GENESIS

Chapter 21

*The Birth of Isaac*

**Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. 2 Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. 4 When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6 Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” 7 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.”**

**21:1** *was gracious to Sarah as he had said.* See 17:16. (CSB)

When God draws near, it is in mercy or in judgment. He drew near to Sarah in mercy and the blessing He had promised. (TLSB)

*did for Sarah what he had promised.* See Gal 4:22–23, 28. (CSB)

With elaborate detail, Moses sketches God’s fulfillment of His promise to Abraham and Sarah. By inverting the Hebrew word order of the first sentence he emphasizes that this was the God of the covenant acting in absolute independence4 but also in absolute constancy. (PBC)

**21:2** GOD HAD PROMISED – God’s powerful Word gives Abraham (and Sarah) the strength to bring forth a child in their old age. (TLSB)

With elaborate detail, Moses sketches God’s fulfillment of His promise to Abraham and Sarah. By inverting the Hebrew word order of the first sentence he emphasizes that this was the God of the covenant acting in absolute independence but also in absolute constancy. The long awaited son was born at just the time God had said he would be, and received the name God had selected. (PBC)

**21:3** *Isaac.* See note on 17:17. (CSB)

**21:4** See notes on 17:10, 12. (CSB)

ABRAHAM CIRCUMCISED HIM – At eight days Isaac received circumcision, the sign of the covenant, the seal of the righteousness his great Descendant would earn and which Isaac received by faith. (PBC)

**21:5** Abraham, in fulfillment of the promise made to him (see 17:16), miraculously became a father at the age of 100 years (see 17:17). (CSB)

**21:6** *laughter … laugh.* See note on 17:17. (CSB)

As she held her infant son in her arms Sarah not only expressed her joy, but she also showed that her repentance was genuine. Recalling her earlier laughter of unbelief at God’s promise, she looked lovingly at her little Isaac (whose name means “laughter”) and said: “God has really given me something to laugh about. Everyone who hears what great things God has done will laugh with me.” (PBC)

*Hagar and Ishmael Sent Away*

**8 The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. 9 But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, 10 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.” 11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. 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. 13 I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also, because he is your offspring.” 14 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. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. 16 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. 17 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. 18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” 19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. 20 God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. 21 While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.**

**21:8** *weaned.* At age two or three, as was customary in the ancient Near East. (CSB)

Weaning was celebrated as an early rite of passage. Everything associated with Isaac was an occasion for celebration. (TLS)

**21:9** *the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne.* Ishmael, who was in his late teens at this time (see 16:15–16). (CSB)

*mocking.* Or “at play.” In either case, Sarah saw Ishmael as a potential threat to Isaac’s inheritance (v. 10).

This was not just an older brother innocently teasing his younger brother. St. Paul’s epistle to the Galatians describes Ishmael’s actions as persecuting the young heir of the promise (Gal. 4:29). (PBC)

**21:10** *Get rid of that slave woman and her son.* See Gal 4:21–31. Driving them out would have had the effect of disinheriting Ishmael. (CSB)

Sarah noticed that and told her husband to send Ishmael and his mother away from the household. (PBC)

Ordinarily, the oldest son becomes the heir. Sarah wanted to prevent Ishmael from taking Isaac’s inheritance. (TLSB)

**21:11** *The matter distressed Abraham.* Both love and legal custom played a part in Abraham’s anguish. He knew that the customs of his day, illustrated later in the Nuzi tablets (see chart on “Ancient Texts Relating to the OT”), prohibited the arbitrary expulsion of a servant girl’s son (whose legal status was relatively weak in any case). (CSB)

**21:12** *Listen to whatever Sarah tells you.* God overruled in this matter (as he had done earlier; see 15:4), promising Abraham that both Isaac and Ishmael would have numerous descendants. (CSB)Though Sarah’s motives may have been mixed, God approved of her counsel. (TLSB)

When Abraham hesitated, God made it clear that her demand did not flow form petty jealousy. Over the years Sarah had noticed that Ishmael had no appreciation for God’s covenant promise, but instead made fun of it. He therefore posed a threat to Isaac’s inheritance and didn’t belong in the same household with Isaac. (PBC)

*it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.* See Ro 9:6–8 and Heb 11:17–19 for broader spiritual applications of this statement. (CSB)

The true spiritual descendants and the messianic Seed, or Offspring, were to be found in the line of Isaac. Cf. Gal. 3:16. (TLSB)

God reaffirmed that it was through Isaac, not Ishmael, that Abraham’s true descendants would be counted. It was through Isaac, not Ishmael, that all nations on earth would be blessed. (PBC)

