1

Ishmael and Esau: Marginalized Men of the Bible

As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation.

—Genesis 17:20

And Esau said to his father, "Bless me too, Father!" And Esau wept aloud. And his father Isaac answered, saying to him, "See, your abode shall enjoy the fat of the earth. And the dew of heaven above. Yet by your sword you shall live and you shall serve your brother; but when you grow restive, you shall break his yoke from your neck."

—Genesis 27:38–40

The displacement of the firstborn by the younger sibling is a recurring motif found throughout the book of Genesis.[1] Indeed, the central theme of Genesis, as Sarna states, is "the fortunes of those who are heirs to God's covenant"[2] and as Robert Alter asserts, the entire book of Genesis "is about the reversal of the iron law of primogeniture, about the election through some devious twist of destiny of a younger son to carry on the line," thus "the firstborn very often seem to be losers in Genesis by the very condition of their birth."[3] First encountered in the narration of primordial history, that is, in the story of Cain and Abel, this motif comes to the fore in the Patriarchal narratives. Indeed, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, Ephraim and Manasseh are part and parcel of this motif.[4] At the same time, however, the extent to which

a sibling is marginalized, the motive for, and the effects of marginalization differ from story to story. A literary analysis of the biblical texts pertaining to Ishmael and Esau demonstrates that while there are significant differences, their narratives consist of particular parallel features that, in turn, contribute to a postbiblical Ishmael-Esau pairing found in rabbinic literature.

An analysis of the biblical narrative of Ishmael in light of the story of Esau[5] will set the stage for our ensuing examination of the rabbinic use of both biblical figures. Both men, deliberately placed "outside" the family not by the will of the father, but rather the mother, who carries out the providential plan (in Sarah's case unbeknownst to her), resemble one another, yet have distinct features. The narratives parallel and eventually intersect.

Ishmael in the Bible

The biblical narrative dealing with the figure of Ishmael is a story of marginalization par excellence. He is Abraham's firstborn, circumcised with Abraham, yet he is not the son of the covenant. He is part of the family, yet he is excluded. His presence is felt, yet his actions are few. He is spoken about, yet never speaks. God hears his voice, but the reader hears silence. He will be a great nation, but "his hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand against him." He is loved, and although expelled from Abraham's house, he is not rejected. As we shall see, the difficulty in discerning the meaning of several biblical references to Ishmael contributes to his ambiguous role in the patriarchal narrative. What, for example, does it mean that he will be a *pereʾ ʾādām*, a "wild ass of a man," that his hand will be against all, that he will live *ʿal pĕnê*, "in the face of" his kinsmen? Before we look at how the rabbis interpreted these phrases and how they portrayed Ishmael, let us examine the biblical story.

The figure of Ishmael is introduced in Genesis 16[6] when the messenger of God appears to Hagar. He informs her that God will multiply her seed exceedingly, that she is with child, and that she shall call him Ishmael, which means "God hears," because the Lord has heard her affliction. Moreover, in Gen. 16:12, one learns that he will be a wild ass of a man whose "hand shall be against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall dwell alongside[7] all his kinsmen."

"Part of the announcement of the birth of a son," Westermann points out, "is a preview of his later destiny, as for example: he will be one of renown, a king, a savior. The son in these cases (as Judg. 16; Lk. 1) will be of

significance for the people."[8] The birth announcement of the ill-fated firstborn is no exception:

> The fierce, aggressive way of life of the sons of Ishmael . . . is other than the peaceful nomadic life-style of the patriarchs. It presupposes the sedentary and bedouin desert tribes living in Canaan side by side and in confrontation in the period after the settlement.[9]

Wenham offers a different understanding of the verse: "This verse describes Ishmael's future destiny, to enjoy a free-roaming, bedouinlike existence. The freedom his mother sought will be his one day. The *pere'*, 'wild ass,' lives in the desert, looks more like a horse than a donkey, and is used in the OT as a figure of an individualistic lifestyle untrammeled by social convention" (Jer. 2:24; Hos. 8:9).[10] In a similar vein, Sarna writes:

> Like the wild ass among the beasts, so are the Ishmaelites among men. In their nature and destiny they call to mind the sturdy, fearless, and fleet-footed Syrian onager (Heb. *pere'*), who inhabits the wilderness and is almost impossible to domesticate . . . Hagar, the abused slave woman subjected to the harsh discipline of her mistress, will produce a people free and undisciplined.[11]

Syren also considers Gen. 16:7–14 as expressing a favorable, or at least neutral position toward Ishmael:

