

The Birth of Ishmael

I. REVIEW

A. God Reassures Abram in a Time of Doubt

It had been ten years since Abram left his home, yet no son had been born to him. It was difficult for him to continue to believe that God would keep His promise. So God appeared to Abram in a time of doubt to strengthen his faith.

- In desperation, Abram suggested that his slave would have to be his heir.

However, God assured Abram that his own son would be his heir. Instead of telling him exactly when that would happen, which might have alleviated Abram's anxieties, God took him out to look at and count the stars, renewing His promise to make many descendants from him.

B. Abram Makes an Act of Faith

Abram pondered the night sky, perhaps reviewing all the pros and cons of putting his trust in God. Finally, he made an act of faith. God counted this act as righteousness in Abram. Abram was pleasing in God's sight because of his faith.

C. Faith, Justification, and Salvation

The references to Abram in the New Testament, especially in St. Paul's epistles, use him as an example of one who received the blessing of God ("justification") through faith and not as a result of being a Jew. St. James, however, warned against misunderstanding **salvation** as coming through faith alone.

- Faith, in the biblical sense, means both belief and behaviour.

St. Paul uses “to be justified” in two senses:

- (1) To be made just here and now by the gift of the Spirit (an event), and
- (2) To be acquitted on the Day of Judgment (the final end of a process). It is convenient, therefore, to distinguish between **first justification** and **final justification (salvation)**.

First justification takes place when the believer passes from the state of sin to the state of grace. **Final justification** will take place when God as Judge declares the believer just at the Final Judgment. Initial or first justification is by faith alone; in

final justification the believer will be judged by his works and by his words [cf. Mt 12:37].

Through faith the sinner becomes a just man; but then his faith, **which is Christ’s faith imparted to him**, must bear fruit in charity, as St. Paul says in Gal 5:6, and St. James in Jas 2:24 [*Galatians – John Bligh*].

D. An Unconditional Covenant

Abram requested from God a sign of the promise He had made. In response to Abram’s request, God seals a covenant with him in which the larger animals sacrificed are cut in two and the halves laid side by side.

Abram fell into a deep sleep, indicating that God alone was responsible for this covenant. While asleep, God told Abram of the future destiny of the nation that would come from him, a future that would involve some suffering [slavery in Egypt] before glory.

God then passed between the animal halves in the form of a flaming torch, renewing the terms of the covenant. This scene is a type of the liturgical action that would become the centerpiece of the true worship.

II. OVERVIEW – BIRTH OF ISHMAEL

The test of time on Abram's faith produced an occasion of doubt in his relationship with God.

The passing of years without a son born to him tempted him to come up with a new plan to fulfill God's promise. God met Abram in a powerful way during this time of uncertainty. Abram was honest about his perception of the dilemma. God heard his honest doubts and enabled him to rise above them.

By repeating the truth to Abram ("Your own son shall be your heir") and by directing his attention to the powerful witness to His power and wisdom given by the night sky, God inspired confidence and trust once again in Abram.

- His act of faith in the midst of reasons to doubt pleased God, and made Abram righteous in His sight.

E. Sarai

Yet what about Sarai? How is she holding up during the long time of waiting? In the next section [Genesis 16: 1-6] we will see how she responds to her own doubts about God's promises to them.

In addition, we will see how God expands the covenant He has made with Abram and Sarai, when He visits them nearly twenty-five years after they had left home for the land of Canaan.

- With so much time spent waiting for God to act, what sort of people have they become?
- What does God expect from them?
- In their advancing years, will they have an opportunity for a fresh start and new hope?

In the longest exchange between God and man yet recorded in Genesis, we will have an opportunity to see the scope of God's plan for Abram and his descendants, its benefits and its requirements. It is the occasion of yet another promise being transformed into a covenant.

III. SARAI’S PLAN

Read: Genesis 16:1-6

[1] Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar;

[2] And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

[3] So, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife.

[4] And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

[5] And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my maid to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!"

[6] But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

F. Sarai's Doubts

It seems that Sarai had doubts of her own about whether she would ever have a son.

- What is the difference between what Abram did, when he doubted, and what Sarai did?

Abram blurted out his doubts to God. He struggled to believe that God would come through with a son, but he was not afraid to lay his doubts before God, asking "What will you give me?" (Gen. 15:2).

He even complained against God for not keeping His Word: "Behold, Thou hast given me no offspring" (Gen. 15:3). His mind raced ahead to come up with another plan, in case the first one had to be scratched.

Sarai's doubts are very similar to Abram's. She, too, wants to hold God responsible for her lack of a son: "...the Lord has prevented me from bearing children" (v. 3).