This scene provided St. Paul with the features for his well-known comparison in Galatians 4:21-31. There the apostle contrasts Ishmael, “born in the ordinary way” and as a result of earthly-minded planning, with Isaac, “born as a result of a promise.” There are not, there cannot be two ways of being saved, one by human merit and the one by faith in God’s promise. The true heirs of Abraham are heirs according to the promise. (PBC)

**21:13** MAKE…NATION – To make Ishmael’s dismissal easier, God reminded Abraham of His promise regarding this son. (TLSB)

To make it easier for Abraham to expel his older son, God restated His promise to build Ishmael’s descendants into a nation. (PBC)

**21:14** *Early the next morning.* Though Abraham would now be separated from Ishmael for the first time, he responded to God’s command with prompt obedience (see note on 12:4). (CSB)

Ishmael was now c 14 years old (cf 16:16; 21:5). (TLSB)

*Beersheba.* See note on v. 31. (CSB)

**21:15** *one of the bushes.* See note on v. 33. (CSB)

When Ishmael collapsed m the heat and thirst, Hagar left him to die in the shade of desert brush.(TLSB)

**21:17** *God heard … God has heard.* A pun on the name “Ishmael” (see NIV text note on 16:11; see also 17:20). (CSB)

Ishmael groaned but likely also prayed. (TLSB)

**21:19** God in His providence had guided Hagar to this well and permitted her to see it. (TLSB)

**21:20** GOD WAS WITH THE BOY – Because Ishmael was a son of Abraham, God watched over him as he grew and blessed him with possessions and success. (TLSB)

**21:21** *Desert of Paran.* Located in north central Sinai. (CSB)

Moses supplies additional information about Ishmael’s descendants in Genesis 25:12-18. For us the most significant feature of Ishmael’s line is that it lost all spiritual kinship with Abraham. (PBC)

*his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.* Parents often arranged their children’s marriages (see ch. 24) (CSB)

*The Treaty at Beersheba*

**22 At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his forces said to Abraham, “God is with you in everything you do. 23 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.” 24 Abraham said, “I swear it.” 25 Then Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized. 26 But Abimelech said, “I don’t know who has done this. You did not tell me, and I heard about it only today.” 27 So Abraham brought sheep and cattle and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a treaty. 28 Abraham set apart seven ewe lambs from the flock, 29 and Abimelech asked Abraham, “What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs you have set apart by themselves?” 30 He replied, “Accept these seven lambs from my hand as a witness that I dug this well.” 31 So that place was called Beersheba, because the two men swore an oath there. 32 After the treaty had been made at Beersheba, Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his forces returned to the land of the Philistines. 33 Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the Lord, the Eternal God. 34 And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines for a long time.**

**21:22-34** The placement of this incident after 21:8-21 presents and interesting thematic parallel. Both 21:8-21 and 21:22-34 describe a scene of conflict – conflict over a boy and over a well. Abraham is the loser in both instances. Ishmael is banished and Abraham’s well is seized by another. In 21:8-21 Sarah is the one who expresses a grievance and Abraham is an innocent bystander and Ishmael’s provider. But in 21:22-34 Abraham’s role is switched and he becomes the one who expresses a grievance. Abimelech replaces Abraham in his role as the innocent bystander and provider. Both times Abraham gives provisions or gifts to another: bread and water to Hagar and Ishmael; sheep and cattle, and ewe lambs to Abimelech. Referring to 21:22-34 as a buffer passage between 21:8-21 and 22:1-9, R. Alter says that “the tale of a dispute over a well in the desert reinforces this network of connections, for it involves obtaining a source of life in the wilderness (as explicitly happens in the Ishmael story) and it concludes with Abraham’s making a covenant meant to guarantee peace and well-being for his progeny. (Hamilton)

**21:22** *Abimelech.* See 20:2 and note. (CSB)

*Phicol.* Either a family name or an official title, since it reappears over 60 years later (25:26) in a similar context (26:26). (CSB)

The name is neither Hebrew nor Egyptian but may derive from a region of the Aegean or Asia Minor, indicating early settlement of Sea Peoples in Canaan. This would explain the reference to the Philistines in vv 32, 34. (TLSB)

It is not clear why Abimelech was joined by Phicol, the commander of the king’s army, on this occasion. One of the Alalakh Tablets (54:16-18) describes a sheep sacrifice in connection with the sale of a city by Irkabtum to Ammitakum as follows: “the neck of a sacrificial lamb was cut in the presence of PN the general. (Hamilton)

GOD IS WITH YOU – This was clear to them from Isaac’s miraculous birth and Abraham’s prosperity. (TLSB)

Abimelech’s statement also provides a parallel with the one made just a few verses earlier about Ishmael (v. 20). Both Abraham and Ishmael are vulnerable for both are away from home – one in a wilderness, one in Philistine country – but God is with both. (Hamilton)

