



The Heir Who Might Have Been

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It's possible that if things had been different, if things had gone as planned, that Yishmael, Avraham's half-Egyptian son of a slave, might have been our ancestor instead of Yitzhak.

That seems, after all, to be what Sarah intended when she told Avraham to have a child with Hagar. “Go to my maidservant,” she says, “and perhaps I will be built up through her” (Bereishit 16:2). While Rashi suggests that Sarah was also hoping for a biological child of her own and that she hoped that the merit of her self-sacrifice would cause God to allow her the pregnancy she'd been denied all those years, a more straightforward reading of her words seems to point to her hope for an adopted child: biologically Avraham's, but relationally Sarah's as well.

And while things don't work out that way, it is not obvious, at this point in the narrative, that this is not a real, possible pathway to the covenantal heir. All that God has promised up to now is that the heir will be Avraham's biological child. It is not until chapters later—long after relations between Sarah and Hagar have entirely collapsed—that God tells Avraham that Yishmael cannot inherit:



בראשית יז:יט-כא

¹⁹וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹקִים אֲבֹל שָׂרָה אִשְׁתְּךָ יֵלְדֶת לְךָ בֶן וְקָרָאתָ אֶת שְׁמוֹ יִצְחָק וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אִתּוֹ לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לְזָרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו: ²⁰וְלִישְׁמַעֲאֵל שָׁמַעְתִּיךָ הִנֵּה בִּרְכָתִי אִתּוֹ וְהִפְרִיתִי אֹתוֹ וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֹתוֹ בְּמֵאד מְאֹד שָׁנִים עֶשְׂרִי נְשִׂאִים יוֹלִיד וְנָתַתִּיו לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל: ²¹וְאֵת בְּרִיתִי אֲקִים אֶת יִצְחָק אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד לְךָ שָׂרָה לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה בְּשָׁנָה הָאַחֲרִית:

Bereishit 17:19-21

¹⁹God said, “Nevertheless, Sarah your wife will bear you a son and you shall call him Yitzhak. I will establish my covenant with him, an eternal covenant for his children after him. ²⁰Regarding Yishmael, I have heard you: Behold, I will bless him and make him fertile and exceedingly increase his numbers. He shall be the father of 12 chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation. ²¹But I will make my covenant with Yitzhak, who Sarah will bear at this season next year.”

It is possible, of course, that it was always God’s inevitable plan for Sarah to give birth to a child of her own, and that the long wait toward that point was part of that destiny. But it is also possible to read the story in another way, not as the story of a misguided attempt always destined to result in an extra, non-covenantal child, but as the tragic story of an heir who might have been.

The story in which Yishmael was the covenantal heir and ancestor of the Jewish people would have been a different story with different symbolism. Instead of a story that traces Jewish origins to Sarah’s miraculous conception at an advanced age, a stage of life when this seemed impossible, this story would have been a tale about love when love seems impossible: a collaboration between two women who have every reason to resent each other bound together by nothing but love for the same child. It would be a story about an in-between child: both Israelite and Egyptian, both slave and free. Instead of a story about a child born to Avraham and Sarah, his niece, a child entirely from the line of Terah and ultimately from

Shem, Noah's blessed son, it would be a story about a child who carries that blessed lineage on his father and adoptive mother's side, but also carries the blood of Ham, Noah's cursed son, on his birth mother's. And in this alternative version of the story, it would be exactly this child, this union of opposites brought together only because of the shared love of a child, that God would choose to carry the covenant.

That would-be story never comes true for Avraham, Sarah, and Hagar. It never comes true because that sort of love is difficult. Hagar and Sarah cannot cooperate in raising this child. Yishmael remains firmly Hagar's son, ultimately expelled from Avraham's home because Sarah cannot abide the thought that he might inherit along with Yitzhak. In the ultimate defeat of this might-have-been, not only do Hagar and Sarah not share a son, their respective sons cannot even share a home.

But Sarah and Hagar are not the last time we see this encounter of Egyptian and Israelite, freewoman and slave. Instead, we meet their counterparts years later, this time in Egypt instead of Canaan:

