



"And he will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be upon all, and everyone's hand upon him, and before all his brothers he will dwell." (JUDAIC PRESS TANACH)<sup>5</sup>

"And he<sup>1931</sup> will be<sup>1961</sup> a wild<sup>6501</sup> man;<sup>120</sup> his hand<sup>3027</sup> *will be* against every man,<sup>3605</sup> and every man's<sup>3605</sup> hand<sup>3027</sup> against him; and he shall dwell<sup>7931</sup> in the presence<sup>5921, 6440</sup> of all<sup>3605</sup> his brethren.<sup>251</sup>" (King James Version 1769 with Strong's numbers © 2002-2011 Rick Meyers)

"And he shall be *as* a wild ass among men; his hand *shall be* against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his brethren." (Authorised Standard Version 1946)

"He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen." (English Standard Version 2001)

"He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility towards all his brothers." (New International Version 1973)

"And he shall be like the wild ass among men: his hands shall take vengeance of his adversaries, and the hands of his adversaries be put forth to do him evil; and in the presence of all his brethren shall he be commingled, (yitharbeb, Arabized,) and shall dwell." (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan).<sup>6</sup>

"He shall be a wild man: his hand will be against all men, and all men's hands against him: and he shall pitch his tents over against all his brethren." (Douay-Rheims Bible 1752)

"and he is a wild-ass man, his hand against every one, and every one's hand against him -- and before the face of all his brethren he dwelleth." (Young's Literal Translation 1898)

#### c. Other translations

"οὗτος ἔσται ἄγροικος ἄνθρωπος· αἱ χεῖρες αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ πάντα, καὶ αἱ χεῖρες πάντων ἐπ' αὐτόν, καὶ κατὰ πρόσωπον πάντων τῶν ἀδελφῶν αὐτοῦ κατοικήσει." (Septuagint)

"hic erit ferus homo manus eius contra omnes et manus omnium contra eum et e regione universorum fratrum suorum figet tabernacula." (Latin Vulgate)

Several older translations, notably the King James and Douay-Rheims, omit the word for donkey and simply say that Ishmael 'will be a wild man.' The New International Version jumps out by its negative ending, stating that he will live in hostility towards all his brothers. Let us consider the three parts of the verse and find out the meaning of each.

### 3. He will be a wild donkey of a man

Ishmael is compared to a wild donkey. As mentioned before, some translations omit 'donkey', but the Hebrew text doesn't warrant this.

Although the word "wild" is reminiscent of untamed, aggressive animals who devour their prey with sharp teeth, the picture given here is very different. Today, wild donkeys live on the Arabian Peninsula and can be seen in the wild in the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Donkeys are herbivores and, unlike predators, have no sharp teeth,. Therefore the image of the wild ass

is not that of the wild and untamed. On the contrary, the wild ass happens to be a social animal and caring toward other animals. Throughout history domesticated donkeys have been useful animals for us in many ways and will continue to be so.

The image of the wild ass is actually a positive message, in accordance with the encouragement that the angel gave to Hagar. In contrast with the domesticated donkey, which is tied up and has to do what his master commands him, the wild donkey roams about freely. This is confirmed in Job 39:5-8, where God says, "Who has let the wild donkey go free?"<sup>7</sup> Hagar was a runaway slave and had to go back and submit to her mistress Sara. However, God promised her that her son would be a free man. What an encouragement this must have been to her. For a comprehensive study of the wild ass, see the separate Study Wild Ass.

#### 4. his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him

Most Bible translations give a gloomy picture about Ishmael. The idea of his hand against all and the hand of all against him points to trouble. The Judaic Press Tanach speaks of 'his hand upon all, and everyone's hand upon him.' Again the question rises what the angel was saying.

