

## Genesis 21

We have been anticipating Abraham's son since God first called Abraham to leave Ur and follow His guidance (12:1-3). That was 25 years ago. Most recently, in 18:10, God promised that Sarah would give birth within a year. A lot has happened since then, but now we see the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Nothing could have caused an old man and old woman like Abraham and Sarah to become parents except the God of heaven. The Hebrew writer refers to Isaac as Abraham's "only begotten" son (11:17), a term otherwise used only of Jesus Christ (John 1:14; 3:16). Since Abraham had already had Ishmael, clearly in Isaac's case, the word does not mean "only" son, but "only, unique" son, begotten under miraculous power, from a promise.

### TRANSLATION - 21:1-7:

**1** Then Jehovah visited Sarah just as He said and Jehovah did for Sarah just as He spoke. **2** So Sarah conceived and gave birth for Abraham a son, for his old age, at the appointed time, just as God spoke to him. **3** Then Abraham called the name of his son, born for him whom Sarah bore for him, Isaac. **4** Then Abraham circumcised Isaac, his son, a son of eight days, just as God commanded him. **5** Now Abraham was a son of one hundred years when she gave birth to Isaac, his son. **6** Then Sarah said,

"A laugh God made to me.  
Everyone hearing will laugh for me."<sup>1</sup>

**7** Then she said, "Who said to Abraham, 'The one suckling sons, Sarah [is], because I bore a son for his old age?'"

### WORDS:

"Visited" (verse 1) is used quite frequently in the OT (304 times). It means to "attend, pay attention to, take care of." "Appointed time" (verse 2; 22 times) refers to an appointed time, like a festival, or an appointed place, or an assembly. Relative to Abraham and Sarah, the word was used back in 17:21, 18:14, and here. On "circumcision," see comments under "Words" at 17:11. "Commanded" (verse 4) is another frequent verb in the OT (496 times), used nine times already in Genesis. The second word translated "said" in verse 7 is a rare word but synonymous with "said." It is used in Psa. 106:2; Job 8:2; 33:3 and Prov. 6:13 (translated "signal," NASV). It is spelled the same as "circumcise." It is otherwise used only in poetry, so we have a further suggestion that Sarah's statement ought to be considered poetry. "Suckling" (33 times) means to "suckle or nurse."

### COMMENTS:

One point is emphasized in the first two verses of this chapter: God kept His promise. Up to chapter 18, God's promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son was a general promise, but at 18:10, God was specific and fulfilled His promise, "just as He said." The word "visit" carries the idea of God taking care of Sarah, providing for her body to carry a child, even nursing him, when her body was past such an age. In just a few words, "Sarah conceived and gave birth," Moses jumps nine months! Such writing style is typical of biblical writers.

Another point emphasized in the text is how old Abraham and Sarah were; he was 100 years old; she was 90. Still another point emphasized is that Abraham obeyed God, both in naming their son "Isaac," as well as circumcising him at eight days old (cf. 17:9-13). We also see the grace of God evident here. Abraham has made mistakes and illustrated a less-than-

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<sup>1</sup> This text is set off separately since it has the form of poetry.

stellar faith in God (primarily in chapters 12 and 20). Yet, God fulfills His promise to Abraham anyway. Of course Abraham does what he can; he obeys.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Abraham was 75 years old when God called him to separate from his father's home, family, and religion. While his faith has wavered some, he never went back to worshipping idols. He trusted God and obeyed what God commanded him to do. Now he enjoys the reward of that obedience.

*Contemporaries of Moses* - Moses, himself, will neglect circumcising his own son, which will inflame the anger of God (Exo. 4:24-26).

*NT writers* - The Hebrew writer will praise Sarah's faith in Hebrews 11:11.

#### TRANSLATION - 21:8-13:

**8** Then the boy grew up and was weaned and Abraham made a great feast in the day of the weaning of Isaac. **9** Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar, the Egyptian, whom she bore to Abraham, mocking. **10** Then she said to Abraham, "Drive out that slave woman and her son because he will not take possession, the son of that slave woman, with my son, with Isaac." **11** The word was extremely displeasing in the eyes of Abraham on account of his son. **12** So God said to Abraham, "Don't let it be displeasing in your eyes on account of the young man and on account of your slave woman, all which Sarah said to you. Listen to her voice because in Isaac will be called for you a seed. **13** Now even the son of the slave woman [will be] for a people, I will put him because your seed, he [is]."

