

Hagar in Midrash and Aggadah

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Why did Hagar so easily conceive, while Sarah was barren?

According to the Rabbis, a field that is neither plowed nor sown nevertheless has thorns that rise up by themselves. However, in order to grow wheat in the field, much suffering must be endured and much toil invested until it sprouts (Gen. Rabbah loc. cit.). This parable explains the facility with which Hagar became pregnant, in contrast with the difficulty encountered by Sarah. Both women are compared to a field. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, who is like thorns that sprout so effortlessly, but are totally worthless. This was in sharp contrast with Sarah, who would give birth to Isaac, Abraham's successor. Isaac is compared to wheat, from which bread is prepared, and therefore his pregnancy required much effort and exertion. Sarah's difficulty in becoming pregnant accordingly attests to the quality of the progeny that she would eventually produce.

Ishmael mocks Isaac

Gen. 21:9–10 relates that after the birth of Isaac, Sarah feared Ishmael's negative influence on her son and (v. 9): "Sarah saw the son, whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, playing [mezahek]." The Rabbis differed as to the nature of the activity that aroused Sarah's ire. The appellation given him in this verse: "the son, whom Hagar the Egyptian [or: the son of Hagar the Egyptian]" delineated the interpretive direction that Ishmael's actions were as those of the Gentiles, leading to different understandings of the word mezahek.

In one view, Ishmael engaged in idolatry and Sarah saw him building pagan altars and trapping locusts, which he offered as sacrifices.

According to a second opinion, Ishmael engaged in licentious sexual acts, and Sarah saw him "conquering the gardens" [a euphemism for raping women] and mistreating them.

In yet a third exegetical notion, Ishmael engaged in bloodshed. Sarah saw him take a bow and arrows and shoot at Isaac [i.e., he was trying to kill him] (T Sotah [ed. Lieberman] 6:6). The three types of behavior depicted here are the three transgressions regarded by the Rabbis as cardinal, for which a person "should be killed rather than transgress" (see BT Sanhedrin 74a).

The aim of these exegetical positions is to present Ishmael's conduct in so extreme a fashion as to be totally unacceptable to the spirit of Judaism, the spirit in which Sarah wanted to raise her son.

There is also, however, a dissenting opinion that asks: Is it conceivable, Heaven forbid, that such would happen in the home of that righteous one [Abraham]? Why, it is said of

Abraham (Gen. 18:19): “For I have singled him out, that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord.” Could there possibly have been idolatry, illicit sexual acts, and bloodshed in his house?

Rather, Ishmael’s laughter [“mezahek”] pertained to the question of inheritance. When Isaac was born, everyone rejoiced and proclaimed: “A son is born to Abraham, a son is born to Abraham! he will inherit the world and take two portions of the inheritance.” Ishmael would hear this and laugh [“mezahek”] to himself, saying: “Don’t be fools, don’t be fools. I am the firstborn, and I will take two portions.” This led Sarah to make haste to tell Abraham (Gen. 21:10): “Cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac” (T Sotah loc. cit.). According to this interpretive orientation, the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael was meant to clarify to them that Isaac was Abraham’s heir.

The Apostle Paul must have known of these interpretations:

Galatians 4: 29 - “But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now.”