

Genesis 21 – Isaac and Ishmael

Review

Last time we discussed two unsavory stories from the time following God’s destruction of Sodom. First, we saw that Lot’s daughters conceived two sons – Ammon and Moab by their father Lot. We looked at the geography and history of the Moabites and Ammonites including the egregious forms of idolatry involving human sacrifice that they practiced, noting that the Israelites also eventually fell into these despicable practices. Next, we saw that Abraham and Sarah repeated to Abimelech King of the Gerar the same lie (or partial truth) they had told Pharaoh years before – that Sarah was Abraham’s sister.

The Birth of Isaac

¹The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. ²And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. [צחק yīṣḥāq – he laughs] ⁴And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” ⁷And she said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” Genesis 21:1-7 (ESV)

Recall from [our study of Genesis 12 – The Calling of Abram](#) that when God first called Abram to leave his father’s house in Haran and go to Canaan, He promised to bring forth a great nation from Abram, and that in Abram’s Seed (צֶרֶף *zera*) all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-7). God made that promise to Abram twenty-five years before Isaac’s birth which began the line of Abram’s descendants that eventually led to Jesus – God’s promised מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* through whom God fulfilled and is fulfilling that blessing of all the families of the earth that He proclaimed to Abram all those thousands of years ago. Just as Abraham and Sarah rejoiced at the birth of their promised heir, so we rejoice at the birth of Abraham’s Seed – Jesus – from whom we receive the promised blessing of eternal life through His sacrificial death and resurrection to rescue us out of death in our sins.

Sometime later, God appeared to Abram in a vision and reiterated his promise to Abram of an heir who would come from his own body. Although Abram surely didn’t fully understand the promise for posterity through his Seed, he believed God who credited Abram’s faith as righteousness (Genesis 15:5-6). Eleven years after God first called him out of Haran, Abram fathered Ishmael by his wife’s Egyptian maid servant Hagar (Genesis 16). When Ishmael was thirteen God appeared again to Abram, renamed him Abraham, and established the covenant of circumcision with Abraham and his offspring forever. When Abraham asked God to allow Ishmael to serve as his heir, God told him that the promised heir would be born to Abraham’s wife Sarah and that they were to name the boy Isaac, also saying that He would establish His everlasting covenant (the new covenant in Jesus’ blood) through Isaac’s descendants (Genesis 17:15-19).

Twenty-five years after God first called Abram to leave his father’s house, when Abraham was 100 years old, Sarah was 90, and Ishmael was 14, Isaac the promised heir through whom all the families of the earth are blessed was finally born.

The Exile of Hagar and Ishmael

8And the child [Isaac] grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing [קנץ sāḥaq]. 10So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” 11And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son [Ishmael]. Genesis 21:8-11 (ESV)

We have no way to know exactly how old Isaac was when he was weaned. We can guess he was about 1 year old give or take a few months, so Ishmael would have been 15 more or less. Virtually every English language translation renders the Hebrew verb קנץ *sāḥaq* in Genesis 21:9 as “mocking” or “scoffing” Therefore, Sarah’s reaction is understandable. Interestingly though, the RSV renders it as “playing with.” If that was the case, Sarah was quite unloving and ungracious to be upset at her teenage stepson playing with his infant half-brother at a party given in his honor!

Clearly, Sarah did not know – and if she did know she didn’t trust – what God had said about the boys when Abraham asked God that Ishmael might serve as his heir:

18And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” 19God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. 20As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. 21But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.” Genesis 17:18-21 (ESV)

Regardless of whether Sarah’s reaction was justifiable, once again she took matters into her own hands just as she did fifteen years prior when she goaded Abram into fathering a son by her maidservant Hagar. It’s unclear from the text of Genesis 21:11 whether Abraham was displeased due to Ishmael’s laughter or Sarah’s reaction (or overreaction). Nevertheless, both Abraham and Sarah unknowingly acted in accordance with God’s will for the two boys as we shall soon see.

12But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. 13And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.”

