

The Bible passage about Ishmael in Paul's letter to the Galatians has had much influence on the views of Western Christians. Most English translations say that Ishmael persecuted his younger brother Isaac. It is easy to see a parallel with the Arab nations surrounding Israel who in recent decades have attempted several times to literally wipe Israel off the map. However, what Paul did really say? That is the central question in this study.

1. The text in Galatians 4:21-31

"Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, "Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear; break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband."

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman."

So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman."¹

Other English translations of Galatians 4:29 are:²

- "But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now." (King James Version 1611)
- "Yet [just] as at that time the child [of ordinary birth] born according to the flesh despised *and* persecuted him [who was born remarkably] according to [the promise and the working of] the [Holy] Spirit, so it is now also." (Amplified Bible 1954, 1987)
- "But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him *who was born* according to the Spirit, so it is now also." (New American Standard Bible 1960, 1995)
- "At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now." (New International Version 1973, 2011)
- "At that time the son who was born in the usual way persecuted the one who was born because of God's Spirit; and it is the same now." (Good News Translation 1992)
- "But the child who was born in the natural way made trouble for the child who was born because of the Spirit. The same thing is happening today." (Contemporary English Version 1995)
- "But as then he that was born according to the flesh persecuted him that was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now." (Jubilee Bible 2000, 2010)
- "but now as this that was born after the flesh pursued him that *was* after the Spirit, so now." (Wycliffe Bible 2001)
- "In the days of Hagar and Sarah, the child who came from faithless connivance (Ishmael) harassed the child who came—empowered by the Spirit—from the faithful promise (Isaac). Isn't it clear that the harassment you are now experiencing from the Jerusalem heretics follows that old pattern?" (The Message 2002)

According to the more literal translations Ishmael persecuted Isaac. Some modern translations use other expressions, such as "made trouble" (CEV), "pursued" (WYC), or "harassed" (MSG).

2. The word "persecute"

a) In the New Testament

The Greek word used in Galatians 4:29 is *dioko*. The English equivalent is "to pursue"³ and it is used both negatively and positively in the New Testament.

In Matthew 5:10-12 it says three times that those who obey God are pursued by those who do not. In these situations, where the word refers to the righteous versus unjust, the meaning is that of persecution.

The word *dioko* has a positive meaning when it refers to the pursuing of the good. In Philippians 3:12-14 Paul writes, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on (*dioko*) to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ... But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on (*dioko*) toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."⁴

The word can also be used to follow after someone in a positive way. Thus Jesus warned against the temptation to follow (*dioko*) the crowd, if they say He's already come back. (Luke 17:23)

b) In the Old Testament

In the Septuagint *dioko* is used to describe the pursuit of an enemy. Abraham pursued the enemies who had captured Lot (Genesis 14:15). Laban pursued Jacob when he had fled from Haran with his wives and children and possessions (Genesis 31:23).

So, the image of *dioko* is typically that of enmity in relation to other people or an intense pursuing of positive values in life, such as justice, peace and hospitality.

It is noteworthy that in Genesis 21:9 the Septuagint doesn't have *dioko* to describe Ishmael's behavior toward Isaac but *paizo*, which means "to play."⁵ This serves as the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *tsâchaq*, which means "to laugh."⁶ The same Hebrew word is found in Genesis 26:8, where it says that the king of Gerar saw Isaac caressing his wife.

According to the Greek and Hebrew words in the Old Testament then, the behavior of Ishmael to Isaac was not very serious. It looks like typical teenage behavior, where a boy vents his own frustrations at a younger, weaker brother.

That means there is no idea of persecution, in the sense of what the followers of Jesus suffered from their religious leaders. Nevertheless Galatians 4:29 ends with the words "so it is now." Paul used the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac as an illustration to describe the relationship between the physical descendants of the people of God and the spiritual descendants; between the Jews who followed the law and the Jews and non-Jews who put their trust in Jesus the Messiah. The latter were indeed persecuted by the former.

3. Context

The Apostle Paul wrote to the believers in the province of Galatia in Asia Minor in order to settle misunderstandings. One of the main themes in this letter is the freedom of the followers of Jesus Christ. However, there were those who taught that they must follow the laws of Moses. In the letter, Paul gave several arguments, supplemented by illustrations, why man is saved by faith and not by good works, based on keeping the law.

a) The arguments of Paul

- i. Galatians 1:10-2:21: Paul began with reasons why his words carried authority. He had personally had a revelation of Jesus, who had told him the Gospel (1:12). Later he was confirmed as an apostle by the apostles and other believers (1:18-2:10). Even Peter, the apostle to the Jews, initially did not keep the Jewish laws (anymore) when he visited Paul in Antioch (2:12).
- ii. Galatians 3:1-9: Paul continued with a reminder to the Galatians of how they had personally experienced the gospel (3:1-5), and how Abraham was justified by faith and not by works (3:6-9).
- iii. Galatians 3:10-4:20: Then Paul pointed to the curse that is the consequence of the law (3:10-14), and the blessing of the promise (3:15-18). He explained that the purpose of the law is to lead men to Christ (3:19-24), and how each one becomes a child of God by faith only (3:25-4:7). Paul gave the contrast between slaves and sons, and appealed from the bottom of his heart to the Galatians that they should follow him and not those who tried to persuade them to keep the law (4:8-20).
- iv. Galatians 4:21-31: Paul closed his speech with a powerful illustration from the Old Testament to explain the difference between law and grace.

b) The illustration

Paul compared the births of Ishmael and Isaac. The difference between the two half-brothers was that the first was born naturally, without the intervention of God, whereas the second was born by a miracle, through trust in God's promise. To clarify the contrast between them, the illustration is put into a diagram.

