

**SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY**  
**Week 8: Genesis 21-22 – Isaac’s Birth & Sacrifice**

**ISRAEL** is the name conferred on Jacob after the great struggle at Peniel (Genesis 32:28). It’s the common name given to Jacob’s descendants. The whole people of the twelve tribes are called “Israelites”, the “children of Israel” (Joshua 3:17; 7:25; Judges 8:27; Jeremiah 3:21), and the “house of Israel” (Exodus 16:31; 40:38). After the death of Saul, the ten tribes arrogated to themselves this name, as if they were the whole nation (2 Samuel 2:9-28; 3:10-17; 19:40-43), and the kings of the ten tribes were called the “kings of Israel” while the kings of the two tribes were called “kings of Judah.” After the Exile, the name Israel was assumed as designating the entire nation.

**HEBREW** is the name applied to the Israelites only by one who is a foreigner (Genesis 39:14, 17; 41:12) or by the Israelites when they speak of themselves to foreigners (Genesis 40:15; Exodus 1:19), or when spoken of and contrasted with other peoples (Genesis 43:32; Exodus 1:3, 7, 15; Deuteronomy 15:12). In the new Testament there is the same contrast between Hebrews and foreigners (Acts 6:1; Philippians 3:5). The name is possibly derived from Eber (Genesis 10:24), the ancestor of Abraham; the Hebrews are “sons of Eber” (10:21). But the name could also come from the Hebrew word “abhar” which means “to pass over” in the sense of a “sojourner” or “someone who passes through” as distinct from a “settler” in the land.

**JEW** is the name derived from the patriarch Judah, at first given to one belonging to the tribe of Judah or to the separate kingdom of Judah (2 Kings 16:6; 25:25; Jeremiah 32:12; 38:19; 40:11; 41:3) in contradistinction from those belonging to the kingdom of the ten tribes, who were called Israelites. During the captivity and after the restoration, the name was extended to all the Hebrew national without distinction (Esther 3:6-10; Daniel 3:8-12; Ezra 4:12; 5:1, 5). Originally the people were called Hebrews (Genesis 39:14; 40:15; Exodus 2:7; 3:18; 5:3; 1 Samuel 4:6-9) but after the Exile, this name fell into disuse.

**SYNOPSIS OF GENESIS 16-20**

**CHAPTER 16 – THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL**

When we get to Genesis 16, Abraham is once again doubting God’s promises of children, acting like God never made any promise at all. So, Sarai urges Abram to follow an accepted custom and father a child with her maidservant, Hagar, an Egyptian. Any child born from a slave given to the husband by a barren wife was considered the wife’s child rather than the servants. But was this really how God was going to make Abraham the father of a great nation? Through an Egyptian of all people? Remember, God had not said that the promise would come through Sarah... yet... so this kind of made sense to both Sarai (who was old) and Abraham (who wanted an heir). Hagar’s pregnancy creates intense jealousy. Sarai was so mean to Hagar that she ran away into the desert. But God doesn’t leave her there. God makes a promise to her as well. She will have a son and eventually too many descendants to count—which is very similar to the promise God made to Abraham. Ishmael is born and it looks like it’s going to turn out alright for Hagar, but as we are told again and again (Genesis 16:12 and Genesis 25:18) his descendants are going to be a hostile bunch who pick fights with everyone around them. This story is probably an etiology of the tensions the Israelites have with the people south of Canaan who were so much like them. These half-brothers, the sons of Ishmael, are just born that way.

**CHAPTER 17 – THE SIGN OF THE COVENANT: CIRCUMCISION**

Thirteen years later, when Abram is 99 years old, with no sign of God coming through on the promise, God shows up with a reminder that God will do what God has promised. But now, God adds a sign to the covenant; a sign that Abram will be faithful to God: circumcision for everyone. God introduces circumcision as a sign of covenant relationship (vs. 1-14). God also announces that God’s promise of countless descendants will not be fulfilled through Hagar’s son Ishmael, but through a child to be borne by Sarah, who is now 90 years old (vs. 15-27). In a sense, the organ of procreation was being claimed by God and dedicated to God. This became a sign of their ethnic identity; a sign that they had pledged themselves to Yahweh. And other people will become known as the “uncircumcised.”

**Names Changed:** Abram’s name is changed to Abraham. Abram means “father” or “exalted ancestor,” while Abraham means “father of a multitude” or “ancestor of a multitude.” Sarai means “she that strives” and Sarah means “princess”. Notice how similar the name Sarai is to Israel. They come from the same root. Israel means “to struggle.”