#### WORDS:

"Grew up" (verse 8) is the verb "to make or become large," the related verb for the adjective "great." "Boy" is found 89 times in the OT, beginning here and used in verses 14-16. It is related to the verb "give birth" and can be translated "child, boy, youth." The word can mean a fetus (Exo. 21:22) but can also refer to teenagers or young adults. In a few passages, it refers to young animals. "Weaned" means to "complete, finish, wean, or ripen;" it is used 37 times. For "feast," see comments under "Words" at 19:3.

The participle translated "mocking" in verse 9 is the verb we have seen many times before, "to laugh." The context here, specifically Sarah's reaction, suggests something harsher than "laughing;" thus, we translate the verb to "mock." "Drive out" (verse 10) was seen back in 3:24 (where, see "Words") and 4:14. "Slave woman" is used 56 times, here in verses 10 and 13 (cf. 20:17). Clearly, Sarah is taking an impersonal view of Hagar, not even mentioning her by name. "Take possession" is found 232 times, first in 15:3-4, 7-8. It can also carry the idea of "inherit." "Was displeasing" (verses 11-12) is a verb, the verbal form of the adjective "to be evil." The verb is used 98 times, but the whole word family is found 783 times. "Young man" (verse 12; 240 times) means "boy, youth, servant." It is found in 21:12, 17-20, clearly as a synonym (in this context) with "boy" used earlier in verse 8. Like "boy," this word can have a wide range of meanings from an infant a few months old (cf. Exo. 2:6; 2 Sam. 12:16) to Absalom who was a young man in 2 Sam. 14:21; 18:5. Therefore, neither word gives an indication of age.

#### COMMENTS:

Children were weaned in those days around two to three years old and it was accompanied by a celebration. This celebration turns sour, however. At the celebration, Sarah sees Ishmael "mocking" Isaac. The verb is actually "to laugh," but here, based on Sarah's reaction, we translate the word with a more negative overtone. Otherwise, we do not know what is happening. It is enough for Sarah to insist that Abraham practically disown Hagar and Ishmael. Ishmael is about 16 years old at this time; Isaac around three.

We see Sarah's rudeness born out in the fact that she does not utter the name of either one: Hagar or Ishmael. What Sarah suggested displeases Abraham; Ishmael was his firstborn

son, after all. It does not appear that Abraham is under any laws of the land, laws of mankind, in this period; however, he is effectively being called on to “divorce” Hagar so that Ishmael will not receive any inheritance in competition with Isaac.

As with the separation of Lot from Abraham’s family, we understand that Ishmael’s separation from the family of Abraham also puts the focus on Isaac, the heir to the promise of the “seed.” God acquiesced to Sarah’s requirement on Abraham, but God will be with Ishmael and protect him. It is true, God acknowledged, that the promise will come through Isaac.

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Sarah lived in a different time than we do today. She did not want Ishmael to inherit the blessing along with her own son, Isaac. The older son would receive twice the estate as the younger son. Sarah did not want that to happen. If she had not sent Hagar away, we do not know how God would have fulfilled His promise. But, He would.

*NT writers* - Paul will understand Ishmael’s behavior toward Isaac as “persecution” (Gal. 4:30). In that context, as Paul makes Hagar and Sarah into an allegory of the Jews (Hagar and her seed) and Christians (Sarah and her seed), he will quote 21:10 to the effect that Christians need to “cast out” the Judaizing teachers from their assembly. Paul reminds the Christians in Rome of God’s ability to work out His plans, despite man’s unfaithfulness, as He did through Isaac (Rom. 9:7-9).

#### TRANSLATION - 21:14-21:

**14** Then Abraham rose up in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave to Hagar. He put [them] on her shoulders and the boy and sent her away and she went. And she wandered in the desert of Beer Sheba. **15** And the days were gone from the water and she set the boy under one of the bushes. **16** Then she went and sat by herself opposite the place being a distance of a bow [shot] because she said, “Let me not see to die the boy.” And she sat opposite and she lifted up her voice and she wept.