This is a little stronger accusation than Abram's. His was a charge of failure to act; hers is a charge of meddling intervention. Her mind also raced ahead to come up with an alternative plan of action.

- The big difference between how they each doubted is that Abram spoke his doubts to God; Sarai seems to have let them burn inside of her.
- Abram questioned God; Sarai issues orders.

G. Sarai Acts Wilfully

Without consulting God or her husband, Sarai tells Abram to go to her Egyptian maid and have a child with her. Abram complies, but this was not an act of faith pleasing to God. Abram commits adultery with Hagar, and Sarai, whose idea this was, is an accomplice to the sin.

Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife.

Perhaps we could excuse Sarai by saying that it was Abram who had the intimate relationship with God, not her.

He was the head of the home and acted as the priest of the family. How would she have an opportunity to speak her doubts to God? Well, she could have presented her doubts to Abram, with a simple request: "Ask your God about it." Instead, she takes things into her own hands. She circumvents both Abram and God.

Note: It was the custom of the time for a barren wife to give her slave girl to her husband, in the hope of having an heir. It was not strictly polygamy but rather a means the lawful wife used in order to give her husband children.

“From what we know of Babylonian laws of the time, if the slave girl became pregnant and then began to look down on her mistress, she could be punished and revert to being treated as a slave. That is what Hagar fears will happen, so she runs away.” (cf. The Navarre Bible -Genesis: Four Courts Press, 2010; p. 97-98).

H. Abram Fails in his Role as Husband . . .

What should Abram have done when Sarai made this proposal?

What did he actually do (vs. 2)? *“And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.”*

Why do you think he acted that way? What does this remind you of?

Abram should have exercised his role as Sarai's husband and domestic priest by insisting that they refer the plan to God for His approval. It was his job to make sure that anything they might do to hurry along God's promise was not an act of unbelief.

He could have gone to God and said, "You told me my own son would be my heir. Did you mean a son from my own wife, Sarai?" Instead of asking God to clarify the situation, he yields to Sarai's urgency.

Knowing from our previous lesson that Abram had consciously put his faith in God for the promise of a son, we might be surprised that he does not stand up to Sarai. Yet this episode reveals just how human these people are.

I. . . Like Adam

Abram looks like a true son of Adam in this scene. Adam, who was perhaps intimidated by the serpent, refused to be the domestic priest in Eden, defending God's honour and His plan for man.

J. Why do you think he acted that way?

Perhaps Abram is intimidated by Sarai and wants to avoid confrontation with her. Perhaps her doubts stir up doubts of his own. Perhaps the reasonableness of her plan appeals to him. Perhaps he fears his life would be miserable unless he yields to her.

We cannot help but remember Eden in this episode. As Adam listened to Eve and ate the forbidden fruit, so Abram "*hearkened to the voice of his wife*" and departed from God's plan for them.

What Sarai needed from Abram was the same thing Eve needed from Adam - a man who puts God first, no matter what the cost, whether it's facing a cunning serpent or an emotional, insistent wife. We almost don't need to read the rest of the details to see where this will lead.

K. Sarai’s Plan Leads to Disaster

Sarai's plan leads almost immediately to disaster, which is what we should have expected. Hagar looks down on Sarai, and Sarai blows up at Abram. She appears to be blaming him for the whole mess.

Surely here is a husband who can't win - his wife insists that he carry out her will and when he does, she blames him for the problems it creates. Abram has another chance here to assert his role as head of the home.

[6] But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

He could have taken the sorry problem to God; instead, he removes himself from it. By allowing Sarai to take care of things, he simply deepens the chaos within the household. In some ways, this is a living example of the effects of original sin on male and female relationships.

When men fail in their leadership, women are ready to usurp authority, with problematic results. No one is happy.

IV. HAGAR FLEES FROM SARAI’S ANGER

In this episode, Hagar seems especially helpless. She feels the sting of Sarai’s jealousy after she submits to Abram, and especially after she conceives a child.

She is used by Sarai to obtain a son, and then is treated harshly when she offends her mistress by her attitude. She runs away out of fear.

[7] The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.

[8] And he said, "Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai."

[9] The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her."

[10] The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude."

[11] And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son; you shall call his name Ishmael; because the LORD has given heed to your affliction.

[12] He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."

[13] So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "Thou art a God of seeing"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?"

[14] Therefore the well was called Beer-la'hai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

[15] And Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.

[16] Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

L. God Deals Kindly with Hagar

God always deals kindly with slaves. As we know from an earlier session, He would allow His own people to become slaves in Egypt so that they would comprehend how utterly dependent on Him they were.

