

PARASHAH EIGHTEEN

Genesis 21:1–34; 1Samuel 2:21–28; Matthew 1:18–25

notes by Tim Hegg

The Birth of the Promised Son

Genesis 21 recounts the story of the birth and circumcision of Isaac, the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael, the marriage of Ishmael, and the striking of a covenant between Abimelech, king of Gerar and Abraham. At a time when we long for the Temple in Jerusalem, but are not even allowed to ascend the mount where it will be built, we read a *parashah* that shows God’s loving care and mercy to the father of Israel’s enemies. Just when we’d like to read a story about how God brings His wrathful vengeance upon the enemies of His people, we read about the tender, loving mercies extended to the father of the Arab nations! All this in combination with the season of Purim and the exercise of remembering what our enemies have attempted to do to us throughout our history.

Here we have the biblical perspective in the whole matter of interpersonal relationships. While some would have “forgiveness” all but negate “justice,” and others would by-pass “forgiveness” in their zeal to see “justice” done, God upholds both equally and with divine purpose. Like Judas who would come hundreds of years after the time of Haman, and whose evil deeds would bespeak his appointment to destruction (cf. John 17:12), so Haman is destined to be the eternal symbol of the covenant fulfillment “I will curse the one who curses you.” (Note the singular used in the sentence for the one who curses, and the plural for those who will bless, Gen 12:3.)

The birth of Isaac is narrated short and to the point: HaShem visited (פָּקַד, *paqad*, NASB “took note of”) Sarah, she conceived, bore a son to Abraham, and he called his name Isaac. While the birth of Isaac is clearly a climax in the story, it is treated with very little “pizzazz.” What is emphasized, however, are the repeated “just as” phrases: כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר (v. 1), “just as He said,” כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר (v. 1), “just as He spoke,” לְמוֹעֵד אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אֱתוֹ אֱלֹהִים (v. 2), “at the festival as God had spoken,” כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה אֱתוֹ אֱלֹהִים (v. 4), “just as God had commanded him.” God fulfilled His promises exactly as He had said He would, and Abraham emulates Him by circumcising Isaac “just as He had commanded him.”

What is emphasized is the perfection of God. He does things with infinite precision! Isaac is born, just *as* He said, just *when* He said. In Gen 18:10 we read: וַיֹּאמֶר שׁוֹב אָשׁוּב אֵלֶיךָ כֵּעֵת הַיָּהּ, “and He said, ‘Most assuredly I will return at the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son . . .’” It says at the “time of life,” (NASB, “at this time next year,” but the Hebrew has the word “life”), the appointed time for a child to be born. In our scientific way of looking at things, the “time of life” is a natural thing—nine months (give or take a little) is the period for the development of a child. But the Scriptures look at this period of pregnancy as the direct result of God’s miraculous working, not some biological fact that just occurs. God is the God of life, and so He determines the “time of life,” the exact day the baby will be born. Like the rebuilding of the Temple which is within the very specific plan of HaShem (even to the exact timing), so the birth of a child is a reminder of God’s very personal and exacting providence. Isaac’s birth is a portend of the distant future and the birth of the Promised Son:

While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6–7)

And midrashically the birth of Isaac may also foreshadow the miracle of Israel's "re-birth" in the end of times:

Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Can a land be born in one day? Can a nation be brought forth all at once? As soon as Zion travailed, she also brought forth her sons. (Is 66:8)

But the text also highlights a second issue, namely, the manner in which God is exacting in His justice. In a brilliant play on words, Ishmael mocks (קִצְחֵיק, *m'izacheik*) Isaac (יִצְחָק, *yitzchak*). We should note the word קִצְחֵיק, the root of Isaac's name, may mean "laughter," but it also can have negative, immoral connotations. Note Ex 32:6 - "people sat down to play" = idolatry; Gen 39:14, 17 - "the Hebrew ... came in to make sport of me (= sexual impurity); 2 Sam 2:14 "let them arise and make sport (קִחֵשׁ, a variant spelling of קִצְחֵיק, most likely, = engage in killing as a sport). The word is thus an ironic element in the narrative. As applied to Isaac, it carries the happy idea of joyful laughter. In connection to Ishmael, it carries the sinister characteristic of foul play.

Isaac receives his name from the spontaneous laughter which erupted when God promised a baby to the elderly Sarah and Abraham. Ishmael is sent away because he "laughs" at the One who caused "laughter." What's the point? God does not look as man looks, for man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. The point is that motive does make a huge difference to God. A laughter of joy and even one of some amazement is one thing. But to mock the very son whom God had ordained to carry the covenant into the next generation is, in essence, to mock God Himself. And God will not be mocked!

An appreciation for the exacting nature of God as displayed in this story is so needful for our times. Somehow, we have, as a society, fallen to the point where it is seemingly impossible in our minds both to administer justice and show mercy. Hagar is a powerless female without personal prerogative, and Ishmael is a young lad (14 years old in this story). Yet justice demands that they leave the home of Abraham and Sarah. The covenant community that is to bear the revelation of God's method of justification cannot be tainted with the failed attempts of Abraham to justify himself in terms of bringing the covenant promises in his own strength. The Hagar event is, in every way, contrary to the covenant of promise. Her presence, and that of the lad's, muddies the waters of God's purpose to reveal the covenant as fulfilled by His own sovereign and merciful hand.

