



## Genesis - Chapter Twenty One

### II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)

#### II.a Genesis 11:27-25:18 - Abraham (continues)

##### Summary of Chapter Twenty One

In fulfilment of God's promise, Sarah bears Abraham a son, who is named Isaac. In due course Isaac is confirmed as Abraham's heir, when God instructs Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. While Isaac takes priority over Ishmael, God does not abandon Hagar and her son.

Although Abimelech had offered Abraham free access to his land, when he travelled out to seal the agreement Abraham informed him of problems he had encountered with Abimelech's herders over a well. Abimelech had not known of this dispute and agreed that Abraham should have sole access to the well. The deal was sealed with a gift from Abraham of seven ewes.

#### II.a.xiii Genesis 21:1-7 - The Birth of Isaac

God fulfilled his promise of a son for Abraham and Sarah, even though Abraham was one hundred years of age. Abraham named the child Isaac to comply with the Lord's instruction and the baby was circumcised when he was eight days old.

<sup>1</sup> The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised.

#### Genesis 21:1

The LORD dealt with Sarah. God's promise of a son was made as much to Sarah as it was to Abraham. He remembers Sarah just as he would later remember Hannah: *<<And the LORD took note of Hannah; she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters. And the boy Samuel grew up in the presence of the LORD>>* (1 Samuel 2:21).

As he had said, as he had promised. The LORD always fulfils his promises, in this case those stated in Chapter Seventeen. God can always be relied upon to fulfil his promises: <<*God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it?*>> (Numbers 23:19).

<sup>2</sup> Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him.

### Genesis 21:2

Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age. Before the flood it was common for a man to father a son at ages well beyond 100 years but times were changing and parenthood was for people of similar ages as in modern times. However, they trusted in God's promises: <<*Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac*>> (Joshua 24:3), and: <<*By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old – and Sarah herself was barren – because he considered him faithful who had promised*>> (Hebrews 11:11).

At the time of which God had spoken to him. Not only were the promises kept but they were kept according to the timescale that God had said (18:10 and 18:14).

<sup>3</sup> Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him.

### Genesis 21:3

Isaac. The name was announced by God to Abraham in 17:19. Isaac means 'he laughs.' The motif of laughter occurs in a number of passages associated with the birth of Isaac. In 17:17 and 18:12-15, Abraham and Sarah respectively laugh out of unbelief that a son will be born to them, but there may be an element of incredulous joy in these instances as well. The joy of giving birth to Isaac causes Sarah to laugh (v.6).

There are many comparisons that can be made between the birth of Isaac and the birth of Jesus:

- Both were specially promised sons.
- Both were born after a period of delay.
- Both mothers were assured by God's omnipotence (Genesis 18:13-14; Luke 1:34 and 1:37).
- Both were given names rich with meaning before they were born.
- Both births occurred at God's appointed time (Genesis 21:2; Galatians 4:4).

- Both births were miraculous.
- Both births were accompanied by joy (Genesis 21:6; Luke 1:46-47 and 2:10-11).

<sup>4</sup> And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.

#### Genesis 21:4

Isaac is circumcised by Abraham at eight days old in fulfilment of God's instructions given in 17:12. His actions are referred to by Stephen: <<*Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day*>> (Acts 7:8a).

<sup>5</sup> Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

<sup>6</sup> Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.'<sup>7</sup> And she said, 'Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.'

#### Genesis 21:5-7

Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. These verses underline the unexpected nature of Isaac's birth. Abraham and Sarah are both very old and well beyond the age of natural conception.

God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me. In their culture, a childless, married woman would view her situation with shame. Some would ridicule her for this, as seen in the account of Peninnah and Hannah, where: <<*Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb*>> (1 Samuel 1:6), although God-fearing women should not feel this way for the prophet states: <<*Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says the LORD*>> (Isaiah 54:1). Now that this burden on Sarah was lifted, she and the other women in her household could freely express their joy: <<*He will yet fill your mouth with laughter, and your lips with shouts of joy*>> (Job 8:21), and: <<*Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them'*>> (Psalm 126:2).

#### II.a.xiv Genesis 21:8-21 - Hagar and Ishmael Sent Away

Sarah wanted to ensure there would be no opposition to her own son from Abraham's first son Ishmael, so she asked Abraham to send him and his mother

Hagar away. Abraham was pained by this thought but God told him to do as Sarah had said, for it was through Isaac that the promises would be reckoned.

Yet God also promised that Ishmael would be the patriarch of a great nation in his own right. So Abraham sent the boy and his mother away into the desert. When their water ran out, Hagar could not bear to watch her son die so she placed him under bushes and went a short distance away to weep. God heard their distress, made the promise to Hagar that her son would be a great leader and provided a source of water. They lived in the desert of Paran and Ishmael married an Egyptian woman that Hagar had found for him.

<sup>8</sup> The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

### Genesis 21:8

On the day that Isaac was weaned. According to the culture of the day, Isaac was probably two or three years old by the time this great feast was held. It would be a celebration of the child and one of thanksgiving to God for his gracious gift.