> Elsewhere in the Bible the wild ass is the typical unfettered wild animal, alone and free to go its own way (Hos. 8:9; Job 39:5). . . . In Hos. 8:9 and Jer. 2:24, the animal serves as an illustration of Israel's apostasy; as the wild ass in her heat exposes herself to her mates, Israel lustfully submits itself to foreign gods. Apart from this, nothing pejorative is associated with the wild ass—and in this instance it symbolized Israel and not her seducers. Like the wild ass, Ishmael is predestined to a solitary, wandering life. In this respect he can be compared to Cain, although unlike Cain, the biblical narrator does not impute any crime or guilt to Ishmael. Yet . . . Ishmael's life . . . is not unlike Cain's: both are sent away from their own family and community.[12]

Von Rad proposes an even more positive understanding of the verse: "He will be a real Bedouin, a 'wild ass of a man' . . . free and wild (Cf. Job 39:5–8) . . . eagerly spending his life in a war of all against all—a worthy son of his rebellious and proud mother! In this description of Ishmael there

is undoubtedly undisguised sympathy and admiration for the roving Bedouin who bends his neck to no yoke. The man here pictured is highly qualified in the opinion of Near Easterners."[13]

Finally, Speiser makes a connection between the Hebrew *pere*' and the Akkadian phrase *lullu-awelu*, approximately translated "savage of a man," a phrase used to describe not only Enkidu but also the first human created by gods.[14] The similarity drawn between Enkidu and Ishmael, as will be shown later, is also drawn between Esau and Enkidu.

What then did the messenger of the Lord mean when he told Hagar that her son shall be a *pere*' *'ādām*, "a wild ass of a man; his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; he shall dwell alongside all his kinsmen"? Given the various ways of interpreting *pere*' and *'al pĕnê*, the connotation is ambiguous and thus ripe for interpretation. The description, however ambiguous, is clearly of the "natural" person who is unrestrained, uninhibited by agrarian life. And, while *'al pĕnê* may express hostility, it more likely describes the close proximity of the nomadic Ishmaelites to other tribes.

Whether or not the description of Ishmael as a "wild ass of a man" is deemed negative seems more to depend upon one's own bias than on the context. That is to say, for some, the free-roaming bedouin existence is uncouth and unconventional, whereas for others, an unshackled lifestyle unencumbered by social convention and unrestricted by geography is desirable. The characterization of Ishmael is neither inherently negative nor pejorative. It presents the antithesis of the "civilized" sedentary Israelites. It is thus not surprising to learn in Gen. 21:21 that when Ishmael grew, he dwelt in the wilderness.[15] The notion that "his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against his" does depict tension between sedentary and nomadic tribes in the Near East,[16] but this tension need not be understood as negative. In fact, upon revisiting Westermann's understanding of Gen. 16:2, we find that he says, "It presupposes the sedentary and bedouin desert tribes living side by side," however, taking it a step further by claiming, "and in confrontation in the period after the settlement." Again, there is nothing inherently negative in the text to warrant this particular reading.

Moreover, in Genesis 17[17] God makes his covenant with Abraham and his seed.[18] God tells Abraham that Sarah is to give birth and that God will establish his covenant with Isaac, not Ishmael. Abraham responds, "Oh that Ishmael might live by Your favor!"[19] God responds, "Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac; and I will maintain My covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his off-

spring to come. As for Ishmael, I have heeded you; I hereby bless him, I will make him fruitful, and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains,[20] and I will make him a great nation" (Gen. 17:19–20). Like Isaac through whom twelve tribes are established, Ishmael will be a great nation and father of twelve chieftains. Ishmael and Isaac, as will be explored later in greater detail, are not presented as paired opposites, but rather as siblings who rarely interact, yet live parallel lives.[21]

The theological implications of the promise in Genesis 17, however, are far-reaching. As Westermann writes:

> The promise concerning Ishmael means that the effect of God's blessing extends beyond Israel to other nations as well. That universal trait which appeared in Gen. 1 and 10 continues here. Even though the covenant is carried on only in Isaac, that does not mean that God no longer acts in regard to nations outside Israel; he blesses, increases, and grants greatness to them too. Abraham then is father, not only the father of the people of Israel, but father in a broader sense, so that Ishmael, the tribal ancestor of the Ishmaelite people, remains Abraham's son with not the least diminution. We have here a truly wide-sweeping historical outlook: the God of Israel has to do not only with Israel, but also with other nations; God's blessing is not confined to the borders of Israel.[22]

