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Abraham had Two Sons, Ishma'el by the Slave Woman and Isaac by the Free Woman 4: 21-31

Abraham had two sons, Ishmael by the slave woman and Isaac by the free woman DIG: What is a Midrash? Why and how did Paul use it here? What does this parable have to do with the Judaizers? How are the Judaizers like Ishmael? What is Paul pointing to when he talks about the weak and worthless principles? Does Paul's parable bad mouth Hagar or picture the Torah as bad in any way? How are the spiritual descendants of Sarah distinguished from Hagar's? What was the promise? How did ADONAI fulfill His promise? Can you summarize the parable?

REFLECT: Can you identify with Sarah in any way? If you can, how does her experience comfort and excite you? Has your experience as a believer been more of a growing into freedom or living under a set of rules? Why? Has your joy in Messiah ever been crushed by someone else who thought you were breaking their set of rules? Have you ever imposed standards on others that limited their freedom? How so? What difference will the fact of your justification in the eyes of ADONAI and the fullness of the indwelling Ruach ha-Kodesh make in your life and witness this week? How often do you ask, "What does the Scripture say?" You can't ask that question enough.

The parable of Hagar and Sarah illustrates the present status of legalism and grace. You can't press the details of a parable, which makes one main point: As the son of the slave woman gave way to the son of a free woman, so legalism has given way to grace.

In a masterful stroke, **the apostle** turned to a scriptural illustration to conclude **his** theological defense of justification by **faith**. **Paul's Midrash (a rabbinic interpretation of the Scriptures)** from the life of **Abraham** enabled **him** to review what **he** had already declared about the contrasts between legalism and **grace**, between deeds and **faith**. It also provided **him** the opportunity to verbalize to the **Galatian** believers that **they** should throw

out the Judaizers (to see link click [Ag - Who Were the Judaizers](#)).¹¹⁹

The preface to **Paul's Midrash** begins with the provocative: **Tell me, you who want to be under Torah, don't you understand the Torah? (Galatians 4:21; Deuteronomy 6:4, 18:15; Exodus 24:7)**. When **Paul** uses the phrase **under the Torah**, he means a **Gentile** becoming a proselyte and converting to **Judaism**, and in the context of the Judaizers, through circumcision (see the commentary on [Acts Bb - An Ethiopian Asks about Isaiah 53: The third level were Proselytes of the Covenant](#)). It was as if **Paul** was saying, "You want to be a proselyte? **You** don't know what it says in **the Torah!**" Then **Paul** offers us a brief parable in which **he** briefly retells the story of **Abraham's two wives (Sarah and Hagar) and his two sons (Isaac and Ishmael)**.



Paul used the story of **Isaac** and **Ishmael** to illustrate two different types of *benei Abraham* (**sons of Abraham**). **He** was not contrasting Jews and Christians, nor was **he** contrasting Jews and **Gentiles**. Instead, **he** used the **Isaac** and **Ishmael** story to contrast two different types of covenants, "For it is written that **Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and one by the free woman**" (Galatians 4:22; Genesis 16:15 and 21:2).

Hagar was a **slave woman**. She was **Sarah's maidservant** (see the commentary on [Genesis Ei - Sarai Took Hagar and Gave Her to Abram to be His Wife](#)). **But one - the son by the slave woman - was born naturally, while the other - the son by the free woman - was through the promise (4:23)**. **Abraham** went to **Hagar**, attempting to fulfill **God's** promise by **himself**. Therefore, **Ishmael** was born in the normal, **natural** way: by human, physical means, **according to the flesh**.

Abraham and **Sarah**, however, conceived **Isaac** through a supernatural miracle because

Sarah was well past childbearing age. **The promise** would be fulfilled through **Isaac, the son of promise**. What was that **promise**? **God promised** to give **Abraham seed** (see the commentary on **Genesis Et - I Will Surely Return This Time Next Year and Sarah Your Wife Will Have a Son**). **Paul** has brought up **the promise** several times in **Galatians** already. **He** dedicated most of **the third chapter** to the subject and equated it with the whole gospel message: **The Scriptures, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, proclaimed the Good News to Abraham in advance, saying: All the nations shall be blessed through you (Galatians 3:8)**. And again: **Now, the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his Seed. It doesn't say, "and to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "and to your Seed," who is the Messiah (3:16). The promise was that all the nations of the world would be blessed through Abraham's Seed, the Messiah.**

Now, to make **[a midrash]** on these things, the two women need to be seen as **two covenants (4:24 CJB)**. **The midrash contrasts two types of *benei Abraham*, or two types of proselytes. The Hebrew word midrash means *study or interpretation*. It comes from *lidrosh*, meaning *to search*. Most of the midrashic literature brings out ethical and devotional aspects of the Bible, sometimes drawing out and applying what is clearly there, and sometimes imposing meaning on the texts, although the norm in Judaism is not to make a midrash that violates the simple sense (Hebrew: *p'shat*) of the text.** Here, **Paul's midrash** goes beyond *the p'shat* of the **Genesis** texts, though without violating them. **His** application of them is bold, even shocking. For although the Judaizers claim physical descent from **Sarah**, **Paul** calls them physical descendents of **Hagar**. **Revelation 11:8** has an equally surprising reversal of traditional Jewish identifications, but such shocking reversals are not limited to the B'rit Chadashah (see **Ezeki'el 23-24**, and **Hosea 1-2** for comparable examples in the TaNaKh). **The two women need to be seen as two covenants.**

