

## ABRAHAM AND ISHMAEL

### *Genesis 16*

Review briefly the story of the Most Ancient Church and its destruction as a preparation for describing the decline and fall of the Ancient Church. Then review the raising up of the remnant called Noah and go from that to an account of the call of Abram. The thought of the Lord's stepping in while a remnant of good remained can be connected with the promise of which the rainbow was the token. Be sure the classes understand why *Abram* is used in our chapter and why we always speak of him as *Abraham*.

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#### **Doctrinal Points**

*The three planes in our lives.*

*The origin of idolatry.*

*Humility and obedience the basis of all spiritual progress.*

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#### **Notes for Parents**

Abraham was a real person. The Jews think of him as the father of their race. His home was in the city of Ur in the land of Chaldea, and he came of a nation of idol worshipers, one of the many branches into which the Ancient Church was divided after its fall, which is described in the symbol story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9).

In Abram the Lord found a man who would obey Him even at great cost to himself, and He called him to leave his home and go to the land of Canaan where He would make him the father of a great nation. Abram obeyed and the Lord prospered him greatly; but in our chapter for today we find that he and his wife Sarai have grown old and still have no child. How is Abram to become the father of a nation? Sarai tries to solve the problem by giving him her Egyptian bondservant Hagar as a wife. People in that

degenerate time had lost all knowledge of what a true marriage is. It seems strange to us that we should read in the Bible of men who had more than one wife and yet were blessed by the Lord. But we must remember that the Lord judges us not by the wrong things which we do ignorantly—which are many—but by those we do knowing that they are wrong.

Sarai meant to do the right thing, and when Hagar despised her, Abram upheld Sarai. Hagar had to be taught to submit to her mistress. We cannot escape the consequences of our misdeeds by running away from them. Yet the Lord dealt gently with Hagar, as He does with us. His Word is our “fountain of water in the wilderness” and also the angel—or “messenger”—of the Lord, recalling us to our duty and promising us happiness if we will obey.

Ishmael was to become the father of a great people, but he was not to be Abram’s heir, as we shall learn later. You will notice that the names *Abram* and *Sarai* are not spelled in this chapter as we are accustomed to find them spelled. In chapter 17, verses 1-5 and 15-16, you will find the story of how the spelling of their names came to be changed. The *h* which was inserted in each is one of the letters of the Lord’s name *Jehovah* and was added to show that they were to stand thenceforth in a closer relation to the Lord than before. Every letter of the Hebrew in the original language of the Bible is important.

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### Primary

Try to fix in the children’s minds the series of names *Adam*, *Noah*, *Abraham*. Emphasize the fact that the descendants of Noah came to think they knew better than the Lord, just as Adam and Eve had, and so they stopped obeying Him and became bad. Then speak of Abram’s call and its result, and read the chapter for today last. Help the children fix in their minds the relationships of Abram, Sarai, Hagar, and Ishmael.

This is a story of the father of the Jewish people. Jews still call themselves “children of Abraham.” The Lord founded a new church

in the world through Noah and his family and for a time people remembered the covenant of the rainbow and obeyed the Lord. But it did not last.

You know how happy you are when you are being good and everyone is pleased with you. But do you keep on always being good? No; sooner or later you forget and do something you know is naughty. That was just the way it was with the people of that Ancient Church. And they became worse and worse until they were no longer obeying the Lord at all; so they stopped being a church.

Then the Lord called Abraham, a man who was still willing to obey. He lived far to the east in a city called Ur. The Lord told him to leave his home and go to the land of Canaan, and promised that if he would obey, his descendants would become a great nation.

Abraham did obey, and the Lord blessed him in the land of Canaan. He lived in a city called Hebron, and became very rich. There was one thing, however, that Abraham needed which he did not have.

What was it?

Who was Abraham's wife?

How did she decide to give Abraham a son?

Who was Hagar?

What did she do that was wrong?

Why did she run away?

Where did the angel of the Lord find her?

What did he tell her to do?

What did he say about her son?