**When he was weaned Samuel was given into the service of God:** <<*The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, 'As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the LORD, and remain there for ever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time'*>> (1 Samuel 1:21-22).

<sup>9</sup> But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.

### Genesis 21:9

The Hebrew verb translated playing is ambiguous and may be interpreted as denoting either 'mocking' or 'laughing at.' The verbal form used here possibly favours 'mocking.' The words of Paul: <<*But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also*>> (Galatians 4:29) follows this interpretation. Ishmael, by now a young teenager, was probably making fun of Isaac's role as Abraham's promised son.

<sup>10</sup> So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.'

## Genesis 21:10

The son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac. Although Ishmael is Abraham's son, Sarah does not want him to be an heir alongside Isaac. Paul uses Sarah's words in his allegory of the two covenants: <<***But what does the scripture say? 'Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman'***>> (Galatians 4:30).

<sup>11</sup> The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.

<sup>12</sup> But God said to Abraham, 'Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you. <sup>13</sup> As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.'

## Genesis 21:11-13

Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you. Ishmael was still Abraham's son. He clearly did not want to lose one of his son's because of his wife's jealousy. Therefore, Abraham might have been tempted to reject Sarah's counsel just because it was Sarah who offered it. Instead he sought the Lord in the matter, did what Sarah suggested, and did so apparently without feeling he merely gave in to Sarah's demands.

For it is through Isaac shall your offspring be named. Even though Ishmael is older than Isaac, God confirms that Isaac will take priority over Ishmael, refer to 17:19. The importance of this is picked up in Christ's genealogy where Isaac and not Ishmael is reckoned: <<***Abraham was the father of Isaac***>> (Matthew 1:2a), as well as in: <<***It is not as though the word of God had failed. For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel, and not all of Abraham's children are his true descendants; but 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you'***>> (Romans 9:6-7), and: <<***By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named after you'***>> (Hebrews 11:17-18). While Abraham is reluctant to send Ishmael away, God reassures him that this is for the best.

As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring. Despite instructing Abraham to do as Sarah had said and send his son away, God knew this was very distressing to Abraham so he lessened the pain by making the promise that Ishmael too would play a significant part in history.

<sup>14</sup> So 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 about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

#### Genesis 21:14

Putting it on her shoulder, along with the child. While these words might suggest that Ishmael was placed on Hagar's shoulder, this is hardly likely, since Ishmael is about 16 years old by this time. The last thing Abraham did was to give Ishmael to Hagar, probably after 'putting it', i.e. the bread and water, on Hagar's shoulder. The Hebrew term for child, *yeled*, may denote an older teenager; the way in which it is used of Joseph in 37:30 is one example of this.

The wilderness of Beer-sheba. Water was difficult to find in this region. Man-made wells appear to have been the main source of water as indicated in v.30 and 26:18-22. Beer-sheba is commented on at v.31.

<sup>15</sup> When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup> Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, 'Do not let me look on the death of the child.' And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.

#### Genesis 21:15-16

When the water in the skin was gone and no other supply could be found, Hagar weeps in despair for the life of her child is in danger.

And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. The joy expressed earlier by Sarah and her household is strongly contrasted with the despair felt by Hagar as she prepared for the expected death of her only child. This expression of grief is compared to that which would be evident when the coming Messiah too faced death: <<*And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn*>> (Zechariah 12:10).

<sup>17</sup> And 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? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. <sup>18</sup> Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' <sup>19</sup> Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of

water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

### Genesis 21:17-19

God's intervention saves Hagar and confirms to her that her son will become a great nation, echoing the promise given to Abraham in v.13.

God has heard the voice of the boy. Although this passage avoids using his personal name, Ishmael means 'God hears' (16:11). Although it was Ishmael's misbehaviour in part that led to the expulsion from Abraham's household, God reaffirms his promise: I will make a great nation of him.

Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. Whether the water had always been there but Hagar was unable to see it or whether it was provided miraculously and she now saw it through the eyes of faith is unclear. Others too had their eyes opened by God in this way: <<*Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road, with his drawn sword in his hand; and he bowed down, falling on his face*>> (Numbers 22:31), <<*Then Elisha prayed: 'O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see.'* So the LORD opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha>> (2 Kings 6:17), and: <<*Open my eyes, so that I may behold wondrous things out of your law*>> (Psalm 119:18).

<sup>20</sup> God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. <sup>21</sup> He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

### Genesis 21:20-21

He lived in the wilderness. This was not unusual for nomadic people often lived away from the urban areas. John the Baptist was another man who grew up in the wilderness before being called to his ministry: <<*The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel*>> (Luke 1:80).

The wilderness of Paran is the central region in northern Sinai.

### II.a.xv Genesis 21:22-34 - Abraham and Abimelech Make a Covenant

Acknowledging Abraham's power, Abimelech establishes with him a treaty intended to protect both parties.

<sup>22</sup> At that time Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, said to Abraham, 'God is with you in all that you do; <sup>23</sup> now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my

offspring or with my posterity, but as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have resided as an alien.’<sup>24</sup> And Abraham said, ‘I swear it.’