One is from Mount Sinai, the Torah of Moshe, and it gives birth to slavery, but not because the Torah is bad (for nowhere does the Genesis account badmouth Hagar); therefore, there is no need to demean the Torah on the basis of this passage. But this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem (that is, the non-Messianic Jewish community of the first century); for she is in slavery, to be enslaved by the weak and worthless principles (4:9) of legalism, because the people had perverted the Torah into a legalistic system of salvation through deeds (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei - The Oral Law). It was the Judaizers who insisted that the Gentile Galatians follow those same weak and worthless principles. Therefore, Hagar, the present Jerusalem, or legalism, gives birth to slavery, along with her children, the Judaizers (4:24-25).**¹²⁰

Paul likened **the Gentile Galatians** who underwent circumcision and pledged to obey the 613 commandments of Moshe to **Ishmael**. **They** had set aside **the promise** that **God** made to **Abraham** as a result of **his faith** - **all the nations will be blessed through your seed**. **They** forfeited that **promise** by being born according to **the flesh** - literally, circumcision, the removal of some **flesh** - the **natural** way of becoming part of **Abraham's** family. The Judaizers wanted **them** to work **their** way to heaven. But that is the ultimate frustration because you can never reach perfection in this life. **That is the first perverted covenant of legalism.**

To establish **his midrash**, **Paul** quoted a proof text from **Isaiah 54**, a prophecy addressed to **the city of Jerusalem** which predicts the final Messianic Redemption, the ingathering, the building of Messianic **Jerusalem**, and the advent of **the New Jerusalem** in the world to come (see the commentary on **Revelation Fs - The Eternal New Jerusalem**). That prophecy depicts ruined **Jerusalem** as a barren **woman** because **her children** had gone into exile. At the time of the redemption, **she** realizes **she** has more **children** than **she** thought possible. The Jewish people return to **her**, and many **Gentiles** come as well. **The rabbis interpreted the barren woman of Isaiah 54 as Sarah, the barren one who became the mother of the nation**. **Paul** followed that traditional interpretation, by making **Sarah** symbolic for **the New Jerusalem**, and **he** proved it by quoting the first verse of **Isaiah 54**. **For it is written: "Rejoice, O barren woman who bears no children! Break forth and shout, you who suffer no labor pains! For more are the children of the desolate than of the one who has a husband" (Galatians 4:27; Isaiah 54:1).**

Next, **Paul** supplies the climax to **4:1-11** (see **Bo - When the Fullness of Time Came, God Send Out His Son**), where **he** has demonstrated that **the Gentile Galatian** believers have become **God's heirs** through **grace**, apart from **the weak and worthless principles** of legalism. This brings **Paul** back full circle to **his** central argument concerning Jewish identity: **Your seed shall be called through Isaac. That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of god; rather, the children of promise are counted as seed (Romans 9:7-8).**¹²¹ **Paul** told the **Galatian Gentile** believers: **Now you, brothers and sisters - like Isaac, you are children of promise (4:28)**. **He** contrasts them with the Judaizers. To **Paul**, the **Galatian Gentile** believers were **the children of promise** that **God** made to **Abraham** when **He** said: **All nations will be blessed through your seed (Genesis 12:3b)**. **That is the second covenant of grace.**

But the Jerusalem above, corresponding to **Sarah**, is free - **she is our mother (4:26)**, **the mother** of all who have the **faith** of **Abraham** and **Yeshua (2:16c)**, whether Messianic Jews or Messianic **Gentiles**. Ultimately, **the heavenly Jerusalem** will **descend from**

heaven to the earth, which will have been **made new (Revelation 21:5)**, to serve as the perfect home for the redeemed throughout human history (see the commentary on **Revelation Fs - The Eternal New Jerusalem**).¹²²

Paul took the analogy a step further and said: **But just as at that time the one born according to the flesh persecuted the one born according to the Ruach, so also it is now (4:29)**. When did the one born according to the flesh (Ishmael) persecute the one born according to the Ruach (Isaac)? As Moshe describes: **The child grew and was weaned - Abraham made a big feast on the day Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian whom she had born to Abraham - making fun (Hebrew: from *tsachaq*). So, she said to Abraham, "Drive out this female slave and her son, for the son of this female slave will not be an heir with my son - with Isaac" (Genesis 21:8-10, for more detail see the commentary on **Genesis Fj - Hagar and Ishmael Are Sent Away**).**