Who was the son of Abraham and Hagar?

In the story in this chapter the names are Abram and Sarai, but later the Lord changed them to Abraham and Sarah, and that is the way we should remember them.

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### Junior

The reason for the decline of the Ancient Church is important for the Juniors. They should also be drilled on the first part of the Abraham story. The essential questions for this are given in their notes. The teacher should add ques-

tions on chapter 13. In this lesson stress the weakness and foolishness of trying to run away from the consequences of our wrongdoing.

After the time of Noah the people had a Bible from which they learned the truth. It is called the Ancient Word and certain books in it are referred to in our Bible. Read Numbers 21:14, Joshua 10:13, and II Samuel 1:18. The Ancient Word has been lost, but we may know something of what it was like because Moses copied from it the first eleven chapters of Genesis. It was all written in symbol language in which the people of that time spoke and wrote, since they knew to what everything in nature corresponds. They were very wise. But unfortunately they began to pride themselves on their wisdom and to forget that they needed to look to the Lord for guidance. So their church—the Ancient Church—declined, and again the time came when the Lord had to gather together the remnant of good people and build up a new church.

The beginning of this new church is described in the story of Abraham. The original names of Abraham and his wife Sarah were Abram and Sarai. The *h*, which is one of the letters of the Lord's name *Jehovah*, was put in later to show the closer relation they came to bear to the Lord (Genesis 17:1-5, 15).

Why did Abram go down into Egypt?

Where did Abram settle when he returned to the land of Canaan?

In Egypt Abram had gained great riches, but there was one thing he did not have. What was it?

How did Sarai decide to help Abram to have a son?

Abram and Sarai did not know that it was wrong for a man to have more than one wife at a time. So the Lord did not blame them. He saw the love in Sarai's heart which wanted to make her husband happy.

What was Sarai's servant's name?

From what country did she come?

When Hagar knew she was to have a son, how did she treat Sarai?

Do we ever make fun of someone because he can't do something that we can do? This is always wrong. In the first place, there are probably things he can do which we can't. But even if we could

do everything better than he, we should not let it make us proud, because it is the Lord who gives us all our abilities, and He gives them to us to use to help other people and never to hurt them.

Did Abram side with Hagar or with Sarai?

Abram was happy that he was to have a son, but he was a just man and he knew that Hagar was in the wrong.

Where did Hagar go when Sarai treated her harshly?

Where did the angel of the Lord find her?

What did the angel tell her to do?

What did He promise her?

We must never run away from the results of our own wrongdoing. That is cowardly and makes us weaker instead of stronger. We grow stronger by acknowledging what we have done that is wrong and by trying to make it right as far as we can. The Lord cannot make us happy while we are doing wrong. The word *angel* means “messenger.” The angel of the Lord speaks to us just as truly as he did to Hagar. The Lord’s messenger to us is the Bible, and He can speak to us through everything we know that comes from the Bible. You know that when you have done wrong, there is something inside you that seems to be telling you so and telling you just what you ought to do. We call this inside voice our conscience, but it is based on what we know from the Lord’s Word. It may help you sometimes, when you hear the voice of conscience, to think, “This is the angel of the Lord speaking to me by the fountain of water in the wilderness.”

Did Hagar obey the Lord?

What was her son’s name?

What did the angel say he would be?

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### Intermediate

The reason for the fall of the Ancient Church and the quality in Abraham which enabled the Lord to use him to begin a new dispensation should be made clear. In the lesson the meaning of producing children and the meaning of the Egyptian servant Hagar are the important parts to stress.

The character of the Ancient Church—the church called Noah—

was different from that of the Most Ancient Church. The people of the Most Ancient Church were governed by their will or emotions, but those of the Ancient Church were governed by their understanding. So at the height of the Ancient Church the people were very wise. They loved to study the inner meaning of their Word and they understood it much more fully than we do. But their wisdom was accompanied by a great temptation, the temptation to be proud of their knowledge and to forget to be humble before God. This “pride of self-intelligence” grew until they could no longer serve the Lord as His Church on earth. The end of the Ancient Church is described in the story of the Tower of Babel.