That said, in discussing God's four-pronged response to Abraham in Gen. 17:19–21, Westermann claims, "The division of the response shows that the emphasis lies on the promise destined for Isaac, which is distinguished clearly from Ishmael."[23] Westermann's understanding of the covenant takes into account the difference between the distinct futures of Ishmael and Isaac, no doubt a providential difference, but his attempt to locate the universal trait in Genesis 17 attenuates the distinction made between them. Like his father and like his brother, Ishmael will be a father of a great nation, but God will maintain his covenant with Isaac.[24]

To be sure, there is an inherent paradox in Genesis 17. On the one hand, Ishmael is excluded: "But my covenant I will maintain with Isaac" (v. 21), yet on the other, he is included: "Then Abraham took his son Ishmael . . . and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins on that very day" (v. 23).[25] Ishmael is not only placed under the auspices of the God of Israel, but he is also a member of Abraham's family, indeed, his firstborn. Therein lies the rub. According to the narrative motif of Genesis, as firstborn he is de facto placed on the periphery. Ishmael and his descendants are relegated to the margin, a most tenuous position that, as we will see in ensuing

chapters, generates ambiguous portrayals at best and engenders hostile and negative depictions of them in postbiblical literature at worst.

In Genesis 17 God "hears." He heard Hagar and now God hears Abraham. In Genesis 21,[26] an expansion of the aetiology of Genesis 16, in which God hears Hagar, he hears Ishmael, and as in Genesis 17, God promises to make Ishmael a great nation. The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21, however, is in many respects unprecedented:[27] "Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing (*mĕṣaḥēq*).[28] She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac" (Gen. 21:9–10). Commentators, ancient and modern alike, have grappled with this verse: Why did Sarah, who provided Abraham with Hagar, now want her and her son "cast out"? What does *mĕṣaḥēq*, "playing," mean? In what horrendous act was Ishmael engaged?

Mĕṣaḥēq, derived from the same root as Isaac's name, "to laugh" (*ṣḥq*), can mean either "playing"[29] or "laughing." As J. Schwartz points out, the piel form of the verb has many meanings that connote positive activities such as laughing, playing, and rejoicing, as well as negative, abusive behavior such as mocking and deriding.[30] Since the negative meanings are usually dependent upon the addition of the preposition *be-*, missing in Gen. 21:9, Schwartz notes, "most modern commentators translate 'playing' or 'laughing,' although these activities need not be the same or mutually inclusive."[31] Indeed, as Westermann states: "Even from the purely grammatical point of view (*mezaheq*) without a preposition cannot mean 'to mock' or the like."[32] And, as many scholars have pointed out, the word has sexual connotations.

In the book of Jubilees, a retelling of Genesis 1 through Exodus 12 usually dated to the second century BCE,[33] there is no hint of "foul" play on Ishmael's part. On the contrary, the image presented is endearing, warm, and touching:[34]

> In the first year of the fifth week, in this jubilee, Isaac was weaned. Abraham gave a large banquet in the third month, on the day when his son Isaac was weaned. Now Ishmael, the son of Hagar the Egyptian, was in his place in front of his father Abraham. Abraham was very happy and blessed the Lord because he saw his own sons and had not died childless. . . . He was very happy because the Lord had given him descendants on the earth to possess the land. With his full voice he blessed the creator of everything. When Sarah saw Ishmael playing and dancing and Abraham being extremely happy, she became jealous of Ishmael. She said to Abraham: "Banish this girl and her son

> because this girl's son will not be an heir with my son Isaac." In Abraham's opinion the command regarding his servant girl and his son—that he should banish them from himself—was saddening. (17.1–6)[35]

The image is one of a celebration in which Abraham rejoiced. He was "very happy," not because Isaac was weaned but because "he saw his own *sons*," because "the Lord had given him descendant*s*." Furthermore, Abraham is portrayed as being very much involved in Ishmael, who is seated "in his place in front of his father," whose "playing and dancing" delights Abraham.

In Jubilees, as in Genesis, Ishmael's playing is not inherently negative. This is not to say, however, that his playing may not be perceived as offensive. As Schwartz comments:

> Bearing in mind that children often play at what they see among adults and that children's play also often includes "role-play" reflecting dreams and aspirations,[36] it is not unlikely that the author of Jubilees wished to suggest that Ishmael's play reflected in some way the role and position of his father. Perhaps indeed Jubilees hints that Ishmael "played" at celebrating such a feast and he played the role of his father. One can well imagine Sarah's terror at all of this.[37]

Although Schwartz is speculating, his comment points to a plausible cause of Sarah's unease and a motive for her behavior, namely Ishmael's status as Abraham's legitimate son.

