

Genesis 21:14 HCSB Early in the morning Abraham got up, took bread and a waterskin, *put them* on Hagar's shoulders, and sent her and the boy away. She left and wandered in the Wilderness of Beer-sheba.

How old was Ishmael at this point? The Hebrew of v.14 is difficult and has been interpreted two different ways, each with a different provision for Israel's age. The first option is that Abraham placed both the provisions and the child on Hagar's shoulders, hence indicating Ishmael was an infant. This is the way the NRSV, NJPS, NJB, NAB, and REB¹ have it.

The second option is that Abraham placed only the provisions on her shoulders and gave over the boy. This permits Ishmael to be older and is the way the NIV, NLT, ASV, HCSB, NASB, and NKJV² have it.

The former (Ishmael as a toddler) reading creates a contradiction with the earlier lexical depictions of Ishmael as a teenager.

- **Genesis 17:25 HCSB** and his son Ishmael was 13 years old when the flesh of his foreskin was circumcised.

If we compare the following two passages we understand that Ishmael was between thirteen and fourteen when Isaac was born.

- **Genesis 16:16 HCSB** Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him.
- **Genesis 21:5 HCSB** Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Today's passage took place a year or two later because we are told:
- **Genesis 21:8-9 HCSB** The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned. (9) But Sarah saw the son mocking--the one Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham.

Therefore, Ishmael was likely fifteen but possibly sixteen by the time this event took place. It would be highly unlikely that Abraham was able to pick UP and boy the size of my son Alex, much less place him on Hagar's shoulders!

The interpreters who choose the first (Ishmael as a toddler) option usually try to explain away the apparent contradiction as being the result of conflicting original sources.³ In my humble opinion, it would be far better for them to simply admit that their interpretation is wrong and correct it. After all, the ancient versions support the Masoretic Text as the original reading.

As with everything in the Bible, there is method to the author's madness. The awkward Hebrew created two interpretive possibilities. First, the troubled language captures the anguish of the participants. Second, delaying the mention of "the boy" suggests that Abraham transferred Ishmael's care to Hagar at the very last possible moment, demonstrating his love and care for the boy. This agrees with Abraham's earlier cries, "If only Ishmael could live in Your presence!"⁴

¹ NRSV New Revised Standard Version; NJPS New Jewish Publication Society Version; NJB New Jerusalem Bible; NAB New American Bible; REB Revised English Bible

² NIV New International Version; NLT New Living Translation; ASV American Standard Version; HCSB Holman Christian Standard Bible; NASB New American Standard Bible; NKJV New King James Version

³ E—21:6–21; P—16:16; 17:25

⁴ Genesis 17:18