**17** Then God heard the voice of the young man and the messenger of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What [is happening] to you, Hagar? Do not fear because God heard the voice of the young man by which he [is] there. **18** Get up! Pick up the young man and seize his hand because for a great people I will put him.”

**19** Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water and she went and filled the skin of water and made the young man drink. **20** Then it was, God [was] with the young man and he grew up and stayed in the desert and he was an archer of the bow. **21** And he stayed in the desert of Paran and she took for him, his mother, a wife from the land of Egypt.

#### WORDS:

“Skin” (verse 14) refers to goat skin that was bound at both ends to contain some liquid such as water, wine, oil, etc. It is found only here in Genesis 21:14-15, 19. “Wandered” means to “wander, go astray, stagger, or be confused.” Abraham used it of himself in 20:13. “Set” (verse 15; 125 times) can be translated “send, throw, or cast.” “Place” (verse 16) is actually a verb, an infinitive absolute, preceded by the definite article, used 59 times and means “to be or keep far, distant.” “Bow” is the word we’ve seen for the rainbow in 9:13. “Wept” (114 times) can mean to weep for joy or from grief, as here.

“Seize” (290 times) can mean to “be strong” as well as to “seize.” It was first seen at 19:16, also with “seizing hands.” “Opened” (verse 19; 21 times) was first seen in Gen. 3:5, 7. This is its last use in Genesis, but it connotes the idea of opening the eyes. “Archer” (verse 20) is found only here and is related to the verb “to shoot.”

#### ARCHAEOLOGY:

Beer Sheba was located 50 miles southwest of Jerusalem, halfway between the Mediterranean and the southern part of the Dead Sea. Paran would be south and west of Palestine, in the northern Sinai peninsula, putting Hagar close to Egypt from where she will

obtain a wife for Ishmael. Paran will be important during the years of Israel's wandering in the wilderness (Num. 13; Deut. 1:1).

#### COMMENTS:

Abraham listened to God, listened to Sarah, gave Hagar and Ishmael provisions, and then sent them away. The "skin" was likely an old goat skin which could contain about three gallons (15 liters) of water, not enough for many days. Perhaps Abraham anticipated the angel of Jehovah caring, again, for them. What did Hagar carry on her back? Perhaps with impure motivations, some scholars suggest Hagar carried Ishmael on her back and, therefore, Ishmael could not have been a teenager. They imply the text is not serious or historical or corrupted in some way. Yet, the text could also easily be read as Abraham putting the skin of water and bread on her back but also "giving" Ishmael to her, into her care.

Hagar "wandered." She was probably lost, a mother expelled from her family with only her teenage boy for companionship. The water ran out. Hagar sets Ishmael under a bush and moves a distance away, as much as a "bowshot," and then sits down and cries. Hagar utters one of the first "prayers" in the Bible. She simply does not want to see her son die.

God heard Ishmael, the text says. Was he crying, too? We presume. In the Hebrew, the phrase actually says "Ishmael's" name ("God hears" is *ishmaelohim*). Otherwise, no human uses the boy's name. For a discussion of the parallel designation "messenger [angel] of Jehovah," see under 16:7-14. God informs Hagar that she should pick up Ishmael and care for him. God had promised Hagar that Ishmael would be a great nation (17:20) and He reiterates that promise here.

God opened Hagar's eyes so she could see a well of water close by. She drank and refreshed herself and gave Ishmael water. The text says God was "with" Ishmael, a significant statement. Abimelech will acknowledge God is "with" Abraham in 21:22. Out of the 104 examples of the expression, fourteen times are found in the accounts of Isaac and Jacob.

Ishmael will live in the desert of Paran, hunting with the bow, married to an Egyptian wife and will show up again in the text at Abraham's death (25:9).

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - The evidence of God fulfilling His promise to Ishmael is found in 25:12-18.

*Contemporaries of Moses* - The patriarch Joseph will be sold into the hands of Ishmaelites (37:28). Again, Israel is seeing that her neighbors are her relatives (Gen. 45:5-8; 50:20). God would provide water in the desert for the nation of Israel on more than one occasion (Exo. 16; Num. 20). This word "drive out" is applied to divorce in the Law (Lev. 21:7, 14; 22:13; Num. 30:9). The verb "send away" is also used of divorce in the Law (Deut. 22:19, 29).

