

Genesis 21 Birth of Isaac

6/24/2002 6:01 AM

Overview

A. A testing journey (choose God over ancestors/descendants)	12:1-9	22:1-19
B. Threats to promises of land and seed	12:10-13:18	20-21
Sarah compromised in strange land	12:10-20	20
Strife over land	13:1-9	21:22-34
Separation from rival heir	13:10-13 (Lot)	21:9-21 (Ishmael)
Divine promise of land	13:14-18	<<lacking>>
Divine promise of seed vindicated (Isaac born)	<<lacking>>	21:1-8
C. Blessing to nations: cities of the plain; covenant with gentile	14	18:16-19:28
Birth of rival heirs (Ammon and Moab)	<<lacking>>	19:29-38
D. Covenant: land and seed	15-16	17:1-18:15
Announcement of birth	16a	18:15
Birth of rival heir (Ishmael)	16b	<<lacking!!>>

Although both B sections have similar paragraphs, they are not in the same order. The order in 20-21 is chiasmic in Abimelech:

Abimelech shows godly character	20:1-18, Sarah compromised in Philistia	21:22-23, Covenant with Abimelech over land: no separation
Distinction between true and rival heir	21:1-8, Birth of Isaac	21:9-21, Ishmael driven out

This appears to be an unfolding of the material in 12-13.

- The outer members of the chiasm in 20-21 appear together in 12:10-13:9
- The separation from Lot in 13:10-13 corresponds to the dismissal of Ishmael, motivated by the birth of Isaac (21:1-21)
- 13:14-18 sets up the promise that is developed and emphasized in all of 20-21.

Contrast with 12:10-13:18. Two details emphasize the promise of the land from 13c.

- In ch. 12, Abraham is driven out of Egypt. Here, he remains in Philistia (20:15), in spite of the same offense.
- There, strife over land forces separation between Abraham and Lot. Here, similar strife is resolved without forcing Abraham out of the land (21:34).

1-7, Birth of Isaac

After all the buildup to the birth of the promised son, the narration of the event is surprisingly terse and lean. Notice the repetition of the subject with each clause. The effect is to make each clause stand by itself as a separate paragraph, rather than tying them together into a smoothly flowing progression. Cinematically, a parallel effect would be shifting from moving pictures to a series of snapshots, a slide show instead of a movie.

Longacre notes that action slows down near the peak of a narrative. This is the ultimate slowing down.

Another characteristic of the chapter is its emphasis on joy. The Hebrew root *cxq* “to laugh” occurs in more than a quarter of the verse in the chapter, either as Isaac’s name or as the verb “to laugh.” This is the densest concentration so far in Genesis.

1-2, God’s Faithfulness

The event itself is described as simply and sparsely as it can be: “Sarah conceived and bare Abraham a son.” Like a diamond in a solitaire setting, with no other adornment around it, the fact itself needs no elaboration. Sarah and Abraham have a baby.

This fact is sandwiched between assertions of God’s faithfulness both to Sarah (before, v.1) and to Abraham (after, v.2b), two on each side, both founded in the dual promises of ch. 17 and ch. 18. Moses leaves no doubt about the supernatural nature of this occurrence. Contrast the detailed narrative in ch. 16, around the birth of Ishmael. Here, the focus is not on what Abraham and Sarah did, but on what the Lord has done.

1, God’s faithfulness to Sarah

This is the burden of v.1. His action is described twice. Source critics like to see here evidence of repetition from multiple sources. In fact, the repetition is organic to the passage:

- It corresponds to the two visits of the Lord to Abraham and Sarah (ch. 17 and ch. 18), promising them a child. The first clause recalls ch. 18, while the second recalls ch. 17 (see contrast between dashed and solid lines on handout).
- It balances the two assertions of God’s faithfulness to Abraham in 2b, on the other side of the announcement of the birth.
- The two clauses are not bare repetitions, but make distinct points.

“**And the LORD visited Sarah,**” the first of the clauses, recalls the second of the two promises, in ch. 18:10, 14, “I will certainly **return** unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. . . . Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will **return** unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.”