4:22	son of the slave woman	son of the free woman
4:23	born according to the flesh	born through promise
4:24-26	covenant of Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery – Hagar – the present Jerusalem, that is in slavery	the Jerusalem above is free
4:27-28		the barren will have more children – children of promise
4:29	born according to the flesh	born according to the Spirit
4:29	pursues	is pursued
4:30	cast out the slave woman and her son	
4:31	children of the slave	children of the free woman

Paul used the birth of Ishmael as an illustration of those who try to enter heaven by their own strength, through the keeping of laws. He called these people slaves. The birth of Isaac stood for those who put their trust in God and were freed from the laws and regulations, so that they could serve God out of love instead of fear. Paul called them sons and daughters.

Ishmael was a threat to Isaac because he could claim the inheritance of their father by birthright. Similarly, the legalistic Jews in Paul's day were a threat to the believers who trusted in God's promise of forgiveness in Christ and wanted to subdue these believers to all sorts of laws again. Paul concluded: send away those who incite you into slavery and live as children of the free.

Paul's quote from Isaiah 54:1 about the desolate woman receiving more children is remarkable. This woman seems to refer to Sarah, but unlike Sarah, she had no husband. Already in the 4th century, church father Jerome pointed out that the barren woman refers to the church of the Gentiles, and that the illustration of Ishmael and Isaac was about the fact that Ishmael claimed the prior right of circumcision and of the firstborn.⁷

So it is this latter, which is the focus of Paul's illustration in Galatians 4. This is in line with Sarah's statement, "The son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac" (Genesis 21:10). That means Paul did not at all qualify Ishmael's behavior, and we should be careful not to do that either 2000 years later.

4. Conclusion

According to the original text in Genesis 21, Ishmael laughed at Isaac. Considering the reaction of Sara, we may assume that this was negative. In his description of the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac, Paul used a word with a stronger meaning.

However, it is unwarranted to state that Ishmael persecuted Isaac. Based on the shades of meaning of *dioko*, the translation that fits most with the text in Genesis is "pursue"

Perhaps the persecution of the early followers of Jesus by the Jews, has led the translators to use "persecute" for *dioko*, rather than "pursue." It is good to see that some newer translators have sought to stay closer to the description of Ishmael's behavior in Genesis.

Also, Paul emphatically stated that he used Ishmael and Isaac as an illustration (Galatians 4:24). Therefore, we must ensure that we don't read things back into the Old Testament based on the illustration. Besides, the subsequent history of Ishmael and Isaac, such as them burying their father together, and also that of their descendants, shows that there were generally few problems between the half-brothers.⁸

At the end of his exposition of Galatians 4, Tony Maalouf writes, "Though Ishmael was not chosen to carry out God's covenantal promises given to Abraham, he was still the object of a special care and attention from God. His circumcision (Genesis 17:23-25), and the gracious promises of blessings he received (17:20) were signs of divine favor bestowed on him as a seed of Abraham (21:13), and as one of the children of the Lord. God's permission for the dismissal of Ishmael and his mother to the wilderness was proven not to be indicative of divine judgment on

them, as much as the only way to see his plan with Isaac and his purpose for Ishmael fully implemented in history (21:8-21)."⁹

As it was Paul's desire that those who lived under the law would be free, so God's destination for the descendants of Ishmael today is deliverance from the bondage of (Islamic) laws. They may live as spiritual sons and daughters of God through faith in Christ.

Note:

Since Galatians 4 offers no explanation for the tensions in the Middle East between the Arabs and the Jews, then what does? I encourage the reader to study the relationship between the Edomites and the Israelites in the Bible. See the information about Edom,¹⁰ the study Prophecies Nations, and Chapter 7 in the article *Muslims feel rejected*.¹¹

¹ *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles

² All verses taken from www.biblegateway.com

³ Strong's Concordance G1377: "A prolonged (and causative) form of a primary verb **διω** diō (to *flee*; compare the base of [G1169](#) and [G1249](#)); to *pursue* (literally or figuratively); by implication to *persecute*: - ensue, follow (after), given to, (suffer) persecute (-ion), press toward." *e-Sword*, version 10.1.0, Rick Myers

⁴ Other examples can be found in Romans 12:13 and 14:19; 1 Corinthians 14:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:15;

1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22; Hebrews 12:14 en 1Peter 3:11.

⁵ Strong's Concordance G3815 **παίζω** paizō, to *sport* (as a boy): - play. *e-Sword*

⁶ Strong's Concordance H6711 **צחק** tsâchaq A primitive root; to *laugh* outright (in merriment or scorn); by implication to *sport*: - laugh, mock, play, make sport. *e-Sword*

⁷ *The Fathers of the Church St. Jerome Commentary on Galatians*, The Catholic University of America Press, 2010, p.191. Likewise St. Chrystostom "He says not that he was cast forth merely because he persecuted, but that he should not be heir. For this punishment was not exacted from him on account of his temporary persecution, (for that would have been of little moment, and nothing to the point,) but he was not suffered to participate in the inheritance provided for the son. And this proves that, putting the persecution aside, this very thing had been typified from the beginning, and did not originate in the persecution, but in the purpose of God."

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf113.txt>

⁸ For more information, see the study Conflicts with Nations

⁹ Tony Maalouf: *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line*. Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids MI, USA, 2006, p106

¹⁰ http://godlovesishmael.com/site/background_info/nations/edom

¹¹ godlovesishmael.com/site/downloads/studies