*Later Hebrew writers* - The verb "send away" is used later specifically for the concept of "divorce" (Mal. 2:16; see also Isa. 50:1; Jer. 3:1). Isaiah will depict the descendants of Ishmael as "bowmen" (21:17).

*NT writers* - When God makes a promise, He keeps His promises, even if those promises are outside of the chosen family, as Ishmael was. God causes His sun to shine on the just and the unjust and sends His rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45).

#### TRANSLATION - 21:22-34:

**22** Then it was at that appointed time that Abimelech said, and Phichol, the prince of his army, to Abraham, saying, "God [is] with you in all which you, yourself, are doing. **23** So now swear to me by God, Behold, if you lie to me, and to my sons and to my posterity as loving loyalty which I did with you, you do with me, and with the land which you are temporarily dwelling in it."

**24** So Abraham said, "I myself will swear."

**25** Then Abraham complained to Abimelech on account of a well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized. **26** And Abimelech said, "I do not know who did this thing. But even you yourself did not report to me and even I myself did not hear at all until today."

**27** So Abraham took a flock and cattle and gave to Abimelech and they cut, the two, a covenant. **28** Then Abraham set seven lambs of the flock by themselves.

**29** Then Abimelech said to Abraham, "What? Behold seven lambs of these which you set by themselves."

**30** He said, "That the seven lambs, take from my hand for the sake [that] she will be to me for a witness that I dug this well." **31** On account of this, he called to that place, "Beer Sheba," because there the two swore. **32** And they cut a covenant in Beer Sheba and Abimelech rose up and Phicol, the prince of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines.

**33** Then he planted a tamarisk tree in Beer Sheba and called there on the name of Jehovah, God of eternity. **34** So Abraham stayed temporarily in the land of the Philistines many days.

#### WORDS:

"Prince" is a related word to "Sarah." "Army" is the same word we saw at 2:1, its first appearance where it referred to the "host of heaven." "Swear" (verse 23) is found 186 times, four times in this text. "To lie" is not found frequently but the noun is found twenty times. "Sons" and "posterity" are synonyms. Both words are found only in the same contexts; here and Isa. 14:22; Job 18:19, meaning "descendant." In Hebrew, the words begin with the same sound so that we have an example of alliteration, similar to the English phrase "kith and kin." We saw "loving loyalty" back in 19:19 and 20:13. "Temporarily dwelling" was first seen in 12:10 and 19:9; 20:1. It is the related verb (found in 21:34) for the noun "stranger."

"Complained" (verse 25; 59 times) can be translated "reprove, rebuke, decide, arbitrate." It was first seen at 20:16. "Seize" (verse 25; 30 times) can mean to "tear off, tear away, seize, or rob." "Report" is used frequently, 371 times, first in 3:11; 9:22; 12:18; 14:13. It means to "announce, report, declare, inform." For "cutting a covenant," see comments under "Words" at 15:18. "Set" (verse 28; 74 times) means "to stand, position oneself, or place." "Witness" is found 69 times, here for the first time. The verb to "dig" in verse 30 is used 23 times and means to "dig, track, or spy out."

"Planted" was found back in the garden of Eden at 2:8. "Tamarisk" (verse 33) is found only here and 1 Samuel 22:6; 31:13.

God is designated by a new term here in verse 33: Jehovah God "of eternity." The word translated "eternity" here is the word translated consistently before as "indefinite." When applied to God, it carries its most indefinite connotation, that is "without beginning and without end."

#### ARCHAEOLOGY:

In Beer Sheba, the men are about 25 miles from Gerar, the scene of the prior chapter. Many scholars assume that "Philistines" here must be an anachronism, since the Philistines weren't (supposed to be) in the land until around 1200 B. C., much later than Abraham's stay here. The earliest mention of "Philistines" outside the Bible is in a record of Egyptian Pharaoh Rameses III (1182-1151 B. C.) However, assumptions can easily embarrass the assumer. The Philistines we see later in Israelite history are a city-state with five established cities: Ashdod, Ekron, Gath, Gaza, and Ashkelon. Here, we only see a group of people living in a village (Gerar).

