



Ishmael: Unwanted Child?

Leader's notes



Introduction

Abraham is famous for having faith in God. God promised to make him the father of a great nation. Already well into middle-age, 10 more childless years went by before Abraham and Sarah followed the custom of promoting a slave girl to the position of concubine in order to secure an heir. Many Christians have been quick to criticise Abraham for his lapse of faith here and point out the problems that this caused.

So what then are they saying about Ishmael?

Was he just the result of one of Abraham's mistakes?

Is any child ever merely an 'accident' or mistake?

Bible passages:

Introduction	Move and Promise: Genesis 11:27-32; 12:1-9 The Promise Confirmed: Genesis 15
Main story	Birth of Ishmael: Genesis 16:1-16 Promise renewed: Genesis 17 – 18:15 Birth of Isaac: Genesis 21:1-21
Ending	Abraham's funeral: Genesis 25:1-18; The wedding: 28:6-9

Introducing Abraham

So there was this family that lived around 2,000 BC – (which was about 500 years after most of the Egyptian pyramids had been built), in the city of Ur in Ancient Mesopotamia (now Iraq). They had a comfortable lifestyle with a nice house and wealth in the form of animal stocks.

Then God said 'I can offer you something better!'

So they gave up the house, bought some tents, upgraded some of the sheep to camels (more suitable for a household move) and became nomads wandering around the Middle East for the next couple of hundred years.

And this was **better**?

Well along the way they learnt some amazing things about life, the universe, themselves and above all – God.

God saw in Abraham someone with the makings of a strong healthy faith and the potential to grow that faith. When he took this childless middle-aged couple and promised them heirs and a land to inherit, they were very excited, but over 10 more childless years went by and Sarah's child bearing years were coming to an end. What had gone wrong? God had spoken to them so dramatically, so clearly, promising Abraham that he would bless the whole world through the child he would give them. Did the promise apply to both of them or just to Abraham? Was there anything they could be doing that they had overlooked?

Sarah

In a culture where a woman's importance and sense of self-worth revolved around motherhood, Sarah would assume that she was childless because of some fault of her own. When she suggested that Abraham take Hagar as substitute or surrogate mother, she was following a custom acceptable at that time.

But why now?

- Was her self-image at an all-time low?
- Did she doubt God's love for her and had given up on herself?
- Was it guilt? Did she feel that she has been a huge failure and had really let Abraham down?
- Was it love? Was she making a great sacrifice by offering to share her husband with another woman?

- How do you think Sarah felt about not having children?
- How would Sarah have felt as the years went by?
- Why did Sarah offer Hagar as a 'solution'?
- How do you think she felt when she did that?
- How do you think Sarah felt after Hagar became pregnant?

Abraham

Abraham was unusual in his day in not having taken a second wife/concubine when he was a chieftain and his wife had not borne him any children.

- Why had he not? Was it:
 - A mark of Abraham's respect for and faith in God
 - A mark of Abraham's love and faithfulness to Sarah. He knew it would hurt her.
 - Due to opposition from Sarah. Was she such a strong character that he did not dare until she gave permission?

Hagar

Being told to try to conceive a baby with her master was in a strange way a sort of promotion for Hagar. Although she had to sleep with someone old enough to be her grandfather, she had gained status within the household. No other man was allowed to touch her and an older man could be a good lover. She had no choice in the matter, true, but that was not so very different from some arranged marriages.

Abraham was a wealthy tribal leader with over 300 men capable of fighting when necessary. There was also a strong sense of expectation about him. But he needed an heir. So *within a few short weeks* Hagar had been elevated from being an ordinary slave girl to being the mother of the heir to this great household.

Hagar was unable to handle the sudden rise to fame. Possibly still in her teens, she was very excited at the prospect of having this baby. As the emotional roller-coaster took off, she began to behave completely differently. After all, she had succeeded where Sarah had failed. Did that make her worth more than Sarah? Could she even take her place?

Did she underestimate the bond between Abraham and his wife? Sarah was Abraham's half-sister, only 10 years younger than he. They had grown up together and been married for around 60 years. Whereas Hagar was probably about 15-20 years old and from a completely different culture.

- What sort of feelings might Hagar have experienced when she was told that she was to become Abraham's concubine?

Sarah

The pregnancy proved that the infertility definitely lay with Sarah not Abraham. Her self-esteem, which was already rock bottom, plummeted even further. She became insanely jealous, perhaps feeling threatened by this younger good looking woman.

