

THE BIRTH OF ISAAC

Genesis 21:1-21

In this lesson, some of the details of the birth of Ishmael are reviewed in order to contrast sharply the first rational—Ishmael—with the second rational—Isaac. The reiterating of the promise of an heir in the last lesson will lead naturally into the story of the birth of Isaac.

Doctrinal Points

We need to develop a higher reason than that which judges according to worldly values and standards.

Notes for Parents

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the three great patriarchs of the Jews, were men like ourselves with weaknesses and faults. The Lord did not choose those whose lives He recorded in His Word because they were better than other men, but because He saw that He could direct them in such a way that from the record of their lives we could learn truths which we need, and He dictated that record to the men who wrote it down in such a way that every word might contain deep lessons for future ages. The Lord leads us as we are, and uses our sins and our mistakes as well as our good deeds and better feelings in His effort to lead us away from evil and toward the heavenly life.

In our lesson for today we review briefly the fact that Sarah, because she had no child, had given her Egyptian maidservant to Abraham to wife. Men in that time had, as we have already learned, traveled very far from their first innocent and happy state. They had by Abraham's day lost all knowledge of true marriage, and polygamy was generally accepted as permissible. Sarah and Abraham had no thought of doing wrong in this story, and they were

not condemned for this decision by the Lord. Indeed Ishmael, the son of Abraham by Hagar, was not only preserved, but was promised that his seed should be a great nation.

However, he was not to be Abraham's heir. Sarah finally gave birth to a son—Isaac—through whom the line of Abraham was to be carried on. This line of Abraham pictures our own development from infancy to adult life. As little children we are simple and obedient, as Abraham was. But it is not long before we begin to try to think and reason for ourselves. We parents all know how “difficult” our children can be while this first reasoning is developing. They do not have experience enough to see beneath the surface of things or to realize that what looks pleasant is not necessarily good, and they are always sure they are right and their parents wrong. This is Ishmael. Ishmael was a “wild-ass” man. The Hebrew word translated merely “wild” in Genesis 16:12 really means “wild-ass.” Ishmael and his mother both showed the same disposition we see in our young teenagers. Yet this faculty of independent thinking about our external conduct, when put in its proper place, is a necessary and useful one. The Lord promised Abraham that Ishmael also should become a great nation although his place would not be in the Holy Land.

The birth of Isaac pictures the birth of a higher type of reasoning power which bases its judgments on knowledge of divine truth and the desire to serve the Lord, instead of upon outward appearances and principles of self-interest. It is from this higher reason that we are able to progress spiritually.

Primary

Center the story on Ishmael's being sent away because he mocked at the baby Isaac. Even little children have this tendency to make fun of younger brothers and sisters and need to be taught to be gentle and kind. The story of both Ishmael and Isaac will interest the children. They should learn the names *Hagar*, *Ishmael*, and *Isaac*.

By this time Abraham and Sarah were very old people. Abraham was nearly a hundred years old and Sarah was nearly ninety.

The Lord had made a promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the Holy Land and become a great nation, but Sarah had never had a child. Therefore, as we learned recently, she had finally given Abraham her Egyptian servant Hagar for his wife, and Hagar bore him a son, who was named Ishmael.

Abraham loved Ishmael dearly, but the Lord told him that Ishmael was not to be his heir, and that Sarah herself should have a child.

When Ishmael was fourteen, Sarah finally had a son.

What was his name? *Isaac* means “laughter.”

How old was Abraham when Isaac was born?

What did Ishmael do which made Sarah ask Abraham to send him away?

Where did Hagar and Ishmael go?

What promise did the Lord make for Ishmael?



Junior

Have the Juniors find Hebron and Beersheba on a map. Dwell on the story of Hagar’s first dismissal and then of how Ishmael showed the same spirit as his mother. If the children get clearly in mind the character of Ishmael, they will more easily understand later the difference in the correspondence of Ishmael and Isaac. Stress the fact that Isaac was Abraham’s heir, but that the Lord gave Ishmael a promise also.

The Lord had promised Abraham that his descendants should inherit the Holy Land and should become a great nation, but Abraham and Sarah had had no children, and now they were very old. So Sarah had given her husband her Egyptian servant Hagar. In the depraved state of religion at that time, it was not considered wrong to have more than one wife; so Abraham and Sarah were doing no intentional wrong.

What was the name of the son of Abraham and Hagar?

Why did Sarah want to send Hagar away?

How did the Lord save Hagar?

What did He tell her to do?

Hagar obeyed the Lord and returned to her mistress. The son who was born to her was named *Ishmael*. Abraham was very happy

to have this son, but the Lord told him that Ishmael was not to be his heir, but that Sarah herself would have a son. When he was finally born, Abraham was a hundred years old and Sarah ninety.