According to His promise—the covenant of the rainbow—the Lord did not destroy these people. He merely took from them the understanding of the truths they had misused, and scattered the people “upon the face of all the earth” (Genesis 11:8). Some of the religions of the Orient are based on ideas handed down by tradition from this church.

But again the Lord gathered a remnant of good people who still wished to obey Him, instructed them anew, and built them into a church. Abram’s virtue was implicit obedience. He had many false ideas in his mind because he had grown up in the last days of the decline of the true Ancient Church, but he was willing to do what he believed the Lord wanted him to do. So the Lord could promise to bless him and make of him a great nation.

In our chapter for today Abram and his wife Sarai are very old and, in spite of the Lord’s promise, Abram still has no heir. So Sarai offers Abram her Egyptian bondswoman Hagar that he may have a child by her, and Abram accepts the offer.

We know that it is wrong for a man to have more than one wife at a time. The people of the early churches—while they were true churches—knew it, too. But by the time of Abram men had forgotten a great many of the truths which had been given them in the beginning, and Abram and Sarai had no thought that they were doing wrong. So the Lord did not blame them for it. He does not blame us for doing wrong in ignorance unless our ignorance is will-

ful; that is, unless we have refused to learn the truth when it was offered us. This is one of the great mercies of the Lord. Nevertheless when we do wrong, there are always bad consequences. Hagar's son could not be Abraham's heir.

In spiritual terms, the desire for children is the desire to produce what is good and true, to make our lives count for something in the building of the Lord's kingdom. This is a good desire, but it is often at first united to false ideas of what is good and true. Hagar was an Egyptian and a servant. There are three great Bible countries: the land of Canaan, Assyria, and Egypt. Like all groups of three in the Word they represent the three great planes of our lives: will, thought, and act. You will learn more about these as we go on, but you may remember that Egypt is the land of "memory-knowledge," Assyria the land of thought and reasoning, and the land of Canaan the land of the will to make all that we know and think serve the Lord. Think, for example, how we come by our religion. First we store in our memories knowledge from the letter of the Word—this is Egypt. Then we think about these knowledges and come to understand what they mean—this is Assyria. Finally we come to love to obey what these knowledges teach—this is the land of Canaan. Women in the Bible represent affections for various kinds of truth. So Hagar the Egyptian represents the affection for memory-knowledges. This is one of our early affections—we like to "know things." This is a good and useful affection so long as it is made to serve the true purpose for which knowledge is intended, which is Sarai, Abram's true wife. But sometimes we become proud of our knowledge and think we know more than those who are really wiser than we. This is Hagar despising her mistress.

When Hagar was rebuked, she ran away into the wilderness. A wilderness is the opposite of a safe, cultivated place where one can be at home. Many times in the Bible we find people going into the wilderness. This is always a picture of a confused and unsettled state of mind, when one seems to have lost his firm hold on the truth, his spiritual home. Those who are proud of their own knowledge and despise others are often brought into such a state.

Yet, in the Bible stories, people in the wilderness are always, like Hagar, being led to wells or springs of water. This means that the Lord is always present to show us the truth when we realize our need of it.

The angel of the Lord found Hagar by the fountain of water in the wilderness. An angel is a messenger—that is what the word means. First he told her to go back to her mistress and do right, and then he made her encouraging promises about her son. When we have done wrong and are confused and unhappy, the Lord leads us to the truth, and His angel—which for us is the Word—tells us to go back and try to make up for the wrong we have done and that the result will be a great blessing.

Hagar's son was Ishmael. Later we shall take up the meaning of Ishmael and Isaac, Abraham's two sons. Notice here the prophecies which the angel spoke concerning Ishmael.