שמות ב:ה-ט

⁵וַתֵּרֶד בַּת פַּרְעֹה לָרְחוֹץ עַל הַיָּאֵר וַנַּעֲרֹתֶיהָ הִלְכֹת עַל יַד הַיָּאֵר וַתֵּרָא אֶת הַתִּבָּה בְּתוֹךְ הַסּוּף וַתְּשַׁלַּח אֶת אֲמָתָהּ וַתִּקְחֶהּ וַתִּפְתַּח וַתֵּרָאֶהּ אֶת הַיֶּלֶד וְהִנֵּה נָעַר בֶּכֶה וַתַּחֲמַל עָלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר מִי־לִדִּי הָעֶבְרִים זֶה׃ ⁶וַתֹּאמֶר אַחֲתוֹ אֵל בַּת פַּרְעֹה הֵאֱלָךְ וַקְרָאתִי לָהּ אִשָּׁה מִיִּנְקוֹת מִן הָעֶבְרִית וַתִּינַק לָהּ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד׃ ⁷וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ בַּת פַּרְעֹה לִכִּי וַתֵּלֶךְ הָעֹלָמָה וַתִּקְרָא אֶת אִם הַיֶּלֶד׃ ⁸וַתֹּאמֶר לָהּ בַּת פַּרְעֹה הִילִיכִי אֶת הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה וְהִינִקְהוּ לִי וְאֲנִי אֶתֵּן אֶת שְׂכָרְךָ וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּנְיָקֶהוּ׃ ⁹וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַתִּבְאֶהוּ לְבַת פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי לָהּ לְבֵן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן הַמַּיִם מָשִׂיתָהוּ׃

Shemot 2:5-9

⁵The daughter of Pharaoh (Bat Paroh) came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to



fetch it. When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, “This must be a Hebrew child.” ⁶His sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?” ⁷Pharaoh’s daughter answered, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. ⁸Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. ⁹When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, “I drew him out of the water.”

The players in this drama are remarkably similar to Sarah and Hagar: a freewoman who is a princess,¹ a slave who is a mother, and a baby boy. This time the roles reversed: it is the Egyptian woman who is in the dominant social position and the Israelite woman who is the child’s biological mother. But the main choice to be made in this story, the question of whether these women who have nothing in common will collaborate to raise a child, whether their shared love can overcome their differences, is exactly the same. And this time, the answer to that question is: yes.

Moshe’s in-betweenness never leaves him. Even as a fugitive from Pharaoh’s court, even after he has gone out to see his brothers, understood himself to be an Israelite and killed for that new identity, his upbringing stays with him:

שמות ב: טז-יט

¹⁶לָכֶּהֶן מִדְיָן שִׁבְעַת בָּנוֹת וַתִּבְאֶנָּה וַתִּדְלֶנָּה וַתִּמְלֹאנָה אֶת־הָרְהָטִים לְהִשְׁקוֹת צֹאן אֲבִיהֶן: ¹⁷וַיָּבֹאוּ הָרָעִים וַיִּגְרְשׁוּם וַיִּקְּם מֹשֶׁה וַיִּשְׁעַן וַיִּשְׁק אֶת־צֹאנָם: ¹⁸וַתִּבְאֶנָּה אֶל־רַעוּאֵל אֲבִיהֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מִדּוּעַ מֵהֲרַתָּן בֹּא הַיּוֹם: ¹⁹וַתֹּאמֶרן אִישׁ מִצְרִי הִצִּילָנוּ מִיַּד הָרָעִים וְגַם־דָּלָה דָּלָה לָנוּ וַיִּשְׁק אֶת־הַצֹּאן:

Shemot 2:16-19

¹⁶Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock; ¹⁷but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose

¹ Sarah’s name literally means “princess” (female form of “שָׂרָה - prince”).



to their defense, and he watered their flock. ¹⁸When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, “How is it that you have come back so soon today?” ¹⁹They answered, “An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock.”

When Moshe encounters Yitro’s daughters at the well, they go home and tell their father they met an Egyptian man. How did they know he was Egyptian? It is not clear. It might have been his clothes, maybe the color or the stitching. Maybe it was his sandals, almost worn through from his journey across countries, that still showed something of their origin.

But it is also possible that, as he chased away the shepherds, yelling at them to leave the young women alone, Yitro’s daughters heard—through his stutters—a thick Egyptian accent. Because after all, even when he understands himself to be an Israelite, even after he has endangered his life for his people, Moshe is still Bat Paroh’s son as much as he is his mother’s. Her language, her accent, will never leave him. And maybe, although the text does not tell us, that was the same accent Moshe spoke with, some time later at Sinai, when he relayed the word of God to the Jewish people. Maybe that was what God was waiting for all this time: the Yishmael who might have been, son of a freewoman and and slave, son of one mother from Shem’s family and one from Ham’s, who would give the Torah to the Jewish people in Egyptian-accented Hebrew, ensuring that we would know, forever, that the Torah never belonged, even in its first moments, to only one type of person.

The Yishmael who might have been, the child of two mothers, is lost to us. But in choosing to work together to save the child they both see as their son, Bat Paroh and Yokheved bring that dream back to the Jewish story. Together they raise a child who is neither entirely one thing or another, who, perhaps because he has always been a man in-between, is uniquely positioned to redeem a people, to help them traverse the no-man’s land between Egypt and Canaan, and ultimately cross the boundaries between heaven and earth.

