

THE PART OF THE STORY EVERYONE KNOWS

Genesis 21 is the chapter where Isaac, the long-promised child, is finally born. Genesis 21:2-5 gives the highlights of the account. There is a fulfillment of both long and short-term prophecies (v. 2), the giving of the name Isaac (v. 3), the circumcision on the eighth day (v. 4), and the reminder that Abraham is 100 years old (v. 5). And while this is interesting (and important) information, it is also stuff that “everyone knows.” It is the basic part of the Abrahamic story.

Before the chapter is completed, there is another “everyone knows” aspect of the Abrahamic story: that of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael (vv. 9-21). In one sense, we could almost see it coming. In fact, we would be surprised at anyone being surprised that the whole “Hagar incident” didn’t end well. This is one we could see coming from a mile away. We may be a bit surprised that Abraham went through with Sarah’s “tirade” (as we commonly see it), but we’re not surprised that there was a tirade!

But let’s dig deeper into the story, beyond the birth of Isaac, beyond the expulsion of Hagar, even beyond Ishmael being promised a nation of his own (everyone knows that, after all).

It turns out that Genesis 21:1-21 has several hidden clues that shout out *the rest of the story*.

THE PART OF THE STORY EVERYONE MISSES

THE SARAH PART

In 20:18-21:3 (four verses), Sarah’s name is mentioned five times. And beyond doubt Sarah is *very much in charge* in this chapter. Having gone from “sister” in chapter 20, Sarah now comes into the story as “angry mama bear.” In fact, the Abrahamic story would, it seems, be radically different if it wasn’t for Sarah’s “angry mama” role in our text.

In verses 6-7 Sarah is presented as a *rejoicing mother*, honoring both God and her husband. In fact, in verse 6 she virtually sets the understanding of the name Isaac as *positive* rather than *negative*. The laughter, prior to this point, has had a negative connotation, but Sarah turns that on its head in verse 6. From here on, Isaac will be a name associated with *joy* and *rejoicing*. In verse 7 Sarah rejoices in what she has been able to do for Abraham’s old-age, honoring him.

What is most significant is that *Sarah drives the narrative* in this chapter. If it wasn’t for Sarah, would the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael have occurred at all? It is almost that you could say, “Abraham has been the ‘covenant father,’ but in

Genesis 21 Sarah definitely becomes the ‘covenant mother.’” There is *zero doubt* that Sarah is “not the sister” from this point onward.

An interesting thing happens in verse 8, when Abraham **made a great feast the same day Isaac was weaned**. This is unusual in Scripture, and we know nothing of a “weaning celebration” anywhere else in the Hebrew world. And we should consider that Abraham really seemed to want his son Ishmael to be the promised child. Remember how Abraham responded to hearing that Sarah would have a son? (see Gen. 17:18). The “weaning celebration” could almost seem like Abraham celebrating the opportunity to *get the boy away from his mother’s influence*.

It was at this party that Ishmael (who is not even called by name) was caught **mocking** (v. 9). This is an interesting word, since *it is the same root as the name Isaac*. In fact, it is very hard to translate (and thus translations vary wildly). Rabbi Zvi Grumet, in his commentary on Genesis, even suggests that it could be translated “Isaacing.” And this could explain Sarah’s immediate and intense anger. Sarah responds that **the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir...** (v. 10).

This suspected plotline is all-but-confirmed in verses 11-12, where Abraham’s sympathies seem to be toward Ishmael, and God gives a very blunt directive: *obey Sarah* (v. 12). It sure seems like *God is on Sarah’s side*.

THE HAGAR PART

Beginning in verse 14, Hagar and Ishmael are sent away. Things do not go well, and by verse 15 Hagar abandons the boy to die. It is said that Hagar went **a good way off, as it were a bowshot** (v. 16). That is interesting detail and brings up two questions.

First, what kind of mother does that? Isn’t it *unbelievably odd* for a mother to leave her son to die alone? In fact, verse 16 says that Hagar **lift up her voice, and wept**, but verse 17 immediately says, **God heard the voice of the lad**. But God comes to Hagar and says, **what aileth thee, Hagar?** But the Hebrew is really, “What’s with you, Hagar?” It almost seems like a chastisement from God (and I believe it is). The contrast in the story is great, between Sarah the “angry mama” doing anything for her son, and Hagar, the mother who backs away in the time of greatest need.

Second, what kind of boy is this? The story reads like Ishmael is an infant or young child. But we know from Genesis 17:25 that Ishmael was 13 when he was circumcised, and we can roughly calculate another year to Isaac’s birth, then about three years to his weaning. That makes Ishmael a 17-year-old *young man*! Why wouldn’t a 17-year old pick himself up and “figure it out?” Perhaps because he had envisioned himself (with Abraham’s help) as *the heir*, and now both his father and his mother had abandoned him. See Psalm 27:10.