

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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THE MIRACLE BABY: THE SON (*GENESIS 21*)

Abraham desperately wanted an heir. Not only did he have quite a bit of property for an inheritance, but he also was realizing more and more the spiritual inheritance that God had given him. The stipulations of this Covenant was that Abraham would pass it on to his descendants; it was a family treasure, and was not intended for any except the family of Abraham.

But who would be that heir? He and Sarah had already tried having a “legal” son through Hagar, Sarah’s handmaid; but God rejected that solution. There was something far more powerful about to happen in their lives, an aspect of the Covenant that they didn’t anticipate: only the son who was *born a certain way* would be the Heir of the Covenant. There are natural sons in this world, and then there are spiritual sons – sons and daughters born by the Spirit of God. Only they would have the ability to experience this new life; to them only would go the rights to inherit the new world of God.

Fulfilling his Word – The LORD went back to Sarah, “visited” Sarah as one keeping an appointment, and gave her a son according to what he had said to her earlier.

Most translations give the word as “promised” in these two verses (1-2). Actually the word “promised” doesn’t do the situation full justice. The Hebrew word that our translations render as “promised” in this passage is דָּבַר, *dabar*. Literally it means “to speak.” Here’s a better translation: “And the LORD visited Sarah just as he had said, and the LORD did to (*or for*) Sarah just as he had spoken ... at the appointed time which God had spoken to [*Abraham*].”¹

¹ The NIV uses “promise” in both places, the ESV only in the first instance. The KJV translates both instances correctly with “spoken.” This may seem like a technicality, but translators shouldn’t interpret a passage first; they should tell us what it literally says. In this case, taking Paul’s use of the word “promise” back to this particular passage is unfounded; he’s looking at the larger theological picture. Paul is referring to 15:4, not 18:12.

The translation “he had spoken” is more accurate in this context. The Promise that God made to Abraham about a son and heir was one of the four great Promises of the Covenant that he gave him in chapter 15. What God said to Sarah in chapter 18 was more of a personal nature – being childless was a grief to her.

The greater Promise was not for Sarah’s pleasure (18:12) but to enable an eternal Plan from the foundation of the world. (Ephesians 1:4) God was about to do a miracle that would be the theological definition of the spiritual birth of all the children of God who would be born into Abraham’s Family for the next 4000 years. The Promise was a global, not an individual, matter.

This son will be a special kind of son:

- He will know God.
- He will be born of the Spirit’s power.
- He will inherit God’s Treasures.

That’s the Promise that God made to Abraham and Sarah. The Promise

included much more than a local family event.

Paul tells us that “the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through Promise.” (Galatians 4:23) The Promise that he’s referring to was one of the four Covenant Promises made to Abraham, which when fulfilled would become the Family inheritance for all of Abraham’s descendants. So the concept of the “child of Promise” was far greater than giving Sarah the child she wanted; it was a declaration of the will of God for all the children of Abraham’s spiritual Family, a precursor of a special work of God. It’s the creative Word that has come from God to form and shape his new children into what he wants them to be. “*Let there be ... a son for Sarah,*” a son made in the image of the Eternal Son who is destined to live with God in Heaven.

Isaac – The name Isaac means “he laughs.” Remember that Abraham and Sarah both laughed at the idea of having a son in their old age. Physical miracles just weren’t in their conception of the works of God at this point, a problem that no doubt we would all have.

But to impress Abraham with the fact that he can do the impossible (“with God all things are possible!” – Matthew 19:26), God instructed them to name the baby “he laughs” – to show that God had the last laugh here. It served as a perpetual reminder to the family that their God did things that no other god could do, and God would provide all that they needed even if it were impossible, naturally speaking. If God thinks it’s necessary, then he *will* provide it one way or another.

The Miracle Baby – Now we get to the crux of the matter. The reason Sarah

was enabled to conceive and have a baby was because of *the hand of God*. The point of this whole event was that God did a miracle.

The reason for the miracle is crucial. The Apostle Paul guides us in finding the right interpretation here.

Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise ... born according to the Spirit. (Galatians 4:28-29)

A miracle, by definition, is something that only God can do. The Spirit of God does the impossible in the physical world; he creates where there is nothing – just as we saw in the Creation account. So we are to learn that the real descendants of Abraham are going to be created as new sons of God, with a character befitting their station:

- The spirit-born children are children of God, and know him as their Father. They are no longer in the dark about who God is; they see him for what he is, hear his Word, and feel his hand upon their lives.
- They live by faith – that spiritual skill that the Spirit gives all the sons of God to enable them to see, experience, and live in God’s spiritual world.
- They taste and enjoy the spiritual treasures that the Father has for their inheritance.
- They share in the Father’s glory – which includes his righteousness, his holiness, his wisdom, his power, his authority.

In other words, the son born by the power of the Spirit has a new destiny

that lifts him/her² up into the world of God so that God becomes real to them, not just a tradition or a legend.

