

BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger... John 6:35

GENESIS 21 - The Birth of Isaac

The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the appointed time which God had spoken. Abraham called the name of his son – whom Sarah had borne him – Isaac.

Through the miraculous intervention of God, Sarah conceived as God had promised. The miraculous nature of the birth of Isaac established the uniqueness of God's chosen people. However, two more tests remained ahead for Abraham.

The Expulsion of Slave Woman and her Son

This is quite an extraordinary chapter, with many details that are easily overlooked, but are rich with meaning and significance.

READ v. 8-13 Abraham threw a 'weaning feast'. In those days children were weaned between the ages of 3 and 5. Ishmael would have been about 17 yrs old at this time.

A day of celebration was spoiled when Sarah saw something that greatly disturbed her:

Sarah saw the 'son of Hagar the Egyptian' mocking. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman with her son, for the son of this bondwoman will not inherit with my son Isaac."

Hebrew insight: There is an interesting wordplay used throughout this whole story, and that is the use of the word *tsachaq* טָחַק - to laugh outright (in merriment or scorn): The name Isaac is derived from this word (remember it means laughter); In Gen 17:17 Abraham laughed questioningly, hopefully; Gen 18:12 Sarah laughed incredulously; Gen 21:6 Sarah laughed joyfully and thankfully; However Ishmael's 'laughter' is in the negative sense of mocking.¹

Q. What do you think this 'laughter' of Ishmael was saying?

Previously Sarah had thought that she would be 'built up' through the child Hagar bore to Abraham. In other words, the child she bore would be regarded as Sarah's own son. But Ishmael's mocking highlighted his Egyptian lineage and she could see that he would try and claim firstborn status. In the natural, we might see this as mean on Sarah's part, but she rightly perceived that Ishmael had to go. Thus we come to a further test for Abraham. Would he be willing to let go of Ishmael, whom he loved, and release him into the outside world? (After all, look what happened to Lot.) The casting vote came from God Himself - Yes! Sarah is right, Ishmael has to go, but God also assures Abraham that Ishmael would become a great nation, *because he is your seed*.

Hagar and Ishmael are conspicuously referred to here as 'the bondwoman and her son', 'the son of Hagar the Egyptian' etc. In fact, Ishmael is not named at all. **Q. Why do you think this is?**

21:11 *And the thing was very displeasing (grievous) in Abraham's sight.* This is the first time we hear anything about Abraham's feelings – the decision is greatly disturbing to him.

God orders Abraham to heed the voice of his wife, and, in characteristic, unhesitating obedience he wasted no time in obeying – providing them with sustenance for the journey. But Hagar wandered

¹ See also Gen 19:14; 39:14; 39:17; Ex 32:6 for other usages.

in the wilderness of Beer-sheva, ran out of water and finally cast the boy off under a tree, distancing herself so she would not see the boy die, and wept. Jewish commentary notes:

Her behaviour was disgraceful and indicative of her flawed Hamitic² character. Rather than comfort her child in his dying moments, she thought only of herself and the discomfort she would feel in the presence of his agony.

Q. Do you agree? What is your response to Hagar's actions?

And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, "What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Ishmael means "God will hear", and here we are told that God hears his voice "where he is" – 'in the situation in which he finds himself', but it is Hagar He speaks to. This is the second time the Angel of the LORD speaks to Hagar. How do we make sense of this honour, considering His insistence that she must leave Abraham's camp?

Up! Lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation and God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. . ."

Hagar no doubt recalls the deep encounter she previously had with God so many years ago. Previously she sat by a well, but this time the Torah implies that she does not perceive the well that was there all along. However, the grace of God opened her eyes to it in order to ensure their survival.

Q. What does this teach us on a spiritual level?

21:20 *And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.* (some translations say: "became an expert with the bow.")

Hebrew insight: This is the only use of the word, translated here as 'archer', in the Bible. What can we make of this seeming insignificant detail? A great deal I think!

The Hebrew word, *Torah* (תורה), is derived from a root that was used in the realm of archery, *yareh* (ירה). Yareh means to shoot an arrow in order to hit a mark. The target is the truth about God and how one relates to Him. Torah means direction, instruction, or doctrine. In fact, the Hebrew word for sin, comes from a root word meaning 'to miss' inferring 'missing the mark'.)

READ & discuss Galatians 4:21-31 in the context of our story. (hint: the previous paragraph is relevant.)

Paul says, in Galatians, that Hagar represents Mount Sinai and bears children who are slaves (Gal. 5:24) He goes on to say she is in slavery with her children (v.25). We need to be careful how we interpret these verses of Paul. First: Was it Hagar's fault that she was in slavery? If God brought the children of Israel out of "slavery" in Egypt into "freedom", how could the Sinai covenant be considered slavery? The Sinai Covenant, whose blueprint for life is the Torah, was not the cause of the slavery – any more than Hagar herself was the cause of her own slavery. It HAD COME INTO SLAVERY - It had been taken into slavery by man's inherent slavery to his sinful nature. (Remember, it was when Abraham went down to Egypt that Hagar became Sarah's servant). Man took the "Sinai Covenant", the Torah into slavery.

Using Paul's understanding, we can see a clear link between Ishmael's mocking of Isaac, and the mocking of Jesus? There are several references in the NT to Jesus being 'mocked': He Himself predicted it (Mt 20:19, Mk 10:34 and Lk 18:32); and there are several accounts of the mocking of Jesus throughout the crucifixion accounts in each of the synoptic gospels.

² Recall that the descendants of Ham (Noah's son) settled in Egypt.

We might also recall the intriguing prophetic words regarding Ishmael in chapter 16, which seem to parallel the promise to Abraham.