### Genesis 21:22-24

As commented on in 20:2, Abimelech, which means ‘my father is king,’ appears to have been a common royal name or even a title. This may or may not have been the same man as in Chapter 20. It is almost certainly not the same man who would later deal with Isaac in Chapter 26.

God is with you in all that you do. Abimelech attributes Abraham’s success and status to God. Scripture reveals that the Lord is with individuals: <<As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground>> (1 Samuel 3:19), <<One of the young men answered, ‘I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skilful in playing, a man of valour, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the LORD is with him’>> (1 Samuel 16:18), and: <<Solomon son of David established himself in his kingdom; the LORD his God was with him and made him exceedingly great>> (2 Chronicles 1:1), as well as with his people in general: <<‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us’>> (Matthew 1:23).

<sup>25</sup> When Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized, <sup>26</sup> Abimelech said, ‘I do not know who has done this; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.’ <sup>27</sup> So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. <sup>28</sup> Abraham set apart seven ewe lambs of the flock. <sup>29</sup> And Abimelech said to Abraham, ‘What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?’ <sup>30</sup> He said, ‘These seven ewe lambs you shall accept from my hand, in order that you may be a witness for me that I dug this well.’

### Genesis 21:25-30

Before sealing the treaty, Abraham raises the contentious issue of ownership of a well. The covenant or treaty was designed to prevent conflict between the two parties. The gift of seven ewe lambs to Abimelech confirms Abraham’s ownership and therefore exclusive use of this well.

These seven ewe lambs you shall accept from my hand, in order that you may be a witness for me that I dug this well. It was common in the culture either to have a group of citizens, a gift or a monument as a witness to the legality of an agreement between two parties, for example: <<*This heap is a witness, and the*

*pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm>> (Genesis 31:52), <<The Reubenites and the Gadites called the altar Witness; 'For', said they, 'it is a witness between us that the LORD is God'>> (Joshua 22:34), <<It will be a sign and a witness to the LORD of hosts in the land of Egypt; when they cry to the LORD because of oppressors, he will send them a saviour, and will defend and deliver them>> (Isaiah 19:20), and: <<You ask, 'Why does he not?' Because the LORD was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant>> (Malachi 2:14).*

<sup>31</sup> Therefore that place was called Beer-sheba; because there both of them swore an oath.

### Genesis 21:31

In light of Abraham's gift to Abimelech, the name Beer-sheba probably means 'well of seven'; however, given that the Hebrew words for 'seven', *sheba*, and 'oath', *shebu'ah*, are similar, it could also mean 'well of the oath.' Perhaps the name was chosen because it embraced both concepts.

Given Abraham's semi-nomadic lifestyle and the need for him to dig a well, no settlement probably existed at this location in his time. When a permanent settlement was later established in this area, the name of the well was given to it (26:33). The town of Beer-sheba, located in the northern Negeb, became famous as marking the southern boundary of Israel, e.g. <<Then all the Israelites came out, from Dan to Beer-sheba, including the land of Gilead, and the congregation assembled in one body before the LORD at Mizpah>> (Judges 20:1), <<And all Israel from Dan to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD>> (1 Samuel 3:20).

<sup>32</sup> When they had made a covenant at Beer-sheba, Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, left and returned to the land of the Philistines.

### Genesis 21:32

The land of the Philistines. The use of the term Philistines here is generally taken to be anachronistic, since the name is normally associated with non-Canaanites from the Aegean region who inhabited southwest Canaan from about 1180 BC onward, nearly a thousand years after Abraham's time. In 1 Samuel the Philistines are portrayed as the main opponents of the Israelites. In light of this, the term may be used here and elsewhere to replace an earlier, obscure term; Genesis contains various examples of such modernisations, refer to the comment on Genesis 14:13-16 and Author, Title, and Date section of the Introduction on the

web site. Alternatively, archaeological evidence from various sites in Canaan points to the possibility that some people from the Aegean region, especially Crete and Cyprus, may have already been settled in southwest Canaan. This raises the possibility that Abraham and Isaac (Chapter 26) had dealings with people who came from the same area as the later Philistines.

<sup>33</sup> Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. <sup>34</sup> And Abraham resided as an alien for many days in the land of the Philistines.

### Genesis 21:33-34

The Everlasting God is Hebrew 'El 'Olam. In Hebrew 'El is the common Semitic term for God, followed by the attribute 'of everlastingness', Hebrew 'Olam. Refer to the comment made on 14:18.

**The eternity of God is frequently referenced in Scripture, for example:** <<*The LORD will reign for ever and ever*>> (Exodus 15:18), <<*The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. He will drive out your enemies before you, saying, 'Destroy them!'*>> (Deuteronomy 33:27 NIV), <<*The LORD is king for ever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land*>> (Psalm 10:16), <<*Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable*>> (Isaiah 40:28), <<*But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation*>> (Jeremiah 10:10), <<*Are you not from of old, O LORD my God, my Holy One? You shall not die. O LORD, you have marked them for judgement; and you, O Rock, have established them for punishment*>> (Habakkuk 1:12), and: <<*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever*>> (Hebrews 13:8).