**21:23** *swear to me … before God … Show to me … kindness.* Phrases commonly used when making covenants or treaties (see vv. 27, 32). “Kindness” as used here refers to acts of friendship (cf. v. 27; 20:14). Such covenants always involved oaths. (CSB)

In light of the presence of Elohim in his life, Abraham’s behavior should be predictable and above reproach. People with whom God dwells should not engage in false, devious practices or conduct. Nonetheless, Abimelech requests Abraham to bind himself by oath to a covenant relating to Abimelech’s own person and that of his posterity primarily because he does not trust Abraham. The verb and preposition used her – saqar l – do not mean “tell a lie” but rather “deal falsely, break a covenant,” as can be seen in Ps. 44:18. (Hamilton)

Abimelech’s use of the root sqr and his invitation to Abraham to swear off any activity of this type are ironical. Abraham had just perpetuated on Abimelech a perfect instance of seqer (“falsehood”), although the word was not used there, when he led the Philistine king to believe that his female companion was only his sister (20:1-17). Will their relationship in the future, asks Abimelech, be determined by seqer, “falsehood,” or by hesed, “loyalty”? It appears that Abimelech is asking for a favor rather than imposing terms or dictating agenda. In an earlier relationship with Abraham, Abimelech was clearly the superior party who treated Abraham fairly nevertheless (20:15). Now the roles are reverses. Abimelech still has the authority of the crown and some military muscle, but he also knows that a powerful God had worked through Abraham’s intercession to bring healing to his people, and the impact of the intercession on Abimelech surfaces only in 21:22. (Hamilton)

Hence, Abimelech’s appeal to Abraham for hesed is based soley on the hesed he had extended earlier to Abraham. He argues not from his position but from precedent. By hesed Abimelech means behavior which is appropriate to a covenant relationship. That God is with Abraham does not mean, however, that Abraham has a two-to-one majority over Abimelech. It means that others’ expectations of him increase. (Hamilton)

Abimelech wished to preserve friendly relations with Abraham by a covenant. Covenants always involved oaths. (TLSB)

Although this is highly unusual, it’s also understandable. It must have been awesome to know a man whom God was so obviously supporting in everything he did – giving him a smashing victory over invading armies, providing abundant food supply in a land of sparseness, delivering him for the consequences of his own stupidity, and miraculously granting him a son in his old age. (PBC)

King Abimelech reminded Abraham that in the past he had shown him kindness, faithful love. He had permitted Abraham, an alien, not only to live in his land and to move about freely, but also to plant crops, to graze his cattle, to dig wells. His request strikes us as reasonable: Sweat that you will show the same kindness to me and to my children and to my descendants.” The proposed alliance between Abimelech and Abraham would also bind their descendants. Abimelech would enjoy the security of a nonaggression pact, and Abraham would continue to enjoy squatter’s rights. Abraham was willing to enter into the alliance and to confirm it with an oath. (PBC)

**21:24**  I SWEAR IT – Such oaths would carry much weight in a society without itmes like court records and verbatim testimony. (Hamilton)

**21:25** WELL OF WATER – Before proceeding with the covenant ratification, Abraham happened to mention that a well of his had been taken over by Abimelech’s servants. After securing his sole right to use the well (v. 30) Abraham joined in the covenant ceremony. (PBC)

Interestingly, the conclusion to this issue is not mentioned. Does Abraham get his well back? It the crisis resolved to everybody’s satisfaction? We never find out. The narrative never presses on to announce a legal resolution, but only to lay the groundwork for that resolution, that is, a mutually binding covenant. (Hamilton)

**21:27-28** It is Abimelech who initiated the action, inviting Abraham to join him in a nonaggression pact (v. 23), but it is Abraham who presents a gift to Abimelech, gifts of sheep, cattle, and seven ewe lambs. The Bible has instances in which an individual in a perilous position attempts to save himself from one stronger than he with what amounts to a bribe. Compare Jacob’s “gift” to Esau (32:20-21), and Ahaz’s offer of cash to Tiglath-lieser for protection against Rezin and Pekah (2 Kings 16:5-9). Scripture also has illustrations of a weaker power offering a gift to the stronger power in hopes of cementing their pact as much as possible. Compare Asa’s gift of silver and gold to Ben-hadad so that both nations may unite in a league against Baasha, king of Israel (1 Kings 15:16ff.), and Hezekiah’s gift of silver and gold to Senacherib (2 Kings 18:13ff.). In at least one instance a more powerful king (Mero-dach-baladan) sent a gift to a king who was much less powerful(Hezekiah; 2 Kings 20:12), an action on Hezekiah’s part that Isaiah did not accept with glee (2 Kings 20:14ff.). (Hamilton)

