

## SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY

### Genesis 16 – Ishmael

#### 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.
<b>Genesis 16: 1– 16</b>	<b>Abraham risks the promise of a son by taking Hagar to bear Ishmael.</b>
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 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

It is interesting how different parts of the Abraham story correspond with other parts; where themes introduced at the outset are resumed in reverse order in the second half. This chiasmic pattern binds many parts of the Abraham story together and puts a heightened emphasis on the sections that occur at the center.

##### A. Prologue (11.27–30)

B. First challenge: call for Abraham to leave family of origin (12:1–3)

C. Wife-sister story 12:10–13:1

D. Separation from Lot (13:2–18)

E. Covenant of pieces with Abraham (14–15)

**F. Hagar-Ishmael story (Gen 16:1–14)**

E’. Covenant of circumcision with Abraham (17)

D’. Hospitality/progeny episodes; Abraham contrasted with Lot (18–19)

C’. Wife-sister story (20)

B’. Final challenge: calls for Abraham to let go of family of future (21.8–21 and 22.1–19)

A’. Epilogue 22.20–24

#### HOW MANY SONS DID ABRAHAM HAVE?

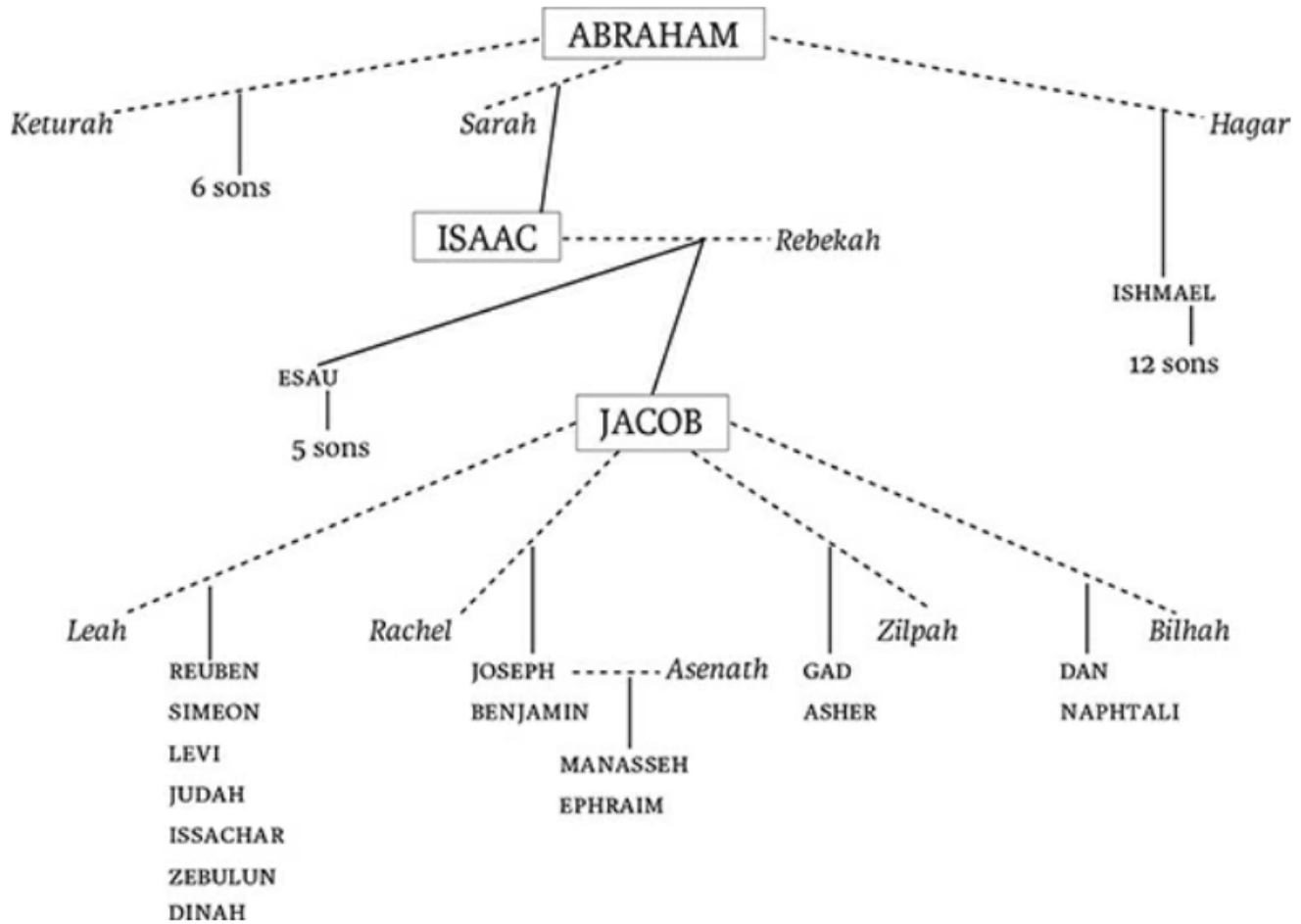
According to the children’s song: “Father Abraham... had seven sons... and seven sons had Father Abraham...” ummm... uhhh.... Oops... Unfortunately, that doesn’t seem to be correct.