Trouble with Ishmael – Ishmael was probably about fourteen at the celebration of Isaac’s weaning. He was already manifesting his inclination to be a troublesome youth. Surely he would have understood the issue by then – that his mother had second-class status, so to speak (and had in fact been thrown out at one point), and that the nature of Isaac’s birth had entitled him to a more solid claim to the inheritance than Ishmael would have. And yet he stupidly mocked the Heir who was the only one who could protect him and ensure his own future. Didn’t he realize that he was rejecting the benefits of the Covenant? It seems that a dangerous trend was starting to develop within the family of Abraham. Ishmael’s half-nephew Esau (Isaac’s firstborn son) would despise the birthright as well.

Isaac was special in the *way* he was born. The importance of Isaac was that the Spirit of God made the impossible happen; he was the child born by the Spirit, not by natural means.

This is the point that Paul makes about this story. Paul sees the real difference between Jew and Christian to be the *spiritual* birth and the *spiritual* inheritance that one son rejects and the other son receives as a gift.

Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. (Galatians 4:25-26)

The Jews have rejected Christ precisely because he came to bring the children of God out of the old physical system of the Jews and into a new spiritual creation, not of this world, made of eternal treasures, before the presence of God in Heaven. And in order to accomplish this he has to give them his Spirit so that they can be “born again.” This is the concept that the Jews are so offended with in Christianity. The doctrine of Christianity is no offense to them; it’s all taken from Jewish Scriptures. The offense stems from the idea of the miracle of our spiritual birth and the new kind of world that the Son becomes part of. We now receive what they rejected. And the root of their trouble is their hatred of, and their despising of, the Son born of miracle, the Eternal Son born in flesh and blood, who came to gather his brothers and sisters to take them back with him to his Father in Heaven.

And so by despising Isaac, Ishmael was distancing himself from this aspect of the Inheritance – the special Son with a new kind of life – just as all others do when they despise Christians. They only want this world.

There’s something deeper here that is unfortunate but inevitable: from then on there would be war between the two sides. The people of darkness hate those of the light; there can never be reconciliation because they have two different worldviews, two different value systems that are irreconcilable. Though they should have been the heirs, the rejected sons can’t see God, the spiritual world makes no sense to them and has no value to them, and their ethics center on their own desires; and on the other side, immorality and idolatry and oppression and destruction make perfect sense to them. Given these diametrically

² There is no gender to the soul; all true children of the Father have the rights of the Firstborn Son.

opposed views, one can hardly expect peace. Particularly when they live in the same world and have to share the same resources – as did Isaac and Ishmael in Abraham’s camp.

Sarah was acutely offended with Ishmael’s behavior. We could attribute this simply to a mother’s protective feelings toward her own son, but again that would be introducing mere moralisms into the story about the Covenant. Let’s assume that she knew full well what the Inheritance entailed, and the reason for her son’s special birth, and the true value of the Family’s relationship with God not only in the short term but also in the long run – according to the Promise of “millions of descendants” living in the Promised Land. These concepts were not secrets; they were the Family Treasure. For Ishmael to despise God’s chosen method for carrying out his Promises would be an offence to *anybody* (let alone Isaac’s mother) who was looking forward to this amazing and unique future. Isaac was not just her son, he was special in God’s eyes. Proper respect for that would have no doubt gone a long way with Sarah; but since Ishmael showed his character by despising the work of God, he obviously didn’t fit in with the Family destiny – firstborn son though he was.

He will never share – In order to understand the full impact of this condemnation of Ishmael, we have to keep in mind two things: *first*, he was Abraham’s son. *Second*, he was the firstborn son. On both counts one would have expected him to receive at least something from his father.

It’s what he was missing out on that is the point. From this point on, Ishmael and his descendants would live in the desert while Abraham’s family

eventually went on to Egypt, then came out to take over the Promised Land. The Israelites would live with God; they would have the Temple and the sacrificial system and forgiveness of sins; they would have the Word of God guiding them and teaching them; they would have the Prophets; they would have the blessings of the Covenant. Ishmael’s descendants, though living in the same area, would have access to none of these things.

Even if Ishmael and his descendants had wanted them (which they didn’t), they couldn’t have them. The LORD told Abraham that “through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” The Ishmaelites were legally cut out of the picture.

This is a sobering view of the destiny of the descendants of Ishmael. Let’s trace it out further. Not only were they being cut out of the Covenant Inheritance that the Israelites would experience in the Promised Land, but they were also cut off from the spiritual reality that those physical blessings represented. As Abraham and Moses and David and Daniel “looked ahead” and saw the Christ, and the Heavenly City “being prepared for them,” the Ishmaelites had no such hope. It was true that they would themselves grow into “many nations” in the Middle East, but that was small consolation when one has to live in a world of war and oppression and poverty and hardship and disease and death without a trace of any benefits of knowing God. With the presence of God came the circumcision of the heart, the Word of God, the cleansing of the conscience, the peace. None of the descendants of Ishmael could say, for example, with David, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my

heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.” (Psalm 84:1-2) All these were spiritual foretastes that the Israelites enjoyed in their physical setting in Canaan; but the Ishmaelites had no experience of these, no true joy in life, and no hope beyond the physical.

