

Ishmael and Isaac ~ The Developing Rational

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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In Genesis, chapter 16, the angel of the Lord appears to Hagar, Sarai's Egyptian handmaid in the wilderness where she has run away from her mistress and says,

“Behold, you are with child, and you shall bear a son, and you shall call his name Ishmael because Jehovah has heard your affliction [Ishma-el means “God hears”]. And he will be a wild-ass man; his hand will be against all, and the hand of all against him; and he shall dwell in opposition to [against the faces of] all his brothers” (Gen 16:11-12).

14 years later Sarai herself (who by then is called Sarah) bears a son - her only son - by a miracle in her old age, and Abraham, her husband, calls his name Isaac, which means laughter, because both he and Sarah had laughed at the prospect of having a child in their old age.

The story of Ishmael and Isaac, the two sons of Abraham, is in the internal or spiritual sense the story of the developing rational mind. Ishmael represents what we often call “the first rational,” or “the Ishmael rational,” and Isaac represents the more mature rational mind of someone who is older and, well, more “reasonable.”

One interesting aspect of the story in the literal sense of the Word is that almost nothing is said about Ishmael. Traditionally, it is believed that he became the father of the Arabic nations and he is revered among Muslims as a prophet and a patriarch of that religion. He had 12 children by various wives, and they all lived “east of Egypt as you go toward Assyria” (Gen. 25:12-18). But that's it; no journeys, no incidents, no miracles, no details of his life at all are recorded in the Word. All we know is what is said prophetically about him before he was born, namely, that he would be a wild ass of a man, that his hand would be against all, and the hand of all against him, and that he would dwell in opposition to his brothers. (By the way, that the New King James Version makes a hash of this translation, saying simply that he would be “a wild man” and that he would dwell “in the presence” of all his brethren – which doesn't do the Hebrew justice at all.)

In contrast, Isaac was the favored son and the whole thread of the Old Testament story continues after Abraham with his life and that of his descendants through Jacob. For what it's worth Isaac was the only monogamous patriarch of the Jewish people, and the two most prominent stories of his life (apart from his blessing of his twin sons, Jacob and Esau) revolve around the way he found his wife, Rebekah, and the fact that he called her his sister when he was living among the Philistines in Gerar during a famine in Canaan. We also read in Genesis, chapter 26, about the jealousy of the Philistines when he began to prosper among them, and his quarrel with them over a series of wells that his people dug in that land.

Curiously the only recorded connection between Ishmael and Isaac in the Word is the fact that Isaac's son, Esau, took one of Ishmael's daughters as a wife (Gen. 28:8-9), a concession to his parents who had disapproved of his previous marriages to two Hittite women (Gen. 26:34-35).

So how is it that the two half-brothers represent the developing rational mind or faculty?

Well, what is the rational faculty and how does it work?

Our first clue should come from the word, rational, itself, which is built up from the word, ratio, describing a relationship between two things. In this case it is the relationship between what is internal and what is external, or between what is spiritual and what is natural in human life. This is wonderfully represented in the relationship between Abraham and his two women (note again, the NKJV does not do this element of the story justice, either: it says Sarai gave Hagar, her handmaid, to Abram for a wife, but the Hebrew has “woman,” for the reason that she wasn’t a wife but a concubine, or in modern terms simply a surrogate mother). But each of the women represents some aspect of the conscious mind – Hagar, the Egyptian, the affection for natural knowledge, especially the knowledge of the literal sense of the Word, and Sarai, later called Sarah, the affection for spiritual truth, which, even though it is about spiritual things, still resides in the memory of the natural mind.

More specifically, Egypt throughout the Word because it was a land of great learning represents knowledge, and an Egyptian servant represents the knowledge that *serves* to support spiritual life. Since a woman generally represents affection, a female servant, or handmaid, in this case Hagar, represents the affection for this knowledge. (By the way, Hagar in Hebrew means wandering, which was a feature of this woman’s life, first when she ran away from her mistress after she conceived and Sarai became jealous, and then later after Isaac was born and both she and Ishmael were sent away to wander in the wilderness of Beersheba.)

Now this affection for natural knowledge, inspired or inseminated by the inner life that Abram represents produces a particular kind of rationality that is, shall we say, typical of teenagers and young adults. And before we review the description of it let’s remember that it is an essential part of the process of our growth and development. Sarai, the true wife and matriarch of Israel, was barren and could not have children. This is why she gave Abram her handmaid as a concubine. This was a necessary means to the end of giving Abram children to fulfil God’s promise. And what Ishmael represents is a necessary means of developing the rational thought process.

But here we go. Because its entire focus is on knowing and understanding, without much, if any thought for truly human qualities of kindness or charity, the first or “Ishmael rational” is not a very endearing thing. In fact it is very much like a wild, untamed ass or donkey – stubborn, self-centered and undisciplined. In the words of the Arcana (AC 1949),

“The person whose rational is such as consists in truth alone, even though this is the truth of faith, and does not at the same time consist in the good of charity, is altogether such. He is quick to find fault, makes no allowances, is against all, regards everyone as being in error, is instantly prepared to rebuke, to chasten, and to punish, shows no pity, does not apply himself and makes no effort to redirect people’s thinking; for he views everything from the standpoint of truth, and nothing from the standpoint of good. In short, he is a hard man. The one thing to soften his hardness is the good of charity, for good is the soul of truth, and when good draws near and implants itself in truth the latter becomes so different that it can hardly be recognized.”

