

"Yishmael"

All scriptural references are to Genesis unless stated otherwise.

"An angel of G-d said to (Hagar), 'You are pregnant and will have a boy. You will call him Yishmael, because G-d has heard your petition. He will be a wild donkey of a man (*pere adam*), his hand will be against all and the hand of all against him, and he will settle within sight of his brothers.'" (16, verses 11 and 12)

It is a strange fact of modern life that the influence apparently wielded by Yishmael today is so far out of proportion with his role in the Scriptures. Here is a brief survey of his Biblical career.

Firstly, he was not a *pere adam* all his life. We will see later on that when Avraham Avinu died, his two sons buried him. (25,9) The Midrash Bereshit Rabbah tells us that Yishmael repented and allowed Yitzhak to precede him at the burial. According to the chronology, Yishmael was born when his father was 86 (16,16) and his father lived to be 175 (25,7) so he would have been 89 at Avraham Avinu's passing. Yishmael lived to be 137 (25,17) and in the absence of evidence to the contrary, we have to assume he behaved himself from the time of his father's demise until his own, which would have been 48 years.

Secondly, if we speak of Yishmael's offspring, the character of Biblical fathers is not necessarily passed on to their descendants. To take one example from many, the virtuous king Chizkiah (Hezekiah) was the father of the notorious king Menashe. Most of the Arab nations in any case are not descended from Yishmael. Chapter 10 seems to indicate that the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula are the sons of Joktan, who was the great-great grandson of Shem ben Noah. They would therefore predate Yishmael by many hundreds of years.

In that case, where are Yishmael's descendants? Their location is somewhat obscure, and I would not like to have to deliver their post. It is described in 25,18 as follows; "They lived from Havilah to Shur, on the Egyptian border, going towards Asshur: he fell (or, following Ibn Ezra, died) in the presence of all his brothers". Havilah and Shur are Amalekite territory (see 1 Samuel 15,7) which was in the Negev, or perhaps in the Sinai peninsula towards Egypt. Asshur is modern Syria, hundreds of kilometres to the north. We have to conclude that the descendants of Yishmael led a nomadic life, rather like the Bedouin of today.

Throughout the Scriptures we were at war with various peoples living near us: Amalek, Canaan, Philistines, Midian, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Egypt, Aram, Assyria, and so forth. However, I have not found anywhere in Scripture when we were at war with the descendants of Yishmael. There would appear to have been Ishmaelite mercenaries in some of the armies that we fought against, as in Judges 8,24. But there seems to be no instance of a conflict between ourselves and Yishmael as a people.

There are many instances where our prophets prophesied against foreign nations. I have not found any such prophecies mentioning Yishmael by name. And although we would never dream of calling our children Canaan or Moab, the name Yishmael was quite happily given to Jewish boys until the rise of Islam.

So, in view of the above, from where did Yishmael get his strength, and why so recently in human history?

It may be that because the Ishmaelites had no settled home, they were not in a position to exercise much influence. As we see from Rashi on 12,2, a wandering lifestyle diminishes family size, wealth, and reputation. Perhaps when a large enough number of the offspring of Yishmael had abandoned their nomadic way of life and settled down in one place, they were then in a condition to receive the Scriptural promises of nationhood.

Our own history has been one of wandering, or being driven, from one place to another. The fact that we were able to exercise some influence despite having no fixed abode is clear enough proof that the Scriptural promises made to us are true, and that they will be, as the prophets say, hastened in their time.