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The Family of Abraham: Part 11—Sending Out the Bondwoman

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In this episode, I discuss the birth of Isaac and the sending out of Hagar and Ishmael.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 11th of my series on The Family of Abraham. We've arrived at Chapter 21, which is the story of the birth of Isaac, the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar, and a covenant with Abimelech. As we look through this story, it's important to cast our minds back to Chapter 16, the earlier story with Hagar and Ishmael.

In that story, we have a series of events that help to set the scene for what takes place here. In that story, Hagar is oppressed in some ways by Sarah when she bears a child. Now, within that situation, Sarah is hoping to be built up by Hagar.

What she's expecting is that Hagar will bear a child, and that child will be primarily hers. It will be a child that she will be built up by, and Hagar will still be her maidservant, and she will be the mistress of the house, and Ishmael will be her child through Hagar. That's not how things happen.

Rather, Abraham takes Hagar and it's described that she becomes, as it were, his wife. And so what we have initially is a rival wife situation. And then when the child is born, Sarai becomes light in the eyes of Hagar.

She's no longer taking that seriously. She no longer views her as her mistress. Rather, she's this childless wife of Abraham, this rival wife, and she doesn't have any children of her own.

Hagar sees herself as lifted up above her original station, and it creates a huge tension within the household. She's sent out and she flees from the face of her mistress, or at that point she flees from the face of her mistress, and then she's met by the angel of the Lord. And the angel of the Lord, within that situation, intervenes and says that she should go back and submit herself to Sarah.

So this is setting up a scene where she will, to some extent, be restored in the status of maidservant. She will no longer primarily be a rival wife. There is a promise attached to that, that God will bless her seed, that it will become a great nation, etc.

All these sorts of things. Now we get to chapter 21, and there's a new thing that has occurred. Isaac is born.

We've seen the opening of the wombs of the Gentiles at the end of chapter 20 with the events in the house of Abimelech. But here something new happens. Isaac is born.

The womb of Sarah is opened, and finally, after all this waiting, we finally have a clear seed apparent. This is the one that's going to be inheriting. This is the one that's going to be the one that bears the baton of the covenant into the future.

And this is a cause of laughter for Sarah. Her laughter in chapter 18 was a laughter of disbelief, perhaps, or a laughter of something of joy, or we don't know. She was shocked by the news, surprised by the news, maybe some element of disbelief.

But yet, here, his name is defined by this surprise, this joke in history that God has turned things around in a way that no one could have foreseen. She declares, God has made me laugh so that all who hear will laugh with me. This is a cause of joy and rejoicing, but there's a fly in the ointment.

The next scene we see, it's the weaning party for Isaac. Now, at this point, Ishmael is probably around 15, 16, something like that. He's a child that's coming of age, a young man that's coming of age.

His father is probably greatly involved in his life. They interact a lot and they work together. And it looks like he's, Abraham's deeply attached to Ishmael, and probably Ishmael is deeply attached to his father.

But Ishmael is scoffing, or literally laughing, Isaac. And this sets up the problem. The problem is that as long as Ishmael is Isaac, the status of Isaac, laughter, is not clear.

We need to know that Isaac is clear in his status as the true seed. And as long as the bondwoman's seed is within the house, and Hagar remains a bondwoman, she's no longer getting above her station in the same way. Sarah is the mistress of the house.

It's not this rival mistress's situation. Rather, the bondwoman's son is a problem. As long as the bondwoman's son is in the picture, Isaac, his part isn't clear.

And this is happening at a key transition within Isaac's life. It's a weaning party. It's an event where he's probably leaving primarily the circle of his mother and moving more into the realm of his father.

And if that is not handled well, if his place within the realm of his father, as he's moving towards that realm slowly, if that realm is one where he'll be competing with this older brother, this older brother who is not stepping aside, but is Isaac, that is competing with his identity, then there's something wrong. And so Sarah's response to this is angry. She wants to cast out the bondwoman.

And she tells this to Abraham. And Abraham's response is displeasure. He does not want to get rid of Ishmael.

He's deeply attached to Ishmael, as we see from chapter 17. He wants Ishmael to be the one that will remain. But no, God says that he should follow his wife's advice.

Now, this response of the Lord should not necessarily be seen as one that is without some degree of ambivalence. If we look at a very similar passage in chapter 8 of 1 Samuel, we'll see that Samuel is told by the people that they want a king. They're not happy with his sons.

They're not happy with him in some ways. And so they want a king. And he tells this to the Lord and he's displeased.

And then he brings the news to the Lord. And the Lord is clearly displeased too, but he says go ahead with it. That this is what has to happen.

And here this might be a similar sort of situation. The son has to be removed. This is a situation that is far from ideal.

