
Patterns of Exodus in the Hagar and Ishmael Traditions of J and E

I.

The traditions of Hagar and Ishmael known outside of P tell a story of abuse and oppression unknown to the other non-chosen familial antagonists of the Genesis narratives. A careful reading of the episodes reflecting Ishmael's status in J and E gives rise to two questions. First, to what extent is Ishmael comparable to his other non-chosen counterparts (described primarily through J accounts in Genesis)? It may be obvious at the outset that Ishmael's status and favor are more ambiguous than some of the others', but here I will seek to determine with as much precision as possible Ishmael's position in relation to figures like Cain, Ham, Lot, and Esau. My contention is that the differences between these hapless figures and Ishmael are greater than their affinities, and that Ishmael is quite clearly favored in these texts in a way that the others are not, even if he is not chosen.

Secondly, having established that the Hagar and Ishmael accounts exhibit many indications of Ishmael's favor—including Jon Levenson's

features of the “beloved son”—I consider how these two figures bear on Joseph’s cycle of humiliation and exaltation by testing the conclusions offered by Levenson and Phyllis Tribble.¹ Tribble contends that the miserable experiences of Hagar and Ishmael are best understood as a negative inversion of Israel’s emancipation in the exodus. It is proposed here instead that Hagar and Ishmael not only anticipate the distress of Israel’s bondage in Egypt, but also their *deliverance*. In this way they provide the basis for a pattern that is recapitulated first through Joseph, and finally in Israel’s bondage and exodus. In Levenson’s view, the story of Hagar’s flight to the desert in chapter 16 differs from that of Israel’s desert wanderings in that she is instructed to return to the oppression of her mistress, whereas Israel is freed from bondage to Pharaoh and eventually led into Canaan. The patriarchal promise to Abram applies to Hagar and Ishmael only secondarily: Hagar faces servitude, but Ishmael thrives, yet outside the land promised to Abram. My conclusion ties Hagar’s continuing oppression not with Israel’s exodus, but rather with YHWH’s announcement to Abram that his descendants would be oppressed for four hundred years in a land that is not theirs (Gen. 15:13)—pointing out that Hagar (the Egyptian), too, is oppressed in a land that is not hers (the land of Israel’s promise). For both Abram and Hagar, comforting promises will be mediated through their own innumerable progenies (Gen. 15:4-5; 16:10 [both J]).² My argument is that the experience of Hagar and Ishmael provides something of a parallel to that of Israel according to the narratives of J and E. I turn first of all to the comparison of Ishmael’s non-chosen counterparts in Genesis.

II.

It is typical of the non-elect siblings and family members that they

1. See Jon D. Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 82–110; Phyllis Tribble, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 9–36.

2. We must be careful to note, as Levenson reminds me, that Hagar and Ishmael do not participate in any sense in the land promises to Abram in Gen. 15:18–21. In fact, Isaac is unique among the patriarchs in that he *does not leave* the Promised Land at any point, even to find a wife (see esp. Gen. 24:1–8; 26:1–6).

have some great moral failure or shortcoming,³ occasionally as a response to the inequity of another's favor from God or a parent. On the whole, they are negative examples, miscreant foils for the chosen or favored sons of Israel's patriarchal stories. Often "foolish" in the proverbial sense of Israelite Wisdom, in many instances they provide case studies of what not to do when confronted with the inequities of God's favor. The point is not that the favored siblings are faultless. Their foibles and transgressions are patent; rather, the non-elect often seem to justify disqualification, even if their misdeeds are committed *ex post facto*.

Cain

In the first instance, though we are not told explicitly why,⁴ it is reported in J that YHWH did not have regard for Cain or his offering (Gen. 4:5). "Why are you angry," asks YHWH, "and why has your face fallen? If you do right—uplift; but if you do not do right—sin is lurking at your door; its desire is for you, but you must master it" (vv. 6-7). The notion that good conduct results in exaltation, not dejection, is a wisdom motif,⁵ and the instruction underlines the exemplary nature of the passage, whether or not it derives from a wisdom school.⁶ It is worth noticing also that YHWH condescends to advise Cain. As Gerhard von Rad indicates, "Cain was not completely rejected even though his sacrifice was not accepted."⁷ That is to say, Cain may not have been regarded, but he is not *disregarded*. YHWH has an interest in Cain and his doings: in fact, Cain is the real focus of a narrative that aims to present a message primarily through his failings and not Abel's success. The terse narrative makes it plain that Cain rejects the all-important instruction, and responds instead by luring Abel to his

3. The term "non-elect" in this usage derives from Joel Kaminsky (*Yet I Loved Jacob* [Nashville: Abingdon, 2007], 121-36).

4. See the discussion in Levenson, *Death*, 71-74.

5. See Ephraim A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB 1; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 33.

6. Recognizing here, of course, that "wisdom language does not constitute wisdom [literature]." Roland Murphy, "Assumptions and Problems in Old Testament Wisdom Research," *CBQ* 29 (1967): 410; cf. James L. Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature," *JBL* 88 (1969): 129-42.

7. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 101.

death. So the first disfavored son fails to achieve favor through the murder of Abel, and the elect status passes instead to Seth, who stands in as Abel's replacement (v. 25).⁸

Ham

Next, Gen. 9:18 (J) informs us that the sons of Noah who went out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and that Ham was the father of Canaan. From these three sons, according to verse 19, all the earth was populated. Following this brief notice, the text describes to some degree the episode of Noah's drunkenness, and that Ham—the father of Canaan—saw his father's nakedness and told his two brothers outside (v. 22). It seems most likely that Ham has been inserted into an older version of the story in order to give a more international account in keeping with chapter 10;⁹ regardless of the reconstruction of details, however, the main point of the narrative as it stands is given clearly in verses 24-27: some offense has been committed against Noah and Canaan is to bear the punitive curse. A midrash in *Gen. Rab.* 36:2 does not miss the implication that Canaan is the "source of degradation." And Ibn Ezra is attentive to what is undoubtedly the central function of the passage, namely, to show that the descendants of the Canaanites "were already cursed since the days of Noah."¹⁰ Heritage and blessing are at stake in Genesis 9. Ham and Canaan, Israel's chief competitor, are ineligible as a result of the evil deed.

Lot

In another J passage, Genesis 13, Lot is a figure for whom the issues of God's favor and Abram's patrimony are ambiguous, particularly to Abram.¹¹ It is significant that Lot does not defer to Abram when faced with the land crisis over grazing rights; instead, looking to the well-

8. See Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved*, 25.

9. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 132.

10. See Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis, Volume 1A* (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 2002), 299.

11. See Larry Helyer, "The Separation of Abram and Lot: Its Significance in the Patriarchal Narratives," *JOT* 26 (1983): 82.

watered “whole plain” (כל ככר) of the Jordan, Lot chooses for himself that region and journeys eastward (v. 10). In typical style, the narrative omits commentary but leaves evaluation to the reader. YHWH’s response to Abram after the affair shows that questions of inheritance and blessing are in view: “Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are . . . for all the land that you see, I’ll give it to you and to your *offspring* forever” (vv. 14-15, emphasis mine). Lot is Abram’s closest kin, to be sure, but he is not his offspring, and thus Lot is revealed to be outside of God’s covenant with Abram. The land crisis appears to function as a kind of litmus test for Lot’s status.

Other observations from the career of Lot as it is depicted in J also suggest that he is unfit. In chapter 19, Lot plays host to the two angels who come to Sodom. It is a laudable act in itself, but Lot is much less successful in his hospitality than Abram in chapter 18 (also J). After rescuing their host, the angel-men strike the aggressors with blindness and take control in Lot’s own household (vv. 10-12). As Lot attempts to gather his sons-in-law at the suggestion of the angels, he is “like a ‘joker’ (מצחק) in [their] eyes” (v. 14).¹² And when the angels finally urge Lot to leave with his wife and daughters, he delays, making it necessary for the angels to lead Lot and his family out by hand (vv. 15-16). Lot’s character engenders sympathy, but the narrative presents “a man whose decisions and acts are only half formed.”¹³ It appears that J’s story is exemplary, once again as in chapter 4, juxtaposing the foolish actions of Lot with the skillful and decisively wise actions of Abram. The result is a justification of Abram’s position and the privilege of his offspring over Lot.

One might add to this that God’s judgment against Sodom and its environs should be read in part as an indictment against Lot for his choice in chapter 13 of the lush plain, which turns out to be undesirable in relation to the hill country. “Escape for your life,” Lot is told; “Don’t

12. Thus anticipating the foolish laughter that characterizes other prominent scenes in J: Sarah’s response to the angel’s birth announcement of Isaac (Gen. 18:12-15), the “sporting” or “Isaacing” of Ishmael (21:9), and Isaac’s sexual play with Rebekah (26:8). Cf. also Abraham’s laughter (17:17 [P]) and Sarah’s joy (21:6 [E]).

13. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 214.

look behind . . . and don't stop 'in all of the plain' (בכל הכבר). Escape to the mountain lest you be swept away" (19:17). Then YHWH rains brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah and overturns the cities and "all of the plain" (כל הכבר), and all the residents of the cities, and, to parallel the verdant well-watered imagery of chapter 13, "what sprouted on the ground" (vv. 24-25). After this, "Abram rose early in the morning"—as is his tendency when potential heirs are nearly sacrificed¹⁴—and beholds the landscape of Sodom and Gomorrah and, once again, "all the face of the land of the plain" (כל פני ארץ הכבר), with the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a furnace (19:27-28). The scene finalizes Lot's elimination and provides for the reader of J an affirmation of what had been promised earlier to Abram.

After this, Lot leaves Zoar, because of his fear, and resides with his two daughters in a cave in the *mountain*—a pathetic resolution to his choice of the lush plain.¹⁵ In the end, Lot's descendants, the Moabites and Ammonites, share in common with the Canaanites a rather ignominious origin from drunkenness and incestuous sexual perversion (19:30-38; cf. 9:18-27).

Esau

In the next example of J's familial rivalry, Esau comes out at birth "all ruddy, like a hairy garment" (25:25); Esau is "a man who knows game, a man of the field" (v. 27). The brief introduction points out that he is animal-like, a carnal figure, brutish and uncultured. The narrator provides an antithetically parallel description of the two sons in verse 27:

ויהי עשו איש ידע ציד איש שדה
ויעקב איש תם ישב אהלים

14. The immolation of Sodom and the plain is suggestive; cf. Gen. 19:27 (J) with 21:14 and 22:3, both attributed traditionally to E.

15. Theodore Hiebert (*The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1996], 107) suggests that J's primary concern in the ancestral narratives is to explain how Israel's fathers are connected to the hill country (their heartland), and to show how their neighbors are associated with their own physical geographies as well.