are you surprised that God blessed him the way He did?

The Lord's hand on Ishmael's life is evident from the moment his mother ran away from her mistress, Sarah, and met a stranger near a well in the desert. That meeting touched Hagar so deeply that she obediently returned to the one who had been mistreating her. She believed his promises. Let's take one more look at this meeting as described in Genesis 16:7-12. It is here that we encounter the following unique events:

1. For the first time in the history of mankind the Angel of the Lord appeared. Hagar was privileged to be first human being ever to meet God's heavenly messenger.¹⁷ This had not occurred during the preceding 2000 years of the existence of mankind. Throughout the ages the church fathers have understood the Angel of the Lord as an appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, in human form. For more information, please go to www.godlovesishmael.com/angel.
2. Apart from Eve, who had been with God in the garden of Eden, Hagar was the first woman to address God directly.
3. Hagar was the first woman on earth to receive a promise from God. God had made Eve a promise as well, but that happened while she was still in paradise.
4. God promised Hagar that her son would become a great nation. No other woman received a promise of such extraordinary blessing directly from God. Only Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob received the same promise directly from God.
5. Ishmael became the first person who received his name from God before he was born. Only three other people in the history of mankind received their names from God before birth: Ishmael's half-brother, Isaac, John the Baptist, and his cousin, Jesus.
See www.godlovesishmael.com/4named.
6. God gave Hagar's son a special name. The name Ishmael means "God hears" and contains a wonderful promise in the context of prayer. God made himself known as the God who would hear both Hagar and Ishmael's prayers.
7. Ishmael would become a "wild donkey of a man." In Scripture the wild donkey is an image of freedom and independence, contrary to the domesticated donkey that has to mind its master. So, while the

Angel called Hagar “servant of Sarah,” He promised her that Ishmael would not be a servant but a free man.

8. Hagar was the first person to give a name to God. She named him “the God who sees,” pointing to his attribute of seeing, in addition to the attribute of hearing, by which He had made himself known to her. The fact that the name Hagar gave was recorded in Scripture, shows the pleasure God took in this interaction with her.

The seventh point needs additional explanation. Throughout the ages, most Bible scholars have interpreted the phrase, “wild donkey of a man”, with a negative connotation, referencing to the “wild Arabs”. This view has even impacted some Bible translations, in which Ishmael and his offspring are depicted negatively.¹⁸

The original text in the Hebrew Torah, however, is neutral. Furthermore, the expression ‘hand upon’ indicates who is the most powerful. According to the text, Ishmael will not be ruled over by any other people, nor will he rule over others. How true this has been of the Bedouin people on the outskirts of the Arabian deserts. It seems that the advent of Islam and tales of barbaric Arabic Bedouins have negatively influenced the interpretation of the original text.

In his book, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel*, the Lebanese scholar Tony Maalouf maintains that every single part of the prophecy spoken by the Angel of the Lord, was meant to comfort Hagar.¹⁹ The command to return to Sarah was an extremely difficult one to obey. No counselor would ever advise his mistreated client, “Submit yourself to your abuser.” Would God, after the previously mentioned blessings, conclude his message to Hagar with a curse over the delicate life in her womb? Would He not rather encourage her with a promise of further blessing?

The gravity of Sarah’s mistreatment is made clear by what the Angel of the Lord says about it. He speaks of oppression (Genesis 16:11). The Hebrew text uses the exact same word to describe the immense oppression of the Israelites at the hand of the Egyptian Pharaoh (Exodus 3:7,17), as well as the grievous suffering of Job under Satan (Job 10:15, 30:16, 27).

A detailed study on Genesis 16:12 can be found at www.godlovesishmael.com/genesis16

It should also be noted that for a period of over thirteen years Abraham and Sarah lived with the expectation that Ishmael was the son of the promise. Why did God wait all this time to reveal to them that he wasn’t? Could it be that he wanted Ishmael and his descendants to realize that they are indeed deeply loved?

When God announced to Abraham that Sarah would conceive a son, Ishmael was thirteen years old. His childhood behind him, he was now a young man. He spent the most vulnerable years of his life being loved by his earthly father. Even when it became known that he was not the son of the promise, he was still loved. The following unique events and blessings can be seen in the life of Ishmael.