Looking at Abram’s family tree, we see that he had eight sons. But, this is strange because when we get to Genesis 22:2, God says: “Take your son, *your only son Isaac*, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.”

Something similar is repeated in the New Testament in Hebrews 11:17–18 (NRSV): <sup>17</sup>By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up *his only son*, <sup>18</sup>of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.”

But when we look at Galatians 4:22 (NRSV): <sup>22</sup> For it is written that *Abraham had two sons*, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. Hmm... Where did the number 7 come from? Some thought that one of the sons was actually a daughter. And some believe that Keturah is another name for Hagar.

**THE ABRAHAM FAMILY TREE**



**Chs 12–50: The genealogy of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.** Dashed lines show the wives; solid lines show descendants.

**SUMMARY OF GENESIS 14-15**

In chapters 14 and 15 we saw that Abram was powerful and protected by God in battle as the Canaanite kings were defeated by the Shemite kings from the east (from Babylon). Abram is blessed by Melchizedek, the royal high priest of Salem (as in Jerusalem). Then God comes to Abram in a vision and says that his reward will be great. But Abram complains that he doesn't have an heir (except one that is a slave). God said that Abram would have as many descendants as the stars in the sky and Abram believed God. So, God reckoned it to him as righteousness. Then God said God would give him the promised land, but Abram had his doubts and voiced them to God.

And so, an anthropomorphic God "cut a covenant" with Abram and waked through the blood and guts of animals severed in two as a sign that God takes God's promise very seriously. God reaffirms the promise, but not before declaring that Abraham's descendants weren't going to have it so good: four hundred years living as aliens in a foreign land being persecuted as slaves (a little premonition of the Exodus story). Apparently, Abram's doubts have serious consequences. Now the question on Abram's mind returns to his seed and his heir. Sarai's infertility poses a problem. How is God going to fulfill God's promise of giving Abraham so many descendants?

**CHAPTER 16 – THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL**

When we get to Genesis 16, Abraham is once again doubting God's promises of children, acting like God never made any promise at all. So, Sarai urges Abram to follow an accepted custom and father a child with her maidservant, Hagar, an Egyptian. Any child born from a slave given to the husband by a barren wife was considered the wife's child rather than

the servants. But was this really how God was going to make Abraham the father of a great nation? Through an Egyptian of all people? Remember, God had not said that the promise would come through Sarah... yet... so this kind of made sense to both Sarai (who was old) and Abraham (who wanted an heir). Hagar's pregnancy creates intense jealousy. Sarai was so mean to Hagar that she ran away into the desert. But God doesn't leave her there. God makes a promise to her as well. She will have a son and eventually too many descendants to count—which is very similar to the promise God made to Abraham. Ishmael is born and it looks like it's going to turn out alright for Hagar, but as we are told again and again (Genesis 16:12 and Genesis 25:18) his descendants are going to be a hostile bunch who pick fights with everyone around them. This story is probably an etiology of the tensions the Israelites have with the people south of Canaan who were so much like them. These half-brothers, the sons of Ishmael, are just born that way.

#### GENESIS 16 (NRSV)

**16 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, <sup>2</sup> and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. <sup>3</sup> So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. <sup>4</sup> He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. <sup>5</sup> Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl 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!" <sup>6</sup> But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.**

<sup>7</sup> The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. <sup>8</sup> And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." <sup>9</sup> The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." <sup>10</sup> The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." <sup>11</sup> And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.

<sup>12</sup> He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin."

<sup>13</sup> So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" <sup>14</sup> Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

<sup>15</sup> Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. <sup>16</sup> Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

#### SOURCE THEORY:

**BOLD** = Yahwist "J" Source;

*Italics* = Priestly "P" Source

**Hagar** – People debate what the name Hagar means. It could mean "Flight" from a verb (*hagar*) meaning "to flee" or it could mean "the dragged away one" from (*ha*) "the" and the verb (*garrar*) "to drag out or away". Others argue that the name means "city, province, region" in old Arabic.

