

General Comments on Genesis 21-23

The events of Genesis 21:22-34 and ch. 23 form a bracket around ch. 22. Verses 22-34 present a mistrustful Abimelech admonishing Abraham to be forthright in his dealings with those around him, and then ch. 23 shows Abraham being exceptionally straightforward with the locals. This informs the reader the subject of ch. 22 is related to the text bracketing it, which is the Lord chastening Abraham over the example he is setting among the Gentiles nations.

Comments on Genesis 21

The chapter discusses the fulfilment of the Lord's promises to Abraham. First, to have a rightful heir (v. 1-7), and then to have land for inheritance (v. 22-34). There is also another (cp. ch. 16) less than flattering exchange between Sarai and Hagar (v. 8-21), necessitating yet again divine intervention to preserve the life of Hagar and Ishmael.

1 AND the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken. 2 For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. 3 And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac. 4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as God had commanded him.

5 And Abraham was an hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him. 6 And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, [so that] all that hear will laugh with me. 7 And she said, who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck? for I have born [him] a son in his old age.

8 And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the [same] day that Isaac was weaned.

v1-8 Some twenty five years after the first promise of obtaining offspring, Sarah conceives (v. 1) and bears Isaac (v. 3) in accordance with the previous promises (v. 2). Abraham circumcises the child (v. 4) according to the Lord's command (cf. 17:10-14).

The text suggests Sarai's considerable surprise over the matter, and presents her as almost incredulous (v. 6-7). Which is entirely natural, given their age (v. 5).

The child grows and is weaned, and Abraham celebrates his good fortune (v. 8). Given the hazards of life in ancient times and high infant mortality rates, a child surviving long enough

to be weaned was a reason to rejoice.

v3 The child is named "Isaac", which is typically rendered "Yitzach" by modern translators and literally means "he laughs", a name given in response to the events of 17:17-19, 18:12. The name is intended to be ironic as the child has brought them laughter, but in doing so the Lord exhibits His power in the face of Abraham's and Sarah's lack of faith on this matter. So one must wonder who the "he" is who is laughing, as in one sense it would be referring to Abram's laughter in 17:17, but in another sense it is the Lord having the last laugh.

9 And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. 10 Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, [even] with Isaac. 11 And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son. 12 And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called. 13 And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he [is] thy seed. 14 And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave [it] unto Hagar, putting [it] on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

15 And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. 16 And she went, and sat her down over against [him] a good way off, as it were a bowshot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against [him], and lift up her voice, and wept. 17 And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, what aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he [is]. 18 Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation. 19 And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink.

20 And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. 21 And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran: and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt.

v9-21 Sarah appeals to Abraham to free Hagar and therefore eliminate Ishamel's claims to inheritance (v. 9-10). However, Abraham is none too excited about the whole situation (v. 11) and only does so upon receiving a promise from God that they will be preserved (v. 12-13), which preservation is presented as

miraculous at times (v. 14-21).

Sarah's appeal to Abraham to grant freedom to Hagar effectively annuls Ishmael's claim to the birthright. The laws of the time were such that if a slave woman bore children to her master or her mistresses' husband the children had a legal claim to the inheritance same as with any other son. However, if the slave woman is granted her freedom she no longer has any legal ties to the family (as a concubine she does not possess the legal rights a wife does) and the son's legal rights are lost as well, cp. 25:6, Judges 11:1-3. See also Nahum Sarna's Understanding Genesis pages 156-157 for additional ancient historical background.

The present conflict between Sarah and Hagar is similar to that of ch. 13 in that they are miraculously preserved by divine providence, however the present resolution is the opposite of that of the former conflict and the parties separate. The bitterness Sarah feels towards Hagar and Ishmael apparently doesn't result in antipathy between Isaac and Ishmael, as they rejoin again at Abraham's burial (cf. 25:9), and therefore must have maintained some sort of contact over the years.

While Isaac is to be the child whom the covenant is perpetuated through, the Lord still protects and prospers Ishmael, never abandoning him (v. 15-21). The tradition is Ishmael was the father of the Arabic nations, and as such might their relationship with Israel might be likened in modern times to that seen between the Lamanites and Nephites in the Book of Mormon.

22 And it came to pass at that time, that Abimelech and Phichol the chief captain of his host spake unto Abraham, saying, God [is] with thee in all that thou doest: 23 Now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son: [but] according to the kindness that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned. 24 And Abraham said, I will swear.