1. The first intercessory prayer recorded in Scripture is Abraham's prayer for Ishmael, and God heard his prayer too!
2. God promised Abraham that Ishmael would become the father of twelve sons. This is equal to the number of sons that God blessed Isaac's son Jacob with.
3. God heard the voice of the young Ishmael when he lay dying. In doing so, He showed himself as the God who indeed hears.
4. The phrase, "God was with..." is used for the first time in Genesis 21:20. Centuries later, the prophet Isaiah, spoke about Immanuel – God with us (Isaiah 7:14). Those were comforting words for the descendants of Isaac and Jacob: the Israelites. The New Testament shows us the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in the person of Jesus Christ. When Jesus said farewell to his followers, He comforted them with the words, "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."²⁰ Ishmael experienced his presence ages before that in a very real and personal way.
5. According to Genesis 25:6, Abraham gave gifts to the sons of his concubines. Two of them are named in Scripture: Hagar and Keturah. Thus, we know that Abraham did not reject his first-born son forever. He met with Ishmael before his death, in accordance with his love for him (Genesis 21:11).
6. After the death of their father, Isaac confirmed his love for Ishmael by living in Lachai-Roi (Genesis 25:11), the same place where the Angel of the Lord had spoken to Hagar. Rather than staying in Mamre of Beersheba, he moved closer to Ishmael.
7. The Bible doesn't necessarily mention the age at which important characters died. For example, it is not known at what age Lot, Esau, or eleven of Jacob's sons died. On the other hand, the Bible does mention that Ishmael reached the age of one hundred thirty-seven years. The record of the length of his life indicates that Ishmael was important to God. Because we know that he had a long life, we can conclude that God's blessed and loved him.

All these unique events and blessings express God’s love for him. Beside this, many similarities between the life of Ishmael and his younger half-brother can be noted.

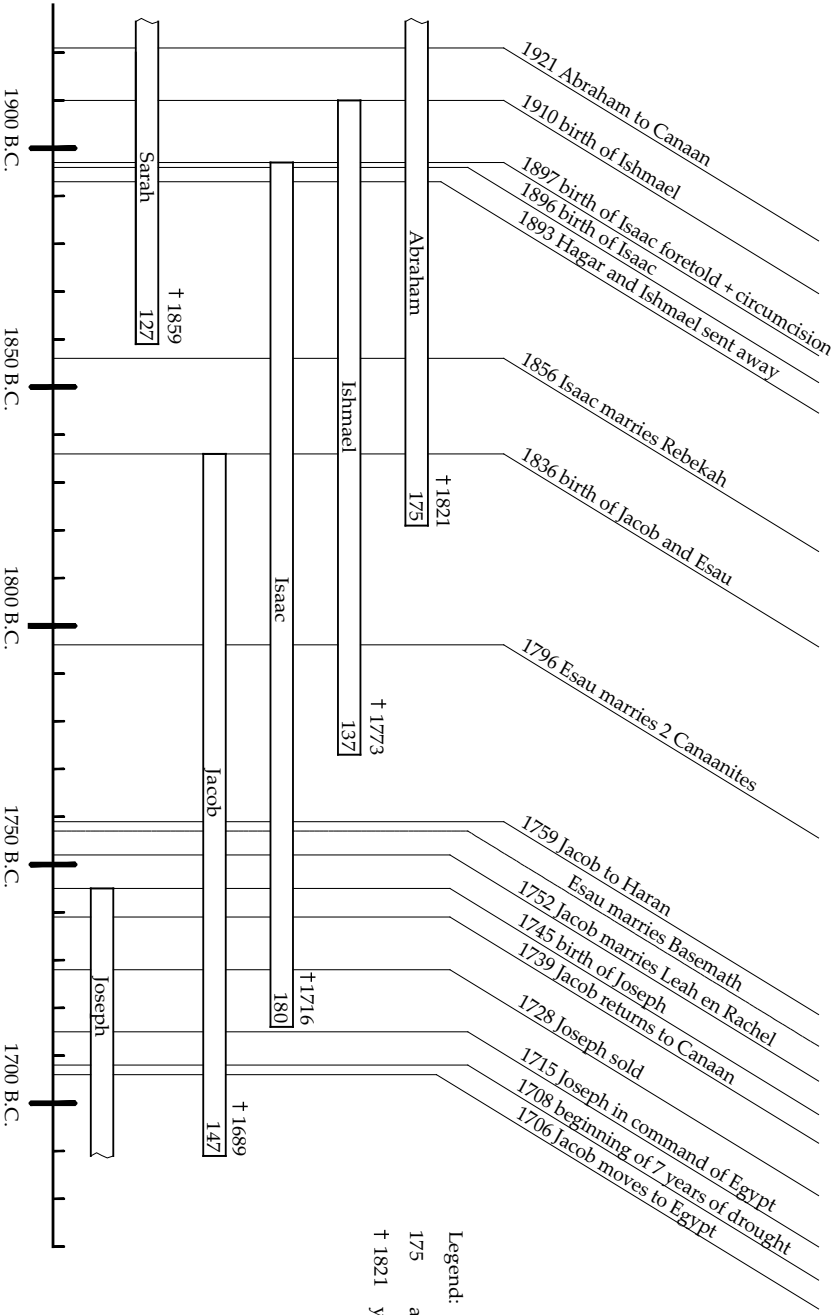
	Event	Ishmael	Isaac
1	Supernatural birth announcement to the mother (by the Angel of God)	Genesis 16:11	Genesis 18:10-15
2	Received name from God before birth	Genesis 16:11	Genesis 17:19
3	Circumcised	Genesis 17:23	Genesis 21:4
4	Rejected by their earthly father at God’s command	Genesis 18:14 Sent into the desert	Genesis 22:9-10 Threatened with a knife
5	Near death experience	Genesis 21:16 Under a bush	Genesis 22:10 On an altar
6	Personal encounter with the Angel of God	Genesis 21:17	Genesis 22:11
7	God intervenes and provides	(living) water	(living) sacrifice
8	Buried their father together, without Keturah’s sons	Genesis 25:9	Genesis 25:9
9	Received the promise of becoming a great nation	Genesis 16:10, 17:20	Genesis 17:16, 26:24
10	Blessed by God	Genesis 16:11, 17:20	Genesis 25:11, 26:24
11	Father of twelve tribes	Genesis 17:20, 25:16 12 sons	Genesis 35:22b-26 12 sons (through Jacob)