What was he named?

How old was Ishmael when Isaac was born?

How can you tell?

What did Ishmael do which made Sarah angry?

Are we ever inclined to make fun of people who may be better than we?

When we do this, it is because we see only the outside of things and have not learned to judge wisely. When we are young, we often get into trouble by just such hasty and foolish judgments. Remember this when you are tempted to think you know better than your parents what you ought to do.

Sarah was angry with both Hagar and Ishmael.

What did she ask Abraham to do?

How did Abraham feel about it?

What did the Lord tell him to do?

Parents often have to punish their children when they would much rather not. Sometimes they even have to send them away from home. Many children have been sent away to school for this reason. But if we do what is right, the Lord will always take care of the consequences.

So Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away, giving them bread and water to take with them. Again they went into the wilderness, but this time Hagar did not find the well herself. When she thought she and Ishmael were about to die, she wept and, it is recorded, God heard the voice of the lad (see AC 2691) and “opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.” Do you think Hagar was wandering around with her eyes shut? No, we have other eyes besides the ones we usually mean when we say “eyes.” We have the eyes of our minds, and these may be shut when our physical eyes are open. When some hard problem is given us, we sometimes say, “I don’t see the answer to that.” And sometimes we shut the eyes of our minds on purpose, because we just don’t want to see. We do this when we want to have our own way instead of doing what we

really know is right. But then, when our own way leads us into serious trouble, we become humble and anxious for help, just as Hagar did when she thought she and Ishmael were going to die in the wilderness. The Lord can open our eyes to see the truth just as He showed Hagar the well of water.

What did Ishmael become?

What country did his wife come from?

What country had his mother come from?

Intermediate

Young people in their early teens are at the stage when they are beginning to exercise the natural rational freely. They are, whether openly or in private, examining the opinions and conduct of their elders from what seems to them a superior height of knowledge. They are very sure they are right—their parents are simply behind the times, getting old and dull. Children at this age are sometimes very disagreeable without realizing it at all, because they can see no flaws in what their natural reason tells them. It is the “wild-ass” stage. The Intermediate teacher will do their parents a great service if he can impress them with the story of Ishmael and Isaac in such a way that they will see the limitations of Ishmael and why he had to be put in his place and can be led to realize that there is a higher type of reasoning into which they themselves may soon grow if they will. It may be helpful to show them that they have a promise of this higher faculty in themselves whenever they find themselves arguing with their own conscience, for their conscience is the beginning of their higher reason.

We are told in Genesis 13:1-2 that when Abram came back from Egypt, he was very rich “in cattle, in silver, and in gold.” This is a picture of the great treasure of knowledge we acquire when we are children. It is knowledge of the things of the natural world and also knowledge of the Bible and of how the Lord wants us to live. We bring this knowledge back to the land of Canaan—the Holy Land—when we use the things we have learned in the Lord’s service. Abram settled in the southern part of the land at Hebron, which became the center of the Jewish Church in its early years. Like Abram himself, Hebron represents a state of simple, childlike goodness and obedience.

The Lord had promised that all the land of Canaan should belong to Abraham and his descendants, and that they should become a great nation. Yet Abraham and Sarah were now old and still had no children. Sarah's giving Abraham her Egyptian servant Hagar to wife and Abraham's having a son by her was not wrong in their sight, for it was customary in those times for a man to have more than one wife. By the time of this third church, the truths originally given to mankind had been so far forgotten that nothing was known about true marriage. The Lord did not condemn Abraham—He does not condemn us for our unintentional sins—but He did not continue Abraham's line through Ishmael.

When Abraham was a hundred years old and Sarah was ninety, the Lord permitted Sarah to bear Abraham a son. The boy was named *Isaac*, which means "laughter." Read verse 6 of chapter 21 to learn one reason for this name, but also read verse 19 of chapter 17, which shows that the Lord Himself gave the name. We can well believe that Abraham and Sarah were joyful when he was born.

Ishmael was fourteen when Isaac was born. We know that many boys at that age are not much interested in babies. Babies seem to them very little and weak, and they can't see why people make such a fuss about them. Ishmael was this kind of boy, and he pictures the kind of reasoning that such a boy uses. To him physical strength and physical ability meant a great deal, and he was scornful of weakness.