To what does this “return” refer? The next documented interaction between God and Abraham after ch. 18 is 21:12, subsequent to the weaning of Isaac in 21:8, but that would be three or four years after ch. 18. Probably the reference is to God’s gracious intervention in the lives of Abraham and Sarah to enable them to have a child. This is the sense of the verb “visit.” It never means simply to “drop in,” but always implies purposeful intervention in someone’s life, either for good or for bad (cf. Zech 10:3). One study on the verb concludes that its overall meaning is “determine someone’s destiny.” It indicates that God has not forgotten Sarah. He intervenes in her life as he has promised, to give her a son.

Interestingly, the LXX translates this verb with *episkeptomai*, which in the NT describes the work of a bishop or overseer. (Technical note: per TDNT, *episkeptomai* and *episkopew* are mutually suppletive, with the first used in the punctiliar tenses and the second in the durative. The ongoing work of a bishop is described with the second, but the first carries this flavor into

individual interactions.) This is the responsibility of the overseer in the NT: not to forget peoples' needs, but to watch over the flock, and intervene where necessary.

In fact, the NT explicitly makes the link between the work of the earthly overseer and that of the Lord, in 1 Pet 2:25; 5:1-4. The role of human overseers is to be the hands and feet of the Lord as he visits his people.

“and the LORD did unto Sarah” describes the actual intervention, giving Sarah conception and safe deliverance. It recalls the frequent references to God's blessing on Sarah in ch. 17.

2b, God's faithfulness to Abraham

There are also two assertions of this, balancing the two assertions of God's faithfulness to Sarah, and again based on the two promises. However, this time each assertion has roots in both promises.

“in his old age.” This word occurs only in Genesis, here and in v.7 (with reference to Abraham at the birth of Isaac), and 37:3; 44:20 (describing Joseph and Benjamin respectively as dear to Jacob). The issue here is not childlessness. The references to Jacob show that it was considered a special blessing for a man to have a son in his old age, independent of whether the man had other sons already or not. It would be a comfort to him as he grows feeble to see the continuity of life.

This assertion recalls the references to Abraham's age in both of the promises:

- 17:17, “Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall *a child* be born unto him that is an hundred years old?”
- 18:12, “Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, ... my lord being old also?”

“the set time of which God had spoken to him.” The Lord had not only promised that Abraham would enjoy the blessing of a son in old age, but also that the blessing would arrive at a certain time. In fact, the term “set time” used here appears elsewhere in Genesis only in 17 and 18, apart from 1:14 (describing the role of the heavenly bodies).

1. 17:21, “My covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year.”
2. 18:10, 14, “10 And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life. ... At the time appointed I will return unto thee.”

The point is that God has a timetable to which he is working. Cf. first (Gal 4:4) and second comings (Matt 24:36; Rev 9:15) of Christ. We are sometimes frustrated that he isn't moving fast enough. We need to remember that “in thy book all of them were written, the days were ordained, when as yet there was none of them” (Psa 139:16).

3-7, Response of the Parents

The responses of Isaac's parents to his birth illustrate the complementary contributions of their respective genders to the marriage. Abraham's response is action; Sarah's is speech. Abraham focuses on issues of obedience to the Lord; Sarah interprets the event in terms of its impact on her and Abraham.

3-5, Abraham's Response.—Abraham responds by obeying the Lord's instructions in ch. 17:

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3. 17:19, the name “Isaac,” because of Abraham’s laughter when the Lord told him that he would father a child by Sarah. Every verse in this paragraph mentions his name.
4. 17:12, the instruction to circumcise all male children on the eighth day.

With the chronological note in v.5, compare 17:1. Only a year elapsed from the promise to the fulfillment, per 17:21.

6-7, Sarah’s Response.—Sarah, as a woman, is more sensitive to the feelings involved, and her response focuses on the meaning of the event to her and to her husband.