This is not a good thing. But it's necessary. Under the circumstances, what happened with Hagar was a wrong to Sarah.

It threatened her place. And now for her seed to truly have his status within Abraham's household, this might need to happen. And so God's response is that he should listen to and follow his wife's voice in this matter.

And he does that. And what happens next is a very important passage because the resonances of this passage play out in a great many other passages in scripture. And I'll list a few of these.

I feel in this sort of point we're getting into very deep scriptural waters. Places where it's very difficult to understand just the full weight of the resonances. There is so much going on here.

But I'll try and lay out some of the pieces of the puzzle and give you the opportunity to think about it a bit more. I'll give some of my own initial thoughts as well. When you look at this passage, one of the things you should notice is how closely paralleled it is with what happens in the next chapter.

In the next chapter, we see Abraham and the test concerning Isaac, the binding of Isaac. And there is a very close parallel between these. As James Jordan has pointed out, Abraham arises early in the morning in both cases.

There's Ishmael's mother taking him to another land from Beersheba in the first. In the second, Isaac's father takes him into another land from Beersheba. Then the boy comes to the point of death in both stories.

God's angel intervenes in both cases. Hagar opens her eyes and sees the well of water. Abraham lifts up his eyes and sees the ram.

God promises to be with the boy in both cases. And then they marry a foreign woman, the woman from Egypt in the case of Hagar's story and the woman, Rebecca, from the household of Bethuel in the next chapter or chapter 24. So these are very important parallels and they help us to encourage us to read these two stories alongside each other.

Perhaps they could be connected with the story of the or the ritual of the Day of Atonement, where you have two goats, one that's taken up to the temple site and you have the blood displayed, the other that's sent out to an unoccupied territory by the hand of someone. And in both of these cases, I wonder whether these two stories are not just to be read alongside each other as juxtaposed, but connected within a deeper ritual that's taking place. There are significant differences, though, and these differences, again, as I've mentioned before, when you see these type scenes, when you see stories that are juxtaposed to each other, pay attention closely to the similarities and the differences.

There's a lot to learn from both of those things. Some of the details that might be interesting at the very outset is the reference to placing things on shoulders. That's another similarity between the stories.

There are juxtapositions, the fearing of God's response to Hagar, fear not, for God has

heard the voice of the lad where he is. And God's response to Abraham, do not lay your hand on the lad, nor do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God.

And so fearing in both cases and differences taking place there. Putting bread and a skin of water on her shoulder and the shoulder, is that associated with Shechem? The words are associated, the same words. So is there something going on there? Rising early in the morning as well.

Similar wording. Is there something that's playing upon that particular term? I'm not sure. There might be.

I suggest you look into that a bit further if you'd like to explore it. But they're sent out into the wilderness. Now, sent.

I mean, he's not just expelled. There's the language that Sarah uses is not the language used here. It's not casting out.

Rather, he's sent out. And the impression is, that you might get, is he's not truly being expelled. He's being sent out and he'll be on the periphery somewhere and come back and have be supported from a distance.

But no, he goes into the wilderness and they wander. And there's maybe something about this that Abraham didn't foresee. I mean, why did he send them away with so little? With the expectation that they would just go away and never come back.

That they would just be expelled completely. Completely out of the family. I don't think that was Abraham's intention.

But yet something goes wrong. And we'll get into another story of this later on in our study of Genesis. But I'll allude to it briefly.

There are a number of other occasions where we see stories that have similar flavours to them. And I'll discuss some of these in tomorrow's account. But when we look in 2 Kings chapter 4, the story of the Shunammite woman, there are parallels.

There are parallels with the story of a woman and a dying son. And things like lifting up your eyes, seeing things from a distance. All these sorts of things that play there.

And it suggests parallels both with the story of the binding of Isaac. In the case of a son that's given to a woman by a divine messenger. Told that this time next year, all these sorts of things.

A miraculous child opening the womb of an older woman. And then that child being threatened with death. In that case, the child dying.

And then all the things that happen after that with her saddling her donkey, arising early

in the morning, going towards the mountain and being seen from afar off. All these sorts of things. They're echoes of the stories of Genesis chapter 21 and 22.

There are things going on there that are very important, maybe for shedding light upon what's taking place here. What do we see about Hagar that's maybe different from what happens with Abraham? Hagar is deeply concerned about the near death of her child and she takes a distance from her child. She does not want to see the child die.

So she just removes herself from the child and she leaves the child under a bush, literally casts him down by a bush. And she goes away. And she goes at a bow shot away.

And there's a distance that she creates between herself and her son because she does not want to see the son die. It's a tragic event and she does not want to witness it. And this helps us, I think, to see some of the differences that take place.

There's a distance there that Abraham does not create with his son. Abraham, throughout the story, we'll see is very present with, he's faithful to God. He says, here I am to God.