In the instance cited from Kings, the giving of gifts is a means of opening negotiations in instances of international diplomacy, hardly the point in Genesis 21. Rather than seeing Abraham’s gifts as either bribes or diplomatic ways of commencing negotiations with a potentially hostile, non-sympathetic individual, one should understand them to be a gift to cement a pact of friendship. Abraham has lost a well to Abimelech’s servants, but this seizure must not be allowed to put distance between Abraham and Abimelech. Abraham has no interest in terminating his friendship with Abimelech over the well. One might also note the covenant Between David and Jonathan; Jonathan gave his personal garments and weapons to David to symbolize the finalizing of the covenant (1 Samuel 18:3-5). The explicit purpose of Abraham’s gift to Abimelech, at least the seven ewe lambs, will be made clear in verse 30. (Hamilton)

**21:27** *sheep and cattle.* Probably to be used in the treaty ceremony (see 15:10). (CSB)

**21:28** SEVEN EWE LAMBS – The relation of the creatures mentioned in v. 27 (“sheep and oxen”) to those mentioned in v. 28 (“seven ewe lambs”) then appears to be this: the “sheep” of v. 27 include the “ewe lambs” of v. 28. This difference in the use of these creatures, apparently, must be established: those mentioned in v. 27, apart from the ewe lambs, are to be used to be used to be slaughtered to establish the covenant; cf. 15:9-11 and our remarks on this passage. Then the ewe lambs constitute a special friendly gift, not usually made in connection with covenants; for Abimelech asks (v. 29): “What mean these?” Abraham’s explanation is that this gift shall serve as “witness” (feminine, ‘edhah, German Zeugin), that he has digged the well. (Leupold)

**21:29** WHAT IS THE MEANING – Abraham’s actions are not self-explanatory, and hence Abimelech presses Abraham for clarification. As a matter of fact, as far as Abimelech is concerned, hardly anything Abraham does or says is self-explanatory! For whatever reason, Abimelech is not eager to accept Abraham’s benevolence. The king’s curiosity is naturally around by the fact that Abraham isolated the seven ewe lambs from the rest of the animals and set them off by themselves (l badd hen, in 28), literally, “in their separation”; l baddana HERE IN V. 29). His strange action provokes Abimelech’s question, just as his earlier puzzling action provoked a a question from Abimelech (20:9-10). (Hamilton)

**21:30** Abraham wished to protect the well by a gift and an oath, in case the Canaanites would claim the well in the future. (TLSB)

Abraham clarifies his motives and actions in the gift of the ewe lambs. In accepting them, Abimelech becomes involved in a legal transaction which binds him as a witness to the fact that Abraham is the legitimate owner of this particular well. The lambs are to be a witness (or “proof,” eda). (Hamilton)

No sacrificial activity is involved, nor is there any covenant meal. The parties swear to the pact simply in words. In accepting the lambs Abimelech releases rights over the well and concedes ownership to the patriarch. In other words, Abimelech is challenged to accept the reliability of Abraham’s word, “I dug this well,” and to side with him in any future altercation. Of course, in an incident not too far removed from this one, Abraham’s earlier word to Abimelech had been anything but reliable. If Abraham can cheat on the truth about Sarah, can he do the same with the truth about a well? (Hamilton)

**21:31** *Beersheba, because the two men swore an oath there.* See NIV text note. For a similar pun on the name see 26:33. Beersheba, an important town in the northern Negev, marked the southernmost boundary of the Israelite monarchy in later times (see, e.g., 2Sa 17:11). An ancient well there is still pointed out as “Abraham’s well” (see v. 25), but its authenticity is not certain. (CSB)

Abimelech chooses to believe Abraham, for both of them swore an oath. To the site Abraham gives the name Beer-sheba, “well of seven,” a reference to the seven lambs. Now, the Hebrew words for “seven” and “oath” are the same (saba). (Hamilton)

**21:32** *Philistines.* See note on 10:14. (CSB)

**21:33** *tamarisk.* A shrub or small tree that thrives in arid regions. Its leafy branches provide welcome shade, and it is probably the unidentified bush under which Hagar put Ishmael in v. 15. (CSB)

Two significant actions of Abraham after the king and his commander had left are recorded. He acknowledged his indebtedness to the Lord, first by planting a memorial tree and then by publicly worshiping “the Lord, the Eternal God.” Unlike the little, limited, local deities of the surrounding heather, Abraham’s God had promised blessings for all people for all time. (PBC)

*Eternal God.* The Hebrew is *El Olam*, a phrase unique to this passage. It is one of a series of names that include *El,* “God,” as an element (see 14:19 and note; 17:1 and note; 33:20; 35:7). (CSB)

Luther: “Whenever this little statement is made – that the patriarchs called or cried out in the name of the Lord, or that they build an altar – it denotes that a certain place is to be preserved, there must be some pious prince to provide quarters for it and grant it room and peace, so that the doctrine and the Word of God can be spread” (AE 4:489).