ISMAELITES, HAGARENES, SARACENS

Anthony Hilhorst

1. INTRODUCTION

Names of peoples are less stable than one might think at first glance. In classical times, the Greeks called themselves *Hellenes*; but to Homer, *Hellènes* were just the inhabitants of one particular region of Greece—the assembled Greeks who besieged Troy were *Achaioi* or *Argeioi* or *Danaoi*. Many centuries later the Greeks of Byzantium proudly called themselves *Rhômaioi*, the traditional name *Hellènes* having come to mean “Gentiles.” Reasons for changes to names are manifold. Among them is the wish not to offend a people’s sensibilities—thus we have learned to say Inuit instead of Eskimo and Muslim instead of Muhammadan—or, conversely, to counter claims harboured by a people—not Palestinians but just Arabs. The initiative for renaming may be taken by the people themselves or by others. Whereas many varieties of name change immediately spring to mind, it is more difficult to find parallels for the one which will occupy us here, where successively no fewer than three, or maybe even four, members of one and the same family were called on to provide names for the people in question. This is the case with the designations we find in patristic and subsequent medieval literature for the Arabs.

The naming we have in mind is summarized concisely by Eucherius (ca. 380–ca. 450 CE) in the second book of his *Instructiones*, in the section on the peoples (CSEL 31.150–151):

Ismahelitae uocati ab Ismahelo filio Abrahae, idem et Saraceni a Sarra, idem et Agareni ab Agar.

The Ishmaelites are called after Ishmael, Abraham’s son, the same are also called Saracens, after Sarah, and Hagarenes, after Hagar.¹

(Eucherius, *Instructiones* 2)

¹ For “Hagar(enes)” I will use the forms beginning with “H,” in accordance with Hebrew, although in Greek the names usually have a smooth breathing, cf. F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and F. Rehkopf, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch* (17th ed.; Göttingen 1990), § 39.3a, and in Latin too the “H” is omitted.
In this paper we propose to trace first the origins and early history of this tradition, and subsequently offer some remarks on its survival after the rise of Islam. The starting point for our discussion is of course the information to be found in the book of Genesis, where it is said that Abraham got a son Ishmael by Sarah’s maid Hagar at the age of eighty-six (Gen 16:15–16) and a son Isaac by Sarah at the age of one hundred (21:3, 5), and that not only Isaac’s but also Ishmael’s offspring will be very numerous (16:10; 17:20; 21:18). For reasons that will soon become obvious, it seems best first to deal with the names “Ishmaelites” and “Hagarenes” and then with the name “Saracens.” Although some of our sources mention that the people bearing these names were the Arabs, we will not go into the complicated question of who exactly were the Arabs. Suffice it to say that roughly speaking in antiquity that name denoted a race of nomads living in the Syrian Desert and in the Middle Ages became synonymous with Saracens, denoting all those who spoke Arabic and adhered to Islam.2 A further restriction of our subject is that after an exploration of the biblical and pre-Mishnaic Jewish evidence we will confine ourselves to Christian literature.

2. Ishmaelites and Hagarenes

Both Ishmaelites and Hagarenes are mentioned in the Old Testament.3 The Ishmaelites (Yišmaʾēʾlîm; Ἰσμαήλῖται; Ismahelitae) occur in the plural in Gen 37:25, 27, 28; 39:1; Judg 8:24; Ps 83/82:7, and in the singular in 1 Chr 2:17; 27:30. The Hagarenes or Hagarites (Hagrîm, Hagriʾîm, Ἡγρίται) occur in the plural in 1 Chr 5:10,4 19, 20; Ps 83/82:7 and in the singular in 1 Chr 27:31.5 For the unsuspecting reader, there is no evidence of their being linked to Ishmael and Hagar. The Ishmaelites in Genesis are the mer-

2 For the pre-Islamic period see J. Retsö, The Arabs in Antiquity: Their History from the Assyrians to the Umayyads (London 2003).
3 Cf. the contribution on Hagar to this volume by Ed Noort.
4 The LXX reads παράκτης here.
5 As a rendering of the name Hagrim in Greek, one might have expected a form Ἱαζίς, for Hebrew names of peoples ending in -î are commonly graecised by -ιτης in biblical Greek, cf. Blass, Debrunner, and Reckopf, Grammatik, § 111.2. Indeed in 1 Chr 27:31 LXX, “Jaziz the Hagrite” is rendered as Ἰαζίς ὁ Ἰαζίς, but otherwise there are only the two forms: Ἰαζίς and Ἰαζίς. In the Latin of the Vg., we have only the forms Agareni and Agarei; the Ἰαζίς in 1 Chr 27:31 has been normalized to Agareus. In later texts Ἰαζίς in Greek and Agareni in Latin are the usual forms.