

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
Genesis 20 & 21 – Gerar, Abimelech, and the Birth of Isaac

OUTLINE OF THE ABRAHAM STORY – Genesis 12-25

Genesis 12: 1– 9	God calls and blesses Abram and he moves west into Canaan.
Genesis 12: 10– 20	Abraham risks his blessing in Egypt by giving up Sarai.
Genesis 13: 1 –18	Abraham and Lot divide their territory and Abraham receives Palestine.
Genesis 14: 1– 24	Abraham shows himself a hero and blessed in warfare.
Genesis 15: 1– 21	God renews his promises and makes a covenant with Abraham, but after declaring a curse.
Genesis 16: 1– 16	Abraham risks the promise of a son by taking Hagar to bear Ishmael.
Genesis 17: 1– 27	God renews his covenant and promise of a son, but commands Abraham to take on the sign of circumcision.
Genesis 18: 1– 15	God renews his promise to give a son to Sarah and Abraham.
Genesis 18: 16– 33	Abraham shows his blessing by interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah.
Genesis 19: 1– 38	Lot proves to be the only faithful person in Sodom; it is destroyed.
Genesis 20: 1– 18	Abraham risks the blessing to Sarah with Abimelech, the king of Gerar.
Genesis 21: 1– 21	God gives the blessing of a son, Isaac, and sends Ishmael away.
Genesis 21: 22– 34	Abraham makes a treaty with Abimelech and his people.
Genesis 22: 1– 24	Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God.
Genesis 23: 1– 20	Abraham lays claim to possession of the land by buying the cave of Machpelah to bury Sarah and himself.
Genesis 24: 1– 67	Abraham arranges a wife for Isaac to continue the blessing.
Genesis 25: 1– 18	Abraham’s death and burial; Ishmael’s descendants; the blessing passes to Isaac.

CHIASM IN THE ABRAHAM STORY; TAKE TWO

- A** Genealogy of Terah (11:27–32)
 - B** Start of Abram’s Spiritual Odyssey (12:1–9)
 - C** Sarai in foreign palace; ordeal ends in peace and success; Abram and Lot part (12:1–13:18)
 - D** Abram comes to the rescue of Sodom and Lot (14:1–24)
 - E** Covenant with Abram; Annunciation of Ishmael (15:1–16:16)
 - Focal Point** 17:1–5: Abram > Abraham | Elohim introduced | covenant
 - E’** Covenant with Abraham; Annunciation of Isaac (17:1–18:15)
 - D’** Abraham comes to the rescue of Sodom and Lot (18:16–19:38)
 - C’** Sarah in foreign palace; ordeal ends in peace and success; Abraham and Ishmael part (20:1–21:34)
 - B’** Climax of Abraham’s Spiritual Odyssey (22:1–19)
- A’** Genealogy of Nahor (22:20–24)

CHAPTER 20 – ABRAHAM AND SARAH AT GERAR

Abraham and Sarah head toward the Negeb, abandoning their long held encampment near Hebron at the oaks of Mamre and to Gerar (about thirty-five miles from Hebron). Abraham once again, tells the local king (Abimelech; whose name means “my father is king”) that Sarah is his sister (hey! It worked in Egypt). But God appears to Abimelech in a dream and reveals the deception. Abimelech pleads with God that he did everything with integrity. God agrees but says that it was I that kept you from sinning. I didn’t let you touch her. Abimelech confronts Abraham and Abraham says “Yes. She is my sister. She is the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother.” Abimelech shows himself to be an upstanding, honorable character, who will be important in this chapter and the next and Abimelech sends them off with riches.

Genesis 20 (NRSV)

20 From there Abraham journeyed toward the region of the Negeb, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While residing in Gerar as an alien, ²Abraham said of his wife Sarah, “She is my sister.” And King Abimelech of Gerar sent and took Sarah. ³But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, “You are about to die because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a married woman.” ⁴Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, “Lord, will you destroy an innocent people? ⁵Did he not himself say to me, ‘She is

my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' I did this in the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands." ⁶ Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart; furthermore it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. ⁷ Now then, return the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all that are yours."