Again we have to follow Paul’s lead here as he identifies the Jerusalem of his day (i.e., the unbelieving Jews) with Hagar’s son. He’s not tracing biological lines here, he is looking at the spiritual genetic line – and therefore so must we. Whoever is not born of the Spirit is without hope and without God. Life for them is vain: “All his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger,” (Ecclesiastes 5:17) filled with emptiness and darkness, a life wasted in the end, having achieved nothing. To Paul, the point is not so much who you are genetically related to, but what you have missed out on – the work of the Spirit that brings life. “This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:3)

There’s a finality about Hell that is truly alarming: the dead will be cut off, with no access to God, with no light and no hope forever. Hell is the destiny of unbelievers; this is God’s decree.

Through Isaac – The LORD chose a specific line of Abraham’s descendants to receive the Covenant Promises – the second-born son, not the firstborn. On the surface it simply means that the Inheritance passed on down to Isaac’s son Jacob, and through him to the Twelve Tribes of Israel – a separate branch and Nation from the Ishmaelites.

Because of the nature of Isaac’s birth, however, there was a new principle at work in Abraham’s Family. From now

on, the chosen heirs are descendants of the Miracle Baby.³

Who then are these descendants? How do we identify them? We’ve learned several things so far. *First*, we know that since they are descendants of Abraham, they share the Family characteristic – faith. Faith is being able to see the true God, to hear his voice, to know his Word.

We also know, *second*, that the descendants of Abraham are the ones who have left the world behind and are wandering “as strangers and aliens” on their way to the Promised Land. People who have their roots only in this world have nothing more than this world; “Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.” (Matthew 6:2) Abraham’s Family, however, is looking forward to a new, better, spiritual world.

Third, we now know that Abraham’s descendants are born by the Spirit, not in the natural way. By choosing Isaac instead of Ishmael, God was creating another essential principle of the Family.

He was not done yet, of course. There would be other Family characteristics, and other principles that are essential to the Covenant. But as every generation learned a new principle, it got added to the list so that by the end of Genesis we have a full description of those who qualify as Abraham’s descendants. We can also see that this list applies to the New Testament Church as well, because Jesus came to give the Inheritance of the Son to only Abraham’s spiritual Family.

Into the desert – For the second time Hagar and her son were thrown out of the camp of Abraham. It’s not as if

³ In fact, none of the physically firstborn sons were appointed as the spiritually firstborn.

Abraham had wanted it this way; he had loved his son Ishmael even from the beginning. But God agreed with Sarah: Ishmael had no right to the Covenant Inheritance. Sarah saw the legal problem, and God saw the spiritual problem. Abraham, evidently, had problems seeing both perspectives. But in obedience he himself sent Hagar away.

This was the beginning of Ishmael's life in the desert. He didn't wander far from his father Abraham. His descendants became the Arabs, later the main constituency of the Muslims in the Middle East. Their primary home was in the desert as nomads and wanderers, basically staying out of everyone else's way and traveling back and forth between Mesopotamia and Egypt.

God hears – And yet, even in light of their consignment to desert life, Ishmael's descendants were an amazingly cohesive group. God made a special promise to Hagar that her son would become “a great nation.”

They may not have shared in the Inheritance of the Covenant with the Israelites, but they certainly have lasted a long time in history – they are still with us, 4000 years after the life of their ancestor. It seems evident that we can attribute that longevity not to any special blessing they have inherited from Abraham (they had none) but rather as an act of kindness to Abraham himself. God held Abraham in high esteem; he was, remember, God's friend. In every way God showed his favor to his friend Abraham by blessing all members of his family, near relations and far. For Abraham's sake, therefore, Ishmael and his descendants would know long life even in the harsh conditions of the desert. Again we see the importance of

being under Abraham's umbrella of protection.

This situation raises the theological point of why exactly anybody receives anything at all from God – it's certainly not because of something in ourselves. The gifts have come down to us only because of the high esteem and loving kindness shown to the Heir, from whom we Christians receive our share of the Inheritance.

The Point – What we're seeing in this story is the stark contrast between the Heir and the one who inherits nothing. If it were up to the father of the two boys, they might have had to share the inheritance (remember Abraham's remonstrance in Genesis 17:18). But only one son would be the heir, and his unique birth was the qualification of his legal right – it's the foundation stone that God would use to qualify all the true descendants of Abraham. The only hope that anybody has for life with God is to be born of the Spirit, as was Isaac. The true children of God live in faith, and are looking for a spiritual home, not this world.

The spiritual side of the Covenant will be revealed in detail in the New Testament, where we see why God was so insistent on this point in Genesis. It's because Jesus shares *his* Inheritance, his position beside the throne of God, with those of the faith of Abraham. And only re-created souls, with bodies raised from the dead and transformed into spiritual bodies, will be capable of such life.

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