Notice that when the angel of the Lord asks her the kind of questions that God asked Adam, Eve, and Cain, Hagar responds honestly and without accusation or blame. God tells her to return and submit to Sarai, a life that is sure to be difficult. Yet she is bound to be safer there than on her own in a strange land.

God encourages her with the promise of many descendants, even though her son's life will be characterized by family hostility.

Hagar seems humbly appreciative of this visit from God, marvelling over the fact that she is still alive to talk about it. God meets her in a situation not created by Him. Her pregnancy is not part of His plan for Abram, and there will be long-lasting consequences of this action.

But Hagar personally meets God. He stoops down to relieve the affliction caused by Abram and Sarai. He never turns a blind eye to human suffering, even (perhaps especially) when it comes from human blundering.

A. Ishmael is Born

Hagar returns to Abram and Sarai in obedience to God, and bears a son, Ishmael. God deals kindly with Hagar, promising a great number of descendants to her through Ishmael (whose name means "God hears").

What joy for Abram and Hagar! What confused emotions for Sarai.

Now it seems that God has fulfilled his promise to Abram, but God has only begun to fulfill the promise. Abram has more sons to come, Isaac in Genesis 21 [the son of the promise], and six more in Chapter 25 from Keturah, another wife.

- But for the next thirteen years, Ishmael remains Abram's only offspring.

The boy grows strong in fulfillment of God's promise to Hagar, and later becomes the father of the Arab nations, brothers by blood to the Jews, yet in constant battle with them, just as God foretold.

[12] He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."

V. ABRAM'S NAME IS CHANGED

Previously in chapter 15, Genesis stressed the way the promise was linked to God's covenant with Abraham. Now the text shows the duties it placed on the patriarchs and their descendants, namely,

- to be holy,
- to acknowledge the One True God, and
- To practice the rite of circumcision.

Read: Genesis 17: 1-8

[1] When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.

[2] And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

[3] Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him,

[4] "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

[5] No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

[6] I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you.

[7] And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.

[8] And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

B. Be Blameless [or Perfect]

God appears to Abram thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael. He is ready to turn the promise to make Abram's "name great" into a covenant. Why do you suppose He commands Abram to "walk before me, and be blameless" as He announces another covenant action?

Each time in Genesis that God has entered into a covenant with men, there has been an implicit understanding that they are to live in a way that honours Him.

- With Adam and Eve, God's commands were more positive than negative - be fruitful, have dominion, and don't eat the forbidden fruit.
- With Noah, the commands were similar - be fruitful, have dominion, and respect life.
- Now that God is formalizing a promise into a covenant (the promise to make his "name great" in Gen. 12:2), He tells Abram to live his life blamelessly before Him.

This perpetuates the pattern we have seen thus far in Genesis, in which God does a mighty thing, with mighty promises, and then requires a life appropriate to the great gift He has given man.

In Eden, God blessed man and woman with life in a beautiful garden, with each other, and with a provision for their every need. They could preserve this blessing by obedience.

With Noah, God preserved him and his family from utter destruction. He blessed them with all they needed; they could preserve this blessing by their obedience.

With Abram, God has opened heaven to heap up promises of blessings for him, his descendants, and all the earth. For his part, Abram will preserve the blessing by living his life before God in righteousness, as God directs him.

C. Be Perfect

To be "blameless" is to be "perfect." Did the episode with Hagar call forth from God this kind of exhortation? It is possible. God wants Abram's complete trust in Him, always a covenant requirement.

This is just what Jesus says to those in the New Covenant: "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Like Abram, we preserve the great gift of new life from God by walking before Him blamelessly.

"To love one's enemies, to pray for one's persecutors, is to love beyond the normal limits of the human heart. It is to love as God loves, to be perfect with the perfection of God" [Companion God – George T. Montague, S.M.]

D. Abram's Response to God

Abram falls down to the ground, in an act of complete reverence for God at his appearance and on hearing His words;

"I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless."

E. From Abram to Abraham

In this appearance to Abram, God is about to do something in and through him that will create the beginnings of a new nation.

Abram has lived for twenty-five years with God. He has occasionally stumbled, but he has never turned back from God's call to trust Him. God is pleased with Abram's faith; He changes his name to reflect the fact that He is going to make of this faithful man "a multitude of nations."

Abraham is the first person in biblical history to have his name changed by God. By doing this God is conferring a new personality and a new mission, as can be seen from the meaning of his new name, “father of a multitude of nations.”