All these parallels point to the fact that the forefather of the Ishmaelites has a very special place, not only in biblical history, but even more so in the heart of God.

We can safely conclude that the life of Ishmael was no accident. God allowed Abraham and Hagar to have a son. When Hagar fled, He did not let her go, but instead he purposefully intervened. This reveals that God had a plan with this yet unborn child. Also, even though at the age of thirteen Ishmael learned that he was rejected as the son of the promise, he was deeply loved, especially by God, but also by Abraham and Isaac.

How did the relationship between the offspring of these two patriarchs develop? Did the Ishmaelites live like savages? Did they quarrel with the Israelites? Or did they live together in peace and harmony? These questions are tackled in the next part of the book.

Timeline of Abraham and his descendants



Legend:
 175 age reached
 † 1821 year of death

You have reached the end of Part One of Rejected and Loved. I hope you have enjoyed reading it and were blessed by it.

Are you curious about how the relationship between Ishmael's and Isaac's descendants continued? You can find out in Part Two of the book.

In Part Three you can discover the promises God has given about the Ishmaelites in the time they became known as Arabs. Part Four takes you to the time of the Arabs during the life of the Lord Jesus and shortly after that.

Finally, Part Five describes modern day efforts of a Palestinian Christian seeking to make God's love known to a Saudi Muslim. This part contains true events.

The full book is available in print through Amazon and other channels. It can also be purchased digitally in Kindle and Epub format.

For more information, please visit www.godlovesishmael.com. Here you can find all kinds of studies and video's related to God's love for the Arabs and His plan with the Arabs to be a blessing in the Middle East.

If you would like to contact me directly, please feel free to write me at info@godlovesishmael.com. I would love to hear how the message of the book impacts your life.

Peace,

Laurens de Wit

Imagine for a moment: you're a teenager and suddenly your dad throws you out of the house. Forever. And by God's command! This is what happened to Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar. This rejection left deep marks on the history of his descendants.

Yet, that's not the end of the story. God didn't really reject Ishmael. On the contrary, He deeply loved him and today, He still loves his descendants, the ethnic Arabs. Discover with the author how great God's love was and is and the unique plan God has for them in the future.

Laurens de Wit has lived in the Middle East for many years and describes life in Biblical times in a refreshing way. In the last section of the book, which deals with the present, he has woven authentic events from the lives of his Arab friends.

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