Scholars claim that the original meaning of *mĕṣaḥēq* is impossible to determine, yet this conclusion does not preclude them from offering suggestions for interpreting the verse and understanding Sarah's behavior.[38] von Rad writes: "Whether the verb . . . [*zahaq*] here means simply 'playing' or 'behaving wantonly with someone' can no longer be decided. What Ishmael did need not be anything evil at all. The picture of the two boys playing with each other on an equal footing is quite sufficient to bring the jealous mother to a firm conclusion: Ishmael must go! Every year he, the older one, becomes a stronger rival for Isaac, and at last he will even divide the inheritance with him."[39] Speiser comments: "There is nothing in the text to suggest that he was abusing him, a motive deduced by many troubled readers in their effort to account for Sarah's anger."[40] As noted earlier, the "playing" itself is not necessarily negative;[41] rather, it is read negatively by some rabbis in order to vindicate Sarah. Ishmael must have done something, innocent or not, to provoke Sarah's response.

The story is either missing a piece that answers the question, or the text is complete as it is and therefore an understanding, perhaps justification, of Sarah's actions is sought by biblical interpreters, particularly by the rabbis. Unlike Westermann, who does not make the connection between Isaac's name and *mĕṣaḥēq* in the verse, Hackett argues that Ishmael may have been "Isaac-ing," which is a typical biblical pun, and therefore a likely explanation for Sarah's ire. Hackett contends, "And this is perhaps what Sarah is complaining about in the next verse, that she noticed he was doing something to indicate he was just like Isaac, that they were equals, and it is this that threatens her so."[42] If this were the case, then Ishmael's "Isaacing" is perceived as negative and his intentions are left ambiguous. Moreover, what Sarah perceives as ill-intentioned and threatening may have been an innocuous gesture on Ishmael's part.[43]

In trying to determine the meaning of *mĕṣaḥēq* in Genesis 21:9, Schwartz draws a connection between the weaning feast of Isaac and Ishmael's play and thus offers an interpretation similar to that of the author of Jubilees. Schwartz claims that whether or not Ishmael was seventeen (as found in the P version) or, as E would have it, still a child,[44] he was certainly old enough to be with his father and would not have been relegated to a section for toddlers. "As a child," Schwartz maintains, "his play at the feast would not have been considered inappropriate or out of place. On the contrary, it might have been considered amusing or entertaining."[45] Schwartz continues, "One can well imagine Sarah looking at her husband playing with his eldest son and the wave of panic that must have come over her. What will happen if Abraham should suddenly die? Who will inherit, in spite of the weaning feast? The public expression of intimacy, suggested by our reading and understanding of play in the text, must have been harrowing for Sarah."[46]

Schwartz argues further that children were reared either by their mothers or by some other female surrogate who played with them, and that contact with men of the family and fathers was limited to formal occasions and ceremonies. He writes: "Fathers rarely played with their children and such scenes that we do have regarding *father's* play with their offspring, albeit from periods later than the biblical period at present under discussion, are specifically meant to express touching scenes of fatherly love and devotion" (emphasis in the original).[47] Schwartz seems to have been strongly influenced by the book of Jubilees. His comments are highly appropriate if he were commenting on Jubilees 17:1–6. There is a possibility that Ishmael was with his father at the feast and perhaps he indeed was "playing" before him, but the notion that Abraham was delighting in his

playfulness and that it was a touching scene (Schwartz refers to sources from the Greco-Roman period) is tenuous at best. Be that as it may, this attenuates neither Schwartz's insightful connection between the feast and Ishmael's play, nor his positive reading of Ishmael's *mĕṣaḥēq* that takes into account why Sarah would command Abraham to cast out Hagar and his elder son. Although the biblical account does not explicitly place Ishmael at the feast with his father, it is reasonable to infer this from the flow of the narrative: "And the child grew, and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she bore for Abraham, making sport" (Gen. 17:8–9).

Perhaps, Ishmael's presence alone alarms Sarah. His existence threatens Isaac's entitlement to full inheritance. Phyllis Trible's literary analysis explains Sarah's behavior as a response to a menacing situation:

> The presence of Ishmael in Canaan plagues the future of Isaac, whose inheritance is threatened. In her move to eliminate the danger, Sarah debases Hagar[48] and Ishmael while exalting herself and Isaac. The phrase, "her son," without the name Ishmael, counters "my son . . . Isaac." The description "this slave woman," rather than "my maid" (cf. 16:2), increases distance between Hagar and Sarah. Not only is the possessive adjective *my* missing, but also a change in nouns connotes a change in status. From being a maid (*shipha*) to Sarai in scene one, Hagar had become a slave (*'ama*).[49]

Trible, like Westermann, Hackett, and Schwartz, demonstrates the extent to which Ishmael's fate is predicated not on his own behavior but rather on Sarah's. Why is she threatened? Does Ishmael threaten Isaac's entitlement to full inheritance?