But God is not restrained from showing her and the lad the kindness and mercy for which He is known. Hagar and Ishmael will never figure into the covenant (בִּיצְחָק יִקְרָא לְךָ זֵרַע, "in Isaac your seed shall be called," v. 12, cf. Rom 9:7) because God did not ordain that they should be. Their sorrowful plight, their own disadvantaged circumstances, do not change the clear and precise plan and ordination of God. He sustains them, reveals Himself to them, gives them water, and opens their eyes to see what otherwise they could not see, yet His eternal choice of Isaac as the one through whom the covenant would come still stands. Isaac has not won covenant status by his deeds, nor has Ishmael and Hagar lost it because of theirs (they were innocent victims in terms of the decisions made by Sarah and Abraham). Covenant membership is a matter of God's sovereign elective choice (cf. Rom 9:8-13), not mankind's actions.

Note well how Abraham's natural inclination toward Ishmael must be overcome in favor of accepting God's plan. Abraham was distressed over the whole matter, as any good father would be. But God's ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are above us. He intends to complete His eternal plan and bring to fruition His decreed purposes, not in ways we approve and determine, but

according to the counsel of His own purposes.

The connection to the covenant (or the lack thereof) is also emphasized, both in Isaac and Ishmael, by their marriages. Ishmael marries an Egyptian chosen by his mother (Hagar is likewise called “the Egyptian”). Isaac will marry a relative of Abraham, chosen through divine appointment accomplished by the hand of Eliezar, Abraham’s trusted servant. One marries within the covenant people of God, the other into their enemies. One represents the product of God’s faithful promise, the other the efforts of sinful flesh. They stand before us as a constant reminder that we must do God’s work, and we must do it His way!

The determinative hand of God is also seen in the blessing He apportions to Ishmael. In accordance with the former promise (cf. Gen 16:12), Ishmael will become a nation. But this “blessing” for Ishmael will become a constant thorn in the flesh of Isaac’s descendants. The struggle of the flesh against the spirit remains in this fallen world, which is Paul’s point in the midrash he employs on this passage in Galatians 4.

The *parashah* concludes with the enactment of a covenant between Abraham and Abimelech, a covenant of peace and well-being (דִּקְוָה) specifically regarding water rights. Like the descendants of Ishmael who would cause Abraham’s family no small amount of trouble and sorrow, Abimelech is a ready reminder that (1) the covenant promises to Abraham did not exempt him from the struggles of life in general. Though he was blessed of God, he would still have enemies, and (2) God had blessed Abraham in such an obvious way, that rather than being a mere sojourner, he is now one to be reckoned with within the region. God has blessed as He promised, and the well named Beersheba (well of oath taking) is a constant reminder that God would give Abraham success with his neighbors, and that He would plant him and his descendants in the Land of promise.

The section ends on a beautiful note: “And Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of Adonai, the God of eternity.” In the ever changing world in which we live, it is the realization that we worship the God of eternity, the One who never changes, that gives us hope and strength. Abraham had experienced the utter faithfulness of God in giving a son, and in blessing him in the Land. The Tamarisk stood as a constant reminder to Abraham of how God is true to His word. And even in the season of Purim, a festival replete with fun and laughter, we remember that our existence in this time is the direct proof that God keeps His word, and that, in accordance with His promises, He has sustained us, raised us up, and brought us to this season. What an awesome thought to consider that we enter into His eternal plan, a plan for blessing and not cursing, as we are reckoned by His grace as privileged covenant members within the people called Israel.

The *haftarah* chosen to accompany our Torah *parashah* in the triennial cycle is 2Sam 2:21-28, chosen because of the opening words of this passage: פָּקַד יְהוָה אֶת־חַנָּה, “Adonai visited (*paqad*) Hannah,” which matches the opening words of our *parashah*, יְהוָה פָּקַד אֶת־שָׂרָה, “Adonai visited (*paqad*) Sarah.” In both cases, the emphasis is upon the divine visitation, which resulted in the giving of children. Both Sarah and Hannah struggled under the inability to conceive children, a problem overcome for both of them by the direct and gracious intervention of God. This is a vivid reminder to us that children are the gift of God. Every child, and thus every individual, carries the sacred gift of life as an endowment from the Giver of life.

The Apostolic text chosen for this Shabbat is the notice of the miraculous conception of Yeshua within Miriam, a virgin betrothed to Joseph, and the subsequent birth of our Savior. The obvious connection to our Torah *parashah* is the miracle of Isaac’s conception and birth as a foreshadowing

of the birth of our Messiah. Even as Isaac was the son of promise, so Yeshua is the One promised by the Prophets, the “coming One” (cf. Matt 11:3). And just as Isaac was born to Sarah at a time in her life when it was, from a human standpoint, impossible for her to conceive (Gen 18:11), so Miriam, the mother of Yeshua, conceived in a manner entirely out of the realm of human possibility, for she became pregnant with Yeshua, never having relations with any man.