In v.6, she reflects on her own joy. Both she and all who hear of the events will laugh with joy. This laughter is very different from the laughter of skepticism and unbelief that she (18:12) and Abraham (17:17) had uttered on previous occasions.

In v.7, she reflects on Abraham’s joy. As noted above, having a son in old age was a source of pride and joy for a man.

8-21, Exile of Ishmael

Genesis is a history of successive election, as God repeatedly distinguishes between the chosen line and those not chosen.

- 11:27, God chooses Terah from the other descendants of Noah.
- 12:1, God chooses Abraham from the family of Terah. Abraham’s nephew Lot comes along, and it seems as though he might become the heir of the childless patriarch.
- 13:11, Lot departs, leaving Abraham.

The current episode recalls the history of Lot’s departure. In both cases,

- There is a potential rival heir,
- The heir leads to strife in the family,
- And the strife is resolved with the departure of the rival.

8, Setting

To understand the reason for this feast, we need to know two things.

1. Infant mortality is very high under third world conditions.
 - In France in 1780, half of the children born died before reaching the age of two, and one authority estimates that in Europe in the eighteenth century, half of all deaths in a given year would be of children under the age of five!
(<http://www.neonatology.org/classics/holt.html>)
 - Some of this may have been due to the negative impact of cities, maternity hospitals, and wet nurses, but a study of evidence for ancient Israel
(<http://faculty.biu.ac.il/~barilm/infant.html>) suggests that 30% of infants born did not live to maturity.
 - Even in my parents’ generation: in my mothers’ home, there were five children. One died at eight days, one at age 11, and one at 20.

2. Children were nursed in antiquity much longer than today (cf. 2 Mac 7:27,28, which suggests three years).

Thus Isaac's *birth* alone would not give much assurance that he would grow to maturity, but his survival to the point of weaning was a major milestone, and Abraham celebrated it as such. Compare the celebration in 1 Sam 1:22ff on the weaning of Samuel.

9-13, Sarah's Objection

v.9, Ishmael's age at this point helps us to understand his mockery.

1. Abraham was 100 when Isaac was born, v.5.
2. Children could be weaned as old as three years, so Abraham is between 100 and 103 at this point.
3. Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born, 16:16.
4. So Ishmael at this point is between 14 and 17.

Big brother is beating up on the newcomer. He no doubt feels threatened by the degree of Abraham's celebration. He has been the only son up to this point, and now he feels cast aside. Learns from his mom, 16:4. This is very dangerous; he brings himself under the curse of 12:3.

v.10, Sarah's request is based not just on a natural desire to defend her son from the mockery of his elder half-brother, but on the legal structures of the day (the same structures that had encouraged her to offer Hagar to Abraham in the first place!) On the question of inheritance and slave children, cf. antecedents in laws of the ANE from this period:

- Lipit-Ishtar, 19th century BC, article 25: "If a man married a wife *and* she bore him children and those children are living, and a slave also bore children for her master *but* the father granted freedom to the slave and her children, the children of the slave shall not divide the estate with the children of their *former* master."
- Hammurabi, 1728-1686, articles 170-71: "When a lord's first wife bore him children and his female slave also bore him children, if the father during his lifetime has ever said "My children!" to the children whom the slave bore him, thus having counted them with the children of the first wife, after the father has gone to *his* fate, the children of the first wife and the children of the slave shall share equally in the goods of the paternal estate, with the first-born, the son of the first wife, receiving a preferential share."

11-13, Abraham's Hesitation and God's Confirmation

Sarah's insistence is disappointing to Abraham. His love for Ishmael is already evident in 17:18. But the Lord confirms her judgment in this matter. It is God's purpose for Isaac, not Ishmael, to be the heir, and so within the legal structure of the society of that time, Hagar and her son must be set free and released from the household.

God's approval of Sarah's decision is reflected in Paul's use of this passage in Gal. 4:21-31.

- 21-23 recount the facts of the history: two sons, one after the flesh, the other by promise; one bond, the other free.

