

ORIENTAL CUSTOMS, &c.—ISHMAEL IN THE DESERT.

From the Weekly Christian Teacher.

Hagar, as the sacred narrative informs us, was a native of Egypt. The Rabbins affirm that she was the daughter of Pharaoh; but Chrysostom says, that she was one of those slaves, whom, as it is supposed to be intimated in Gen. xii. 16. Pharaoh gave to Abraham, at the time that he entreated him well for Sarai's sake. The Mussulmans and Arabians, who are descended from her son Ishmael, still hold her memory in high estimation; and maintain that she, and not Sarai, was Abraham's lawful wife; and that Arabia, the lot of Ishmael, is much more valuable as a country, than the land of Canaan, that fell to the lot of Isaac. This is one of the common manifestations of human pride and vanity. The circumstances in which Hagar became one of the wives of Abram, are briefly mentioned in the beginning of the 16th chapter of the Book of Genesis, where we are told that it was at the earnest request of Sarai herself, and not by the wish of Abram, and from an opinion which Sarai now began to entertain, that the long promised child was to be one by adoption, and not one to which she herself should give birth.

Polygamy, in the early ages of the world, was allowed by God; but in these cases, however numerous might be the wives of one man, there was always one among them, and generally the one first wedded, who had authority in the household, and was honoured by the others as their mistress. This understanding prevails in some parts of the East at the present day; and when the fact is remembered, it shows us that the conduct of Hagar was highly inexcusable in betraying, when she was about to give birth to Ishmael, an insolent and contemptuous spirit towards Sarai. If, according to the distinction of the Rabbins, Hagar was a concubine only, and not a wife married by contract, her behaviour was still more culpable; although Sarai also was probably too severe in her resentment.—When she complained unto Abram, we are told that Abram said unto Sarai, 'Behold, thy maid is in thine hand, do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face.' But the angel of the Lord found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by a fountain in the way to Shur, and enjoined her 'to return to her mistress, and to submit herself unto her hands.' She returned accordingly, gave birth to Ishmael, and dwelt afterwards in the family of Abraham for about sixteen or seventeen years, when she finally departed, as mentioned in the verses we have read. The cause of her departure was a quarrel, or some contemptuous treatment, on the part of Ishmael, towards Sarai, or her son Isaac, who had just been weaned, and was the fruit, no doubt, of an enmity that had been growing since the birth of Isaac, and implanted and fostered probably in the bosom of Ishmael by his mother, when she saw that Isaac was likely to displace her own son in the affec-

tions of Abraham, and to dispossess him of the wealth to which he would otherwise have been entitled.—Nothing would now satisfy Sarai but the immediate ejection of Hagar and Ishmael; and Abraham, who was naturally loath to such a step, from the deep hold that Ishmael, his first-born child, had on his affections, yielded at length, in consequence of an admonition to this effect from heaven, and the promise given along with it:—'Of the seed of the bondwoman also will I make a great nation, because he is thy seed.'

There is much caution and tenderness apparent on the part of Abraham, in the manner in which he arranged the departure of Hagar and Ishmael. It took place early in the morning, before Sarai, or perhaps any other member of the family, could witness the scene, and also before the sun had arisen, so that the wanderers might have time to obtain shelter ere its meridian heat should come. Suitable provisions were also prepared, and a leathern bottle, filled with water, which was so necessary in these scorching deserts, was given them. It is difficult, however, to banish from our minds the idea of cruelty, in the contemplation of this scene. Those provisions must have been but few, which a female and a lad were able to carry in such a journey; and how little prospect, humanly speaking, must Abraham have had that his wife and child should find their way in the desert? or, supposing they would not wander, that their lives could be long preserved amid those fearful wilds? But while Abraham, no doubt, lavished on them many acts of tenderness, of which the brief narrative of Moses gives no information, and did all that was in his power to secure their safety; let it be carefully remembered, that a voice from heaven had commanded them to depart,—that God had assured the patriarch of their preservation,—and that Abraham had already too much knowledge of the power and the goodness of God to doubt that even miraculous influence, if it were necessary, would be exerted in their behalf. To a man so eminent in faith as the Father of the faithful was, this was sufficient consolation under this severe struggle of parental affection; and the appearance of the angel to Hagar, when she and her son were in an extremity of suffering, is a proof that on the goodness of God Abraham did not rely in vain.

There is a very popular error abroad in reference to the age of Ishmael, at the period of his departure from his father's house. In pictures, to be found in many of our parlours, of Ishmael's exposure in the desert, he is represented as a child of only two, or, at the most, of three years of age. This error has probably arisen from the striking and pitiable nature of the incident generally, and from the natural tendency of the human imagination to exaggerate whatever circumstances are affecting in such a scene. The thought of an infant and its mother, exposed and alone in a wide howling