Hackett asserts that given the contradictory evidence in the Bible and evidence from legal materials of Ancient Near Eastern societies, it is difficult to know what Ishmael's inheritance rights would have been. She maintains, nevertheless, that Sarah thinks that if Ishmael were to remain in the house, he would have had inheritance rights.[50] Sarna, Speiser, and Thompson, on the other hand, examine the Near Eastern texts and demonstrate that indeed Ishmael had inheritance rights as a member of the household, but his expulsion abrogates these rights.[51]

The Code of Hammurapi (pars. 170 and 171) states that if the father of children of a slave-wife legitimates the children by claiming them as his own, then they have an equal share in the inheritance. If he does not claim them as his children, they have no share in the inheritance. Furthermore,

both the slave and her children are given their freedom.[52] As Sarna suggests, although we do not know whether or not legitimization would be required if the wife supplied the slave to provide a son, as in the case of Sarah and Hagar, the heir would doubtless not have been inferior to the children of an ordinary slave. And, in the case of Ishmael, Abraham explicitly recognized him not only as a member of his household, but also as his son.[53]

Sarna also brings the Code of Lipit-Ishtar to bear on the issue: "The laws of Lipit-Ishtar, about one hundred and fifty years earlier than Hammurapi, stipulate that the offspring of a slave-wife relinquish their inheritance rights in return for their freedom."[54] He therefore concludes that Ishmael, as Abraham's legitimate son, was entitled to a share of the inheritance and that because of this, Sarah demanded Hagar and her son be given their freedom. In this way, they would forfeit their stake in the inheritance. "This being the case," writes Sarna, "the entire episode can be seen as having taken place according to the social custom and legal procedure of the times. Abraham's distress would then not be over the legality of the act, which was not in question, but because of both fatherly love and moral considerations."[55] For Sarna and others, it is clear that the issue at hand is one of inheritance.[56]

The question, however, still remains whether, and to what degree, the Bronze Age Mesopotamian laws were applied in the (proto) Israelite legal system. Greenspahn, in fact, contends that primogeniture "may not be as ancient or as universal a human practice as is commonly supposed."[57] He states:

> Biblical accounts of Israelite inheritance and succession confirm the impression that holders of both property and hereditary office were free to grant preferential treatment to whichever offspring they wished. . . . This system of fraternal sharing and paternal autonomy is confirmed by every incidental reference to inheritance in the Bible.[58]

Given the legal codes of Near Eastern societies and the narrative structure of the Genesis story, it is reasonable to believe that Ishmael, as Abraham's legitimate son, would inherit along with Isaac. Even if Greenspahn is correct that there are no rigid laws of inheritance in the Bible that obliged the father to treat the firstborn preferentially (a dubious idea), in the case of Ishmael it seems likely that inheritance was an issue for Sarah. Legitimate or not, Ishmael, she assumed, would inherit with her son—if not by law, then by Abraham's choice. Fearing that Abraham's affection for Ishmael

would lead to his inheriting with her son and certainly unwilling to have him share in the family fortune, Sarah sought Ishmael's expulsion. It is Sarah who sets the siblings in opposition. As a result of the strife between her and Hagar, Sarah creates an implicit atmosphere of competition, of fraternal conflict between Ishmael and Isaac. That an explicit rivalry existed between Ishmael and Isaac is textually unsubstantiated.

Rivalry existed in as much as the brothers participate in the larger narrative structure of Genesis that sets one line of Abraham's descendants apart from others. The promise made to both Hagar and Abraham as to Ishmael's fate, however, does not put him in direct conflict with Isaac, nor is there anything in the story that would lead one to believe that the brothers engaged in interpersonal conflict. To be sure, the prophecy depicts Ishmael's fate as riddled with strife, but it is not strife exclusively with Isaac: the statement that "His hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him" (Gen. 16:12) reflects the general tensions between sedentary and nomadic populations in the Near East.[59] There is no mention of competition or warfare between the brothers.