Genesis 21:12-13 (ESV)

There is an important lesson in this passage that we shouldn’t miss. God had determined His plan of salvation for all mankind through Jesus’ birth, sinless life, sacrificial death, and miraculous resurrection by the power of His own Spirit even before Jesus spoke the Word “***Let there be light***” to begin creation of the world He was to come and give His life to save. God determined before the beginning to bring forth Jesus through the line of Isaac.

Like Abraham and Sarah, we oftentimes lose sight of the fundamental truth and reliability of God’s perfect plan of salvation when we are laboring amid the myriad details of its fulfilment. Sometimes we stray from His will – willfully or unknowingly – and God must correct our course and set us back on

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track just as He did here in this passage with Abraham. Ironically, Sarah was the one who was fulfilling God's will even if her motivations may not have been exactly admirable.

Before we move on, it may be helpful to look at what Paul had to say about this matter in his letter to the churches in Galatia.

NOTE – Remember that Paul's purpose in writing to the Galatians was to refute the teachings of Judaizers who contended that salvation unto eternal life is only possible by belief in Jesus' Gospel **and** conformance with the Law of Moses.

²¹Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. ²³But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. ²⁴Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai [the Law of Moses], bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. ²⁵Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present [worldly] Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. ²⁷For 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.” [Isaiah 54:1]

²⁸Now you [we], brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But 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.” ³¹So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. Galatians 4:21-

31 (ESV)

¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. ¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Let me not look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. Genesis 21:14-16 (ESV)

Look at the [Southern Desert map](#). Beersheba is in the northern Negev southeast of Gaza about halfway between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea. Recall from Genesis 20:1-2 that Abraham moved his tent from the Oaks of Mamre near Hebron to Kadesh in the southern Negev. Assuming the Genesis 19-21 narrative is in chronological order, Abraham moved south following the destruction of Sodom sometime while Sarah was pregnant with Isaac. Thus, Hagar's exile journey would have brought her northward from Kadesh toward Beersheba.

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NOTE – Beersheba was not yet so named. We will learn how Beersheba got its name shortly.

Most of the Renaissance paintings of this story depict Ishmael as an infant. Furthermore, the painters all seemed to have a very poor conception of the length of a bowshot, but that's neither here nor there. In fact, Ishmael would have been roughly fifteen years old when Abraham cast him and his mother out. In fact, Ishmael's young body would likely have been stronger against the privations of the desert than his 30 or 40-something mother's. But that too is neither here nor there. Let's press on.

¹⁷And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” ¹⁹Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. ²⁰And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. Genesis 21:17-21 (ESV)

Like most of the ancient peoples of the Middle East, the Ishmaelites were nomadic herdsman and traders. The area where they settled offers little by way of arable land, so they were not primarily horticulturists. Centuries after God rescued Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness near Beersheba, Abraham's great-grandson Joseph was sold by his brothers to Ishmaelite traders who then sold him into slavery in Egypt (Genesis 37). We will look at Ishmael's descendants and the region where they settled when we study Genesis 25.

It stands to reason that Hager – who was an Egyptian herself – obtained a wife for Ishmael from Egypt. Ishmael though was Abraham's son – a circumcised Hebrew. Furthermore, we read here that God was with Ishmael as he grew into manhood. God's Word doesn't tell us whether Ishmael and his immediate descendants worshiped the One True and Living God of Abraham. We can assume that Ishmael himself must have done so, because we are told that God was with Him in his youth. This is a cautionary tale for us. Even those of us who start out well in devotion to God can stray from the narrow way that leads to life. In all likelihood, Ishmael's Egyptian wife led her children into the idol worship practiced by her people, and Ishmael himself may have been complicit and cooperative in that idolatry. All we know for certain is that nearly all of Ishmael's present day Arabic descendants follow Islam.