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- 24-27 develop an allegory of the two covenants from this history. The covenants themselves were introduced in 3:16,17, the Abrahamic covenant of grace, followed by the law.
 - 24b-25 makes Hagar correspond to Mount Sinai, characterized by bondage. V.25: “This [word] ‘Hagar’ means ‘Mount Sinai’ in Arabia...” (Alford, following Chrysostom, and noting the neuter article on “Hagar”). V.25 establishes the basic categories:
 - The *mother* (Hagar), which alludes to Mt. Sinai
 - *Earthly* Jerusalem
 - Its state is *bondage*.
 - Those who suffer that bondage (“her children,” the *Jews*)
 - 26-27 draws the natural parallel.
 - The *mother* must be Sarah. She is not explicitly mentioned, but implicit in the comparison in v.27, from Isa 54:1.
 - The focus is on *heavenly* Jerusalem
 - Its state is *freedom*
 - Those who enjoy that freedom are “us all,” the *believers*.
- 28-31 apply it to us.
 - 28: we, like Isaac, are children of promise, not fleshly works. We are saved by God’s sovereign grace.
 - 29: we should expect persecution from those who are trying to procure salvation by the strength of the flesh. (Recall context of Galatians here: Paul is encouraging the Galatians not to submit to the circumcision being urged upon them by Judaizers.)
 - 30: we should separate ourselves from this teaching of bondage, for we are free, not under bondage.

Thus the NT reinforces what we learn from the Lord’s words to Abraham, that in this case Sarah’s judgment is correct. We can draw several lessons from the history in Genesis.

- The nature of headship in the home. It does *not* mean that the man has all the good ideas. In this case, Sarah has the correct insight, and Abraham is clinging to the flesh. Sarah makes her desire known. Abraham takes it into account in his meditation before the Lord., and when the Lord confirms it, he executes it faithfully.
- Consequences of disobedience. We must be very calloused if we do not share Abraham’s sense that an injustice is being done to Hagar and Ishmael. It is not their fault that Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham, or that a son was born, and Ishmael’s mocking, while wrong, is certainly understandable. Abraham and Sarah sinned back in ch. 16, and others suffer for it. We do not live in a vacuum, and we never sin in privacy. When we are tempted to sin against the Lord, let us pause to consider the pain we will bring to others as well as the dishonor we bring to his name.

- The absolute nature of righteousness. Abraham might be tempted to say, “This mess is my fault, so I’ll let you stay.” But Isaac must not be challenged as the heir; the usurper must go. Yesterday’s sin never excuses today’s. Doing right today may be more difficult because we didn’t do right yesterday, but that’s all the more reason to get back on the road now; if we sin again today, we’ll be even more deeply mired in the mud. Like wandering off the road: the sooner you head back, the less work it will be to set things right again.
- Impossibility of persisting with a mixed multitude. The church, like Abraham’s household, should not tolerate those who deny its fundamental truths. Cf. Paul’s teachings concerning excommunication in his epistles (Tit 3:10; 1 Cor 5:13), perhaps echoed in Gal 4:30; 5:12 “cut off.”

14-21, Departure of Hagar and Ishmael

14a, Abraham sends Hagar away.—Two details merit attention.

1. “Abraham rose up early in the morning.” As unpleasant as the task is to him, he does not defer it. In fact, he makes it top priority, perhaps to avoid any temptation to procrastinate. Here we see his devotion to obey the Lord’s clear command. Once he sees clearly what he must do, he does it right away. We will see this again in the next chapter, where the same expression describes his obedience to the command to sacrifice Isaac.
2. Abraham gives Hagar only what she can carry. Why does he not provide her with an ass laden with provisions? Ch. 16 provides a possible explanation. There, she fled on her own, without the ability to take much provision at all, from the area near Hebron, farther from Egypt than Gerar was, and still was able to make her way to a “fountain in the way to Shur” (16:7). Abraham assumes that she will head back to Egypt, and gives her enough to reach the next town along the road to Egypt.

