

Genesis 21: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 21 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 time of which God had spoken to him.

Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.

Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, God has made laughter for me. Everyone who hears will laugh over me. And she said, Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?

Yet I have borne him a son in his old age. And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing.

So 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. And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son.

[1 : 1 3] But 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. And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring. 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 in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bow shot.

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. 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? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.

[2 : 2 1] Up, lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation. Then 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. And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow.

He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. At that time Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, said to Abraham, God is with you in all that you do.

Now 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.

And Abraham said, I will swear. When Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized, Abimelech said, I do not know who has done this thing.

[3 : 24] You did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today. So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. Abraham set seven new lambs of the flock apart, and Abimelech said to Abraham, What is the meaning of these seven new lambs that you have set apart?

He said, These seven new lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well. Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath.

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. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God.

And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines. Genesis chapter 21 begins with the birth of Isaac. Isaac is named after the laughter that greeted the announcement of his birth to Abraham, and to Sarah.

In those cases, the laughter was laughter of surprise and astonishment or even disbelief. Later on, the laughter takes on different character. The laughter of joy is foregrounded here in this chapter.

[4 : 42] This is something that will characterize Isaac. And as we go through this story, we'll see a way in which it plays out. Abraham is about 100 at this point. And we've already seen significant events and persons being associated with round centuries on various occasions in Genesis.

Adam lives 800 years after the birth of Seth. Jared lives 800 years after the birth of Enoch. Enoch lived 300 years after the birth of Methuselah.

Noah, Father, Shem, Ham and Japheth when he was 500 years old. And the flood occurred when he was 600 years old. So the fact that Abraham has Isaac, his son, at the age of 100 is probably not an accidental detail.

We've already read about Sarai, Hagar and Ishmael in the previous chapter. In chapter 16, Sarai hoped to be built up, this barren woman, she hoped to be built up by her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar.

And Hagar was taken as wife by Abram. And it established a rivalry between the two of them. Seeing that she had been taken as wife by Abram and that she had borne a son to him, Hagar despised her mistress.

[5 : 55] And the very purpose of Sarai's plan seemed to be foiled by this. She had hoped to be built up by Hagar and to have a child born to her.

But now Hagar was playing the role of a wife. It seems that she had established a rivalry rather than actually being built up by Hagar. Hagar was now an opponent.

At the end of that chapter, after Hagar fled from Sarai's presence, Hagar was told to return to Sarai and submit herself to her. Now that might seem to resolve the tension between the two women.

But there's a problem now. The problem is that Ishmael is probably around 15 or 16 and he is very close to his father. And it seems that he is the heir apparent of Abram's house.

How is Isaac going to fit into the picture? So on the weaning day of Isaac, Sarah sees Ishmael laughing or mocking Isaac. He's Isaac-ing Isaac.

[6 : 59] That laughter that Isaac was named after is now being used as a sort of mockery of him. Not the astonishment and joy at his birth, but something that threatens his status.

It highlights the fact that Ishmael is increasingly closely attached to Abraham. And this attachment directly threatens Isaac's status.

While Hagar might have submitted herself to Sarah as her mistress after the events of chapter 16, Ishmael is now the more direct problem. It isn't clear that Ishmael is going to step aside for his much younger half-brother.

And Sarah is angry. She wants to cast out the bondwoman and she tells Abraham to do so. Abraham's response, unsurprisingly, is displeasure. He is deeply attached to Ishmael, as we've already seen in chapter 17, where he expressed his desire that Ishmael would be counted as his seed.

But God tells him that he should follow his wife's advice. And this response shouldn't necessarily be seen as one without some degree of ambivalence. It shouldn't necessarily be seen as a statement that this is a very positive course of action.

[8 : 07] If we see something similar in the story of 1 Samuel 8, we can see that Samuel is told by the people that they want a king. And God says to Samuel that he should go along with them, even though it's not a good decision in certain respects.

God's statement that Abraham should go ahead with the counsel of Sarah isn't necessarily a statement that this is a good thing in every respect.

The casting out of Ishmael is an event that is far, far more significant within the story of Genesis than most people appreciate. Genesis is a subtle book that conveys many of its meanings through careful literary parallels and juxtapositions.

When you look at this passage, one of the things that you should notice first is how closely parallel it is with what happens in the next chapter, with the binding of Isaac.