Abraham's Treaty with Abimelech

²²At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, “God is with you in all that you do. ²³Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants or with my posterity, but as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned.” ²⁴And Abraham said, “I will swear.” Genesis 21:22-24 (ESV)

Recall from Genesis 20:1-2 that Abraham had moved his tent at some time after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah from the Oaks of Mamre near Hebron down to Kadesh and that he sojourned

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in Gerar. Abimelech King of Gerar took Sarah into his harem thinking she was Abraham's sister, but then God appeared to him in a dream and threatened him with death unless he returned Sarah to Abraham. Afterward, Abimelech lavished gifts upon Abraham and permitted him to dwell anywhere he liked in Abimelech's kingdom.

Here in Genesis 21:22 we read that this conversation between Abimelech, Phicol, and Abraham took place “*at that time*” although the Genesis narrative interposes the story of Ishmael's and Hagar's exile that we just looked at. The disturbing dream in which God spoke to Abimelech was thus fresh on his mind, and in return for the kindnesses Abimelech had shown to Abraham he asked Abraham to reciprocate.

***25**When Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized, **26**Abimelech said, “I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.” **27**So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. **28**Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart. **29**And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?” **30**He said, “These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well.” **31**Therefore that place was called Beersheba, [בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע *b'ēr šeba* ' - well of the seven-fold oath] **because there both of them swore an oath.** Genesis 21:25-31 (ESV)*

It's not entirely clear whether this covenant between Abraham and Abimelech was made at the same time as the conversation we just read about when Abraham offered to swear that he would deal kindly and honestly with Abimelech and his kingdom.

It is possible but unlikely that the well over which Abraham and Abimelech made their covenant is the same one at which God rescued Hagar and Ishmael. If it were, the story of the exile of Hagar and Ishmael is indeed out of place chronologically. But of course, the answer doesn't really matter. All we really know for sure is that Abraham states point blank in this conversation that he dug this well himself.

BTW – The location of Beersheba (בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע *b'ēr šeba* ' - well of the seven-fold oath) is well known, although the specific location of this particular well is uncertain. The city of Beersheba still exists today.

***32**So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines [פְּלִשְׁתִּים *pīlišṭīm* - immigrants]. **33**Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God [יְהוָה אֵל עוֹלָם *Y'hōvâ 'ēl 'ōlām*]. **34**And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.* Genesis 21:32-34 (ESV)

These seemingly innocuous verses are quite intriguing. The Genesis writer(s) (traditionally Moses) made a passing remark (Genesis 10:14) in the so-called Table of Nations that the Philistines were descended from the Casluhim who were in-turn descended from מִצְרַיִם *miṣrayim* (also known as Egypt) – one of the sons of Noah's son Ham. Apart from that brief mention, Genesis 21:32 is the first

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mention of the Philistines and their land. Assuming that Moses was indeed the writer of Genesis and the remaining four books of the Pentateuch (presumably with some assistance by whoever told the story of Moses' death and burial), then Genesis must have been written prior to the time of the Israelite's conquest of Canaan around 1250 BC, since Moses himself died in the land of Moab prior to the Israelites' conquest of Jericho (Deuteronomy 34:1-8).

NOTE – The name מצרים *misrayim* is plural (as indicated by the “im” suffix). Thus, Egypt may not have been a particular son of Ham, but rather a people descended from Ham. The name Egypt is used throughout English language translations of God's Word to refer to the land surrounding the Nile River, to the people who live there, and to the worldly and idolatrous society there.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the Philistines (פְּלִשְׁתִּים *p-lištīm* - immigrants) originated from a seafaring immigrant people who arrived on the shores of the southeast Mediterranean from the area of Crete right around 1200 BC. Unless these Philistine progenitors arrived in Canaan earlier, Moses either wrote Genesis very late in his life, or someone else (possibly Joshua) filled in some additional details including these mentions of the land of the Philistines.

Note that the text doesn't specifically say that Abimelech and Phicol themselves were Philistines. How could it? By the time of the Israelite conquest of Canaan when the Philistines' progenitors first arrived there, Abraham had been dead for hundreds of years!

BTW – In Genesis 21:33, we find the only instance of the name *LORD, the Everlasting God* (יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם *Y'hōvâ 'ēl 'ōlām*) in God's Word.

Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll devote our entire study to the familiar story of God's calling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac the son of promise and the symbolism surrounding that story.