14b-16, Hagar becomes lost and prepares to die.—But she does not head SW to Egypt. Whether through confusion or reluctance to leave, she wanders eastward, and eventually runs out of water. With the water gone, death is not far off. She prepares herself to await the inevitable, and weeps in despair.

17-18, God appears to Hagar.—As in ch. 16, God intervenes.

The clause “God heard the voice of the lad” is noteworthy for two reasons.

1. It contains a hidden occurrence of Ishmael’s name. Otherwise the boy is unnamed in the episode, fading into the background as Isaac becomes prominent. But the phrase “God heard” is in Hebrew “wayishma ‘el”, echoing his name, “yishma ‘el”, reminding us that God’s earlier promise to Hagar still holds. He is as faithful to his promise to her as he is to his promise to Abraham.
2. It is Hagar whose weeping is mentioned in v.16. Why then is God said to hear the boy’s voice, especially since in ch. 16 it was Hagar’s affliction that caught his attention (16:11)? Perhaps because there it was Hagar’s offense that led to her departure, while here it is Ishmael’s. There may be some suggestion of penitence on the part of the boy for his rude treatment of Isaac.

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God once again appears to her as “the angel of God.” In ch. 16, he appeared in human form. This time, he speaks from heaven, emphasizing his authority.

- Note the characteristic alternation between his role as God’s messenger (“the angel of God,” “God hath heard”) and his identity with God (“I will make him a great nation”). These frequent appearances of “the angel of God” in the OT are probably what Micah 5:2 has in mind when it says that Messiah’s “goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” The “angel of God” or “the angel of the Lord” is the preincarnate Word.
- The usual title (and the one used in ch. 16) is “angel of the Lord,” but here he is “the angel of God.” In ch. 16, Hagar was to return to Abraham’s house; she was still seen as under the protection of God’s covenant with Abraham. Here the change in title emphasizes that Ishmael has been severed from that covenant.
- “The angel of the Lord” is mentioned 52x in the OT, and “the angel of God” 10x. They often appear to Israelites, but it is interesting that the first appearance of each is to Hagar, a Gentile! One great change with the coming of Israel’s Messiah is the integration of Gentiles into the people of God. It is interesting that the first appearances of the one who later becomes the Messiah are to a Gentile.
- Lesson: The Word of God is the one mediator between God and men, OT or NT, Jew or Gentile. This is why he is at the center of the church’s gathering and worship.

His question “What aileth thee, Hagar?” reminds us of the previous questions that God asks people:

- Adam (3:9, “where art thou?” 11, “hast thou eaten of the tree?”),
- Eve (3:13, “what is this that thou hast done?”),
- Cain (4:9, “where is Abel thy brother?” 10, “what hast thou done?”),
- Hagar (16:8, “whence camest thou? Whither wilt thou go?”)

These questions are always more didactic than curious. They are asked not to gain information but to call the person to account and force them to think of some incongruity in their action. In every case so far, they imply a reproof or rebuke. This leads us to focus deeper on what may be the sin that requires rebuke in this case.

The AV’s translation here is beautifully idiomatic, and was part of common English speech down to my mother’s time. I can remember her saying, “I don’t know what ails so and so, that he would behave that way.” The question calls attention to unexpected conduct. The Hebrew is literally, “What do you have?” and is regularly translated this way in the AV. We might say today, “What’s with you?”

Why is Hagar’s conduct unexpected? She has forgotten the promise of 16:10. There is no reason for her to give up and surrender herself and her son to death. Yes, it must have been heartbreaking to be cast out of Abraham’s household, but God will be faithful to his promise. She must not let her emotions overwhelm her, but rather should look confidently to him to do what he has said for her son, and thus for her.

God’s question is a tender rebuke to her, and is followed two commands. Each has a motive, based on God’s earlier revelation of himself to her in ch. 16.

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1. “Fear not,” for “God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is.” Even in the burning desert, hid from the heavens by a bush, God can hear him. She should have known this, for in 16:13 she confessed, “Thou God seest me,” recognizing that nothing is hid from God’s knowledge.
2. “Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him with [hardly ‘in’] thine hand,” for “I will make him a great nation.” She should not abandon her son, but devote herself to his welfare, strengthening, helping, encouraging him, preparing him for the destiny that God has graciously prepared for him. She should have known this as well, for 16:10 promised that her seed would become a multitude.