25 And Abraham reproveth Abimelech because of a well of water, which Abimelech's servants had violently taken away. 26 And Abimelech said, I wot not who hath done this thing: neither didst thou tell me, neither yet heard I [of it], but to day. 27 And Abraham took sheep and oxen, and gave them unto Abimelech; and both of them made a covenant. 28 And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. 29 And Abimelech said unto Abraham, what [mean] these seven ewe lambs which thou hast set by themselves? 30 And he said, For [these] seven ewe lambs shalt thou take of my hand, that they may be a witness unto me, that I

have digged this well. 31 wherefore he called that place Beersheba; because there they swore both of them. 32 Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba: then Abimelech rose up, and Phicol the chief captain of his host, and they returned into the land of the Philistines.

v22-34 Concerning these verses, the Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary on Genesis states:

Abraham's encounter with Abimelech is reported with such an economy of detail that the background is obscure. Clearly it is told not for its own sake but for other reasons. It projects a fresh image of the patriarch. Now that his life's dream is fulfilled and his posterity assured, he possesses a new sense of confidence. No longer does he exhibit timidity and evasiveness in dealing with royalty; he negotiates as an equal. Moreover, Abraham reaches a new stage in his relationship to the promised land. He makes his first acquisition -a well at Beer-sheba- and his rights are acknowledged and guaranteed by the king. Finally, the narrative provides folk etymology for the name Beer-sheba and an explanation of its origin as a cult center in Israel.

Despite its paucity of detail, the composition of this story, like the previous two in the chapter, is artful. Each of the names of the two principal characters, Abraham and Abimelech, occurs exactly seven times; there are seven ewe lambs; both the verb "to swear" (v. 23) and the name Beer-sheba contain the same Hebrew stem as the word for "seven" (sh-v-`).

While Abraham's confidence is certainly a theme in the text, the larger issue that is passed over in the above comment is Abimelech's complete lack of trust in Abraham conveyed in v. 23, as a result of the events of ch. 20. Abraham's present confidence in these mortal affairs has been at the expense of his trustworthiness and the Lord's behind-the-scenes heavy-handed dealings with Abimelech.

This lack of trust makes the Lord look bad, because it makes Him look like a pagan god who is playing favorites, when He wants to be a God of Justice and Righteousness, and expects Abraham to be an example of that to his children and all nations (cf. 18:17-19). Abimelech is concerned Abraham and his children will be a problem to himself and his children, so he comes to

secure a promise from Abraham that he and his children will not deal falsely with them while they dwell in their land.

Note that "Abimelech" is not a name, but a title for the Philistine king. This king, or abimilech, is coming to Abraham with his head military leader to secure a covenant of peace between the two parties to ensure there will be no problems between them or their children. Abraham's prior dissembling is clearly a concern for this current Abimelech.

This account immediately precedes the account of ch. 22, indicating this is the cause for the events there. The Lord is upset with Abraham's bad example for the locals, so He chastens him in ch. 22 to remind him the Lord is not like the other local pagan gods, and cannot be made to look like them. It is then followed by the events of ch. 23 where Abraham scrupulously adheres to local customs in order to procure land to bury Sarah, showing that Abraham has heard the message here and effectively been chastened in ch. 22.

v22-24 Something must have prompted the interview between Abimelech, Phicol and Abraham. Verses 25-26 clearly suggest there is some animosity between the two groups, but Abimelech's denial suggests he wasn't part of that conflict, assuming he was telling the truth. It is safe to assume Abimelech had at least heard something from his people concerning Abraham, otherwise there wouldn't have been any reason for this interview.

That Abimelech brought Phicol to participate suggests that he wanted him the loop on the decisions and pacts, but also clearly displayed to Abraham that Abimelech had a professional standing army, where Abraham didn't. Given Abraham's past exploits (cf. ch. 14), it is clear to everyone he was willing to engage in military action to pursue his own agenda, so this was not an outlandish concern for Abimelech.

v29-31 The king's act of accepting the ewes was a separate transaction designed to indicate the public acceptance of Abraham's legal ownership of the well. If the ownership was ever questioned, Abraham would simply point out that the local king had seven ewes in his possession that indicated it was his well, otherwise why would they be in his possession?

33 And [Abraham] planted a grove in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God. 34 And Abraham sojourned in the Philistines' land many days.

v33 The planting of a tree is probably intended to be

indicative of Abraham's long term plans to stay put at that site as trees take a long time to grow. Additionally, the tree would be something of a "thank you" token to God as trees require a steady water supply, and Abraham has just obtained legal claim to the well. Thus, Abraham would see the tree and be reminded of its relative permanence (when contrasted to nomads driving sheep across wild grazing lands) and the reliable water supply.

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