**Ishmael** – "God hears" or "God heeds"

**El-roi** – "God who sees" or "God of seeing"

**Beer-lahi-roi** – "the well of the Living One who sees me"

Ten years in Canaan and no children. Notice where Sarai places the blame; "The Lord has prevented me." So, Sarai takes matters into her own hands and offers her slave girl as a wife and surrogate mother (in accordance with ancient near-eastern practice; because Hagar is her slave, she could claim the children as her own). We will see the same practice played out later in Genesis 30 where Rachel and Leah both give their slaves (Bilhah and Zilpah) to Jacob in competition to give him a son.

According to the Laws of Hammurabi and other ancient Near Eastern legal documents, it was common for an infertile wife to provide her husband with a concubine in order to bear children for the couple. Those children were considered the wife's children as much as biological children would be. noted, Sarai's suggestion is understandable given that ten years went by without the fulfillment of God's promise.

Notice that the text says Abram listened to Sarai. Do we remember what happened when Adam listened to Eve? Is there a pattern here? Is it fair? Or does this simply reflect a patriarchal society trying to maintain patriarchy?

But wait, Sarai gave a slave to her husband so that he could have sex with her and possibly gain a child, an heir. Wouldn't this make Hagar Abram's sex slave? That doesn't sound like a good thing.

And then Hagar gets pregnant and *looks at her with contempt* (or perhaps it is better translated as "her mistress was lowered in her eyes"). The NRSV's translation "looked with contempt" implies that Hagar disdained her mistress, whereas the Hebrew verb ("תִּקַּל" means either "to treat lightly" or "to treat as small or insignificant") and it may imply only that Hagar did not look up to her mistress the way she once did. Having had a child, Hagar is now derisively seen by her mistress as a slave who is not sufficiently submissive.

The problem is that Sarai's and Hagar's status has reversed because of the high estimation of motherhood in biblical culture and, of course, this is upsetting to Sarai. If you want to know to know how upsetting this was to Sarai, just look at how the ancient Hebrew's described a similar situation, Proverbs 30:21–23:

<sup>21</sup> *Under three things the earth trembles; under four it cannot bear up:*

<sup>22</sup> *a slave when he becomes king,  
and a fool when glutted with food;*

<sup>23</sup> *an unloved woman when she gets a husband,  
**and a maid when she succeeds her mistress.***

How does Sarai respond? Sarai goes and complains to Abram, saying "May God judge between me and you." Sarai demands justice for the wrong done to her and Abram gives her carte blanche to do whatever she wants to do; "She's yours, do whatever you please." So, Sarai deals harshly with Hagar and Hagar runs away and into the wilderness. Sarai's oppression of her Egyptian slave, who then flees toward Egypt, ironically reverses the exodus theme.

In the book of Exodus, Israelites are "oppressed" (Heb "anah") by the Egyptians (Ex 1.12), flee east toward Israel through the wilderness, and meet God there (Ex 19.24.1–2,10–11). In this chapter, however, it is an Egyptian, Hagar, who is "oppressed" (Heb "anah"; "dealt harshly with" in the NRSV of v. 6) by the Israelite matriarch Sarai; Hagar flees west from Israel toward Egypt and meets God in the wilderness.

The flight of the oppressed slave into the wilderness where they meet a divine being, foreshadows the exodus experience which was prophesied in chapter 15:13-14 (see Exodus 3:1-2). But this time the oppressor is an Israelite, the slave is an Egyptian, and the angel of the Lord (who is God) commands the escapee to return to her cruel mistress and submit to her harsh treatment. Notice that the angel of the Lord who finds her by a spring of water in verse 7 is not a heavenly being subordinate to God but the Lord (Yahweh) in earthly manifestation, as is clear from v. 13 (cf. Genesis 21:17,19; Exodus 14:19).

Why would God side with the oppressor and not the oppressed in this instance? Why make her return? Isn't that the opposite of what God did for the Israelites in Exodus? Does election have anything to do with it?

But, just because Abram and Sarai make bad choices, it doesn't mean that God is not going to redeem those choices and situations and turn them into something good. Notice what God does for Hagar. God's angel grants Hagar the patriarchal promise of descendants so abundant that they cannot be counted (v. 10; cf. the promise to Abram in 13.16; 15.5). The angel's announcement of the future child's name and destiny is also similar to the announcements given to Abraham (17.19; 18.10) and Rebekah (25.23). Ishmael (lit. "God has heard"), so named because God has given heed to (lit. "heard") Hagar's affliction. The name highlights God's compassion for Hagar, probably because he has saved her life,

but this is tempered by the command to return to Sarai and submit to her (v. 9). The description of Ishmael as a wild ass of a man (v. 12), in conflict with all, describes the fierce independence and warrior ethos of the Arab peoples of antiquity.

