

# BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

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

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## GENESIS 21

This is quite an extraordinary chapter, with many details that are easily overlooked, but are rich with meaning and significance. In order to comprehend the underlying meaning of Torah, we need to understand that, apart from the plain meaning of the text, it is also analogous – the details point the astute reader to a broader understanding, far beyond the immediate storyline.

### 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.  
Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.  
Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.  
And Sarah said, “God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me.”*

Hebrews 1:11 By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.

Finally, Abraham had reached the level of faith where the Son of the Promise could be conceived. Yes, of course it was Sarah who conceived the child, but marriage holds a mystery: “the two shall become one flesh”. Faith is a journey, and we can learn much from the faith journey of Abraham. He was 75 years old when he answered the call of God – now he is 100. Isaac is born – but two final, and heart wrenching, tests remain ahead for him.

### The Expulsion of Slave Woman and her Son

**READ v. 8-13** Abraham threw a ‘weaning feast’. In biblical times, it was the custom to make a joyous feast on the occasion of weaning a child, to give thanks to the Almighty that the child had survived the most perilous stage of infancy. Ishmael would have been about 17 years old at this time.

The 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.”*

There is an interesting wordplay used throughout this whole story, and that is the use of the word *tsachaq* טָצַח - to laugh, mock, make sport. 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. In fact, the word is used six times in regard to the birth of Isaac—but this time Ishmael’s ‘laughter’ is in the negative sense of mocking.<sup>1</sup>

### 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

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<sup>1</sup> See also Gen 19:14; 39:14; 39:17; Ex 32:6; Ezek. 23:32 for other usages.

natural, we might see this as mean on Sarah's part, but she rightly perceived that Ishmael and Isaac could not co-exist. 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*.

21:11 *And the thing was very displeasing (grievous) in Abraham's sight – remember when he pleaded: "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"*

God tells Abraham to heed the voice of his wife, promising, "Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed." In characteristically unhesitating obedience, Abraham wasted no time in obeying – providing them with bread and water for the journey. But Hagar wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheva, ran out of water and finally cast the boy off under a tree, *Then she went and sat down across from him at a distance of about a bowshot; for she said to herself, "Let me not see the death of the boy."*

17 *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 God does indeed hear his voice, but it is Hagar He speaks to: *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. . ."*

This is the second time the Angel of the LORD speaks to Hagar. No other woman throughout the whole of Scripture is recorded as having heard God speak to her twice, which puts her in an especially unique and significant position! How do we make sense of this honour, considering His insistence that she must leave Abraham's camp? And how different her circumstances are in each encounter, and how correspondingly different are God's responses! Hagar no doubt recalls the deep encounter she previously had with God so many years ago<sup>2</sup>. Previously she sat by a well, but this time the Torah implies that she does not perceive the well that was there all along, but the grace of God opened her eyes to it in order to ensure their survival. Previously she was told to return and submit to Sarah, but this time His instructions are, "Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation."

19 *Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink.* (In rabbinic sources, water is a metaphor for Torah because of water's necessity for life and as a transformative substance.)

20 *So God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer – or "an expert with the bow."*

Why this seemingly insignificant detail in this situation of life and death?

The Hebrew word, *Torah* (תורה), is derived from a root word that was used in the realm of archery, *yareh* (ירה), a word meaning to shoot an arrow, to point out, teach, instruct—the target being the truth about God, and how one relates to Him. The Hebrew word for 'sin' comes from a root word meaning 'to miss' inferring 'missing the mark'.) So, let's dig a little deeper here.

## Two Covenants – Galatians 4

21 *Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. 23 But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, 24 which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage,*

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 16

*which is Hagar— 25 for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children— 26 but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. 27 For it is written:*

*“Rejoice, O barren,  
You who do not bear!  
Break forth and shout,  
You who are not in labor!  
For the desolate has many more children  
Than she who has a husband.”*

*28 Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. 29 But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. 30 Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” 31 So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.*

Using Paul’s understanding, we can now see the significance of the well of water, and “the boy” (offspring of Hagar), becoming expert with the bow (Torah); why she was told to hold him fast with her hand, and why God would remain with him and make him into a great nation!