What may very well have happened was that peoples emigrated to Palestine from the Aegean Sea, from the island of Crete, dwelling in the area known as "Philistia", who were called "Philistines" before Abraham's time. Philistia is a 50 mile long by 15 mile wide strip of land on the coast of Palestine. Then, a subsequent migration could have happened even later, perhaps in the time of the judges, moving into the same area; subsequently being called "Philistines,"

who then established a large, strong nation which caused problems for Israel later in her life. Eventually, David was able to subjugate the Philistines (2 Sam. 8:1; 1 Chron. 18:1).

#### COMMENTS:

Around the same time as the prior events, Abimelech shows up at Abraham's tent, with his military leader. The fact that Phicol, the military leader, is present suggests Abimelech is scared of Abraham's growing household and fears armed conflict. Therefore, he wants to make a nonaggression pact with his neighbor. Abimelech's comments on Abraham show a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (12:3). Abimelech has seen how God has blessed Abraham. Among other things, God has spoken directly to Abimelech, commanding him to give Sarah back to her husband. He also saw God give Abraham and Sarah a son while both were past the years of child-bearing. Abimelech is drawing the conclusion that God is blessing Abraham and is with him. However, since Abraham has lied to Abimelech before (chapter 20), this time, Abimelech wants a covenant, a treaty. Abraham's response is short and curt: "I will swear."

However, Abraham has a complaint against Abimelech's men. Abraham's men had dug a well (21:30), which Abimelech's men had seized (21:25). Building a well was hard, manual labor in those days and required some skill. The owner would have to identify a natural aquifer and then dig down to it. He would have to strengthen the shaft so it would not collapse. He would need to prevent seepage. It is obvious why someone who went through so much effort would want to guard his wells! So, if they are going to make a covenant, Abraham wants that well in his covenant.

Abimelech says he does not know anything about the event. He also sounds hurt that Abraham has not mentioned the incident before. The sheep and cattle, perhaps, were part of the covenant ceremony, being split in half and sacrificed, as Abraham and Abimelech pass between the pieces. The seven lambs seem to have been a gift on Abraham's part as a part of the covenant ceremony. Abimelech is confused about the seven lambs. Abraham responds that the lambs were a "witness" that he had dug the wells. Exactly what Abraham meant by that, we do not know.

Then Abraham named the well "Beer Sheba." The verb "to swear" and the number "seven" are very similar in sound so that the well could have been called the "well of seven" or the "well of the oath" (cf. 26:33). Abimelech and Phicol return to their home among the Philistines while Abraham plants a tree.

Planting the tamarisk tree was a sign of hope, perhaps an anticipation of future, peaceful negotiations under its shade between Abraham and Abimelech. The tree could grow to be 25-30 feet (9-10 m) and would provide much shade. The lower limbs could provide food for the flocks, its bark was used for tanning, and its wood for charcoal. Then Abraham again worshipped God in thanksgiving, perhaps for keeping Abraham safe from a war with Abimelech and, no doubt, fulfilling His promise of a son for Abraham. The patriarch was able to settle down for a while right there, beside his well.

Referring to God as "Jehovah God of eternity" suggests that God has no definite boundaries relative to time, without a beginning and without an end. It also suggests God's faithfulness; that He is able to keep a promise that He had made 25 years earlier. This is the fourth designation for God, aside from "God" and "Jehovah," in the book (14:18; 16:13; 17:1; cf. also 33:20; 35:7).

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Abraham seeks a peaceful coexistence with his neighbor, Abimelech. Abraham shares his flock with him but also negotiates for the ownership of the well, which Abraham's men had dug. Finally, Abraham actually owns something in the land, if only a hole in the ground!

*Contemporaries of Moses* - Isaac's herdsmen will have their own problems with Abimelech's men (Gen. 26:17-22). The timeframe would suggest this second Abimelech is different than the first one. God will warn Israel against making covenants with the people of

Canaan (Deut. 7:2). Again, since Abraham is clearly violating what later came to be laws of Moses, it illustrates the antiquity of the events and the text.

*Later Hebrew writers* - Joshua will inadvertently make a treaty with the Gibeonites of the land (Josh. 9).