

## THE ISHMAEL PLAN ... HELPING GOD FULFILL HIS PROMISE ...

Abram was seventy-five years old when he received the initial promise from God in Genesis 12.

- (Genesis 12:4 ESV) So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

But the years came and went and no son had been born to them. So Sarai had an idea. They would help God fulfill his promise to them for an heir. So Sarai told Abram to go and have sex with Hagar so that she could “obtain children by her.”

- (Genesis 16:1–5 ESV) Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, “Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!”

Abram did as Sarai suggested and Hagar gave birth to a son, Ishmael.

- (Genesis 16:15–16 ESV) And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

Abram was now eighty-six years old when he became the father of Ishmael. But Ishmael was not God’s plan. That is not what God had spoken and promised to Abram. God had promised a son to Abram and Sarai.

- (Genesis 17:15–17 ESV) And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

But still Abraham (now Abraham, not Abram) struggles with the promise and the miracle of this old man and old woman having a baby son. So he holds out the “the Ishamel Plan” once again.

- (Genesis 17:18 ESV) And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!”

But a promise is a promise. And God

is God. God does exactly what he says he will do. If it takes a miracle, then so be it. But Sarai will have a baby boy because God promised that to them.

- (Genesis 17:19 ESV) God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him.”

Isaac means “laughter,” which is understandable. Abraham and Sarah were so old, they were nearly fossils. In a mixture of joyous faith and bewilderment, both Abraham and later Sarah (Genesis 18:12) split their sides at what God had said. Sarah’s womb had long since given up the ghost, and we can imagine Abraham—looking at his own body, which was as good as dead (Romans 4:19)—thinking, “This is going to be really interesting!”

Isaac was born to Sarah, not of her or Abraham’s will or logic, but simply in fulfillment of God’s promise. Every time they called Isaac’s name, they would have been reminded of how utterly ridiculous the whole thing was—and, simultaneously, would have been reminded to marvel at their God. *[Bush, D., & Due, N. (2015). Live in Liberty: The Spiritual Message of Galatians (p. 139). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.]*

THE HISTORICAL CANVAS / God promised to make Abram into a great nation, but he seemed to be taking his time. Neither Abram nor Sarai (as they were then called) were getting any younger, so, in keeping with ancient practice, “Sarai said to Abram, ‘The LORD has prevented me from having children. Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her.’”

And Abram agreed with Sarai’s proposal” (Gen 16:2 NLT). Abram took Hagar as a concubine, and Ishmael was conceived. It’s logical: God’s promises don’t rule out our cooperation, and we know that God helps those who help themselves, right?

Not at all! Divine promises are never contingent on human cooperation. God hadn’t forgotten his promise, despite his timing not being to their liking. Fourteen years after Ishmael, God spoke again to Abraham: [See previous Genesis 17:19.] *[Ibid. (p. 138).]*

The two women in the text have been variously identified, but it makes best sense to think that they both refer to Jerusalem/Zion, at different stages of its existence

And this makes good sense if, indeed, we realize that Paul is associating the “barren woman” who eventually produces many children with Sarah, and the “one who has a husband” with Hagar. The former identification finds solid basis in the OT and in the immediate context of the Isaiah text. The theme of a barren woman who, by God’s intervention, is able to have children is a motif found at several points in the OT. *[Moo, D. J. (2013). Galatians (p. 306). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.]*

- (Romans 4:19–21 ESV) He [Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.