19, Deliverance.—God enables her to see a nearby well. He does not open a spring in the rock, as he does for Israel in the wilderness. Apparently, the well was there all along, but in her distraught condition she could not see it. Her lapse of faith is all the more notable because it happened in full view of provision that the Lord was indeed leading her. How often do we fall into despair over circumstances, without recognizing that God has faithfully made provision for us already.

- Compare God’s words to Moses in Exod 4:2: by means of the rod that was already in his hand he would work wonders to deliver Israel from Egypt.
- 2 Kings 6:17, Elisha’s servant couldn’t see the host the Lord had already deployed to protect them from the army of Syria
- Luke 24:16, 32, how the Lord can be walking with us but our doubts can keep us from being sensitive to his presence.

20,21, Sequel.—Ishmael grows under God’s care and his mother’s love.

- God is faithful to his promise to this Gentile family. He protects Ishmael as he matures and develops the skills he needs to survive in the desert lands of NE Sinai (“wilderness of Paran”).
- Since Ishmael has no father to procure a wife for him, his mother undertakes this duty. There are two valuable lessons here for young people contemplating marriage.
 - Like Abraham in ch. 24, she returns to her kinsfolk to find a wife for him. This is wise, since it reduces the differences that must be accommodated in a marriage.
 - However, it is bad because it removes Ishmael even further from the knowledge of the true God. Abraham’s kin in Haran were no saints (Laban was still harboring household gods in the time of Jacob, 31:30), but at least they recognized the call of God to Abraham and had accompanied him from Ur as far as Haran, and those wives would come to live in Abraham’s extended family, where that knowledge would be preserved. There is no such hope for Ishmael’s wife, and it is not surprising that his descendants drifted off into idolatry (the universal state of the Arabs until the rise of Mohammed in AD 600).

22-34, Abraham and Abimelech

22a, Setting

“At that time,” at the time of Isaac’s weaning, when these powerful neighbors were invited to the feast. Thus it is not said that they came, but only that they spoke.

Each side has an issue; each is resolved with a covenant.

22b-24, Abimelech’s Issue

He makes a statement and a request.

Statement: he recognizes God’s blessing on Abraham.

- The appearance of God to him when he took Sarah
- The healing that came when Abraham interceded for him
- Now, the birth of a son under unnatural circumstances.

Note the statement, “God is with you.” This is what all men deeply desire:

- 1 Cor 14:25, the confession of Gentiles when they see the work of the Spirit in the church
- Isa 45:14; Zech 8:23, Israel during the Millennium.

Ever since Adam was cast out of the garden, the deep desire of the human soul is to be with God. This was what Abimelech desired; he saw God’s presence with Abraham, even though Abraham didn’t always appreciate it. “God is with thee in all that thou doest.” Even when he lied about Sarah, or doubted God’s promise and took Hagar, God was with him.

There are three lessons here for us.

- God is with us, too. Compare our Saviour’s title of “Immanuel” and his promise to be with us to the end of the age. Like Abraham, we sometimes forget his gracious company, but we should treasure it.
- If we acknowledge him as our Lord, his blessings on us can be a witness to those around us. The most basic form of witness is simply being known as his children.
- Note the nobility of those who are seeking for this fellowship. Abimelech bears comparison with other kings with whom Abraham has dealings. In only one other case does Abraham give gifts to the king, and that is the King of Sodom, 14:21-24, who comes demanding physical wealth. Abimelech recognizes that the greatest thing Abraham has to give him is not wealth, but the knowledge of God.

Request: He asks Abraham for an oath. The oath is both negative and positive. Consider the positive side first.