⁸ So Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants and told them all these things; and the men were very much afraid. ⁹ Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, "What have you done to us? How have I sinned against you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that ought not to be done." ¹⁰ And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?" ¹¹ Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. ¹² Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³ And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.' " ¹⁴ Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. ¹⁵ Abimelech said, "My land is before you; settle where it pleases you." ¹⁶ To Sarah he said, "Look, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your exoneration before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated." ¹⁷ Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. ¹⁸ For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

E Source – *italicized*; P Source – **bold**; J Source - normal

Many scholars have argued that chapters 20–22 contain the first major block of an Elohist (E) source parallel to the Yahwistic (J) source found in chapters 12–19 and extending through the rest of the Pentateuch.

Note parallels between stories of endangerment of Sarah in 20:1–18 (E) and 12:10–20 (J); the Hagar stories 21:8–19 (E) and 16:1–14 (J), and even stories about Abimelech in 21:22–34 (E) and 26:17–33 (J). Attributed by source criticism to the Elohist (E), this episode parallels the accounts of Abram and Sarai in Pharaoh's court in Egypt in Genesis 12:10–20 and of Isaac and Rebekah in Abimelech's court in 26:1–11 both ascribed to the Yahwist (J).

In this version, the emphasis lies on points of law and ethics and on the motivation of the protagonists, and the moral and psychological situation is much more complex than in either of the parallel narratives.

3–7: The depiction of Abimelech is far more detailed and sympathetic than that of the foreign king in either of the parallel accounts (cf. 12.15–19; 26.9–10). Even though Abimelech has not consummated his relationship with Sarah (v. 6), he is still culpable for abducting another man's wife (v. 3).

7: To Abraham is attributed the intercessory role of prophet; this is the Bible's first use of the term, and the only designation of Abraham as a prophet in the Torah (but see Ps 105.15). It's the first and only occurrence of the word "Prophet" in Genesis. Prophecy as a formal institution begins in Exodus 20.

8: The servants' fear gives the lie to Abraham's attempt at self-exoneration on the grounds that "there is no fear of God in this place" (v. 11).

9–10: The image of a Gentile king righteously upbraiding an Israelite prophet (v. 7) for the latter's moral failures is a fine comic inversion of our expectations.

12: Abraham tries a new line of defense based on a semantic ambiguity: Since sister can mean "half-sister" (e.g., Lev. 18.9), he really was not lying. But was Sarah even his half-sister? The narrator never asserts that Sarah is Terah's daughter (cf. 11.27–30). Nevertheless, faced with Abimelech's passionate questioning, Abraham claims to be her half brother by way of his father. Though many have taken his assertion at face value, it may be an attempt to provide as many excuses for his behavior as possible (cf. 20.11). On the plain sense of the biblical text, there is no evidence that she was. "Father" in ancient Hebrew could also mean grandfather (e.g., 28.13). Even if Sarah really was Abraham's half-sister, Abraham was still in the wrong for not mentioning the vastly more important point that she was his wife.

17: “Pray” in biblical Hebrew very often denotes intercession. Abraham is the first person called a prophet in the Bible, and here functions as a prophetic intercessor, as God predicted he would in v. 7.

18: This conclusion is less surprising than it first seems. It is consistent with 12.17, which speaks of the Lord’s afflicting “Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues” in the analogous situation. It also correlates with the harsh tone that God takes when He first confronts Abimelech in 20.3. Though God recognizes the king’s innocence, He also takes special measures to ensure that no untoward act occurs (v. 6).

CHAPTER 21 – THE BIRTH OF ISAAC; HAGAR AND ISHMAEL SENT AWAY; AND COVENANT WITH ABIMELECH

The promised son is finally born after decades of waiting. They name him Isaac, and everyone lives happily ever after. Right? No. Not in this story. Now that Sarah has a son, she wants to banish Hagar and Ishmael so that Isaac can claim the entire inheritance for himself without competition. Abraham gets upset but listens to Sarah after God tells him to. So, Abraham sends them on their way with some food and water, but it soon runs out, and it looks like that is going to be the end of them. But once again, God comes to the rescue, shows her a well, and promises to make Ishmael into a great nation.

Genesis 21 (NRSV)

21 The LORD dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as he had promised. ² Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. ³ Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. ⁴ And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. ⁵ Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶ Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” ⁷ And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

⁸ The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” ¹¹ The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³ As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” ¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸ Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰ God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

²² At that time Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, said to Abraham, “God is with you in all that you do; ²³ now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have resided as an alien.” ²⁴ And Abraham said, “I swear it.”