While the practical application relates to **the Galatians'** immediate circumstances, it is based on several **midrashim** to mean that **Abraham's natural son of the flesh (Ishmael)** behaved maliciously and immorally towards **the son of promise (Isaac)**. **Thus, rabbi Akiba lectured: But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian whom she had born to Abraham - making fun (Genesis 21:9). Now making fun refers to nothing else by immorality, as with Joseph and Potiphar's wife: The Hebrew slave you brought to us came to make a fool (Hebrew: from *tsachaq*) of me" (Genesis 39:17 CSB). Thus, this teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael rape young women, seduce married women and dishonor them. Rabbi Ishmael taught this term making sport refers to idolatry when the golden calf was formed: They rose up the next morning, sacrificed burnt offerings and brought fellowship offerings. The people sat down to eat and drink, and got up to party (Hebrew: from *tsachaq*) (Exodus 32:6 CSB). This teaches that Sarah saw Ishmael build altars, catch locusts and sacrifice them. Rabbi Eleazar said that the term fight refers to bloodshed, as in the verse: Then Abner said to Joab, "Let's have some of the young men get up and fight (Hebrew: *sachaq*, meaning sport and in this context meant to *wrestle hand to hand*) in front of us" (Second Samuel 2:14). Rabbi Azariah said in Rabbi Levi's name, "Ishmael said to Isaac, 'Let us go and see our portions in the field,' then Ishmael would take a bow and arrow and shoot them in Isaac's direction, while pretending to be playing. This is written: Like a madman shooting deadly arrows so is one who deceives his friend, and says, "I was only joking" (Hebrew: *sachaq*, meaning sport and in this context means *playing around*) (Proverbs 26:18-19). But I say, this term sport [mockery] refers to inheritance. For when our father Isaac was born all rejoiced, but Ishmael said to**

them, **“You are fools, for I am the firstborn and I receive a double portion.” You may infer this from Sarah’s protest to Abraham: Drive out this female slave and her son, for the son of this female slave will not be an heir with my son (Genesis 21:10) (Genesis Rabbah 53:11).**¹²³ Therefore, as **Ishmael** acted maliciously and immorally toward **Isaac**, the Judaizers were acting maliciously and immorally toward **the Gentile** believers in **Galatia**.

And the Judaizers, who were behaving just like **Ishmael**, needed to have their claims rebutted. Just as **Sarah** had **Abraham** send **Hagar** and **Ishmael** away, **Paul** urged **the Galatian Gentile** believers to reject the pressure and persuasion of the Judaizers. **He** preached: **But what does the Scripture say? What is the truth of God’s Word? “Drive out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit eternal life with the son of promise, Isaac, born of the free woman, Sarah.”** They had not lost **their** salvation, and **Paul** identified **them** as *benei Abraham*. **So then, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, legalism, but of the free woman, grace (4:30-31).**

Legalism and **grace** cannot coexist. But understand this. There is nothing legalistic or wrong with living a life based upon the teachings of **God’s** Word. There is nothing wrong with having a set of standards with which you live your life. That is not legalism. Legalism is when you think that’s what saves you. When you think that by your “being good,” or by you “keeping the rules,” will save you, you’re lost. We need to live godly lives, but that doesn’t save us; we live that way because we have been saved.

Summary of the parable: The passage contrasts two types of proselytes: the legal proselyte and the spiritual proselyte. The one becomes part of **Abraham’s** family by legalism, the other through **faith** in **Messiah**, the promised **Seed of Abraham**, in whom **all nations will find blessing**. The passage does not contrast **the Torah** against the B’rit Chadashah. It does not equate Judaism and **the Torah** with **slavery**, nor does it pit Christians against Jews.

It means that if you are a Jewish believer, you should be proud of being Jewish because you are **a child of Abraham**, legally, physically, and spiritually. It means that if you are a **Gentile** believer, you, too, are a part of the people, the spiritual **child of Abraham**, and this is remarkable - miraculous even. You are a child of **the promise** that **ADONAI** made to **Abraham** so long ago.¹²⁴

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, How much we love **You** and are so grateful that **Your** love includes both Jews and Gentiles as **Your** children in the Kingdom of **Your Son (Colossians 1:13).***



Praise **You** that in the genealogy of **Your Son**, you included Gentile women -**Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah's wife (Matthew 1:3-6).**

Praise **Your** wonderful heart that **by the blood of the Messiah** you were able to **create within Himself one new man from the two groups, making shalom, and to reconcile both to God in one body through the cross (Ephesians 2:13c and 16a).**

Praise **You** that by reconciling us to **the Father** we now have access to **Him! For through Him we both have access to the Father by the same Ruach.** Also, you say that we are **no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household (Ephesians 2:18-19).**

Wow - reconciled, access to **the Father, fellow citizens** and then you cap it off by including **the Ruach** in both Jew and Gentile! **In Him, you also are being built together into God's dwelling place in the Ruach. (Ephesians 2:22).** After you heard the message of truth - the Good News of your salvation - and when you put your trust in Him, you were sealed with the promised **Ruach ha-Kodesh (Ephesians 1:13).** We desire to respond to **Your** gracious offer of love by offering to you ourselves **our bodies (Romans 12:1)** our thoughts, our time, money and everything that we can possibly give **You.** We joyously place our lives humbly in **Your** hands, for **You** to use for **Your** honor. In the name of **Your Holy Son** and by the power of **His** resurrection. Amen