Sibling rivalry between Ishmael and Isaac is neither divinely ordained nor explicit in the narrative. In fact, they appear together only once in the narrative when they bury their father: "And Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah" (Gen. 25:9). The text reverses the birth order by mentioning Isaac before Ishmael. As we soon shall have occasion to see, this reversal figures prominently when comparing this narrative to that of Esau and Jacob.

Esau in the Bible

The following section looks at particular features of the Esau narrative and describes similarities and distinctions between Ishmael and Esau in order to establish a basis for understanding their depiction in rabbinic literature. It will become apparent that while the biblical character of Esau is more fully developed than that of Ishmael, the converse is true in rabbinic literature in which Ishmael is more multidimensional.

Jacob's twin brother, Esau, is red[60] (Gen. 25:25), which is connected to Edom, *'adāmâh*, "the red land, the land of the red clay," and his "hairiness" is related to Seir, the region in Edom[61] that Esau makes his home (Gen. 32:4). In both cases, Esau's identity is, as Vawter observes, "accorded by geography, but physical characteristics draw attention to it."[62]

Esau's hairiness calls to mind the story of Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Both are covered with hair, "a condition that was popularly taken

to be a sign of boorish uncouthness."[63] As Speiser indicates: "Yet J is . . . able to depict Esau as a sort of Enkidu figure: the child emerges 'like a hairy mantle all over,' which is almost the same as 'shaggy with hair was his whole body,' applied to Enkidu in Gilg., Tablet I, column ii, line 36 (where the phrase *su'ur sarta* is cognate with Heb. *se'ar*); and Esau, like Enkidu, is a man of the open spaces."[64] Similarly, Ishmael is depicted as an Enkidu-type figure. Not only is he a "wild ass of a man," which as we saw earlier, recalls the Akkadian phrase, *lullu-awelu*, used to describe Enkidu, but in Genensis 21:20, Ishmael is a "skilled bowman"[65] whose home is the "wilderness of Paran." "Skilled bowman," *rōbe qaššāt*, resonates with "hunter-man," a familiar term from the Epic of Gilgamesh.[66] Both Ishmael and Esau, connected with the outdoors, the former a bowman, the later a hunter, call to mind the image of Enkidu. Both biblical figures have Enkidu-like features and the association between Esau and Enkidu may be deliberate.

At the outset, Esau and Jacob are pitted against each other. Rebekah is given an oracle about the struggling children in her womb: "Two nations are in your womb, two separate peoples shall issue from your body; one people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger" (Gen. 25:23). At the outset, competition and conflict plague the twins. "The theme of hostile twins whose mutual opposition manifests itself already while they are still in their mother's womb," explains Vawter, "is a frequent enough detail of myth and folklore. Biblical tradition has adapted it to the careers of Edom and Israel, two peoples closely bound to each other by ties of blood and history who were destined to live in constant enmity and border warfare."[67] Esau, the archenemy, is Edom and the prenatal struggles of Esau and Jacob prefigure the eventual struggles between Edom and Israel. The strife between the fathers of two nations, one greater than the other, begins in Genesis, but the bitter rivalry continues throughout Israelite history.

The Edomites, whose land is traditionally located southeast of the Dead Sea, do not permit the Israelites to pass through their territory on their way from Kadesh to the promised land, thus forcing the Israelites to circumnavigate Edom (Num. 20:14–21).[68] Moreover, there is conflict between Edom and Israel throughout the period of the monarchy. Several texts from the exilic period recollect Edom's disdainful role in the fall of Jerusalem (e.g., Ezek. 25:12–14; Obad. 10–14; Ps. 137:7). As an ally of the Babylonians, Edom assists in preventing Judeans from escaping their enemy. The prophetic literature portends the destruction of Edom and its incorporation into the kingdom of Israel, thus fulfilling the prophecy, "the older will be slave of the younger."

It is important to note, however, that the depiction of Edom and Esau is not consistent throughout the biblical text. In Genesis 25 and 27 Esau is the "rude natural man," who shuns his birthright, lives by his sword, and holds a grudge against his brother. On the other hand, in Genesis 33 the reader is presented with a noble chieftain in charge of a clan who is both gracious and sympathetic to his brother. Esau, the brother who hates his sibling and seeks revenge, is the same brother who in Genesis 33:4 runs to meet Jacob, who falls on his neck and kisses him.[69] But perhaps rather than inconsistency, what we find is the development of his character.