Just as Hagar had been sent away when she was scornful of Sarah, so now the same thing happened to Ishmael. Abraham loved Ishmael and did not want to send him away, but the Lord told him to obey Sarah. Sarah pictures our love for heavenly things and her son Isaac pictures a higher type of reasoning power than that pictured by Ishmael, a reasoning which judges according to spiritual standards instead of natural ones. The "Ishmael" in us would tell us that we should do the things which will bring us the most obvious profit now; our "Isaac" would tell us that we should do the things which will please the Lord and help other people. Ishmael would call a rich man successful; Isaac would call a good

man successful. Ishmael would think of death as a tragedy; Isaac would think of death as the beginning of real life.

If we want the Isaac type of reasoning to grow in us, we have to keep Ishmael in his proper place. He is useful to us all our lives and the Lord wants him to live and prosper, but not to direct our thinking and acting. We remember that all through the Bible the Holy Land pictures a heavenly character, while Egypt pictures mere knowledge in the memory. The wilderness pictures our state of mind when we do not see anything above the worldly or natural level and so have no real spiritual home or abiding place, no fixed foundation from which to think and decide our problems. Our minds wander about from place to place.

It is said that Ishmael became an archer. Arrows picture arguments. The natural reason is very clever in the use of argument. Remember this when you are inclined to argue with your mother or father about something they say you ought or ought not to do. Can you see why Ishmael married an Egyptian wife? Think how beautifully all the details in this story fit into the picture as the internal sense of the Word explains it.

Basic Correspondences

Hebron	=	the church as to good
a wilderness	=	a spiritual state in which the mind has no settled home
Abraham	=	simple, innocent obedience (the infant state)
Ishmael	=	the natural reasoning faculty
Isaac	=	the higher or spiritual reasoning faculty
arrows	=	truths or falsities used in argument

Senior

It is often helpful to go back to the first verse of the Bible and point out that the whole Bible is a study of the development of the heavens and the earth in man, as a race and as an individual, and that it is our principal business in life to recognize both and to develop them in their proper relationship. Seniors

are beginning to outgrow the Ishmael stage. They are facing such questions as, “Can a man be honest and succeed in business?” “Can a girl be popular without ‘petting’?” “What is the use of going to college when I might be earning money now?” These are questions to which the answer of Ishmael is very loud and positive. We need to do all we can to strengthen the baby Isaac in them.

Today we come to the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham by the Lord. Sarah bears a son, and he is named Isaac. Abraham was a hundred years old when Isaac was born, and Sarah was ninety.

In the Scriptures the birth of a son pictures a new development of truth or a new intellectual faculty. Abraham’s first son, Ishmael, fourteen years older than Isaac, was born to him by Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian bondservant, and represents our first reasoning power, born of our observation of the world about us and judging according to appearances, without taking spiritual things into consideration. When we are developing this kind of reason, we are very sure that we are right and are impatient with those who disagree with us. We like to argue with everybody, and we are scornful of the ideas and advice of older and wiser people. We may make ourselves so disagreeable that people avoid us, as Sarah wanted Ishmael sent away.

But if we believe in the Lord and the Word and really want to do right, there comes a time when we begin to see more deeply into life, and to reason on the basis of the Lord’s purposes for us instead of from merely worldly considerations. This is the birth of Isaac, whose mother was Sarah, the affection for spiritual things. Isaac represents the true reasoning power which the Lord intends to be ruler of our minds. Isaac and not Ishmael was to be Abraham’s heir.

Then Ishmael had to be cast out. For instance, when we are young, we are likely to think that having fun is the object of life and that bodily strength and ability, good looks, and good clothes are the most desirable things. We admire “football heroes,” good dancers, those who dress well, those with money to spend. Even

when we begin to look for deeper qualities, it is often hard for us to believe that they are not necessarily present in the people and things we have admired. It is hard for us to put the physical attractiveness of a person out of the question and to look more deeply into those things which seem to produce desirable external results and ask, “Are they based on right principles?” Abraham grieved because he had to send Ishmael away. Some people never outgrow the Ishmael stage; they never really grow up spiritually. They may live good moral lives and even belong to a church and attend it regularly, but their idea of doing good, both for themselves and for their church, never gets beyond externals, the things which are called good in a worldly sense. They are scornful of those who dare to question the actual “goodness” of what they propose.

Ishmael mocked Isaac, just as Hagar earlier had scorned Sarah. Our natural reasoning power looks askance at spiritual things and makes fun of them. So if our spiritual reasoning faculty is to develop, the lower must be thrust out. This is hard to do, and at first it may seem about to die altogether. But it is not to die. Our lower reasoning power—the “natural rational,” as Swedenborg calls it—is useful in its proper place. When we recognize that it is helpless by itself and must look to the Lord in the Word for life and guidance, it can see the truth. When Hagar saw that she and her son were about to die and wept in despair, the Lord opened her eyes to see the well of water in the wilderness.