*Basic Correspondences*

the land of Canaan	=	the inmost plane of our life in which we desire to serve the Lord
Assyria	=	the thinking and reasoning plane
Egypt	=	the outmost plane— memory-knowledges
a wilderness	=	a confused and unsettled state

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**Senior**

Try to make clear to the young people that Abram, although he is the third in the series of churches, is also the first in a new series of three—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—all on the natural plane. Our lessons from now on will be interpreted mainly as they apply to our individual development from infancy to adulthood.

From chapter 12 of Genesis on, although it continues to be parable, it is also for the most part true history. Historical records other than the Bible go back approximately to the time of Abraham; so we may fairly say that the first eleven chapters of Genesis treat of prehistoric times. From the height of the Most Ancient



Church, described by the Garden of Eden before the creation of Eve, down to the fall of the Ancient Church, described in the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), we find people becoming less and less spiritual, and more and more external and worldly. The first church was a celestial church, the second a spiritual church, and the third—described by Eber (Genesis 11:14)—a natural church. We shall find presently that in the descendants of Abraham this third church gradually lost all interior understanding until in the church set up among the children of Jacob or Israel it was no longer anything but the “representative of a church,” because it had no spiritual life within it.

The Ancient Church declined and fell as a result of the growth of the “pride of self-intelligence.” Its people had had great wisdom, but after a time they began to forget that all their wisdom was a gift from the Lord. They had understood correspondences and developed a worship in which they used images of natural things to remind them of the spiritual things which they signified. But in time they forgot the spiritual significance and began to worship the images themselves. So they became idolaters, and all the idolatrous religions with which we are familiar in the world today are perverted remains of the Ancient Church.

While there were still, however, a few left who, although they worshiped idols, still were sincere in their desire to obey God instead of depending on themselves, the Lord called Abram to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees and go to the land of Canaan and reestablish there the worship of the one God. Abram was chosen because he was willing to be obedient even at great cost to himself. He obeyed without question.

In our lives we may think of the Most Ancient and Ancient churches as picturing our inherited background, and of Abram as representing our early childlike obedience to the Lord. But we soon begin to grow up as independent individuals and, just as the early people wanted a life of their own, so in the literal Bible story Abram wanted a son of his own. Children always picture new developments: sons, truths; and daughters, goods or affections.

Abram's first son, however, was not to be his heir, because he was not the son of Abram's true wife Sarai. This is a very interesting story. In the letter Abram and Sarai do wrong as we see it. The early people in the Adamic and Noachic churches knew that a man should have only one wife at a time, but by the time of Abram this truth, along with many others, had been lost. Thus Abram and Sarai were innocent in their wrongdoing and the Lord did not hold it against them; but still there were evil consequences. The same law holds today. We are not held responsible by the Lord in His mercy for evils we commit ignorantly, if our ignorance is not willful; yet the consequences of our wrong deeds follow inevitably.

In the Bible the various countries picture different planes of life. Egypt pictures the plane of natural or external knowledge—that is, of memory-knowledge. As women picture affections for different kinds of truth, Hagar, the Egyptian servant, pictures the affection for natural or memory knowledges. Our first efforts to produce ideas and works of our own are often the offspring of purely natural affections. The ideas so produced are never truly spiritual. So Ishmael, the son of Abram and Hagar, was to be a “wild man,” or, as the original Hebrew says, a “wild-ass man.” When we are young, our affections cling to external satisfactions and we reason from these external things. We are always sure we are right and are likely to laugh at our parents and teachers, just as both Hagar and later Ishmael despised and laughed at those higher than they.

Hagar represents an external, natural type of affection. Ishmael represents our youthful reasonings. Hagar's pride drives her into the wilderness. Our state of mind at this time is very like a wilderness, with no regular paths, no fixed abode, no cultivated food. Yet even here we find water. The Lord shows us the truth in our time of need, and His angel, or messenger, the Word, tells us to go back and submit ourselves humbly to those who are wiser than we, and all will be well with us.

The great fault of our first reasoning power is pride. No matter how bright and clever we are, we always need to look to the Lord

for guidance, or we are really lost in a wilderness. And in trouble and temptation the Lord is very close to us and ready to show us the way home as soon as we really acknowledge our need.