In the case of Edom, its representation in the Bible may be categorized as mostly negative, but in some cases we find neutral and positive depictions.[70] A positive attitude toward Edom, for example, is found in Deuteronomy 2, and several neutral passages are found elsewhere.[71] Edom evidently plays a greater role in Israelite history than the Ishmaelites, the nomads who live in the desert of northern Arabia.[72] Psalm 83:7 notwithstanding, like their eponymous ancestor Ishmael, they are not generally depicted as an enemy but rather simply as one of the neighboring peoples. Tension between the Ishmaelites and the Israelites does not exist to the same extent as it does between the Edomites and the Israelites. It is therefore no surprise that the relationship between this second set of brothers, Esau and Jacob, differs to a large extent from that of Ishmael and Isaac.

The brothers are depicted as polar opposites: "When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp. Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game; but Rebekah favored Jacob" (Gen. 25:27–28). Esau is hairy, "The first one emerged red, like a hairy mantle all over" (Gen. 25:25), and Jacob is "smooth-skinned" (Gen. 27:11). In Genesis 27:22 we read: "So Jacob drew close to his father Isaac, who felt him and wondered: 'The voice is the voice of Jacob, yet the hands are the hands of Esau.' " The twin brothers complement each other.[73] Ishmael and Isaac, rather than binary opposites, parallel each other. A close reading of Genesis 21 and 22 illustrates the point. In both cases Abraham confronts the loss of a son.[74] Even the compositional strategy of Genesis 21:3, 8–14, and 22:2 draws attention to the symmetry between the brothers. L. Lyke also makes this point. By analyzing the broad narrative structures and compositional strategies of Genesis 21 and 22, Lyke convincingly argues that the stories told in Genesis 21:8–21 and 22:1–14 are parallel.[75]

Not only is the pairing of siblings different, the nature of their interaction also differs. Esau and Jacob engage in dialogue, whereas Ishmael and Isaac exchange no words. One may, however, argue that the biblical

account implicitly refers to Ishmael and Isaac's positive interpersonal relationship. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the rabbis, attuned to scriptural subtleties, take notice of Genesis 24:62, "Isaac had just come back from the vicinity of Beer-lahai-roi, for he was settled in the region of the Negeb," and recall Hagar. But Hagar is not the only person with whom this area is associated. As the site of God's promise of a son to Hagar, it is arguably associated with Ishmael. In fact, in his commentary on Genesis 25:11, "and Isaac settled near Beer-lahai-roi," Sarna suggests that Isaac's settling in this area "may be a symbolic assertion of hegemony over his brother."[76] The idea of hegemony over Ishmael is unwarranted. Given the preceding analysis of Genesis 16 and 17, there is no indication in the promises to Hagar and Abraham that augurs a fate riddled with fraternal strife for Ishmael. If anything, it is plausible that they dwelt "alongside" one another under relatively peaceful conditions. And certainly, unlike the other siblings and relations in the Genesis genealogies, Ammon, Moab, Edom, and for that matter, Aram and Midian, the Ishmaelites do not figure as significant enemies of the Israelites.

Furthermore, according to Genesis 25:9, "Isaac and Ishmael buried him [Abraham] in the cave of Machpelah." Unlike the burial notice of Isaac (Gen. 35:29) where Esau and Jacob bury their father, in this notice the younger son is mentioned first. Commenting on 35:29, Alter states: "At this end point, they [Esau and Jacob] act in unison and despite the reversal of birthright and blessing the firstborn is mentioned first."[77] By the same token, if Genesis 25:9 and 35:29 are contrasted, it becomes clear that the reversal, "Isaac and Ishmael" portrays the brothers acting not only in unison but also in accordance with God's preordained plan.

In the story of Esau and Jacob we have a prenatal struggle that sets the tone for the story, whereas in the story of Ishmael and Isaac the rivalry is not so much between brothers as between rival wives. There is no prenatal struggle. Not only is there no explicit sibling rivalry, there is no notion that one nation would serve the other. Since there is no portent of domination in the case of Ishmael and Isaac, the reversal of names may be symbolic of acceptance of the divine plan. That is, Isaac is the son of the covenant yet Ishmael is recognized as a great nation that will live "alongside" its kinsmen. Where? Perhaps in Beer-lahai-roi, where Isaac settles, where Ishmael was born.

The images of the two sons burying their father and living in proximity evoke reunion, reconciliation, and renewal. To be sure, there is no mention of Ishmael in the text, however, we know that Ishmael dwelt in the wilderness of Paran (Gen. 21:21), which is located in the Negeb, in the

same vicinity as Beer-lahai-roi, that is, near Kadesh.[78] There is no internal nor archaeological evidence that they are the same place, nonetheless, they both clearly refer to the southern region. Furthermore, the verse ordering of Genesis 25:11–12 indicates a connection between not only the two areas, but also between these siblings. In Genesis 25:11 we learn that Isaac dwells in Beer-lahai-roi and the very next verse begins listing the generations of Ishmael who, we are informed in Genesis 25:18, "dwell from Havilah unto Shur that is before Egypt." They, too, dwell nearby, or at least in the same vicinity. A careful reading of the texts supports the notion that they may have settled in the same area, unlike Esau and Jacob who part ways.