In the next chapter, Abraham is tested concerning Isaac. And there's a very close parallel between these stories. In both cases, Abraham arises early in the morning. In the first story, the son of Abraham Ishmael is taken by his mother to another land from Beersheba.

[9 : 13] And in the second, the son of Abraham Isaac is taken by his father into another land from Beersheba. The boy in both stories comes to the point of death.

And God's angel intervenes in both cases. Hagar opens her eyes and sees the well of water. Abraham lifts up his eyes and sees the ram. God promises to be with the boy in both cases.

And then they go on to marry a foreign woman. The woman from Egypt in the case of Ishmael and Rebecca from the house of Bethuel in chapter 24 in the case of Isaac.

So these are important parallels. And they should encourage us to read these two stories alongside each other. I believe that there's probably some connection with the ritual of the Day of Atonement, where you have two goats, one that is taken up to the temple site and offered as a sacrifice, and the other goat that is sent out to an unoccupied territory by the hand of someone.

It seems likely to me that we are not just supposed to read these two accounts as juxtaposed with each other, but perhaps to see them as connected within a deeper ritual that is playing out, that is taking place in the intertwined identities and destinies of the two sons of Abraham.

[10 : 27] There are significant differences though, and these differences again invite you to think about the similarities and the divergences between these stories.

Some of the details may be interesting. For instance, placing things on the shoulder, whether that's the wood for the sacrifice, or whether it's the water and the bread in the earlier story.

There are juxtapositions elsewhere. God responds to Hagar saying, fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. And then God's response to Abraham, do not lay your hand on the lad, nor do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God.

There are differences, but in both cases there's an emphasis upon fearing. We might ask why Abraham sends out Hagar and Ishmael with so little. Is he expecting that they'll be completely expelled and never have any relationship with him again?

I don't think so. I think that he's maybe expecting that they will come back and be supported more in a peripheral position. But something seems to go wrong at this point, and I believe that this can maybe shed light upon stories later on in the story of Genesis.

[11 : 42] What is different about what happens with Hagar to what happens with Abraham? Hagar is deeply concerned about the near death of her child, and she takes a distance from him. She does not want to see the child die, so she removes herself from the child and leaves the child under a bush, literally casts him down there, and she goes away to the distance of a bow shot.

There's a distance that she creates between herself and her son because she does not want to see the son die. She does not want to see this tragic event. That distance is not created in the story of Abraham.

Abraham, throughout the story, is very present with and faithful to both God and to his son. In all of the cases, we see him expressing his presence in terms of, here I am.

He says, here I am to God. He says, here I am to his son. And he says, here I am to the angel. In each case, presence is maintained, whereas in the story of Hagar, it isn't.

The child is placed under one of the shrubs, and she goes at a distance and says, let me not see the death of the boy. Now the fact that the child is placed under the shrub might make us think about the ram as the replacement or substitute for Isaac that is caught in the thicket.

[12 : 58] Maybe there's a parallel between those two things, the fate of Isaac and the fate of Ishmael being entangled in some way again. God hears the voice of the child, not primarily the voice of Hagar.

Hagar sits opposite him at a bow shot's distance and lifts up her voice and weeps in despair. But it seems that God hears the voice of the child rather than her voice.

The angel of the Lord calls to Hagar out of heaven and said to her, what ails you, Hagar? And then says, fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is.

God hears the voice of Ishmael and calls Hagar to be present to him once again. She has to fill the skin with the water from the well that her eyes are opened up to.

And then God is with the lad and he dwells in the wilderness. He becomes an archer. Now maybe that might connect with the detail of being at a bow shot, a distance from his mother.

[13 : 57] He becomes an archer, something that bridges that distance of a bow shot. I'm not sure what to make of that, but it is a curious detail of the text. He's given a drink and then God is with the lad and he grows up and he dwells in the wilderness of Paran.

This might remind us of the story of the birth and growth of John the Baptist. He grows in a similar way in the wilderness. The child grew and became strong in spirit and was in the deserts until the day of his manifestation to Israel.

Is there some connection between these characters? It's worth thinking about and I'll leave that as a question for you to ponder. Both of them are in some way a character who prepares the way for someone else who is the true seed.