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### Adult

The three main lines of thought to be followed are the transition from the Ancient to the Jewish Church, the change of application in our interpretation as we pass to the historical part of the Word, and the meaning of Hagar and Ishmael.

We have thought of Noah as picturing the Ancient Church which was established on earth after the flood. We commonly think of this as the second church and of the Jewish Church as the third. But Swedenborg points out that the three sons of Noah picture different derivations of doctrinals and worships in the Ancient Church—Shem true internal worship, Ham “internal worship corrupted,” and Japheth “external worship corresponding to internal” (AC 1146)—and the explanation of the internal sense of the genealogies in chapter 10 of Genesis shows clearly how these three types deviated more and more widely as time went on from the true pattern of the Ancient Church. As might be expected, the descendants of Shem continued to be the core of the Lord’s connection with mankind, and in this line there developed a “second Ancient Church” in Eber. Of this church we read in AC 1343: “That ‘Eber’ was a nation called, from Eber as its father, the Hebrew nation, and that thereby is signified the worship in general of the second Ancient Church, is evident from those historical parts of the Word wherein it is spoken of. From that nation, because the new worship commenced there, all were called Hebrews who had a similar worship. Their worship was of the kind that was afterwards restored among the descendants of Jacob; and its chief characteristic consisted in their calling their God ‘Jehovah,’ and in their having sacrifices. The Most Ancient Church with unanimity acknowledged the Lord, and called Him Jehovah, as is evident from the first chapters of Genesis, and elsewhere in the Word. The

Ancient Church, that is, the church after the flood, also acknowledged the Lord, and called Him Jehovah, especially those who had internal worship, and were called ‘sons of Shem.’ The others, who were in external worship, also acknowledged Jehovah, and worshiped Him. But when internal worship became external, and still more when it became idolatrous, and when each nation began to have its own god whom it worshiped, the Hebrew nation retained the name Jehovah; and hereby were distinguished from the other nations. Together with their external worship, the descendants of Jacob in Egypt lost this also—that they called their God Jehovah; nay, Moses himself did so; and therefore they were instructed first of all that Jehovah was the God of the Hebrews, and the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.”

AC 1360 tells us that Terah, the father of Abram, was a “third Ancient Church” which had become idolatrous, and Terah’s death in Haran (AC 1375) signaled the end of this idolatrous worship and “the beginning of a representative church through Abram.”

In AC 1403 Swedenborg says: “From the first chapter of Genesis up to this point [Genesis 12:1], or rather to the mention of Eber, the historicals have not been true but made-up historicals, which in the internal sense signify celestial and spiritual actualities.” This is further explained in AC 1409: “The Most Ancient Church, which was celestial, looked upon all earthly and worldly, and also bodily things, which were in any wise objects of the senses, as being dead things; but as each and all things in the world present some idea of the Lord’s kingdom, consequently of things celestial and spiritual, when they saw them or apprehended them by any sense, they thought not of them, but of the celestial and spiritual things; indeed they thought not from the worldly things, but by means of them; and thus with them things that were dead became living. The things thus signified were collected from their lips by their posterity and were formed by them into doctrinals, which were the Word of the Ancient Church, after the flood. With the Ancient Church these were significative; for through them they learned internal things, and from them they thought of spiritual

and celestial things. But when this knowledge began to perish, so that they did not know that such things were signified, and began to regard the terrestrial and worldly things as holy, and to worship them, with no thought of their signification, the same things were then made representative. Thus arose the Representative Church, which had its beginning in Abram and was afterwards instituted with the posterity of Jacob. From this it may be known that representatives had their rise from the significatives of the Ancient Church, and these from the celestial ideas of the Most Ancient Church. But with representatives the character of the person is not considered at all, but the thing which he represents; for all the kings of Judah and Israel, of whatever character, represented the Lord's kingly function; and all the priests, of whatever character, represented His priestly function. Thus the evil as well as the good could represent the Lord and the celestial and spiritual things of His kingdom."