He says, here I am to his son. And he says, here I am to the angel. In every single case, there's a presence maintained.

Whereas in the story of Hagar, it doesn't work out in that quite the same way. And the child is placed under one of the shrubs and she goes at a distance and says, let me not see the death of the boy. Now the fact that you have the shrub, the child placed under the shrub, and then the ram as the replacement or the substitute for Isaac and the ram caught in the thicket, that might be a significant parallel or a significant way of relating the story.

There is a connection between these stories. The fate of Ishmael and the fate of Isaac are entangled in some way. And we'll see as we go through the story that this entanglement is subtly playing within the text in a number of different ways.

These stories are not detached from each other. God hears not the voice of Hagar, Hagar sits opposite him at a bow shot's distance and lifts up her voice and weeps. I mean, it's despair.

There's no way out of this. This is the sort of despair that you see in Esau when he loses the birthright, when he loses the blessing. This is despair.

There's a sense of desolation. What else is there that is left to me now? And at this point, God hears the voice, not of Hagar, but of Ishmael. And the angel of the law calls to Hagar out of heaven and says to her, what ails you, Hagar? Which is a strange thing to say.

Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. And God hears the voice of Ishmael. He doesn't mention hearing the voice of Hagar at this point.

Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation. And so she is called to go back to the lad, not to distance herself from him, but to be present to him. And her presence to him is important, that God will make him a great nation.

And if she distances herself from him, she's failing him at that point. God opens her eyes and she sees a well of water. She goes and fills the skin with water and gives the lad a drink.

God was with the lad and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness and became an archer. Now, the connection between Ishmael becoming an archer and Hagar being at a bow shot is probably not accidental. It maybe says something about the relationship between Hagar and his mother, I don't know.

But those two details are not accidental within that chapter. Why does it mention that he becomes an archer? He's a hunter. It's a hunter figure.

We have hunter figures in people like Nimrod, in Esau, in characters like... Some of the characters associated with Cain's line as well. And these are significant themes that juxtaposed with shepherds. Shepherds versus hunters.

And he is also a wild ass that he's described as in chapter 16. So he's a wild ass. He's a creature of the wilderness.

He's a creature that is... He's also one who becomes an archer. He's a hunter. And he's a very different sort of person from the men of tents.

The men of the cattle and the shepherds of Abraham's line. This is a juxtaposition between these two characters. Caesar well of water.

And that well of water again, we might connect it with what happens in chapter 16. Where she is met by a spring on the way to shore. An eye.

These connections between women and wells or women and springs is important. They're important in scripture. We'll see that motif being played out later on in this chapter.

And more generally within the text, these connections are very strong ones. And they're important to pay attention to. He's given a drink and then God is with the lad.

And he grows and he dwells in the wilderness of Paran. Now as we look in the New Testament, we'll see some very surprising and maybe interesting parallels with this story. If you look in the story of the birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus in the beginning of Luke's gospel.

I think you see some parallels here that Luke is in some senses, maybe suggesting that John the Baptist is a desert character that prepares the way for the one who leads into the land. And that John the Baptist's birth is described in a way that associates it with the story of Jesus' birth. And then it says the child grew and became strong in spirit and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

And where else do we hear of a child growing and becoming strong in the desert or in the wilderness? It's the story of Ishmael. These stories maybe should be held alongside each other. In one case we see a child growing in the wilderness.

In another case we see another child growing in the deserts. Both of them are preparing the way for someone else who is the true seed. And one must decrease so that the other might increase.

But their destinies are intertwined. One is the child of the promise, the child of the kingdom. And one is a child of those sons of the flesh as it were.

The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than the greatest born of women. And the greatest born of women is John the Baptist. So John the Baptist is the greatest of a particular type of birth.

And then following on from that you have the true child of promise who is Christ who is the one begotten of the spirit, eternally begotten of the spirit. Now when we look at that pattern as it plays out in scripture, maybe what we can see is an intertwining of the destiny of Ishmael and Isaac where Ishmael prepares the way for Isaac. And we'll see some of these interesting connections later on.

And keep that thought in your mind. There may be something there. There are various other stories in scripture that have parallels with this story of the sending out of Hagar and Ishmael.

Some places that we might look are, I've already mentioned 2 Kings chapter 4 with the story of the Shunammite woman. And the emphasis upon her being far off at certain points, the distance between the woman and her son and the lifting up of the son at the end might suggest some connections with the story of the sending out of Ishmael. But it seems to me that the greater connections in that story are with the binding of Isaac and we'll get into those tomorrow.