From that time on Ishmael, protected by the Lord, prospered. The fact that his mother took him a wife from the land of Egypt is quite proper in the internal meaning, for the affection for natural knowledge is the true “wife” of the natural rational faculty. He continued to dwell in the wilderness because the natural reason is concerned with many different natural fields and has no fixed abiding place. He was an archer, because arrows picture arguments and the natural reason is interested in argument concerning external things. But the Ishmaelites continue to play an important role in the Bible story. Our natural reason, properly placed, is strong

and useful, helping us to make our way in the world, to defend ourselves and others, to master those things which are necessary to our natural life and to our occupations and to confirm spiritual things by what we experience in the world. The truly good man bases his thinking and acting upon what the Lord teaches him in the Word, but he does not withdraw from the world and live in a world of dreams. He lives a useful, practical life from love to the Lord and the neighbor, thinking always what the Lord would have him do rather than what will bring him the praise of men.

Adult

The lesson should center on the nature of the natural and spiritual rationals and the difference between them. Ishmael is the reasoning that is born of the world, Isaac the reasoning that is born of the church.

Our writings tell us that we commit sin only when we do what we know or believe to be wrong. When we do wrong, believing that we are doing right, the inevitable external consequences follow, but our souls are not injured. The Lord is always striving to keep us from destroying our spiritual life; so when He sees that men are no longer able to resist certain evils, He takes away the knowledge that these things are wrong, and lets them live under lower standards in order that they may still be able to choose to do what they believe is right and save themselves from hell, if they will. The Hebrew nation began after men had degenerated to such a degree that the inner planes of their minds had been closed and they thought only of this world, and not at all of spiritual things. All spiritual knowledge had thus been taken from them and many things seemed right which the people of the Most Ancient and Ancient churches had known to be wrong. One of these things was marriage with more than one wife. This is why the Old Testament Scriptures contain so many instances of multiple marriage. We should understand this in order that we may not be troubled by the question of why the Lord permitted such things to become part of the Bible. Abraham and Sarah did no conscious wrong

when Abraham, at Sarah's prompting, took Hagar to wife. They were old and had had no children and the carrying on of their family meant a great deal to them, especially in view of the Lord's promise that Abraham's seed should inherit the land of Canaan and should become a mighty nation.

But in the Lord's sight the son of the Egyptian bondwoman was not a proper heir for Abraham, and fourteen years later the Lord performed a miracle and permitted Sarah, then ninety years old, to bear Abraham a son. When, on the day when Isaac was weaned, Ishmael mocked at him, Sarah was more clear-sighted than Abraham. Abraham's love for his first son would have prompted him to keep Ishmael in the home, but the Lord told him to obey Sarah and send Hagar and Ishmael away.

In general Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob picture the development of three planes in our lives: the celestial, the spiritual, and the natural. When we are babies, we live in a celestial state—although we have no real knowledge or understanding of it—in which we are close to the Lord (Matthew 18:10) and depend wholly upon His care without thinking for ourselves or trying to govern ourselves. This is the period represented by Abraham. Then comes a time when our reasoning faculty begins to develop. This general period is represented by Ishmael and Isaac. Then follows the period when we have to carry out our ideas in the conduct of our daily life and occupations—make them practical, or put them into practice. This period, the hardest of all, is represented by Jacob and his sons. We must pass through all these stages of development before we are really ready for the work of regeneration.

Isaac, when he is grown up and has become the head of his family, represents our reason when it is fully and rightly developed, but this does not come all at once. When a child first begins to use his reason, he makes a great many mistakes because he has only superficial knowledge to draw upon and because he is proud of his new faculty and unwilling to admit that others may know more than he does. This first type of reasoning power is represented by Ishmael. Ishmael was a son of Abraham. That is, our first

reasoning power, as well as our higher reason, comes to us from the Lord in the course of our normal development. But Ishmael's mother was an Egyptian bondwoman. We recall that women represent the affections and that Egypt represents external or memory knowledge, a purely natural affection. All children at a certain age are eager to learn all sorts of things, to fill their minds with information of various kinds without discrimination, and their first reasoning faculty springs from this affection and is fed by the material which they gather into their memories. But Hagar was only a bondwoman. This pictures the fact that the mere affection for learning is not the true affection from which our thoughts and feelings should spring, but only one of the servants of that affection, and that it should be kept in control and not permitted to set itself up. If it is not kept in its place, it easily becomes scornful of spiritual things. So first Hagar and then both Hagar and Ishmael had to be sent away to make room for Abraham's true heir.