²⁵ When Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized, ²⁶ Abimelech said, “I do not know who has done this; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today.”

²⁷ So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant.

²⁸ Abraham set apart seven ewe lambs of the flock. ²⁹ And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What is the meaning of

these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?”³⁰ He said, “These seven ewe lambs you shall accept from my hand, in order that you may be a witness for me that I dug this well.”³¹ Therefore that place was called Beer-sheba; because there both of them swore an oath.³² When they had made a covenant at Beer-sheba, Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, left and returned to the land of the Philistines.³³ Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.³⁴ And Abraham resided as an alien many days in the land of the Philistines.

E Source – *italicized*; P Source – **bold**; J Source - normal

21.1– 8: The promise to Sarah fulfilled at last. With its heavy emphasis on God’s fulfillment of His promise of a son to Sarah and Abraham (vv. 1– 2) and its note that the father circumcised his son on the eighth day in accordance with God’s command (v. 3), this passage marks a major turning point in the story. Despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles (including Abimelech’s abduction of Sarah in the previous ch), things have gone according to plan.

A midrash reports that it was on Rosh Ha-Shanah that The Lord took note of Sarah (b. Rosh Hash. 11a); Gen. ch 21 is thus the Torah reading for the first day of Rosh Ha-Shanah.

5: Abraham’s life divides into seven periods of 25 years each: three of them in Mesopotamia (12.4), one in Canaan without the promised son (21.5), and three in Canaan after Isaac’s birth (25.7). The period of his life in which Abraham lived with the promise unfulfilled, though the shortest, is the pivotal and central one and occupies the most space in the narrative.

6: The narrator uses the theme of Sarah’s laughter (cf. 17.17) to stress the incredibility of God’s promise of a son (eventually Isaac, 21.1–3).

21.9– 21: The expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar. This passage closely parallels ch 16. Source criticism accounts for this by attributing ch 16 to J, but 21.9– 21 to E. Note that the J-name (“Lord”) never appears here; the E-name (“God”) is used throughout.

This story of endangerment of Ishmael parallels the following one of endangerment of Isaac. After God gives Abraham the command to let his child go (v. 12; 22.2), he rises early in the morning to fulfill it (v. 14 || 22.3), the child is delivered when an angel of God/the Lord cries out from heaven (v. 17; 22.11–12), and Hagar and Abraham both see a way to save the child (v. 19 || 22.13). These features distinguish this story of Hagar and Ishmael from its parallel in ch 16, where Hagar likewise left Abraham’s clan, went into the desert, and heard a message from an angel of God (there an “angel of the Lord”) about her child’s destiny. Though the divinity is referred to in ch. 16 as “the Lord” and here in ch. 21 as “God,” the angel in both cases promises that Hagar’s offspring will be numerous (16.10; 21.18) and assures her that God has “heard” her (ch. 16.11) or her child’s (ch. 21.17) suffering, wordplays on Ishmael’s name, which means “God hears” (see also 17.20, part of the Priestly tradition). These are probably oral variants of a story about the origin of the Ishmaelites (see 25.12–18).

9: Playing is another pun on Isaac’s name (cf. 17.17; 18.12; 19.14; 26.8). Ishmael was “Isaacing,” or “taking Isaac’s place.” Playing with, literally “making [him] laugh,” another reference to Isaac’s name; Isaac’s name means “he [God] laughs”; other traditions develop the link with laughter as well (17.17–19; 21.6,8; 26.8). The Greek text has “fooling around with her son Isaac,” which can connote either playing with Isaac or mocking him. The word in Hebrew is a pun on his name and it will appear again in the story of Isaac, Rebekah, and Abimelech (Gen 26:8). At this point, Ishmael was about sixteen years old and Isaac was about two. According to Gen 16:16, Abraham was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born and according to Gen 21:5, Abraham was one hundred when Isaac was born. The brothers are fourteen years apart. Since a child is usually weaned at about two, this would make Ishmael sixteen.

10: Sarah’s sion of the names of the two individuals who have aroused her jealousy indicates the depth of her contempt.