- “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude”
- “I will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.” (Ishmael did father twelve sons Gen. 25:16)

Bring all the details of this story into play as you view it through the eyes of allegory and you will see an amazing prophetic foreshadowing.³

Nevertheless, we need to understand that, aside from this allegory, the Ishmaelites that emerged did become sworn enemies of the Israel, and eventually formed a chief element of the Arab nation, although the Bible contains no evidence for the assumption that all Arabs are Ishmaelites. Certainly, they would have intermarried with other tribes, like the Canaanites, Moabites, Ammonites, etc. Mohammad claimed Ishmael for his ancestor for political reasons and his followers have, as a consequence, accepted this assumed descent.⁴

The Beer-sheva Covenant

You will recall the encounter Abraham had with Abimelech and Phicol in chapter 20. We saw that, unlike Sodom, Abimelech and his people were ‘righteous’. Although they were gentiles, they did have a fear of God, and Abimelech was exemplary in his dealings with Abraham and Sarah. Here we read that Abimelech and Phicol have witnessed how Abraham is blessed by God and see the wisdom in making a peace treaty with him.

21:21 *And it came to pass **at that time** that Abimelech and Phicol⁵, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, “God is with you in all that you do . . .*

However, Abraham had been deceptive before, so first they want assurance that he would not deal falsely with them again. Abraham also had a grievance – Abimelech’s servants had seized a well which he had dug. Abimelech assures Abraham that this is the first he has heard of this, and the two of them make a covenant of peace with sheep and oxen. But Abraham went a step further, taking seven ewe lambs and setting them aside. Abimelech asks, “*What is the significance of the seven ewe lambs?*” to which Abraham replied, “*...that it may be a witness unto me that I have dug this well.*”

There are several details in this short encounter which demand our attention. One being: Why is it here? We might expect the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael to lead straight on to the unfolding of the Isaac story, which would follow on quite seamlessly. Perhaps, as we look at the details of the story, we might find an answer to this question.

1. It should be observed that the numbers three and seven – the two most significant divine numbers – dominate this section. (3 – divine perfection, usually indicates something significant in God’s plan of salvation; 7 – spiritual perfection or completion)⁶; The word ‘swear’ is mentioned three times; ‘seven ewe-lambs’, three times; and the name ‘Beer-sheva’ is also used three times.

³ After the destruction of the Temple, subsequent dispersion of Jewish people, and the emergence Christianity, when the two faiths were torn apart, the Jewish people, survived as a people group only because they clung to the Torah through the new Rabbinic system that emerged. I have no doubt God has been with them and ensured their survival for His own unfolding purposes, despite the terrible persecutions they have suffered. Likewise the Torah was preserved as sacrosanct by the Jewish elders, also according to the plans and purposes of God.

⁴ <http://www.thisisyourbible.com/index.php?page=questions&task=show&mediaid=1286>

⁵ Abimelech means “my father is king”; Phicol “spokesman of all”.

⁶ For more information on the meaning of Hebrew numbers see:

<http://www.agapebiblestudy.com/documents/The%20Significance%20of%20Numbers%20in%20Scripture.htm>

2. The name Beer-sheva means “well of seven” or “well of swearing” because there they swore an oath. The Hebrew word “sheva” contains both these meanings. Oaths were confirmed by repeating a declaration 7 times, or by 7 sacrifices. This oath settled any dispute over the ownership of the well.
3. WELLS speak of spiritual life and truth – (God Himself being “the source of living waters - Jer. 2:13) Abraham apparently digs many wells, as he opens up many revelations of truth about the one true God and teaches these truths to those around him.
4. Abraham then planted a grove in Beer-sheva and called upon the name of the LORD, *El Olam*, “Everlasting God”.
 - a. In digging the well and planting the grove, Abraham established Beer-Sheva as a holy place of great importance.
 - b. This is the first mention of this name of God. *Olam* comes from a root word meaning to conceal, be hidden/secret – God is indeed “everlasting”, but his ways and times remain hidden until He chooses to reveal them.

How can these various insights enlighten us? For that we need to move to a deeper level of understanding.

That this happened ‘at the time’ of the previous story, invites us to look for any relationship there might be between the two stories. We have seen in Galatians that Paul interpreted the expulsion of Hagar and her son allegorically⁷ – as foreshadowing a contrast between the Sinai Covenant and the New Covenant – therefore could we also view see this encounter allegorically in order to uncover its deeper meaning? The name of God revealed here gives us our best clue:

This name foretells exactly what the Apostle Paul calls the “eternal purpose” (Eph 3: 11), namely, that in His dealings with men for their salvation, while His purpose remains absolutely unchanged, God yet reveals Himself in varying degrees, according to man’s capacity to receive the growing revelation; first in the flesh, then in the Spirit; now giving law, now gospel; at one time with an election, at another with a call to all people. The name “El Olam” teaches, that in the restoration and redemption of mankind there is an appointed order, a first and a last, both component parts of one purpose . . .⁸

At the end of the Book of Romans, Paul speaks of “the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages, but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about obedience of faith.” Again, in Ephesians 3, Paul speaks of the “unsearchable riches of Christ, that had been hidden in God, and were now revealed according to His eternal purpose.”

When Christ was revealed, the age of the Law (the bondwoman) needed to give way to the New Covenant - salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (Freedom, foreshadowed by Isaac).

Q. How might we understand the Covenant between the ‘gentile’ Abimelech and Abraham?⁹
How do we now understand the link between the two stories we have covered?

We have noted before that the story of Abraham is an unfolding journey of faith. We are now at the threshold of his final test—the offering of his son Isaac on the altar of sacrifice—another part of the story that is intrinsically linked to what we have studied today.

⁷ Whilst the Torah does not lose its plain, simple meaning, it can also be seen as allegorical.

⁸ Andrew Jukes, *The Names of God*, p.142.

⁹ See Galatians 3:26-29.