Another story, also from the Book of the Kings, is in 1 Kings chapter 19 where persecuted by his life being pursued by Jezebel, Elijah goes into the wilderness. He leaves his lad, his servant, behind at Beersheba and he goes into the wilderness and sits under a broom tree and asks for death. And then the angel of the Lord visits him and he's given water and he's given food and he's prepared to go into the wilderness for 40 days.

What's going on there that might shed light upon the story of Ishmael? Well, there's the

lad left behind, there's the sitting under the broom tree, there's the waiting death, awaiting for death, being visited by the angel, provided with food, all these sorts of things. And there's the lifting up of the eyes as well. He looks and there by his head was a cake baked on coals and a jar of water.

And in these connections maybe we're seeing something about the wilderness connections of Ishmael and Elijah. Both of them are people of the wilderness. We see in this story of John the Baptist as well, John the Baptist is someone of the wilderness.

He's associated with Elijah, both dress and camel skin, other connections that he's the Elijah to come. And in the story of Ishmael, maybe what we're seeing is something similar. Also, the place of Jezebel within that story is ominous.

Jezebel takes the role of Sarah, the one who casts out, who persecutes this son, as it were. And clearly, Elijah is a good character. And the connections with Ishmael are suggestive of something deeper that's going on.

He has been cast out of Abraham's house. But yet God is preparing a new people. God has prepared, has preserved a people for himself, a remnant.

There will be a seed. And Elijah is going to be part of preparing the way for that seed. Maybe there's something going on there that we need to explore.

But we could also contrast the way that God treats Elijah at that particular point, the nearness that he creates, and the distance that Hagar creates with her son. Other things going on there, perhaps. Maybe the most interesting connections are found later on in Genesis.

In the story found in chapter 37 with the selling of Joseph into slavery. In that story, you have Joseph being cast into a pit. He's sent out, first of all.

He's sent out to find his brothers in the wilderness. Once he wanders, he ends up wandering around. And then he's encountered there and told to go and found them.

They see him afar off. And then he's cast into the pit, just as Ishmael was cast at the tree. And it says about the pit that there was, or the cistern, it was empty.

There was no water in it. Now that might throw our minds back to chapter 18. There was no water in the, they had no water left.

And at that point, they still have bread left, presumably, but there's no water. And immediately afterwards, we have them eating bread, eating a meal together. And then what do they do? They sell him to the Ishmaelites.

And these connections, more generally, I think, suggest a deeper set of resonances between these stories that illumine both, perhaps, perhaps especially the Joseph story.

That here we have a child being expelled and cast out of the family, in some ways very similar to Ishmael. And he ends up being with the Ishmaelites.

And their part in the story is maybe more significant. It's not just incidental that they are there at that point. Rather, they are part of the removed family of the distanced or estranged family of Abraham.

They're the family that belong in the wilderness, but they prepare the way. They're not written out of the story, but rather they have an unusual role to play. Moving further on, we have the events between Abimelech and Abraham.

And they create a covenant. Swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity, but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have sojourned. And Abraham agrees.

He swears. Now, God has had a number of developing relationship, a developing relationship with Abraham. A series of promises and covenant rights and other things like that that have raised the scale of the promises that he's made to him.

At this point, I think what we're seeing is an intensification of God's relationship with the nations through Abraham. That Abraham is one that will be a means of blessing to the nations. And in this particular relationship with Abimelech, we're seeing that starting to play out.

That there is a covenant formed not just with God and Abraham, but also with Abraham and people from other nations. But there immediately is a problem. Abraham reproves Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized.

Abimelech said, I do not know who has done this thing. You did not tell me, nor had I heard of it until today. Now, unless we're very deaf, we will hear resonances of the story of Abimelech's taking of Sarah.

The well is connected with the woman. And many, many occasions within the story of Genesis and outside of that, taking of the well, Abimelech claiming ignorance and then setting things right. And then they take, there's an exchange.

Abraham takes sheep and oxen, gave them to Abimelech and the two of them made a covenant. And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. Then Abimelech asked Abraham, what is the meaning of those seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves? And he says, those are his witness that he has dug this well.

And that relationship is associated with sheep, ewes particularly, and women and wells. All of those symbols are attached together within the stories of Genesis. And we also find it within Exodus as well.

Ewes, women, and offspring, and the wells. These things connect in ways that help us to understand some of the significant things that are going on. Rachel is associated with the ewe lamb in her name and other things.

Abraham plants a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and there he calls on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God. And he sojourns in the land of the Philistines many days. Planting a tree is interesting.

You have the tree and the altar. These two things are associated with each other. And often you'll see the oaks of Mamre, the tamarisk tree, and other places there is a tree and there is the altar.

And those two things alongside each other are worth looking into. James Jordan has some very helpful discussion of that in *Through New Eyes*. Thank you very much for listening.

Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow with some further thoughts. If you would like to leave any questions please do so on my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support videos like this please tell your friends.

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