The remarkable conclusion we come to here, is that Hagar and Ishmael refer to the Jewish people and the Sinai Covenant. That is why Hagar is singled out so significantly! The LORD is very clearly showing us here, in an allegorical story, that when the final “Son of the Promise” (Yeshua), is born there will indeed be a separation between Him and God’s covenant people who do not accept him as God’s anointed Son—just as there needed to be a separation between Isaac and Ishmael.

Let’s have a look at yet another link:

There are several references in the NT to Jesus being ‘mocked’, which again highlights a clear connection with Ishmael’s *mocking* of Isaac: Jesus 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.

We might also recall the intriguing prophetic words regarding Ishmael in chapter 16, which parallel the promises to Abraham, which we understand to refer to the descendants of Isaac and Jacob.

- “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, as did Jacob, who became Israel)

As we bring all the details of this story into play and view it through the eyes of allegory, we see an amazing prophetic foreshadowing. After the destruction of the Temple, the 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 held fast to the Torah**, through the new Rabbinic system that emerged. I have no doubt that God has been with them and ensured their survival for His own unfolding purposes, despite the terrible persecutions they have suffered. God has never forsaken the people of the Covenant to whom He betrothed Himself at Sinai. He ensured their survival and brought them back to their own Land after 2000 years of dispersion—not only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, but many from the Lost Tribes have emerged from all over the world. Moreover, the Torah was preserved as sacrosanct by the Jewish elders, also according to the plans and purposes of God. It is a most precious and foundational work, which the Christian Church has not fully appreciated, but to the Jewish people, it is their lifeline.

Nevertheless, we also need to understand that, aside from this allegorical view, 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.<sup>3</sup>

## The Beer-sheva Covenant

You will recall the encounter Abraham had with Abimelech and Phichol in chapter 20. We saw that, unlike Sodom, Abimelech and his people were 'righteous'. Although they were Gentiles<sup>4</sup>, they did have a fear of God, and Abimelech had been exemplary in his dealings with Abraham and Sarah. Here, in Chapter 21, we read that Abimelech and Phichol 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 Phichol<sup>5</sup>, 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. But 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. Firstly, why is it here at all? We might expect the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael to lead straight into 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.

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); The word 'swear' is mentioned three times; 'seven ewe-lambs', three times; and the name 'Beer-sheva' is also used three times.

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 seven times, or by seven sacrifices. This oath settled any dispute over the origin of the well. In digging the well and planting the grove, Abraham established Beer-Sheva as a holy place of great importance.

A verse I find particularly interesting is verse 25: "Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because **of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized.**" The two of them made a covenant and Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves saying: "You will take these seven ewe lambs from my hand **that they may be my witness that I have dug this well.**" So, that is the very basis of the covenant.

Abraham then planted a grove in Beer-sheva and called upon the name of the LORD, ***El Olam, "Everlasting God"***. This is the first mention of this name of God. *Olam* comes from a root word

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thisisyourbible.com/index.php?page=questions&task=show&mediaid=1286>

<sup>4</sup> Gen 26:1 "...Isaac went to Abimelech king of the Philistines in Gerar." Philistines were regarded as outsiders and gentiles. They were a distinct people group that were immigrants to ancient Israel – a very warring people and enemies of Israel.

<sup>5</sup> Abimelech means "my father is king"; Phichol "spokesman of all".

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 allegorically<sup>6</sup> – foreshadowing a contrast between the Sinai Covenant and the New Covenant – therefore, could we also view see this encounter allegorically? 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 . . .<sup>7</sup>

At the end of the Book of Romans, Paul speaks of “the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began, but has now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of **the everlasting God**, for obedience to the faith.”<sup>8</sup> 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 the Messiah sent by God (foreshadowed by Isaac). As for the Abimelech component, it was vitally important to God’s unfolding plan of salvation, for the emerging gentile Church to understand that “Abraham dug the well” – they were not to take possession of it for their own purposes, and pollute it. To what extent do you think they have actually done just that? We have certainly seen a growing appreciation of the Jewish roots of our faith over the past decades, and at the same time a growing Messianic movement among the Jewish people, as well as many, many Muslims turning to Christ.

**Q. How then might we understand the Covenant between the ‘gentile’ Abimelech and Abraham?<sup>9</sup>  
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 here.

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<sup>6</sup> Whilst the Torah does not lose its plain meaning, it can also be seen as allegorical.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Jukes, *The Names of God*, p.142.

<sup>8</sup> Romans 16:25-26

<sup>9</sup> See Galatians 3:26-29.