Later, in Gen 21:8–21, we will see a doublet of this story told from the perspective of the Elohist (E) source, where Hagar again must leave Abraham’s clan, go into the desert, and hear an oracle that will revolve around an interpretation of the name of Hagar’s son, Ishmael (Hebrew for “God hears”; whereas here the translation is “God heeds”). Both stories have their origins in ancient traditions surrounding the origins of the Ishmaelites, seen in Genesis as ancestors of the Arab peoples (see Gen 25:12–18), but the version here in Genesis 16 (told from the perspective of the Yahwist J source and the Priestly P source) is distinguished by its echoes of the Exodus story and ultimately sympathetic focus on Hagar.

But God does take note of Hagar’s suffering and rewards her with the Abrahamic blessing of offspring... too many to count (cf. 13:16; 15:5). Indeed, her high-spirited and militarily formidable son will bear the name Ishmael (“God heeds/heeded”) as testimony to the Lord’s concern about her affliction and his descendants will become a mighty nation.

Notice what Hagar says at the end of verse 13. Why does she say this? It’s because of the idea that anyone who sees a divine being must die (see Exodus 33:20 and Judges 13:22).

### **ISHMAEL**

The son of Abraham and Hagar, the Egyptian slave-girl of Sarah (Gen. 16; 17; 21:1–21). Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham as a wife when she herself seemed to be infertile. Hagar bore Ishmael to Abraham, but Sarah later also bore a son, Isaac. After Sarah saw Ishmael playing with Isaac at the latter’s weaning ceremony (21:9), she pleaded with Abraham to expel both Hagar and Ishmael, so that the two would not share the inheritance. God approved this, but subsequently protected Ishmael and his mother (21:15–21). God promised to make Ishmael “a great nation” (21:18; cf. 16:10). Indeed, God promised Abraham that Ishmael would become the father of twelve princes (a parallel to the twelve tribes of Israel that would descend from Isaac [through Jacob], 17:20; cf. 25:12–16). Ishmael is described as “a wild ass” (16:12), a possibly complimentary reference to his ability to survive in the wilderness. At Abraham’s death, Ishmael and Isaac reunited to bury their father (25:9). Ishmael’s daughter Mahalath (or Basemath) married Esau, the son of Isaac (28:9; 36:3). Ishmael is said to have lived to be 137 years old (25:7), a further indication that he is to be regarded as someone favored by God and worthy of honor within Israelite tradition. Despite the close connections between Ishmael and Isaac, however, the two would sometimes be viewed as progenitors of competing traditions—and in that sense Ishmael would always be cast in the inferior light. For instance, although Ishmael was circumcised at the age of thirteen and so brought into the covenant of circumcision (17:25; cf. 17:10), he was not included in the “everlasting covenant,” as was Isaac (17:19). The latter covenant evidently pertained to possession of the land (17:8). In the nt, Paul refers to Ishmael in an allegory that tries to show how people can be descended from Abraham “according to the flesh,” but still miss out on promises that must be received through faith (Gal. 4:21–28).

### **ISHMAELITES**

The descendants of Ishmael are named as twelve princes or “sons of Ishmael” in Genesis 25:13-16 and 1 Chronicles 1:28-31 who are said to have settled in northern Arabia, opposite Egypt in the direction of Assyria (Genesis 25:18). The names contained in Genesis 25 genealogy have affinities with the Edomites (see Genesis 36) with whom the Ishmaelites are said to have intermarried (Genesis 28:9) and with the descendants of Keturah (Genesis 25:1-4; 1 Chronicles 1:32-33).

Elsewhere, the caravan of traders who carry Joseph to Egypt are referred to as both Ishmaelites and Midianites, suggesting that those two groups might overlap or that the designations might be synonymous (Genesis 37:25-28; 39:1). In Judges 8:24-26, “Kings of Midian” seem to be included among a group of Ishmaelites defeated by Gideon. In Psalm 83:6, the Ishmaelites are listed among Israel’s enemies, and so it must be surmised that they sometimes competed with Israelite tribes for such things as land, pasture, and water rights. Still, the Ishmaelites often seem to have been on friendly terms with Israelites. Amasa, a commander of David’s army, was an Ishmaelite (2 Samuel 17:25, as was Obil, the keeper of his camels (1 Chronicles 27:30).