



Ishmael: Unwanted Child?

Leader's notes



Introduction

Is any child ever merely an 'accident' or mistake? There are many who feel that they were, if their birth appeared to be unplanned, but is this really so in the eyes of God?

Abraham is famous for having faith in God who promised to make him the father of a great nation. Already well into middle-age, several more childless years went by before Abraham and Sarah followed the custom of considering a concubine or maid servant as a mother for the much-needed heir. Many Christians have been quick to criticise Abraham for having a lapse of faith here and point out the problems that this caused within the family.

So what then are they saying about Ishmael? Was he just the result of one of Abraham's mistakes? Should he never have been born? Or does this story have some hidden depths?

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: Genesis 28:6-9

Introducing Abraham

Abraham and his family lived around 2,000 BC¹ in the Sumerian city of Ur in Ancient Mesopotamia. They had a comfortable lifestyle with a nice house and wealth in the form of livestock.

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 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. He could also rely on him to establish a tradition of passing down the family stories faithfully and accurately. When he promised this childless middle-aged couple heirs and a land to inherit, they were full of hope, but so many years had gone by with no sign of a son. 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?

¹ Possibly 2165 – 1990 B.C.

Sarah

In a culture where a woman's importance and sense of self-worth revolved around motherhood, Sarah may have worried 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 did Sarah feel after Hagar became pregnant?

Abraham

Abraham was unusual in his day in not having taken a second woman before this when his wife had not borne him any children.

Why had he not? Was it:

- A mark of Abraham's love and faithfulness to Sarah. He knew it would hurt her.
- A mark of Abraham's respect for and faith in God
- Due to opposition from Sarah. Was she a very strong character?

Hagar

This part of the story may sound horrific to many Western people today but Hagar would not necessarily have been either surprised or revolted. Women in that culture and era did not usually choose their husbands and the idea of romantic love was not seen as a prerequisite for marriage. As a slave, her master, in place of her father, would have made any decision concerning her marriage. Given that Sarah had not provided Abraham with an essential heir, it was seen as her duty in Middle Eastern culture to either offer her handmaiden or allow her husband to take a second wife or concubine. Hagar may have been partly expecting what was required of her. Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar;... So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. Genesis 16:1-4

Abraham was a man with status; respected, respectable, wealthy and capable of leading men into battle when necessary. It says much about his character that he had not taken a concubine many years ago. Having made the decision to accept Sarah's offer of a surrogate mother in her maid servant, we can expect that he approached this young girl in a dignified manner, showing her the respect due to someone he hoped might bear his child. Although Hagar had no choice about the arrangement, she had gained status within the household and it gave her certain rights and protection. She appears to have conceived fairly easily which increased her status further and so found herself 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 change of status. 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 a teenager and from a 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 low, plummeted even further. She became insanely jealous, perhaps feeling threatened by this younger, good looking, fertile woman.

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.

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?

Caught in the middle between two highly emotional women in a complex family dispute, Abraham was not in an enviable position! It was Sarah's right to supervise the women so he allowed her to deal with it. Some city states even had provisions in their law code for this type of situation. For example one contemporary suggested that if a slave girl insolently compared herself to her mistress, "*her mouth should be scoured with 1 quart of salt*".² A later code simply stated that if a maid servant assumed equality with the wife because she had borne children, she should be demoted back to the status of a slave.³

Hagar

When the situation backfired on her, Hagar became very fearful. Was she in danger? Was her baby in danger? Being pregnant makes it harder for her to think clearly and her emotions are more intense than usual. She desperately needed 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.

² Code of Ur-Nammu clause 25

³ Code of Hammurabi clause 146

And so Hagar had a life changing encounter. God himself reassured Hagar, met with her, 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

Things settled down and Ishmael was born. Abraham was as delighted as any father would be on the birth of a first-born son. He saw Ishmael as his heir and Ishmael grew up enjoying both this status and his father's love. 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 sole heir. This new arrival had put his status in question. How would his father now treat him? Was he as loved and as important as before? Would he even be disinherited? Difficult questions for a 14 year old.

It certainly created a complicated situation but God allowed it. He could have intervened to prevent Abraham using a surrogate mother or prevented Hagar from conceiving but he allowed Ishmael to be born and he continued to bless him as Abraham prayed that he would.

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.

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

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 go against the accepted codes of the day. It is God's reaction which is the most surprising us here as He tells 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. It is appropriate that some years later Abraham had to trust God at least as much 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. Although not an unplanned baby, his role and status changed forever once Isaac was born. Some ancient law codes did cover this type of situation but it could be very difficult for those who were affected. They may no longer be ‘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?

The Jews believe that there was reconciliation between Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael after Sarah died. We certainly know that both Isaac and Ishmael were present at Abraham’s funeral and that 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

This suggests that God continued to work in these relationships to bring about healing.

God did bless Ishmael as Abraham had prayed. Both of these sons became the father of 12 tribes. Genesis 17:20 & 25:16

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

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.

The Bible gives us verses like:

I have cared for you since you were born and 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?

Romans 4

Galatians 3-4

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.

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.

Extracts from Ancient Law Codes

Code of Ur-Nammu c.2100 B.C.

25. If a man's slave-woman, comparing herself to her mistress, speaks insolently to her, her mouth shall be scoured with 1 quart of salt.

Code of Hammurabi 1792-1750 B.C.

146. If a man take a wife and she give this man a maid-servant as wife and she bear him children, and then this maid assume equality with the wife: because she has borne him children her master shall not sell her for money, but he may keep her as a slave, reckoning her among the maid-servants.

170. If his wife bear sons to a man, or his maid-servant have borne sons, and the father while still living says to the children whom his maid-servant has borne: "My sons," and he count them with the sons of his wife; if then the father die, then the sons of the wife and of the maid-servant shall divide the paternal property in common. The son of the wife is to partition and choose.

171. If, however, the father while still living did not say to the sons of the maid-servant: "My sons," and then the father dies, then the sons of the maid-servant shall not share with the sons of the wife, but the freedom of the maid and her sons shall be granted. The sons of the wife shall have no right to enslave the sons of the maid; the wife shall take her dowry (from her father), and the gift that her husband gave her and deeded to her (separate from dowry, or the purchase-money paid her father), and live in the home of her husband: so long as she lives she shall use it, it shall not be sold for money.

Whatever she leaves shall belong to her children.

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