12: Yet it is Sarah’s protection of Isaac’s rights, rather than Abraham’s solicitude for Ishmael, that mediates God’s will in this tragic situation (cf. ch 27). In the Talmud, this is cited as evidence that Sarah was a prophet (b. Meg. 14a). God’s command to Abraham to do as she says uses the same term with which He rebuked Adam for obeying Eve in 3.17— only with the opposite intent.

13: Like 17.20 (and 21.18), this verse stresses that Isaac does not altogether displace Ishmael (whatever Sarah's designs). Ishmael inherits a substantial portion of the promise to his father Abraham. The genealogy of the Ishmaelites appears in Genesis 25:13-18 and they will figure in the Joseph story (37:25-28; 39:1). They do not appear in the Torah after that.

14–17: In these verses Ishmael is a little boy, a stark contrast to the presentation of him as a teenager in the preceding Priestly traditions (16.16; 17.25; 21.5). This is just one sign that stories like this one about Hagar and Ishmael were not originally written with the Priestly tradition in view.

14: There is room to wonder just how far Abraham expected Hagar and Ishmael to travel before the bread and skin of water gave out. Did he not realize that by provisioning them so slimly, he was putting them in mortal danger? Ibn Ezra, surmising that Sarah must have determined the provisions, concludes that had Abraham done otherwise, he would have violated God's command.

15– 16: The narrator presupposes a child small enough to be carried by his mother. But since Ishmael was 13 before Isaac was even conceived (17.25), and Isaac's weaning, which likely occurred at 3, has already taken place (21.8), Ishmael is at least 16. In an analysis informed by source criticism, the problem is easily explained, since the present narrative stems from E, but the chronology from P. Calculating Ishmael's age as 27, a midrash takes a different tack: Sarah had cast the evil eye on him and made him ill, thus incapable of walking (Gen. Rab. 53.12).

21.22– 34: Abimelech and Abraham make a pact. The focus shifts from the promise of offspring, on whose fulfillment the chapter has so far focused, to the promise of land,

Abraham's dispute with Abimelech. This text continues the story about Abraham and Abimelech that was begun in ch 20. Together, the narratives of Abraham's sojourn in Gerar in ch 20 and 21.22–34 resemble that of Isaac's sojourn in Gerar in 26.6–33, and they may have a common oral background. This story combines a tradition that explains the name Beer-sheba as meaning "well of seven [Hebrew sheva']" (see 22.28–30) with an explanation (parallel to 26.31–33) that it means "well of oath [shevu'ah]."

The number seven figures prominently in this story, as it does throughout the Torah and in the Book of Genesis. The seven ewes are one example, as are Abimelech and Abraham's names, each of which is mentioned seven times. Another tie-in of the number seven is the men swearing an oath (v. 31), which in Hebrew is *shvua*, a word having the same root as the Hebrew word for "seven" (*sheva*). And although the name of the place where they make their oath, Beer-sheba, derives from the Hebrew word for oath, Beer-sheba also means "well number seven." Seven often signifies completion or perfection. But, more than anything else, seven signifies either God's involvement or remembrance of the seven days of creation.

GERAR in the Negev. Abraham visited the town and entered into some type of agreement with the Philistine king of Gerar, Abimelech (Gen. 20:1–2). However, the bulk of episodes involving Gerar are in the Isaac stories: Isaac and Rebekah settle at Gerar (Gen. 26:2) but, like his father before him, Isaac tells Abimelech that his wife is his sister, because he fears someone will kill him to obtain her. The ruse is exposed when Abimelech looks out a window and sees Isaac fondling Rebekah (26:8). Isaac is guaranteed Abimelech's protection and he subsequently sows seed in the land and becomes rich, with so many flocks and herds and such a great household that the Philistines envy him. Isaac then moves to the valley of Gerar, where he digs wells that become a source of contention with herders there (26:17–21).

Literary Pattern – There is a familiar literary pattern that develops; one we say in chapters 12-14.

Threat from a foreign ruler	12:10-20	20:1-18
Division of the family	13:1-13	21:8-21
Granting of the promised blessing	13:14-17	21:1-7
Agreement with a foreign ruler	14:1-24	21:22-34
Heir crisis	15:1-4	22:1-2
Descendants as the stars	15:5	22:17
Recognition of Abram's faith	15:6	22:12
Sacrificial context	15:9-11	22:1-11