**Genesis 21:8-21**

God had promised Abram numerous offspring, but Sarah, his wife, could not have children. She had therefore suggested that Hagar should act as a surrogate mother and bear Abram’s child (see Gen 16). That resulted in a breakdown in the relationship between the two women. Sarah’s affliction of Hagar then made Hagar run away, but God’s aide appeared to her and told her to go back. That tough requirement was also an act of grace: membership of Abram’s family meant membership of the people promised God’s blessing. That is underlined by the promise that Hagar will indeed become mother of a vast people. Initially she will be mother of a boy called Ishmael, *yišma’el*, God hears. It will be an appropriate name. Hagar has proved God as one who hears and gives heed to her affliction. In turn, Hagar herself has given God a new name, *’el ro’i*. The name looks as if it means something like “God sees me”, which makes a similar point, though the story has Hagar taking up the idea that she is someone who has seen God.

Abram thus acquired his son. Through him he will indeed become a great nation, as God promised. But God also made clear that Sarah herself would have a son with whom God would have a special covenant relationship (ch. 17). Sarah understandably laughed at this idea (18:9-15). But in due course Sarah had her son, and Abraham called him Isaac, *yitshaq*, “he laughs” or “he plays”. God has indeed given Sarah reason to laugh (21:1-7)

So the laughing/playing baby begins to grow into a laughing/playing boy. But he is not the only person laughing and playing. Ishmael is also doing so, and gets into trouble with Sarah for it, though there is more than one understanding of why this happens. The Septuagint and the Vulgate have him playing *with* Isaac at Isaac’s weaning party. This perhaps implies that his weaning took place rather later than we might expect. But the Hebrew text simply says he was laughing/playing. He was behaving like his half-brother. This was what offended Sarah. (If he was indeed playing *with* Isaac, the point is not really affected). She knows Ishmael is the eldest son, the one through whom she had suggested God’s promise could be fulfilled. She has changed her mind about that, but she cannot be sure that (e.g.) Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael himself will cooperate with her new desire, even though God backs it. If Ishmael is behaving as if Isaac’s name applies to him, will he soon be behaving as if Isaac’s promise applies to him?

She therefore determines that Hagar and her son must go, as once she had determined when he was still in Hagar’s womb. This time she seeks to get Abraham to do her dirty work. Abraham again behaves like a wimp, caught in the rivalry between his two women. We might also have preferred God to have acted with more apparent awareness that Hagar and Ishmael were again being treated rather toughly. But God declines to stand up to Sarah, too. For Sarah is right. It is through Isaac’s line that God’s main promise is to be fulfilled. But, Hagar and Ishmael do have a promise of their own. Ishmael will become the beginning of a nation.

“So Abraham rose early in the morning”. Old Testament stories are generally sparing in the information they give us on people’s feelings and motives. They tell us about people’s actions more than about their inner workings, and leave us to work out what was going on inside people. In this respect they are more like movies than like novels. So we must pay attention to what we are told about people’s actions if we are to determine what was going on in their hearts. Now when we get up early to do something, it is a sign that we are committed to it and want to set about doing it. Abraham is evidently so committed.

He gives Hagar some basic provisions and sends her away to wander in the waterless and resourceless wilderness of this foreign land. When their water is gone, she puts her child under one of the spiny bushes that grow there in the desert and sits a distance away, not wanting actually to watch her child die. Presumably she wrestles with some agonized questions about the supposed promise of God concerning her child, as well as with the pain of a mother forced to wait for her child to die. She weeps and howls.

The story does not say she prays. Once more she anticipates the experience of Israel in her homeland. They will cry out in their pain. The story does not tell us that they cry out to God, and neither does Hagar. She simply cries out.

But this does not stop God hearing and responding. Except that the cry to which God responds is actually the boy’s. For God knows it is impossible to allow this child to die. A promise attaches to him. God’s aide reaffirms the promise and points Hagar to a well she had not seen before. Was it there all the time, or is this a miraculous provision? From now on, God is “with” Ishmael. It is a key expression to describe God’s relationship with Abraham (21:22), Isaac (26:24), Jacob (28:15) and Joseph (39:21), and later with Israel as a people (e.g., Isa 41:10; 43:5). It signifies not merely an inner sense of God’s presence but an objective reality that issues in visible experience of God acting. The expression also applies to Ishmael, and has the same implications for him (v. 20).

There is a broader significance to the sentence about Abraham rising early in the morning. The expression recurs in 22:1, when Abraham gets up early to set out to offer his other son as a sacrifice. They are two parallel but strange ventures that God sets him on. It is also noteworthy that so much space is given to the story of Ishmael. It is Isaac, after all, who is the one through whom God’s most far-reaching promise is to be fulfilled.

The stories in Genesis 12—22 come in pairs. There are two stories when Abraham is charged by God to go off and do something and is promised God’s blessings. There are two about his adventures in a foreign land that involve passing off his wife as his sister, two stories about Lot in danger and about Sodom, two stories about covenant-making, and two stories about Hagar and Ishmael. They are arranged thus:

12 The call; blessing promised

12 Abram in a foreign land; wife‑sister story

13‑14 Lot in danger; Sodom

15 Covenant

16 Hagar and Ishmael

17 Covenant

18‑19 Lot in danger; Sodom

20 Abraham in a foreign land; wife‑sister story

21 Hagar and Ishmael

22 The call; blessing confirmed

God’s promise regarding Isaac is theologically central to the story of Abraham, yet oddly Ishmael occupies the structural center of the chapters. Then just before the end we get another story about Ishmael to accompany the first, disturbing the neatness of the overall arrangement. It is as if there have to be a pair of stories about Ishmael to balance the other pairs. It was by Sarah’s initiative that Ishmael came to be part of this story, and she can wish he was not part of it, but she cannot now eliminate Hagar and her son.

This is good news for the Gentiles who listen to sermons on this text. God’s promise to Abram did itself put the Gentile world into the frame of the story of Abram. In Abram all the peoples of the world were to find blessing. But Sarah’s action also brought an actual Gentile and her son into the center of the story. In one sense Sarah is our mother, but in another Hagar is thus our mother. It is further noteworthy that Hagar is an African, a woman, and a slave. It is such a woman who stands at the heart of the story of Abraham. The story thus also brings good news to women. It brings good news to people who are enslaved or oppressed, or have slavery or oppression in the history that has shaped them. It brings good news to people of African descent, or of other descent that that of the Asia in which the gospel was born and the Europe in which it long found its best-known home.

It is then noteworthy that Ishmael himself is the ancestor of the nomadic Arab peoples who live around Israel. The story is a reminder that God stands in covenant relationship with them as well as with Israel. This might imply that God is committed to the Palestinians and the other Arab peoples around Israel as well as to Israel, and to the Islamic community as well as to the Jewish and Christian communities. That would be an extra basis for prayer for the gospel to reach them and for them to be treated fairly in Middle Eastern politics.