Perhaps it was necessary for his faith to be tested before he would be ready to receive a new name like this. By living in Canaan for twenty-five years, he has left behind for good the life he once knew. Now even his name will reflect the new thing that God is doing in him.

VI. THE COVENANT OF CIRCUMCISION

Read: Genesis 17:9-14

[9] And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations.

[10] This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.

[11] You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you.

[12] He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house, or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring,

[13] both he that is born in your house and he that is bought with your money, shall be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant.

A. The Practice of Circumcision

The practice of circumcision was fairly extensive in the world of Abraham's time. The Egyptians circumcised boys at the age of 13, which would have been Ishmael's age at this time.

For the Jews, it became a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham. This is one of many instances of God's appropriating an already existing practice and dedicating it to His own purpose.

B. A Sign of the Covenant

“The most difficult part of Abraham’s covenant with God was surgical. At age 99, he assumed the obligation of amputating his foreskin. He performed this operation upon his son Ishmael at age 13, and upon all male members of his group. This action seems more traumatic than anything required of Abraham up until now” [*Come and See - Genesis, p 93*].

God makes an incredible promise to Abraham and his descendants, a promise that will be received through a rite that causes pain, blood, suffering, and a period of impotence in adults as they recover.

C. Significance of Circumcision

For Abraham, it was a test with special meaning, since it directly affected his reproductive organ - the part of his body most crucial to the production of descendants. As a sign of the covenant God made to the descendants of Abraham, it packs a powerful message.

Through a kind of "death," marvellous life will come. Through a rite that represents complete dependence on God to keep His promises (since, humanly speaking, those who receive it will be "temporarily incapacitated"), a great nation will be born.

It will also be a reminder that the child to be born to Abraham will be a miracle child, not one produced through human will, like Ishmael. It is actually a very appropriate sign of how God works His will.

It is a pre-figuring of the death and seeming impotence of Christ on the Cross. The One the Jews expected to usher in the kingdom of God was put to death as a criminal. Christ's obedience "unto death" (Phil. 2:8) opened the gates of heaven for all men, fulfilling the promise of blessing given so long ago to Abraham.

A. Baptism: the Fulfillment of Circumcision

Baptism now is the fulfillment of circumcision. It is the initiation rite of the New Covenant. Although it involves water, which seems a far cry from pain, blood, suffering, and death, the Scripture tells us that in baptism, we share in Christ's death. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3).

In Christ, death leads to life, just as in accepting the sign of circumcision, a temporary "death" led to greatness for Abraham.

Summary

1. Sarai, Abram's wife, had doubts about God keeping His promise of a son, so she came up with her own plan, using Hagar, her maid, as a surrogate mother. Abram didn't consult God about this idea; he listened to his wife, with disastrous results. The peace of the family was shattered.

2. Hagar fled from Sarai's harsh treatment; God met her in her affliction, easing her heavy load. She had to return home, but she went back as a different woman - one who had seen God and who had hope for the future.

3. Ishmael was the son born to Abram through Hagar. When he was thirteen years old, God appeared to Abram to renew the promise of making his "name great" through a dynasty of kings by sealing a covenant with him.

4. To mark the significance of this occasion, God changed Abram's name to Abraham. This new name began the fulfillment of God's promises to him and his descendants. God was about to build a new nation through His servant, Abraham.

6. God blessed Ishmael, but He refused Abraham's specific request. The promises would be kept through a miraculous birth. God's plan remained intact.

7. God commanded Abraham to circumcise all the males in his household. This would be a sign in the bodies of these men and their descendants of the covenant God had made with them. He would be their God, and they would be His people, ones for whom He would do great things and ones from whom He expected obedience.

8. Abraham's prompt response to God's command to be circumcised, even though it would cause pain and suffering, not to mention raising the possibility of needing an even more miraculous conception of a child in Sarah, made him an example for all those who enter into a covenant with God.

He demonstrated faith in God's promises, acceptance of the terms of the covenant, and sacrificial obedience to the Word of God.

Questions

1. Define COVENANT using the Catechism or a dictionary.
2. How was the covenant between God and Abram ratified? [Gen 15:9-18].
3. What would Jesus think of Sarai’s proposal to her husband Abram? [Mt. 19:4-6].
4. Who found Hagar in the wilderness and what did he tell her? [Gen 16:7-10].

Preparation for Week #14

Read:

1. Genesis Chapters 17 and 18 – RSV Catholic Edition.
2. Come and See Catholic Bible Study – Genesis Chapters 18-20.
3. The Navarre Bible: Genesis – Chapters 17 -18