Carol Bakhos. *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. viii, 207 pp.
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Viewed in light of the perennial tensions and conflicts between Jews and Arabs in our own time, the sages' vilification of Ishmael, the firstborn son of Abraham and the putative forefather of the Arabs, might seem to some to be perfectly natural. After all, anyone familiar with the midrash knows that the rabbis were not shy about displays of open hostility toward biblical characters considered to be Israel's enemies. Thus, Ishmael is often found among a roster of villainous wrongdoers that also includes Pharaoh, Haman, and, most nefarious of them all, Esau, who, as is well known, serves as a thinly veiled cipher for the Roman Empire in rabbinic literature. However, upon close inspection of the sources, the rabbinic attitude toward the oft-maligned Ishmael is much more nuanced than we might at first expect. In her monograph *Ishmael on the Border: Rabbinic Portrayals of the First Arab*, Carol Bakhos charts the development of the rabbinic representation of Ishmael. By doing so, she is able to explore much larger theoretical issues, in particular the responsiveness of midrash as a genre to social, political, and cultural change.

Due to the difficulty of dating midrashic compilations, the question of the relationship of midrash to its historical context has long been a thorny one. However, Bakhos is able to show quite clearly here that although the rabbinic attitude toward Ishmael was originally variable, and at times not even particularly unfriendly, this fluidity eventually gave way to almost unremitting hostility, thus producing what is usually understood as the "normative" rabbinic perspective on Ishmael. As this shift was indisputably attributable to the rise of Islam and the rabbis' close association of the Arab dominion with Ishmael, this provides us with a particularly vivid example of the susceptibility of rabbinic hermeneutics to the influence of "real world" concerns and circumstances.

After a concise discussion of theoretical issues in the introduction, Chapter 1 provides a close analysis of the traditions on Ishmael found in Genesis, "a story of marginalization par excellence" (14). Here, Bakhos demonstrates that the portrayal of Ishmael in Genesis is highly ambivalent: While Ishmael *is* recognized as a legitimate son of Abraham in the biblical narrative, at the same time, the Genesis account clearly emphasizes that it is *not* the firstborn Ishmael, but rather the second son Isaac, who will inherit Abraham's legacy. Despite the fact that Ishmael and his mother Hagar are cast out into the wilderness, in the end, the Genesis account foregrounds Ishmael's marginality without resorting to explicit condemnation or vilification. Ishmael's destiny of becoming an unencumbered wanderer in the desert, an archer, "a wild ass of a man" (16:12), both reflects the relatively peaceful coexistence of the ancient Israelites with the tribal nomads they identified as "Ishmaelites" and the Genesis narrative's ultimate goal of portraying Ishmael as a free man who partakes in his father's destiny and dignity, in stark contrast to the servile origins of his mother.

Though it is widely assumed that the rabbis reflexively associated Ishmael with the Arabs, in Chapters 2 and 3, which deal with tannaitic and amoraic

traditions on Ishmael, Bakhos shows that the complexity of Ishmael's portrayal in the midrash has long been underappreciated. She emphasizes that in the earlier midrash, Ishmael generally represents a generic "Other," in contrast with whom the elect status of Isaac and his progeny, Israel, is highlighted. Ishmael is neither automatically identified as an Arab nor even consistently portrayed negatively; even positive depictions can occasionally be found alongside mildly negative or indifferent ones. The variegated portrayal of Ishmael in the earlier midrashim demonstrates the importance of literary context in determining the rabbinic reading of scripture; as Bakhos puts it, Ishmael's ambiguity reflects "the tannaitic and amoraic resistance to stabilizing the meaning of words according to a system of symbolization, and is a reminder of the rabbinic penchant for multiple meanings and verbal maneuverings" (45). That is, in the absence of any compelling reason for casting aspersions on his character, if a negative portrayal of Ishmael was not dictated by the immediate interpretive context, the Tannaim and Amoraim felt free to allow Ishmael to simply be a legitimate son of Abraham and *not* Israel's enemy.