The story of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob pictures in the internal historical sense the development of this representative church, and in its internal sense the development of any one of us. So we may think of the whole story of Abraham—which is more or less familiar to all of us—as picturing our spiritual state in infancy and very early childhood. Our lesson for today deals with the beginning of the change from this innocent, trustful, obedient age to the part of our childhood when we are beginning to try to think and act for ourselves. Swedenborg summarizes our chapter in its inmost meaning as follows: "The subject treated of in this chapter is the Lord's first rational, which was conceived by the influx of the internal man into the affection of memory-knowledges [*scientiae*] of the external. The internal man is 'Abram'; the affection of memory-knowledges in the external is 'Hagar the Egyptian handmaid'; the rational thence derived is 'Ishmael.'" The name *Hagar* means a "stranger" or "sojourner" and in a simple way we can see that our conclusions from our early thinking are inevitably temporary. They are based on our knowledge of the external world alone. We reason from appearances. And it follows

that we resent efforts to correct our ideas and conduct by those who are older and wiser and whose standards are based on deeper spiritual truths. This is pictured in the story of Hagar's despising her mistress, being rebuked, and fleeing from the face of her mistress.

Hagar is found by the angel at the fountain of water in the wilderness. Our affection for external knowledges, under the Lord's providence, is always supplied with some external knowledge of the Word, which serves for rebuke, advice, and encouragement in goodness. So Hagar returns and is again subject to her mistress. But Hagar's son, although he is to be the father of a great people, is not to be Abraham's heir. This means that our first natural reasoning is necessary and will always play a part in our lives, especially in the conduct of our worldly affairs, but it is not adequate to lead us in our spiritual progress.

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#### From the Writings of Swedenborg

*Arcana Coelestia*, n. 1949: "He shall be a wild-ass man. That this signifies rational truth, which is described, is evident from the signification of 'a wild-ass,' as being rational truth. In the Word there is frequent mention of horses, horsemen, mules, and asses; and as yet no one has known that these signify things of the intellect, of the reason, and of memory-knowledge. That these animals and their riders have such a signification will of the Lord's Divine mercy be fully confirmed in the proper places. Of the same class is the 'onager,' for this is the mule of the wilderness, or wild-ass, and it signifies man's rational; not however the rational in its whole complex, but only rational truth. The rational consists of good and truth, that is, of things belonging to charity and of things belonging to faith, and it is rational truth that is signified by the 'wild-ass.' This then is what is represented by Ishmael, and is what is described in this verse. It seems incredible that rational truth when separated from good should be of such a character, neither should I have known this to be the case unless I had been instructed by living experience. Whether you say rational truth, or the man whose rational is of this kind, amounts to the same. The man whose rational is of such a character that he is solely in truth—even though it be the truth of faith—and who is not at the same time in the good of charity, is altogether of such a character. He is a morose man, will bear nothing, is against all, regards everybody as being in falsity, is ready to rebuke,

to chastise, and to punish; has no pity, and does not apply or adapt himself to others and study to bend their minds; for he looks at everything from truth, and at nothing from good. Hence it is that Ishmael was driven out, and afterwards dwelt in the wilderness, and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt (Gen. xxi. 9-21); all of which things are representative of one who is endowed with such a rational.”

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### Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Who was the father of the third church? *Abraham*  
J. In what place did he settle in the land of Canaan? *South (Negeb)*  
P. What was his wife's name? *Sarai*  
P. What one thing did Abram not have that he wanted? *a son*  
J. How did Sarai try to supply this lack? *gave Abraham Hagar as a wife*  
P. From what country did Hagar come? *Egypt*  
J. What fault did she commit? *despised her mistress*  
J. Why did she run away from her mistress Sarai? *harsh treatment*  
P. Where did she go and where did the angel of the Lord find her?  
*wilderness, spring*  
P. What did he tell her to do? *go back and obey*  
J. What did he say about her son? *to father great nation*  
P. What was her son's name? *Ishmael*