- Positively, Abraham is to return Abimelech’s kindness, his *xesed*. This term is used in the first instance to describe the reciprocal obligations inherent in close human relations, such as man and wife (Gen 20:13; Ruth 1:8), cousins (Gen 24:49), father and son (47:29), friends (David and Jonathan), or as here, host and guest (cf. also Jos 2:12,14). The fact that Abimelech asks for a promise of it here suggests that he realizes he may not always

be in the position of host, and he wants to ensure that as Abraham becomes stronger, he treats Abimelech as Abimelech has treated him. Similar instances of a host requesting *xesed* of a guest who is in the ascendancy: Jos 2:12,14; Gen 19:19.

- Negatively, Abraham is not to deal falsely with him or his descendants. Language about “truth” and “falsehood” is often associated with *xesed*, and this should be understood here as the opposite side of the coin of the positive promise. Now that the continuity of Abraham’s family is assured, Abimelech wants reassurance that Abraham will not betray their relationship.

By asking Abraham to “swear,” he is asking for a formal agreement, that is, a covenant. The relation between *xesed* and “covenant” is very close. In fact, “*xesed* is the real essence of the covenant” (Glueck), cf. 1 Sam 20:8 between David and Solomon.

Abraham agrees to this, but before executing the covenant, there is some open business that must be finished.

25-26, Abraham’s Issue

Before executing the required covenant, Abraham raises an issue that up until now he has disregarded.

The *issue at hand* is dispute over access to a well that, according to v.30, Abraham had dug. In this arid land, access to water is a matter of life and death. Though not usually mentioned, it is at the center of the Palestinian/Israeli struggle: the West Bank’s water comes from rainfall on the western slopes of the Judaeen hills, which is out of their control as long as Israel exists.

Abraham’s *attitude* is commendable. He has not made an issue of it up until now, manifesting the spirit of Prov. 19:11, “The discretion of a man deferreth his anger; and *it is* his glory to pass over a transgression.” But now Abimelech is requesting a more formal relation, and Abraham wants to be sure that there are no unresolved issues that might poison their interactions. So he is duty-bound to raise the matter at this point, and does.

Abimelech’s *response* is to completely dissociate himself from the offense.

This episode is an illustration of what the Lord requires of us in Matt 18:15-20. Note the condition: “If thy **brother** shall trespass against thee.” In keeping with Prov. 19:11, we ought not to harp on every offense that comes our way. But within a close relationship, such as the family or the church, we must keep short accounts, or the intimacy of the relationship will be destroyed. Note the apparent irony of this: we are often reluctant to confront people for fear of losing their friendship, but in fact, to stay close to people, we must be willing to confront them. Prov 27:6, “Faithful *are* the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy *are* deceitful.” In fact, Ps 141:5 says that it is *xesed* for the righteous to rebuke a saint.

With this matter out of the way, the covenant-making can proceed. There are either two separate covenants, or one with two parts.

27, The First Covenant

Apparently, this is a general covenant of friendship, responding to Abimelech’s request. Note that Abraham is returning part of what Abimelech had given him in 20:14. Perhaps the gesture is

meant to echo what Abimelech had requested: “I have showed *xesed*, hospitality, to you; you do the same to me.” So Abraham does so.

28-32a, The Second Covenant

The second covenant deals with the matter of the well. Abraham makes a special gift of seven ewe lambs as a sign of their agreement over the matter of the well.

- The relevance of the sign is that the economy in this area is primarily pastoral, not agricultural. The function of a well is to water the flocks, not to irrigate the ground. With Abraham’s ewes among their flocks, bearing future generations, Abimelech’s servants will think twice before they try to displace him from the wells he has dug for his own flocks.
- Why seven lambs? Not only for the sacred use of the number, but also because of a pun. Seven is *sheba*, and the verb “to swear” is *shaba*, with the cognate noun “oath” *shebua*. The very number of the lambs indicates the seriousness of the commitment they are undertaking.
- We have here also an instance of the usefulness of symbols in commemorating important events. Compare wedding rings. Our memory is weak; symbols help make important things vivid to us. The greatest examples are the sacraments, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which remind us of our death and resurrection with Christ and of his sacrifice for us.

