

WHO IS THE PROMISED CHILD?

In our last encounter with Abram (Gen. 16), Ishmael was born to Abram and Hagar, resulting in conflict in the home and leaving us wondering “Is this the promised child?”

Abram was 86 years old (Gen. 16:16) at the time of Ishmael’s birth, and with the opening verse of chapter 17 we find him to be 99 years old, an expanse of 13 years of silence. If we were living on the scene, we very well might conclude that Ismael was the promised child.

And if we were so predisposed, there is some evidence we could draw upon. For example, the words of the Angel of the Lord to Hagar in Genesis 16:10-11 could sure be convincing that God is going to fulfill His *great nation* promised through Ishmael. Even his God-given name, *Ishmael*, means **the Lord hath heard** (Gen. 16:11).

When God, in Genesis 17, tells Abram (by then Abraham) that Sarai (Sarah) will bring forth the promised child, Abraham himself cried out, **O that Ishmael might live before thee!** (Gen. 17:17). Is Abraham’s heart toward his growing son, desiring him to inherit the covenant? Is Abraham still unsure, even with God’s announcement?

In Genesis 17, we remove any doubt that Ishmael might be the heir. Verses 19-21 make more explicit than ever that Isaac (named directly by God in v. 19) would be the heir to the covenant.

A NEW COVENANT AND A MARK FOR THE OLD

With Genesis 17:1 God introduces Himself as **the Almighty God**, a translation of the Hebrew *El Shaddai*. The *God who can do anything* instructed Abram to **walk before me, and be thou perfect**. That’s a tall order, and the latter could not be done without the former. God promises to **make my covenant between me and thee** (v. 2), but we should understand the word **make** to mean *deliver* (as in 2 Kings 18:23). God had previously made the covenant, and He will deliver. BUT, God is also about to enter *an additional promise* to Abram, and that is that **thou shalt be a father of many nations** (v. 4). This differs from that which is in the previous covenant, in which Abram would be God promised to **will make of thee a great nation** (Gen. 12:2). Notice the new addition of *nations* rather than *nation*.

Verses 4, 5, and 6 each repeat the *many nations* promise, making sure the reader catches the change (though most commentaries miss it completely). This is such a *new thing* that Abram will get a *new name* to give testimony to this throughout all time.

In verses 7-14, God returns to the previous *single nation* covenant that had been given in chapter 12 (and again in 15). This covenant involved one nation and one land, **the land of Canaan** (v. 8). It further gave the rite of circumcision as **a token of the covenant betwixt me and you** (v. 11). [A KJV note: *betwixt* means *between*, as can be seen in comparison with v. 10. The now archaic word is used to make the oral presentation of the Word more effective]. Why circumcision? The best answer may be, “we don’t know.” Many attempts have been given to provide a reason why *this* should be the sign of *that*. One thing that does become clear is that this relates to the previous land covenant and not the new *nations* promise.

NEW IDENTITIES FOR THE COVENANT COUPLE

With the promise of *many nations*, Abram gets a new identity. God declared; **thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee** (v. 5). The name Abram meant “Father of Aram” but the addition of the “h” made it “Abrham” or *Abraham*, the “Father of many nations.”

In Genesis 17:15-16 God not only clearly states that He **will give thee a son also of her** (v. 15), but that her name will change from Sarai to Sarah. The name Sarai means *princess* in conduct while *Sarah* means *princess to many*.

The name change of both Abraham and Sarah should tell us that this is important to God, and that through this couple the vast majority of humanity would either descend or find their spiritual home.

CONCERNING THE NUMBERS

There are two numbers which have significance hidden within this passage. The first is number 8, for on the eighth day the male was to be circumcised (v. 12). This number carries Biblical significance of a *new beginning* or *beyond natural*.

The number 13 appears for the second time in the Bible in verse 25, and seen *incognito* between 16:16 and 17:1. It is considered an *unlucky* number in contemporary society, and always carries a note of separation from God, judgement from God, or calamity in the Scriptures. Here there were 13 years of silence from God.