The Hebrew preposition *b* or *bi*, usually translated as 'against', is very common and has a wide range of meanings, such as 'in', 'by', 'at', and 'with'. The meaning in English is determined by the context. In order to find the correct meaning, the following questions should be considered:

- a. how is the expression used elsewhere in the Bible?
- b. what does the expression mean in the direct context?
- c. how does this meaning fit in light of the whole Bible?

##### a. The expression elsewhere in the Bible

The expression is made up of the word 'hand' with a personal pronoun, followed by a preposition and a person. The writer of the book of Genesis uses the same construction in chapter 49:8, which says, "Judah, your brothers shall praise you; *your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies*; your father's sons shall bow down before you" (italics added).

The expression also appears in 1 Samuel 18:17 "Saul thought, "Let not *my hand be against him* [David], but let *the hand* of the Philistines be *against him*,") and in 2 Samuel 24:17 "David said to the Lord, "... these sheep, what have they done? Please let *your hand* be *against me and against my father's house*" (italics added). Other examples can be found in 1 Samuel 24:11-12; 26:9 and 23; Esther 8:7 and Psalm 55:21.

Usually someone raises his hand in order to increase his authority, for example by subjecting a people to himself. Sometimes it is about someone who resists the authority above him by raising his hand against him. In each case the expression points to a power relationship or enmity. Therefore, the Hebrew preposition *bi* is translated "against".

b. The expression in its direct context

In Genesis 16:12 the expression appears directly after the description of Ishmael being a wild donkey of a man. As we have seen, this is a positive picture. However, based on the previous point, it seems that the freedom of Ishmael will not be without problems. He will have enemies everywhere and no friends. The third clause of this verse may or may not confirm this.

c. The meaning in light of the whole Bible

How did the relationship between Ishmael and his brother Isaac and the sons of Keturah develop? According to Genesis 25:9 Ishmael and Isaac buried their father together. After that, Isaac went to live at the well Beer-lahai-roi, the place where Hagar had first met the Angel of the Lord (Genesis 25:11). This is remarkable because Abraham had planted a tamarisk in Beersheba (21:33) and settled there. That was an excellent place for Isaac to live, yet he decided to make Lahai-roi his home, not far from Ishmael who lived in Paran. This points to a good relationship between the two half-brothers.

Ishmael's and Isaac's descendants did get into conflict with each other. However, these problems were not bigger than those between the descendants of Isaac and the other surrounding nations. Sometimes part of the Ishmaelites went up with other nations against Israel, such as the Midianites and Amalekites at the time of the judges, and the Hagrites at the time of King Saul. For a comprehensive study of the conflicts between Israel and other countries, see Study Conflicts with nations.pdf.

In summary, it seems that, though the Hebrew words point toward enmity, the context doesn't support a negative interpretation. In his article *Is Ishmael Really a "Wild Ass"?*, Dr. Biegeleisen that the Hebrew preposition "bi" usually means "in" or "with", and that the meaning "against" is used only if the context gives rise to it.<sup>8</sup>

As stated before, the first clause about the wild ass gives no reason for that. What about the last clause?

## 5. he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen

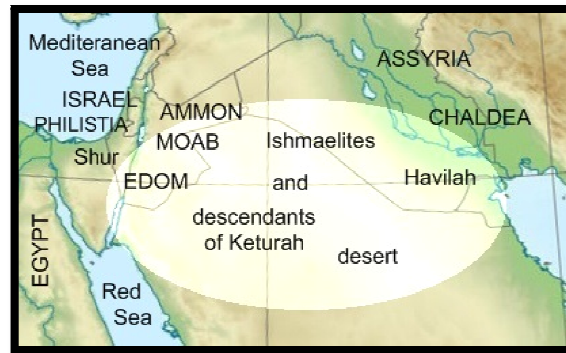
Of the translations given above, only Young's Literal Translation reflects the Hebrew text in a neutral and accurate way, with the words, 'and before the face of all his brethren he dwelleth.'