How had Abraham reacted to the news of the pregnancy? Did he now treat Hagar differently? Was he suddenly aware of her presence? Was she given new privileges; treated as the star of the household?

Sarah had seen Hagar merely as a slave who could serve her purpose, rather than as another woman. She hadn't expected it to change Hagar. She now started blaming everyone else for the problem that had arisen, starting with Abraham.

Caught in the middle between two highly emotional women/ of a complex family dispute, Abraham was not in an enviable position! He took the easy way out by letting Sarah take the responsibility. After all it was her right to supervise the women.

Hagar

When the situation backfires on her, Hagar becomes very fearful. Is she in danger? Is her baby in danger? Being pregnant makes it harder for her to think clearly and her emotions are more intense than usual. She desperately needs some support.

Frightened and homesick, Hagar attempted to get back to Egypt. God waited until Hagar was in the wilderness before he stopped her and asked.

Where have you come from?

Where are you going?

He wanted to make her think. She was used to gods in Egypt who sat still and sightless and were served all day. The idea of a god who could see her and had heard about her misery was mind blowing.

And so she has a life changing encounter. God himself reassured Hagar. He met with her. He put her back in the place where she and her son would be safest for the time being, despite the problems she had encountered. He also gave her a promise "I will give you so many descendants, they cannot be counted". He dealt with her fears and gave her hope for the future. He did not promise that Sarah would be nice to her on her return although we can hope that the episode had mellowed her somewhat.

- Is it easier to put up with living in a difficult situation once we know we are special to God and that he is concerned about us?
- Does that also make it also easier to attempt to live in a right relationship with others?

Abraham and Ishmael

So things settled down and Ishmael was born. Abraham is as delighted as any father would be on the birth of a first-born son. He sees Ishmael as his heir. And Ishmael grows up seeing himself as Abraham's only son and heir. Imagine the impact on Ishmael then, when Sarah was discovered to be pregnant and then gave birth to a live healthy boy.

Ishmael was still Abraham's son but he was no longer his heir. This new little bundle of joy had robbed him of most of his status in life. He was now merely the maid servant's son. And he was 14.



Yes it did complicate things but God allowed it. He could have guided Abraham to prevent him going off course. He could have prevented Hagar from conceiving but he allowed Ishmael to be born and he blessed him also.

Weaning is a gradual process which takes several months in modern Western cultures as solid food is slowly introduced and breast or bottle-feeding lessens, but in traditional cultures it took much longer. A child might be 3 or 4 years old when they finally had their last feed from their mother. It was a rite of passage and a time to celebrate. Given that many children died before the age of five, the family had reason to hope that this was a strong child who would grow to maturity. (In some cultures even today, people do not take gifts immediately a baby is born but wait a few weeks to see if it will survive.) Genesis 21:8

For Ishmael, the weaning celebration meant coming to terms with the fact that Isaac was more than a temporary setback. It would never be like the 'good old days' again. Isaac would be their father's favourite – there was no doubt. Abraham was already having the same kind of little conversations with him that he had had with Ishmael at that age. Little wonder that Ishmael tried to give Isaac a hard time when he thought no one was looking. Big mistake! The ever watchful Sarah missed nothing.

When Sarah demanded that Ishmael and Hagar be thrown out of the household, Abraham must have been shocked. Not only was she expecting Abraham to deny and reject his own son whom he loved, she was also asking him to break the law codes of the day. It is God's reaction which could most surprise us here, telling Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away! Was God also rejecting Ishmael? Did he see him as a mistake that Abraham had made, born as a result of Abraham's lapse in faith?

More likely God was saying something like "Okay, here's a relationship situation where there are serious problems. I don't expect you to get it right in the short term, this will take time." Both sons were destined to become leaders and that in itself was liable to cause friction. Two prospective alpha males! God sent them their separate ways and provided for both children. Abraham had to trust God to look after Ishmael in this situation. Appropriately some years later Abraham also had to trust God concerning Isaac. (Genesis 22)

Ishmael: Children can find it difficult when a baby brother or sister is born. This would have been especially true for Ishmael who had been Abraham's heir for 14 years, even though he was the son of a slave girl.

Although Ishmael was not an unplanned baby, his role and status changed forever once Isaac was born. The ancient law codes did cover this type of situation and stated that the father should continue to provide for both the child and the mother but it was very difficult for those who were affected. They were no longer 'as important' as before.

Ishmael was a joy and a blessing to both Hagar and Abraham. And God valued him also – Genesis 17:20

Did the story have a happy ending?

