

All of my life I have heard it taught that Abraham made a mistake in having Ishmael, that in having a child by Hagar he tried on his own to realize God's promises, thus creating all sorts of avoidable historical conflict. At a back-of-the-mind level I have always wondered why no later biblical author gave such a criticism, but in general I accepted the contemporary teaching.

I was quite startled recently in reading the story anew that the text itself gives no indication that Ishmael was in any way a mistake or the result of Abraham making things happen on his own without waiting for God to act. Reading the story chronologically, considering what Abraham knew at each time and the cultural norms of that day, no such conclusion can be drawn.

In the first covenant scene, God simply promises Abraham that he would have countless descendants; nothing was said at that time that the child would be born by Sarah. The story then follows with Sarah, remaining childless, giving Hagar to Abraham and Hagar bearing Ishmael. It was only in a much later reiteration of the promise, after Abraham and Sarah are both beyond childbearing age, that God stated specifically that Sarah would have a child; both of them laughed at that promise, it seemed so impossible.

The conclusion is clear: God had in mind something that Abraham could not have known because it was not previously given to him, and thus on the basis of which he could not act. In having Ishmael by Hagar, Abraham in no way violated or pushed God's promise to make it happen on his own. He acted according to what he knew at the time, and his actions were normal in his time.

I wonder if current teaching doesn't source at least partly from reading contemporary discomfort back into the text regarding the practice of having children by the slave of one's wife. There are at least two sensibilities involved, one regarding slavery, the other regarding an exclusive relationship between man and wife. The problem is that, whether we like it or not, whether or not it tidily fits our theology or praxis, both practices were normal for that day.

A consistent judgment of Abraham having a child by Hagar would also entail an equally sharp judgment of Jacob's relationship to Leah and Rachel and their slaves, from which the twelve tribes sourced. Who today would state that the twelve tribes are the result of a mistake, of Jacob making things happen on his own? Yet, if Ishmael was a mistake, so were the twelve tribes.

Ishmael was not a mistake any more than were the twelve tribes.

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