The phrase 'before the face' consists of פָּנִים *pānîym* (Strong's H6440) and עַל *'al* (Strong's H5921). The first word means 'face' and the second 'upon'. As a phrase the meaning is 'in the presence of' and is used literally as well as figuratively.<sup>9</sup>

In this text, the obvious meaning is literally as it says something about where the descendants of Ishmael will live. The sense is neutral, because only a fact about the location is given. There is no reason to see anything negative here, unlike the picture given by certain Bible translations.

The angel told Hagar that Ishmael would live near his brothers. She would have taken this as a promise, as Ishmael was the firstborn of Abraham and God promised her that he would have brothers.

The same expression occurs in Genesis 25:18, where the fulfillment of God's promise is given. It says that Ishmael's descendants settled in the area from Havilah in the east to Shur in the west and Assyria in the north. That means they were neighbors of the Israelites and Philistines, the Amalekites and Edomites, Moabites and the Ammonites, and the descendants of Midian and his brothers. Many of these were indeed descendants of Ishmael's father Abraham.



The Ishmaelites were characterized by their Bedouin life in the desert. This is specifically mentioned in the Bible of Nebaioth, Kedar and Tema (Isaiah 13:19-20, 21:13-17, 42:11, 60:7, Jeremiah 49:28-29). Even today, most Bedouins are living on the edge of the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula, where there is not enough food and water for a sedentary lifestyle. So the Ishmaelites lived near their relatives and moved around with their tents and herds. They didn't have a separate army and didn't fight against other nations, because their goal was not ownership of a country. They could go wherever they wanted, because no one claimed the desert regions where they dwelled..

## 6. The Complete Picture

When bringing the three parts together, we see that the clause about the donkey is a positive prediction of the life of Ishmael. He will not be a slave, like his mother, but a free man. The third part mentions the habitat of Ishmael and his descendants, giving a positive picture for Hagar. Neither her son, nor his descendants, will be subject to his brothers. The second part is difficult to interpret. In other places in the Scriptures, the phrase "someone's hand against others" speaks about power relations with a tone of hostility. The context in Genesis 16:12 points to power relations, but not necessarily hostility. There is an equality in this clause, where both parties have their hands raised and neither is subjected to the other. This speaks of the destiny of freedom that the Angel promised Hagar through the image of the wild donkey.

So the meaning of the preposition *bi* must be such that it expresses independence. The Interlinear Scripture Analyser has chosen for 'in' (his hand in all) and JUDAIC PRESS Tanach for 'upon' (his hand upon all). In conclusion, how the Hebrew *bi* is translated exactly, is of less importance. The big lesson is that Ishmael will not be better or less than his brothers; he will not dominate them and they will not dominate him.

How different that was between Esau and his twin brother, Jacob. The firstborn would serve the younger, and he would live by his sword (Genesis 27:29, 40). Biblical history teaches that Ishmael had relatively few problems with his brothers, while the descendants of Esau often were in conflict with the Israelites.<sup>10</sup>

Why then have many Bible translators and commentators chosen for a negative interpretation of Genesis 16:12? It seems that the text in Galatians 4, where Paul says that Ishmael persecuted his brother Isaac, has influenced them.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the early wars in the name of Islam and the stories about plundering Bedouin may have played a role.

A Biblical explanation for the current aggression of some Arab groups against Israel and each other can be found in the predictions of Esau and his descendants, the Edomites. They eventually assimilated with the Ishmaelites, the original Arabs.<sup>12</sup>

## **7. Conclusion**

Although many Bible commentators see a prediction in Genesis 16:12 that the Ishmaelites would become a wild and violent people, the real message is one of hope and encouragement to Hagar. It motivated her to return to her mistress Sarai, despite the persecution she had endured.

May the descendants of Ishmael come to their destiny of spiritual freedom, through Jesus Christ who bought them free. May they follow the example of Hagar and submit to God in His choice of Israel as His chosen people.

