

Responding to the New Atheists' attacks on the God of the Old Testament-16: "Child Abuse"(Part 5—4th context: Hagar & Ishmael)

Before one can understand God's command to sacrifice Isaac, he must see it in light of its context. Context is everything! Let me illustrate: My guess is that if I came up to you and said I know of a woman who hid a lot of little children in a very small cramped room for many years, you would be aghast. Then if I asked you if she should be brought up on felony child abuse, without hesitation you would probably say, 'of course.' In your indignation you might even say something like 'they should string her up' for doing such a thing or 'she should never be allowed to be around any children *ever*.' What would your reaction be when I informed you that you just condemned Corrie Ten Boom, who is celebrated the world over by Christians, Jews, and even atheists for doing just that—by hiding Jewish children from the Nazis in a cramped closet/room to save their lives (see <http://www.corrietenboom.com/exhibits.htm>)? The difference between Corrie putting little children into a small cramped room and making them stay quiet and some Cruella de Vil doing the *same thing* is the intent and context, which determines whether an act is honorable or shameful.

We now hone in on the nearer and more immediate context of Hagar and Ishmael—namely, what took place with Abraham's first son, Ishmael, and his mother, Hagar. The Ishmael story turns out to be the preliminary testing ground that informs Abraham's later experience. Let's not forget that Ishmael was born to Hagar, Sarai's maidservant. Sarai, with Abraham, assumed that her having a *biological* son of promise in their old age wasn't going to work out:

Genesis 16:1-14: Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. 2 So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 3 And after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. 4 And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight.

When Hagar conceived, Sarah and Hagar began to despise each other. This caused Sarah to drive away Hagar. Yet God met Hagar in her desperation in the wilderness and told her to go back and live with Sarai and Abraham. There Hagar gave birth to Abraham's first son. As Ishmael grew up, Abraham unquestionably became quite attached to this son.

However, God had different plans. God assured Abraham and Sarah that the son of the promise was to come from *both* their bodies, not just Abraham's. Through God's miraculous fulfillment of his promise, Isaac was born to Sarai and Abraham. As one might imagine, trouble continued between the child of promise and the child of Hagar.

Genesis 21:8 And the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9 Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. 10 Therefore she said to Abraham, "Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac." And the matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son.

It was painful enough for Sarah to have her handmaiden Hagar—rather than herself—give birth to Abraham's first son. But for Ishmael to then scorn Sarah's own biological child was just too much to take. Abraham knew that sending Hagar and Ishmael away would calm Sarai down, but he was concerned about their safety if he sent them into the wilderness. At this point God allays Abraham's fears by reassuring him that Ishmael wouldn't die and that Isaac was the promised seed:

Genesis 21:12 But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named. 13 "And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant."

So Abraham confidently sent Ishmael away with Hagar and entrusted them to God's care. It was in this context that we have God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham was aware of the promise God had made concerning Ishmael (i.e., that he would live and become a great nation). God would take care of Ishmael and Hagar and fulfill His promises to them separately from Abraham and Sarai.

Abraham not only had to trust God regarding Ishmael's safety, he was face-to-face with a test regarding the miracle son, the son of promise who had come from Sarai's own body—"your only son."

Genesis 22:1 Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 And He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."

This long-awaited son of promise would also become a great nation. Ishmael had been a preliminary test; *Isaac would bring even a greater test*. Abraham knew that God would fulfill His promise regarding Isaac—*although he was not sure how God would do it!* All he could do was trust God's promises and obey Him. Somehow God *had* to come through! Abraham's obedience, we now see, was carried out in the context of his awareness of God's earlier deliverance of Ishmael and of God's act of providing the miracle child of promise through Sarai.

Trusting in God is always the key issue of the spiritual life—for Abraham and for every other believer:

Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please Him,

Proverbs 3:5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And do not lean on your own understanding.

Psalms 37:3 Trust in the LORD, and do good; Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.
4 Delight yourself in the LORD; And He will give you the desires of your heart. 5
Commit your way to the LORD, Trust also in Him, and He will do it.

Isaiah 26:4 "Trust in the LORD forever, For in God the LORD, we have an everlasting Rock.

Psalms 62:8 Trust in Him at all times, O people; Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us. Selah.

Isaiah 12:2 "Behold, God is my salvation, I will trust and not be afraid; For the LORD God is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation."

Isaiah 26:3 "The steadfast of mind Thou wilt keep in perfect peace, Because he trusts in Thee.

Psalms 9:10 And those who know Thy name will put their trust in Thee; For Thou, O LORD, hast not forsaken those who seek Thee.

Psalms 118:8 It is better to take refuge in the LORD Than to trust in man.

Jeremiah 17:7-8 "Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD And whose trust is the LORD. 8 "For he will be like a tree planted by the water, That extends its roots by a stream And will not fear when the heat comes; But its leaves will be green, And it will not be anxious in a year of drought Nor cease to yield fruit.

In Esse, Pure Act,

Pastor Don

2 Corinthians 4:17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,