The virginal conception of our Lord Yeshua is mocked by unbelievers, and considered to be a myth concocted by the later Christian Church, based upon their desire to present Yeshua as a god much like the gods of the pagan myths in which a deity (such as Zeus) cohabits with a mortal woman, causing her to give birth to a “son of the god.” Herakles was described in Greek mythology as the offspring of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmena. The differences, of course, are many, most notably that the Greek gods have multiple “sons,” and often these “sons” are in conflict with their supposed “father.” Indeed, in regard to the Greek and Roman pantheons, the stories are built upon the attempt of each god to assert his power over all the others and the conflicts such attempts create within the pantheon. More to the point, however, is the fact that Satan is the father of lies, and he seeks to counterfeit the acts of the One true God. The pagan myths are full of stories about how the world came into being, how mankind was created, how the gods devastate the world with a flood, and so on. It is not surprising, then, that Satan would also seek to counterfeit the virginal conception of our Master.

But the foundation for truth which we receive is the inspired word of God, the Scriptures. And when we look at the Scriptures, there is no doubt about the fact that Yeshua was conceived through the work of the Ruach HaKodesh and not by normal means of procreation. Besides our Apostolic portion, in which the conception of Yeshua is clearly stated to be “before they (Miriam and Joseph) had come together,” Luke, himself a physician, describes the message of the Angel to Miriam in these words:

The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.
(Lk 1:35)

Moreover, upon being given the startling news by the Angel that she would conceive a baby boy, Miriam responds, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” Further, as we have read in our Apostolic portion, Matthew connects the virginal conception of Yeshua with the prophecy of Isaiah (7:14) as its fulfillment:

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us.” (Matt. 1:22–23)

Some detractors point to the fact that the virginal conception of Yeshua is never mentioned in the later epistles and thus suggest that this doctrine was not known until much later in the emerging Christian Church. But such arguments from silence are notoriously weak. For instance, Paul never mentions the Sabbath commandment either, but it is clear that he affirmed it, for he openly confesses that he lived in accordance with the Torah (Acts 24:14; 25:8). What is more, Paul seems at least to hint at the extraordinary birth of Yeshua when he includes the ancient hymn in 1 Tim 3:16.

There, speaking of Yeshua, the language is “who was *revealed* in the flesh,” where the verb φανερώω (*phaneroō*), “to reveal,” “to cause to become visible” suggests the pre-existence of Yeshua before His being born to Joseph and Miriam. Likewise, in Phil 2:5–11, the pre-existence of Yeshua is clearly affirmed. In the end, arguments from silence tell us nothing. What is clear, however, is the fact that the Gospel writers, who alone give us the inspired record of Yeshua’s life upon this earth, affirm without hesitation the virginal conception of Yeshua. If we accept their record as the word of God, then we too will affirm this truth.

Why is the virginal conception of our Lord a foundational doctrine of our faith? First, it marks Yeshua out as distinct from all other people. More to the point, it connects Yeshua to the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy and the One Who is Immanuel. That is to say, the virginal conception emphasizes both the deity and humanity of Yeshua. Paul can rightly say that He was “born of a woman” (Gal 4:4) by which he means that Yeshua was (and is) human in every way. In the mystery of the incarnation, full humanity as well as the fullness of deity resides in the person of Yeshua.

Secondly, the fact that Yeshua came to us as fully human raises the question of His sinlessness. Are not all people born under the condemnation of sin and death which was passed on to all of Adam’s progeny? The truth is that a sinful nature is not integral to humanity. Adam was fully human before the fall into sin. Yet it is true that Adam was placed by God as the representative of his race, and the guilt he incurred through his disobedience was passed on to all of his offspring. Paul writes in Rom 5:12 that “death spread to all men” because of Adam’s sin, and that the guilt of Adam’s sin was also reckoned to all who came from him (Rom 5:18). In Eph 2:3, Paul says that we all are “by nature children of wrath,” meaning that we all are born sinners and therefore under the wrath of God. But the virginal conception of Yeshua isolated Him from having such a connection to Adam. From the standpoint of God’s economy of justice, Yeshua was not born under the imputed condemnation of Adam. He had no requirement to make payment, either for sin imputed to Him from Adam, nor for guilt incurred by His own sin. As the spotless Lamb of God, He was therefore able to give Himself as a sacrifice for us *who do* bear the imputed guilt of Adam as well as of our own sins.

In the end, the importance of the virginal conception of Yeshua in our confession of faith in Him is that in such a confession, we affirm the supreme mystery that Yeshua is both God and man, and that as such, He alone is able to secure our eternal salvation. But the bottom line is that we base our confession of Yeshua’s extra-ordinary, miraculous conception and birth on the clear statements of Scripture, itself the sole basis for our faith and *halachah*.