

The Book of Genesis

Chapter 21

21:1-2 Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what He had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. (NIV)

Isaac's Birth

Tradition places Isaac's birth at Passover 1876 B.C. The indication is that Isaac was born while Abraham's household was living in the land of the Philistines (20:15).

21:3-4 Abraham gave the name "Isaac" to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. (NIV)

God had instructed him to give his son this name due to his reaction to God's promise of Sarah being the mother (17:17-19). Isaac was the first of Abraham's sons to be circumcized on the eighth day. Isaac's birth, due to a miracle by God, is symbolic of the miracle which will allow God's children to be born into His family.

21:5-7 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age." (NIV)

Though doubting at first, now that Isaac was born, Sarah was beside herself with joy.

21:8-10 The child grew and was weaned [tradition places this at two years of age], and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." (NIV)

Hagar's Position

According to the custom of the time, the surrogate mother and the child which was produced as the heir of the patriarch retained high status, rights and privileges, whether or not the patriarch's wife later gave birth to an heir.

21:11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. (NIV)

Abraham & Ishmael

Abraham had grown to greatly love Ishmael during the years he had been his only son and Sarah was asking Abraham to retract Hagar and Ishmael's family rights.

21:12 But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. (NIV)

God's Intervention

If God had not intervened at this point, it is possible Abraham would have refused to acquiesce to Sarah's wishes. God reminds Abraham in the next verse that Ishmael was the result of a human attempt to accomplish God's stated purpose.

Paul mentions this verse in referring to the Church of God: In ROM 9:7-8, "*Neither because they are the seed of Abraham are they all children: but, in Isaac shall your seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh... are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.*" Also, in GAL 4:28, "*Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.*"

21:13 I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring. (NIV)

God had compassion on Ishmael because he showed Abraham honor, and God promised to bless those who blessed Abraham.

21:14-16 Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the desert of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there nearby, she began to sob. (NIV)

Ishmael was approximately 15 years old at this time.

21:17-18 God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." (NIV)

Although Ishmael is not mentioned by name in this account, the phrases "God heard" and "God has heard" are used, which mean the same as "Ishmael." God now shows Hagar His intention to fulfill the promise made to her through Ishmael.

21:19-21 Then God opened her eyes ["gave her understanding"] and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt. (NIV)

God helped Ishmael learn how to live and prosper in a desert wilderness. This upbringing molded him into an independent, "*wild donkey of a man.*" If his wife was a full-blooded Egyptian, his descendants were 3/4 Egyptian.

21:22-24 At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his forces said to Abraham, "God is with you in everything you do. Now swear to me here before God that you will not deal falsely with me or my children or my descendants. Show to me and the country where you are living as an alien the same kindness I have shown to you." Abraham said, "I swear it." (NIV)

Abraham's Oath

Abraham is still living in the land under Abimelech's rule. Not only had Abimelech witnessed the incredible increase in Abraham's prosperity, but he was also aware of the miraculous birth of Isaac. This proved to him that the God of Abraham, who had afflicted him and his household a few years earlier and had come to him in a dream, was continuing to bless Abraham. He realized the day would come when Abraham would be stronger than he, and he wanted assurances. However, after his experience with Abraham's "sister" earlier, he now wanted an assurance he could trust—a promise made in the presence of the God of Abraham.

21:25-26 Then Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech's servants had seized. But Abimelech said, "I don't know who has done this. You did not tell me, and I heard about it only today." (NIV)

Abraham said he would make an oath as requested, but pointed out the occurrence of the seized well.

21:27-31 So Abraham brought sheep and cattle and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a treaty. Abraham set apart seven ewe lambs from the flock, and Abimelech asked Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs you have set apart by themselves?" He replied, "Accept these seven lambs from my hand as a witness that I dug this well." So that place was called Beersheba ["the well of the oath"], because the two men swore an oath [NKJ: "made a covenant"—just as in GEN 15:18] there. (NIV)

Transferring Ownership

This custom of legalizing a transfer of property was altered by the time of the judges. In the days of Ruth (RUT 4:7), the one securing property gave the original owner one of his shoes.

21:32 After the treaty had been made at Beersheba, Abimelech and Phicol ["strong"] the commander of his forces returned to the land of the Philistines. (NIV)

Abimelech's Return

Since Beersheba was in the land of the Philistines, this simply means that Abimelech returned northwest the twenty miles to Gerar where he was king.

21:33 Abraham planted a tamarisk tree [KJV: "grove"] in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the LORD, the Eternal God. (NIV)

"Planting a Tamarisk Tree"

He probably also built an altar there. At this time, planting a tree was a religious practice without any idolatrous connection. Later, God forbade the Israelites to plant tamarisk trees because the practice had become associated with idolatry.

21:34 And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines for a long time. (NIV)

Inclusion of Information

Moses includes this information to show that Abraham did not live out the remainder of his life in the land of promise, but instead spent a great deal of his life outside of it.