Chapter 4 of Bakhos's study, which focuses on post-amoraic compilations such as *Midrash Tanḥuma* and *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, is the most robust and provocative part of the work as a whole. Whereas older midrashim seemingly favor textually congruous interpretations in their readings of Genesis, thus generating positive or neutral portrayals of Ishmael, the opposite is true of post-amoraic traditions: Here, every opportunity to defame and slander Ishmael as a vicious evildoer, even when this is not suggested by the original biblical context and runs *counter* to the plain sense of scripture, seems to be exploited. The shift in perspective in the later midrashim is especially telling in cases in which an older tradition with a more innocuous portrayal of Ishmael has been rewritten to make it negative. The manner in which these earlier traditions are reworked indicates that it was most likely the identification of Ishmael or the Ishmaelites with Islam that motivated such recasting.

The imposition of the rule of the "Ishmaelites" on both Palestine and Babylonia after the Arab conquests in the seventh century gave rabbinic exegetes ample motivation to rethink their understanding of Ishmael. Whereas in the earlier period, Ishmael had served as an ideological "antipode," an "imagined Other" with a particular function in the articulation of rabbinic identity, now Ishmael became a more or less unambiguous cipher for a *real* Other, the Arab Islamic empire. While Ishmael had been clearly contrasted with Isaac in earlier traditions, such a portrayal did not necessitate excessively vituperative condemnations of him; but now, viewed as the forefather of a wicked nation, Ishmael was increasingly described in hostile terms.

Bakhos's careful argument for the shift in rabbinic portrayals of Ishmael clarifies the position of the post-Islamic stratum of material to be found in many classic works of midrash. Many new traditions on Ishmael were produced in response to Arab hegemony, and some older traditions were recast as well. A more difficult question, however, is the degree to which later midrashim may reflect actual *dialogue* with Muslims or respond to articulate theological claims made by spokesmen of the Muslim community. In the culminating section of

her work, Bakhos examines the oft-cited narrative of Abraham's visit to Ishmael found in *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*, a post-amoraic midrashic source that, most notably, features a more positive portrayal of Ishmael himself while vilifying the Ishmaelites, who represent the Arab Islamic dominion.

As many scholars have noted, there are in fact a number of conspicuous parallels to this story in Islamic sources. But while most have seen the midrashic account as a polemical or apologetic response to (or even appropriation of) Islamic tradition, Bakhos abstains from weighing in on the question of textual priority or "influence," justifiably criticizing older scholars' obsessive attention to such issues at the expense of other considerations. She notes that what is most significant about the treatment of Ishmael in *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* is not the possibility of this narrative's derivation from Islamic sources or its influence *on* Islamic sources but rather the sharp contrast between this work's portrayal of Ishmael and that of his descendants, the Ishmaelites. Moreover, the fact that so many of the details of the visitation narrative itself appear to be not so much polemical or apologetic in nature—that is, reactive or derivative—but rather develop themes found in the original biblical narrative, echo older midrashic motifs, and address particular *internal* narrative agendas in the text as a whole, links Bakhos's examination of this specific story to the larger methodological questions addressed by her study. Overall, it is Bakhos's ability to negotiate complex textual problems such as this one without losing sight of broader issues that makes *Ishmael on the Border* a significant contribution to Midrash studies, with much to offer not only to scholars of rabbinic literature but to those interested in biblical narrative or Islamic literature as well.

Michael E. Pregill
Elon University
Elon, North Carolina

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The book is a series of originally independent studies on the historical significance of the aggadic material in the Bavli, continuing and developing this extremely prolific author's previous studies on these issues: *Sages, Stories, Authors and Editors* and *The Sage in Jewish Society.*[1] The first four chapters compare Palestinian and Babylonian portrayals of several subjects: Chapter 1 compares their differing descriptions of Roman persecutions between 135 and

1. *Sages, Stories, Authors and Editors* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994); and *The Sage in Jewish Society* (New York: Routledge, 1999).