The name records this covenant. “Beer-sheba” means literally, “the well of seven,” and then through the pun, “the well of the oath.”

32b-34, Sequel

32, 34, “land of the Philistines”.—This is sometimes criticized as anachronistic, since the Philistines are not mentioned in secular historical documents until 1190. They were sea people from Crete and the Aegean isles who settled in the levant, and in fact gave it the name “Palestine.” But there are records to trade with Crete in the patriarchal age (the Mari archives), and Cretan artifacts from this period at various archaeological sites, so we should understand Abimelech and his people as an earlier wave of settlers from the same ethnic stock that later settled the pentapolis of Gaza, Ekron, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gath.

The reference is important, in establishing the right of Abraham and his people to move freely in this area. David’s later wars with the Philistines are thus rectifying a breach of this covenant on the part of the Philistines.

33, Abraham’s devotions.—Early in Abraham’s history we had references to his acts of worship. These disappear after ch. 13, but now return. Note two classes of worship:

- built an altar or planted a tree (not “grove,” which elsewhere is a different word, *asherah*, referring to a Canaanite idol): 12:7 (Shechem), 8 (Bethel, cf. 13:4); 13:18 (Oaks of Mamre); 21:33 (Beersheba); 22:9 (Jerusalem)
- called on the name of the Lord: 12:8; 13:4; 21:33

Genesis 21 Birth of Isaac

We discussed calling on the name of the Lord when we first encountered the expression in 4:26. The distinctive feature of this action is public proclamation. It may be translated, “to make proclamation with the name of the Lord,” crying aloud while uttering the Lord’s name. As in ch. 4, the concept to be noted is “worship as witness.” It is the duty of God’s people to be known as such, to “Praise the LORD, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted” (Isa 12:4).

The altars (in this case, a memorial tree, especially noteworthy in an arid land) had the function of enhancing and strengthening the public nature of his worship. They were a persistent marker of his devotion, visible to all who might pass by.

These devotions are mentioned in every location of Abraham’s sojourn except Egypt and (until now) the land of the Philistines. (The altar in 13:18 would have provided his testimony throughout the sojourn at the Oaks of Mamre.) The embarrassing experience with Abimelech in ch. 20, and Abimelech’s statement in 21:22, have showed Abraham the importance of these public declarations, and he now remedies his neglect by belatedly declaring his devotion to the Lord.

He does so under the name “the everlasting God,” *el olam. am olam* in Ezek 26:19,20 refers to the prediluvians, wiped out by the flood, and it has been thought that *olam* refers in general to the world before the flood. The point here would then be that Abraham recognizes the Lord as the same God from before the flood. The Lord is not just a random God who happens to have spoken to him, but the only God who has ever acted. Compare *el elyon qoneh shamayim wearec* in 14, which combines old Canaanite names and transforms them into a title of the Lord.

Notes for ch. 21

Abraham’s Foreign Relations

The interactions with Abimelech should be compared with those with other gentiles.

Ref	Person	Abraham...	Initiator	
12:14-20	Pharaoh	Receives	Pharaoh	
14:13	Mamre	Gives (24)	Abraham?	
14:18a	Melchizedek as King	Receives	Melchizedek	
14:18b-20	Melchizedek as priest	Gives	Melchizedek	
14:21-24	King of Sodom	Gives	Sodom	
20:1-18	Abimelech	Receives	Abimelech	
21:22-33	Abimelech	Gives	Abimelech	

Excursus on Chronology of Abraham

12:4, 75 when he left Haran.

16:16, 86 at birth of Ishmael

17:1, 99 at the announcement of Isaac’s birth

21:5, 100 when Isaac was born

Genesis 21 Birth of Isaac

Other Notes

21:14, “Abraham rose up early in the AM,” cf. 19:27 (to check on status of Lot) and 22:3 (to sacrifice Isaac).

The Ishmael episode resembles

- Sacrifice of Isaac (parent taking child away to apparent doom)
- Deception of Abimelech (God intervening with a pagan)