Well, both Isaac and Ishmael were present at Abraham's funeral and Isaac's son Esau married one of Ishmael's daughters, his cousin Mahalath. Esau did this to please his parents, as they didn't like his two Canaanite wives. Genesis 25:7-9 Genesis 28:8-9

Both of these events suggest that a considerable degree of reconciliation had taken place over the years.

How many tribes were descended from Isaac?

How many tribes were descended from Ishmael? Genesis 17:20 & 25:16

God is still blessing the descendants of both of these sons.

Application

With God there is no such thing as an accident or unwanted person. We are all his children whom he wants to reclaim. He made us and wants to re-adopt us into his family. Did you know that God has a tattoo figuratively speaking? Our names are written on the palm of his hand!

Bible verses to help

I have cared for you since you were born & before - Isaiah 46:3-4

I have written your name on the palm of my hand - Isaiah 49:16a

You are precious to me - Isaiah 43:4b

Even if my father and mother abandon me, the Lord will hold me close. - Psalm 27:10 NLT

I plan to give you a future and a hope - Jeremiah 29:11

Reasons why children may feel unwanted

- Unplanned pregnancy
- A girl instead of a boy or vice versa
- Parents very busy or ill so they don't spend much time with them
- Long separation from parents for some reason
- Death or divorce giving the wrong message to the children
- Arrival of a new baby who need lots of time and attention
- Believing that you don't measure up to expectations
- Being disabled or different in some way

Extension

So why could Ishmael not be Abraham's heir?

It was part of God's overall plan that the child of the promise should be born in a miraculous way. It was an important start to the events that led up to the miraculous birth of Jesus. It is a matter of having faith when all seems lost. Abraham's 'children' spiritually are all those who have such faith in God.

Romans 4

Galatians 3-4

When God promised Abraham that he would be the father of many, he wasn't just referring to natural children. Everyone who has faith in God is a child of Abraham. Galatians 3:6-9, 29; Galatians 4:23. It was therefore essential that Isaac should be born in a special way and through faith. God brought about a miracle in order to fulfil his promise. He gave Abraham one of the longest running tests of faith in the Bible.

Further reading

Mark Stibbe's book: 'The Father You've Been Waiting For: Portrait of a Perfect Dad'

Steve Hepden: Rejection

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Appendix

Wives, Concubines and Maid-servants in Ancient Times

Ancient law codes: As civilisations developed, unwritten codes grew up setting standards of conduct concerning such things as property, employment, marriage, divorce, adoption, justice and other matters. Such guidelines were later embedded into written codes. The most famous one was the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (1792-1750 B.C.) but the most ancient code discovered was set down by the Sumerian King Ur-Nammu (2112–2095 B.C.). Abraham was a 21st century B.C. man and came from Ur so he would have known of this early code. Some of these guidelines later became part of the 'Law of Moses' c.1445 B.C. All of these guidelines reflected a certain amount of respect for women but that did vary according to their social rank.

A wife was usually of similar social status to her husband. Generally men only took one wife and she was expected to provide him with heirs. If the couple did not have children, it became socially acceptable for other arrangements to be made.

Hand maidens - If the wife did not bear children she could choose one of her **hand maidens** (or slaves) to be a surrogate mother for her. If the maid bore children, they could be seen as belonging to the wife. If the husband officially recognized them as legitimate children before witnesses they ranked equally with any children the wife might later bear. A woman might gradually rise from hand maiden to concubine in such a way as did Bilhah and Zilpah who were part of Jacob's family. Genesis 30; 25:22

If the maid assumed equality with the wife because she had borne children, she could be demoted back to the status of a slave but she could not be sold. If she had no children then she could be sold.

Concubines If the wife did not give a handmaiden to her husband then he could choose a **concubine** or second wife himself in order to produce an heir. A concubine was a free woman and legally a wife although of a lower rank. Her children were automatically legitimate and full legal heirs. She should not be allowed equality with the first wife but she did not come under her authority in the way that the maid servants did.

Concubines were respected ladies. It became customary for kings to have a harem of concubines as well as several wives. In modern times they are more likely to have a collection of pristine cars and motor bikes! Surrogate mothers still exist of course but it is handled differently.

Adoption Alternatively a man could adopt a son. If he later had sons of his own, he still had to give the adoptive son a third of a child's share in goods but not in land. Genesis 25:1-5 indicates that Keturah was a concubine or certainly lesser than Sarah. Her sons received gifts. Abraham had no land to leave apart from the field that he bought as a burial ground. His main inheritance was a divine promise!

Sources

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