The fact that "Esau and Jacob bury their father," on the other hand, is symbolic of future conflict and tribal clashes. Indeed the biblical text explicitly states that they separate.[79] Genesis 33:12 reads as follows:

> And [Esau] said, "Let us start on our journey, and I will proceed at your pace." But he said to him, "My lord knows that the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; if they are driven hard a single day, all the flocks will die. Let my lord go on ahead of his servant, while I travel slowly, at the pace of the cattle before me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir." . . . So Esau started back that day on his way to Seir. But Jacob journeyed on to Succoth. (Gen. 33:12–16)

After Esau and Jacob bury Isaac, we learn that Esau took his entire family and all his belongings and "went to a land away from his brother Jacob" (Gen. 36:6). In contrast to Isaac and Ishmael, the later set of siblings separate and their future descendants will be in conflict with each other.

It is worth mentioning that the annunciation of Ishmael's birth more closely resembles the annunciation of the birth of Samuel, Solomon, Josiah, and Emmanuel than that of Esau.[80] To give an example, in 2 Kings 13:2, Josiah's birth is announced: "Thus said the LORD: A son shall be born to the House of David, Josiah by name; and he shall slaughter upon you the priests of the shrines who bring offerings upon you." And also in I Chronicles 22:9 we read of Solomon's birth: "But you will have a son who will be a man at rest, for I will give him rest from all his enemies on all sides; Solomon will be his name and I shall confer peace and quiet on Israel in his time." The annunciation of Ishmael's birth follows a similar pattern: "Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son; You shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has paid heed to your suffering. He shall be a wild ass of a man" (Gen. 16:11–12). As in the examples given, especially in the case of

Josiah's birth announcement, here too one learns of a child's birth, his name, and his destiny. Esau's birth announcement, in contrast, does not include the child's name, nor does it deal specifically with one child: "Two nations are in your womb" (Gen. 25:23).

Other differences between the narratives include the more active role Esau takes in his fate. Though he is acted upon, unlike Ishmael he acts and speaks. In both instances, however, mothers effect the marginalization. Both mediate God's preordained plan. Rebekah's behavior, albeit surreptitious, is not only known to the reader, it is justifiable given the oracle Rebekah received as well as the threat Esau posed to her favored son, Jacob. Even though Sarah's command to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son" (Gen. 21:10), fulfills no previously announced predestined program (Isaac's destiny as bearer of the covenant is another matter), nor is it obvious why Sarah is determined to remove Ishmael from her household, God approves of Sarah's request. Ishmael's destiny is to be a great nation. God says to Abraham, "I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous" (Gen. 17:20), but Esau, however, a victim of ill-fortune, receives a negative blessing from Isaac.[81]

In contrast with Ishmael, Esau is a fully developed character whose destiny is to serve his brother. He is the father of a nation that plays a greater role in Israelite history than the Ishmaelites. Associated with outdoor activities, both characters are dispossessed and forced to live outside the family circle, in the desert where their lives intersect.

Thus in Genesis 28:6–9 we read:

> When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob and sent him off to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, charging him, as he blessed him, "You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women," and that Jacob had obeyed his father and mother . . . Esau realized that the Canaanite women displeased his father Isaac. So Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael, sister of Nebaioth.

Esau goes to Ishmael and marries his daughter, Mahalath. This may be understood as Esau's attempt to appease his father after having married the Hittite women. Bringing them together creates a relationship between the two ostracized elder brothers and confirms their shared marginalization.

As Jacob's rival, Esau's future in rabbinic literature is less ambiguous than Ishmael's. Ishmael, who is present, yet for the most part passive in the biblical narrative, presents the rabbis with greater difficulty, which in turn

provides them with more space for the imagination to fill. After all, he is Abraham's circumcised son, a son whom Abraham found difficult to cast out. In trying to vindicate Sarah, the rabbis are forced to vilify Ishmael. At the same time, they must accept his place as Abraham's legitimate son. In the following chapters, we will examine how these ostracized figures, along with the Ishmaelites and the children of Keturah, come to represent Other, for purposes related to group-identity formation, boundary maintenance, and rabbinic notions of Jewish self-identity.