**Circumcision:** The rite of circumcision involves removing the flap of skin that covers the tip of a male's penis. This is done on the eighth day of a Jewish boy's life. Circumcision was the physical mark of participation in the covenant which God made with Abraham and his descendants. One who did not consider covenant relationship with God important enough to identify himself or his children with the covenant people and thus did not practice circumcision, "will be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant (vs. 14). In Deuteronomy 10:16 we see the symbolism of circumcision as a readiness to respond to God: <sup>16</sup> *Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.*

#### LOCATION HISTORY

##### **Oaks of Mamre (just outside of Hebron; 20 miles south of Jerusalem in an open valley)**

What is significant about this location? The Oak of Mamre (a single tree) was believed to be an ancient tree (a holy tree) that was supposed to have grown there since the beginning of the world; believed to represent the center of the world.

**Patriarchal Period** The site first appeared in chapter 13, where Abram had built an altar to the Lord. It appears again in chapter 14 where Abram led his trained men to rescue his nephew Lot from the hands of his kidnappers. In Genesis 23, Abram will buy the field and cave of Mechpelah (Hebron; "facing Mamre") and bury Sarah in the cave. This becomes the place where all the patriarch couples were buried (Sarah and Abraham, Genesis 25:7-10; Rebecca and Isaac, Genesis 35:27-29; and Leah and Jacob, Genesis 49:29-33).

**Times of Joshua and Judges** The spies visited Hebron and near there cut the cluster of grapes (Numbers 13:22). It was taken by Joshua and given to Caleb (Joshua 10:36-37; 12:10; 14:13). It became a Levitical city and a city of refuge (Joshua 20:7; 21:11). One of Samson's exploits was the carrying of the gate of Gaza "to the top of the mountain that is before Hebron (Judges 16:3).

**Days of the Monarchy** David, when a fugitive, received kindness from the people of this city (1 Samuel 30:31). Six of David's sons were born there (2 Samuel 3:2). Here, Abner was treacherously slain by Joab at the gate (2 Samuel 3:27), and the sons of Rimmon, after their hands and feet had been cut off, were hanged "beside the pool" (2 Samuel 4:12). When David became king of Judah, it was his royal residence, and he resided there for seven and a half years (2 Samuel 5:5) until he captured Jerusalem and made that his capital (2 Samuel 15:7). It was here that David was anointed as King over all Israel (2 Samuel 2:1-11; 1 Kings 2:11).

**Later History** After the revolt of the Jewish leader Shimon Bar Kockba against the Roman occupiers in the second Roman-Jewish War, (132-136 CE) many Jews were captured by the Romans and sold into slavery under the Oak at Mamre. The cause of the Revolt: Hadrian had abolished circumcision because he considered it a mutilation and Bar Kockba claimed to be the Messiah who believed Jeremiah had prophesied that the Temple would be rebuilt seventy years after its destruction, as the First Temple had been after the Babylonian exile.

#### CHAPTER 18 – THE VISITORS AND THE PROMISE

Verses 1-2: *"The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him."* These mysterious visitors (two appear to be angels and one seems to be God) are shown hospitality by Abraham. They confirm God's promise that Sarah will have a son within the next year, though Sarah laughs. But they also say that Abraham needs to *"keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what has been promised"* (Genesis 18:19). The covenant is no longer a one-sided promise.

Think about what this says to the Israelites reading this after they had been taken into exile because of their failure to follow God's ways. Up to this point, we haven't learned what the "way of the Lord" is. We don't get that until the book of Exodus. But for a story written after the exile, the Israelites surely would have known. They are using this story to connect their present to the past. We will see Abraham described as a law-keeper again in Genesis 26:4-5 when God says to Isaac: *"I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and will give to your offspring all these lands; and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing for themselves through your offspring, because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."* This is a clear indication that the Israelites were building on ancient stories of their people and shaping them to help make sense of their identity as a nation in exile.

Leaving, one angel tells Abraham the Lord is about to destroy wicked Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham then prays and begs God to spare anyone who is righteous in these cities and not sweep them away with the wicked.