And may the words of the Angel of the Lord motivate the other nations in the world, including Israel and the West, to meet the Arabs with loving open arms, just as God does.

For more information, see *Arabs in the shadow of Israel*, written by Tony Maalouf. The following is his conclusion regarding Genesis 16:12:<sup>13</sup>

'Thus the reversal of Hagar's slavery conditions becomes obvious throughout verse 12. In 12a, her son is portrayed as a wild donkey of a man, a prediction of a free nomadic lifestyle. This reverses Hagar's position, who is pictured as a mere instrument in service of others. Furthermore, the statement "his hand upon everyone and everyone's hand upon him" in 12b plays on the term translated "hand" as a metonymy for power. Powerless Hagar was delivered by her husband to the power of Sarah her mistress—"in your hand" (v. 6 ), In the wilderness the angel tells Hagar to go back and subject herself again to the power of Sarah "under her hand" (v. 9). For Hagar to be fleeing from confrontation is a sign of powerlessness.

Consequently, this powerless slave mother was promised a son who will have power to fight for his freedom. He will not be under the hand of anyone. Although many would like to subdue him ("everyone's hand upon him"), he will always be able to maintain his freedom ("his hand upon everyone"), Third, dwelling "before the face of " all his brethren (v. 12c) plays on the motif of face in the sense of presence. Sarah afflicted Hagar because her presence in Abraham's household was a continuous challenge to her privilege as the primary wife. She wanted to do something to get rid of the ensuing situation. She afflicted Hagar, and Hagar fled from her presence (literally, "from her face," v. 6). Later, Hagar confirmed, 'from the face of Sarah, my mistress, I am fleeing' (from Sarah's presence, v. 8). Now Hagar is told that her son will be continually dwelling in the presence—"before the face"— of all his brethren.'

---

<sup>1</sup> Genesis 16:7-12

<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version, Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles

<sup>3</sup> See for instance the Pulpit Commentary: 'Exemplified in the turbulent and lawless character of the Bedouin Arabs and Saracens for upwards of thirty centuries. "The Bedouins are the outlaws among the nations. Plunder is legitimate gain, and daring robbery is praised as valor (Kalisch)', Commentator Gill: "And he will be a wild man,.... Living in a wilderness, delighting in hunting and killing wild beasts, and robbing and plundering all that pass by; and such an one Ishmael was, see Genesis 21:20; and such the Saracens, his posterity, were, and such the wild Arabs are to this day, who descended from him." And Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Bible Commentary: 'he will be a wild man—literally, "a wild ass man," expressing how the wildness of Ishmael and his descendants resembles that of the wild ass. his hand will be against every man—descriptive of the rude, turbulent, and plundering character of the Arabs.'

Accessed at <http://biblehub.com/genesis/16-12.htm>

<sup>4</sup> *ISA basic* 2.1.5 Copyright © 2011 André de Mol.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.chabad.org/library/bible\\_cdo/aid/8211](http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/8211)

<sup>6</sup> <http://targum.info/pj/pjgen12-7.htm>

<sup>7</sup> English Standard Version

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ark-of-salvation.org/wild\\_ass\\_2003.htm](http://www.ark-of-salvation.org/wild_ass_2003.htm)

<sup>9</sup> BDB entry of H6440: '1g1) in front of, before, to the front of, in the presence of, in the face of, at the face or front of, from the presence of, from before, from before the face of,' accessed in *e-Sword*, version 10.1.0, Rick Myers

<sup>10</sup> See the studies Conflicts with nations and Prophecies nations <http://godlovesishmael.com/site/downloads/studies>

<sup>11</sup> According to the story in Genesis Ishmael didn't persecute Isaac but laughed at him. Therefore a better translation in Galatians 4 would be 'pursue.' See Study Galatians 4 on the download page mentioned above

<sup>12</sup> See Study Origin Arabs on the download page

<sup>13</sup> Maalouf, Tony. *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line*. Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids MI, USA, 2006. p75-76