So, eventually, Isaac supplants Ishmael and Ishmael is cast out. But as the means to an end the “Ishmael rational” is very important. It builds confidence in a young person’s ability to work with knowledge, to appreciate the truth, and to see how different things relate to each other, including the injustices and apparent contradictions that, as we know, tend to drive teenagers crazy. It helps to establish an identity based on clear, objective realities outside of self. And best of all it confirms the value of continued learning by giving the young person a sense of the power that is in knowledge, even if is used at first mainly for selfish purposes. This is all part of the Divine plan, a plan that accommodates every step of the way to our selfish and worldly natures, providing for gradual improvement, *little by little*, through what we call “mediate” or intermediate stages partaking of both good and evil until we are ready to make a great leap forward.

In the story that great leap comes with the birth of Isaac.

Now remember, every individual character in the Word represents some particular aspect of our spiritual lives – or the life of the church. So when we switch from Ishmael to Isaac, or even when we talk about Abraham and Sarah, we are not talking about different people in the spiritual sense, we are talking about different aspects of our own lives. And as Sarah represents an affection for interior truth, that is, knowledge more intimately connected to heavenly life, her son, Isaac, represents a rationality that includes much more of heavenly life than that represented by Ishmael. This new and happier rationality expresses itself in thought that flows from genuine charity, building relationships between the good of life and the truth of the Word.

Now imagine this. Ishmael is about 14 when Isaac is born, and the baby is nursed for 2 years or so, as was normal in those days, and then, when he is weaned, a great feast is held to celebrate the occasion. But as this is going on Sarah looks up and sees the 16 year-old mocking. And this mocking is what prompts her to appeal to Abraham to cast him and his mother out for good.

Still, God is merciful toward them both and sends an angel to minister to them in the wilderness, to show her a well of water and to promise that Ishmael, too, would become a great nation. So they thrive, and he becomes an archer, and his mother gets him a wife from her native Egypt. In other words, they continue to serve a purpose in the Divine plan as they represent qualities and characteristics of our lives that stay with us even though they fade into the background. As an archer, for example, Ishmael represents our ability to argue a point from doctrine, even if not always from the best motive. This can be annoying but it keeps us honest, even when the argument is within our own minds. And it’s kind of interesting to speculate, on a larger historical scale, about the link between Ishmael and his Muslim descendants as they continue to argue their case against Jews and Christians alike.

But back to Isaac as Abraham’s true heir, and the true spiritual rationality that he represents. What do you suppose is the trigger that prompts the change from the first rational to the second, from arguments for arguments’ sake to truly rational thought from the goodness of love?

Well, in the story things begin to change when Ishmael is 13, just a year before Isaac is born and when Abraham is 99 years of age. The old man has a vision of the Lord who promises him another son, and through him generations of descendants in an “everlasting covenant” with God, a covenant that would be sealed in their flesh by the rite of circumcision of all the males from 8 days old and up. At first he can’t believe it, and he falls on his face laughing, but he is gradually

convinced, and when the vision comes to an end he does his part, performing the circumcisions beginning with himself and Ishmael and including all who were born in his house (presumably his relatives) and those “bought with money.” (Obviously we can’t dwell on this, but... just imagine the discipline and conviction involved – especially with a 16 year-old boy!) THEN he and Sarah are visited again by an angel – or three angels – who make the same promise to her, and she laughs too, although inwardly, and then in fear denies it, but the angel sees and asks Abraham, “Why did (she) laugh? ... Is anything too hard for the Lord?” And sure enough, she conceives, and Isaac is born within the year.

Meanwhile, it is of more than passing interest that the whole story of Sodom and Gomorrah takes place right in the middle of this – between the prophecy and the birth of Isaac – because the men of those two cities represent the loves of self and the world, particularly the desire to control others for self-gratification. We won’t go into that story now, but note that *circumcision in the Word represents the removal and rejection of this love of self*, thus the removal of impurities that infect and corrupt a person’s regeneration. Lot, who was “sitting in the gate of Sodom,” represents the external man, tempted as always by the allurements of the loves of self and the world, and he had to be rescued from those allurements before the cities were destroyed. But because Abraham and his household had been circumcised they represented a more enlightened state, and that, confirmed and consolidated in the destruction of Sodom, is what triggers the birth of Isaac. In short, it is the *discipline* of shunning the evil of self-love, especially the discipline of shunning it as a sin against God, that provides for the birth of the truly rational mind – the mind that truly “gets” the relationship between the internal and the external, the spiritual and the natural, heavenly *love* and the proper use of knowledge in our worldly lives.

How can we inspire this more advanced rationality in ourselves or in others? We can’t. Only the Lord can do that. But what we CAN do is pay attention to the vision He presents to us in His Word, and follow His instructions – whether it feels good or not. As Moses himself said in Deuteronomy 10:16, we must circumcise *the foreskin of our hearts*, which is to remove the temptations, remove the barriers, remove the obstacles to a pure and innocent affection for the truth for the sake of the uses of a generous, heavenly life. This we can do, especially for ourselves, and if we do it with humility and real conviction we may serve as an example to others, but that is up to them and the Lord – in His time, in His wisdom and providence. The one thing we can know for sure is that if we do our part the Lord will do His for us, indeed He does His part all the time, we only have to do ours in order to receive the benefits, and this despite the potentially overwhelming appearance that we really are barren, we’re much too far along in life, and, well, it’s just too late. After all, “is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Gen. 18:14).

Amen.

Lessons: *Genesis* 16: the birth and life of Ishmael
 Genesis 21:1-21: the birth of Isaac
 Arcana Caelestia #2568:4-6 on the negative and affirmative principles