#### **CHAPTER 19 – SODOM AND GOMORRAH DESTROYED; AMMONITES AND MOABITES BORN**

Two angels go to Sodom and Lot invites them in and shows them hospitality. But the men of the city come and surround the house and call for Lot to bring them out. But Lot offers his daughters instead. They decline and still want the men. The men pull Lot back inside and strike the crowd with blindness. They tell Lot that they are going to destroy the place. The next morning, they instruct Lot to leave but he is slow, so they drag him out by the hand and tell him to head for the hills and don't stop or look back. He flees to Zoar. Sulfur and fire rain down. But Lot's wife, looked back and became a pillar of salt. Abraham saw the smoke and destruction.



Instead of living in Zoar, Lot went and lived in a cave with his two daughters. They got him drunk and both laid down with him.

Both bore children from their encounters; the firstborn bore a son and named him Moab (the ancestor of the Moabites); the younger also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi (the ancestor of the Ammonites).

#### **CHAPTER 20 – ABRAHAM AND SARAH AT GERAR**

Abraham and Sarah head toward the Negeb. Abraham once again, tells the local king (Abimelech; whose name means “my father is king”) that Sarah is his sister (hey! It worked in Egypt). But God appears to Abimelech in a dream and reveals the deception. Abimelech pleases with God that he did everything with integrity. God agrees but says that it was I that kept you from sinning. I didn't let you touch her. Abimelech confronts Abraham and Abraham says “Yes. She is my sister. She is the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother.” Abimelech sends them off with riches.

### **THE ISAAC DRAMA**

#### **CHAPTER 21 – THE BIRTH OF ISAAC; HAGAR AND ISHMAEL SENT AWAY; AND COVENANT WITH ABIMELECH**

The promised son is finally born after decades of waiting. They name him Isaac, and everyone lives happily ever after. Right? No. Not in this story. Now that Sarah has a son, she wants to banish Hagar and Ishmael so that Isaac can claim the entire inheritance for himself without competition. Abraham gets upset but listens to Sarah after God tells him to. So, Abraham sends them on their way with some food and water, but it soon runs out, and it looks like that is going to be the end of them. But once again, God comes to the rescue, shows her a well, and promises to make Ishmael into a great nation.



## CHAPTER 22 – THE COMMAND TO SACRIFICE ISAAC

Finally, we come to the story where God tells Abraham to go to Mount Moriah and sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering. Where is Mount Moriah? It's the rocky hill in Jerusalem on which Solomon built the temple (2 Chronicles 3:1). It is the location where David purchased a threshing floor and built an altar to the Lord (see 2 Samuel 24:18-25). The importance of this location can't be emphasized enough. It all starts here with the "almost" sacrifice of Isaac.



So, God is testing Abraham. That's clear from the first verse. And unlike Adam in the garden, Abraham, the new Adam, is obedient. Abraham makes all the necessary preparations and is about to plunge his knife into his only son, when an angel tells him, at the last second, not to go through with it. Abraham passes the test.

This is a disturbing story. First, Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac. Second, why this as a test? Couldn't God think of something else? We see elsewhere that God hates child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3). So why test Abraham in this way?

Again, we need to look at this story from the point of view of later Israelites. They were against child sacrifice. That's something the pagan gods tell their people to do. But Israel's God still laid some claim on the first born (see Exodus 13:1, 11-13). The first born belongs to God (which is a theme we will see again and again). If the firstborn is an animal, you "give it over" to God, which means you sacrifice it. A donkey, however, you can "redeem" with a lamb, that is, a lamb can take the place of a donkey (because donkeys are unclean animals and were needed to haul things).

Firstborn humans are redeemed also. In Numbers 8:17, we see another way firstborn humans are redeemed: the tribe of Levi is a stand-in for the firstborn of Israel. God takes that tribe "for himself," not by killing it but by separating it from the other tribes to run the sacrificial system in the tabernacle (and later the Temple). The point is that the Israelite firstborn *still belongs to God*. God just decides not to go through with it and accepts a substitute.

The story of the binding of Isaac makes more sense with that in the background. It is a story about whether God would exercise God's right over the firstborn, whether God would actually go through with it and say, "No substitute." Abraham believe that God would not go through with it, and he says in verse 8, that God would replace his son with a lamb—exactly in keeping with Exodus 13 and Numbers 8.

And so, we see that Israel is, was and always will be God's firstborn son (Exodus 4:22) and is, was, and always will be safe in God's hands—no matter how dire the circumstances.

Genesis will now continue with a few episodes on Isaac, including the death of his mother and father, before moving quickly to Abraham's grandson, Jacob, the true father of the Israelites.