One must decrease so that the other might increase. Their destinies, however, are intertwined. The twinning of characters in this way is something that we see elsewhere in scripture. So I wonder whether we're supposed to reflect upon the way in which Ishmael and Isaac are bound up together.

Another story from the book of Kings suggests some interesting things going on here that maybe we should come back to and look in more detail. In 1 Kings chapter 19, when he's persecuted, Elijah is pursued by Jezebel, goes into the wilderness.

[15 : 16] He leaves his lad or his servant behind at Beersheba and goes into the wilderness and sits under a broom tree and asks for death. Then the angel of the Lord visits him and gives him water and food and he's prepared to go into the wilderness for 40 days.

Now, we can see many details there that remind us of the story of Ishmael. The lad who's left behind sitting under the broom tree. The broom tree is associated with Ishmael and his land elsewhere in scripture.

There's waiting for death being visited by the angel, provided with food and drink, lifting up the eyes and all these things remind us of the story of Ishmael.

Is there some connection between Elijah and Ishmael? Both of them are people of the wilderness. As we see in the case of John the Baptist, John the Baptist is another character of the wilderness.

The place of Jezebel is also interesting. Jezebel takes on the role of Sarah, the one who casts out, who persecutes this son. Elijah is a good character and his connections with Ishmael are suggestive of something deeper that might be going on.

[16 : 20] As we read through the story, we'll see further of these connections. Perhaps the most interesting are found in the story of chapter 37, as Joseph is sold into slavery. In that story, Joseph is cast into a pit.

He is sent out, first of all, and he's sent to find his brothers in the wilderness and he ends up wandering around and encountered there and told to go somewhere else.

They see him afar off. He's cast into the pit just as Ishmael was cast down at the tree and it describes the pit or the cistern. There's no water in the cistern. It's empty, much as the water skin is empty.

At this point, they still have bread left, but there's no water and they go and eat bread together at a distance so that they will not see him die when he's in the pit. And then they sell him to, surprise, surprise, the Ishmaelites.

He ends up going down into Egypt and he ends up being in a house of a master who treats him well, but whose wife mistreats him. The wife of Potiphar declares that her husband has brought in this Hebrew servant to mock us, to laugh at us.

[17 : 29] We've heard that language before and she calls him to be cast out, much as Sarah called for Abraham to cast out Ishmael. So these connections suggest that the story of Hagar is playing a much more significant role in both the story of Genesis and the larger story of Scripture than we might otherwise realize.

There's a child being expelled and cast out of the family in ways very similar to the story of Ishmael in Joseph's narrative. He ends up being with the Ishmaelites and it's not just incidental that this connection is formed.

They are both part of the removed family, the distanced or estranged family of Abraham, a family that belongs in the wilderness but prepares the way. They're not written out of the story, but they have an unusual role to play.

Now after this particular series of events, we see interactions between Abimelech and Abraham. They create a covenant and this is a sign once more of Abraham dealing with wider nations round about.

He's acting as a king and a prophet and someone who is expanding in his influence within the region. God has developed his relationship with Abraham, promises, covenant rights and other things like this and they've raised the scale of the promises that he's made to him.

[18 : 49] And we're also seeing now, I think, an intensification of God's relationship with the nations through Abraham. Abraham is the one who will be a means of blessing to the nations.

And so the way that Abimelech is blessed by his association with Abraham is important here. There is rivalry that occurs and that rivalry is connected with other themes that we've seen in the previous chapter.

There is an association with sheep, ewes particularly, and women and wells. All of these symbols are attached together within the stories of Genesis and in the story of Exodus too. Rachel, for instance, is associated with a ewe lamb in her name and also with a well that is the place where she's first met.

Abraham plants a tree, a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and he calls on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God. He sojourns in the land of the Philistines many days. The planting of a tree is important.

In the story of Abraham, we will often see trees and altars associated with each other. The oak of Mamre, the tamarisk tree, other things like that.

[19 : 57] There is a tree and there's an altar. And it's worth thinking about why those two things come together. What do they represent? And that is a question to meditate upon that I'll leave you with, along with the question of the deeper purpose of the story of Hagar and Ishmael within Genesis and Scripture more generally.

Why is it that God gives so much attention to this particular character? What might we learn from the hidden narrative that is playing out here?■■■■■■■■■■