Yet both times the Lord preserved Hagar and her child. The love of learning and the reasoning which springs from it are both orderly and useful in their place. Ishmael married an Egyptian woman. That is, our natural reason—or natural rational, as Swedenborg calls it—not only springs from an affection for natural knowledges, but this affection is its proper “wife” from which its further developments come. Ishmael became a great nation, but he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran, the Arabian desert. Our natural rational continues to develop and to function throughout our lives, but its field of usefulness is in the constantly changing environs of our external lives, and not in the Holy Land of our inner thought and feeling. Our spiritual development is carried on through the higher rational, the spiritual rational, which is represented by Isaac, the son of Abraham by his true wife Sarah, who represents the affection for spiritual truth.

Ishmael has his place in our lives. The Lord gives us our natural rational and wishes it to develop and to serve in our outer lives: prudence, thrift, foresight, executive ability, salesmanship are all “children” of Ishmael; they are useful and worth cultivating so

long as they are recognized as servants and not considered spiritual virtues or allowed to interfere with our spiritual life and development. The Lord said to Abraham, “In Isaac shall thy seed be called.” The spiritual rational is later in developing—Isaac could not be born until Abraham and Sarah were old—but it is the thoughts and affections which spring from it—Isaac’s descendants—which connect us with the Lord and enable us ultimately to possess the Holy Land of heavenly happiness.

Examples of the distinction between Ishmael and Isaac in our own experience are not hard to find. Ishmael tells us that we are in this world for only a short time and that therefore we should get as much as possible for ourselves from it in pleasure, in money, and in fame. Isaac also tells us that we are in this world for only a short time, but he tells us that we shall live to eternity in a world where nothing counts but the character we have developed here, and that therefore it makes little difference whether or not we have pleasure, money, and fame here so long as we are developing heavenly character. Ishmael uses many sharp arguments to uphold the necessity for considering self first—he was an archer. Isaac is quiet and gentle, at home in the Holy Land, seeking to learn the Lord’s will and to base the daily decisions upon that will. He takes his wife from among his father’s kindred. He does not contend for the wells of the Philistines. He is forbidden by the Lord to go down into Egypt. The spiritual rational must maintain its integrity against all worldly temptations if our spiritual life is to be preserved.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Arcana Coelestia, n. 2654: “The human rational—that namely which has its birth from worldly things through impressions of sense, and afterwards from analogies of worldly things by means of knowledges—is ready to laugh and mock if told that it does not live of itself, but only appears to live so; and that one lives the more, that is, the more wisely and intelligently, and the more blissfully and happily, the less he believes that he lives of himself; and that this is the life of angels, especially of those who are celestial, and inmost,

or nearest to the Lord; for they know that no one lives of himself except Jehovah alone, that is, the Lord. . . . This rational would mock if it were said that in heaven the greatest are they who are least, the wisest they who believe and perceive themselves to be the least wise, and the happiest they who desire others to be the most happy, and themselves the least so; that it is heaven to wish to be below all, but hell to wish to be above all; consequently that in the glory of heaven there is absolutely nothing the same as in the glory of the world.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. What story in the Bible tells of the end of the second church on earth?
Tower of Babel
- J. What happened to its people? *scattered*
- P. What family was chosen by the Lord to begin a new church? *Abram*
(Eber, Terah)
- P. Where did they live? *Ur, Chaldea*
- P. What did the Lord tell them to do? *go to Canaan*
- P. Where did some of them stop? *Haran*
- P. Who went on? *Abram, Sarai and Lot*
- P. In what two places in Canaan did Abraham build altars? *Shechem, Bethel*
- P. Why did he go down into Egypt? *famine*
- J. Where did he settle when he came back? *Hebron*
- J. What promise did the Lord make to Abraham about his descendants?
to be as sand of sea
- P. What one necessary thing did Abraham lack? *son*
- J. How did Sarah try to make up for this lack? *gave Hagar as wife*
- P. What was the name of Hagar’s son? *Ishmael*
- J. What did the Lord tell Abraham about Ishmael? *not your heir*
- P. How old was Abraham when Sarah’s own son was born? *hundred years*
- P. What was Sarah’s child named? *Isaac*
- P. What did Ishmael do which displeased Sarah? *mocked Isaac*
- P. What did Sarah tell Abraham to do? *send them away*
- J. What did the Lord tell him? *do as Sarah said*
- J. Where did Hagar and Ishmael go? *desert*
- J. What did the angel promise them? *“I will make him a great nation”*
- J. What did Ishmael become? *archer*
- J. From what country was his wife? *Egypt*
- I. What does Egypt represent? *memory-knowledge*
- S. What do Ishmael and Isaac represent? *(1) natural or first rational*
(2) spiritual or second rational