

The NIV's "very time" is a Hebrew word (מִתְּיָדָם, *mô'ēd*) used of the appointed times of festivals and other significant events of revelation. At God's appointed times he does something special. The imagined audience might well make the connection with the special revelation that sometimes took place at the specially appointed times.

The switch from the LORD in verse 1 to "God" in verse 2 is the type of evidence that has been used to distinguish between the hypothetical sources J on the one hand and P or E on the other. But the usage may indicate no more than intentional variation. In fact the two verses repeat each other, a narrative example of the Hebrew penchant for parallelistic structure in prose as well as in poetry. God's faithfulness to his promise is emphasized yet again. This is remarkable given the failure of Abraham's faith that has just been recorded in chapter 20. This is yet another indication of God's grace. While human participation and obedience are necessary and expected, that flawed and fallible obedience is far too insecure a foundation for God's promises. God is faithful even when, perhaps especially when, we are unfaithful.

21:3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him.

As God had commanded in chapter 17, Abraham gave the name Isaac ("He will laugh") to his son. The promise, which at first brought laughter from both Abraham and Sarah, brought a different type of laughter when the son was actually born. The Hebrew emphasizes the identity of Isaac by describing him as, "his son, the one born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac." This may prepare the reader for a similarly elaborate description of Isaac in 22:2, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac." The ludicrous sounding promise that the 100-year-old Abraham and his long barren ninety-year-old wife Sarah would have a child gives way to the joyous laughter of celebration in the faithfulness of a God who does the implausible and the impossible. Every time the child's name is mentioned, the joke that God played on them would be recalled with great delight.

21:4 When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him.

Here Abraham's obedience is noted. The child at the vulnerable age of eight days is placed at risk by having an operation. But Abraham obeyed and did precisely what God commanded him to do in Genesis 17:9-13.

21:5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

The reader is reminded of just how incredible the miracle was. Abraham had asked, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" (Gen 17:17). The answer is, "Yes, if God is behind it."

21:6 Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.”

The laughter of nonbelief (Gen 17:17; 18:12) is converted into the laughter of rejoicing (21:6). Sarah quite rightly acknowledges the source of her joy. God brought laughter to her after decades of frustration. She will tell others of God’s marvelous joke on her. They will join in the celebration.

21:7 And she added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

Sarah asks rhetorically, “Who would have predicted this?” Actually, God had predicted it. While Abraham had shown in the birth of Ishmael that he was capable of begetting children, Sarah’s barrenness had long been confirmed. Perhaps every time Sarah nursed Isaac there was a little chuckle of joy and satisfaction.

Given the importance of Isaac’s birth it is surprising that it occupies such a small space in the narrative. It soon becomes clear, however, that the narrator is much more interested in the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac. Despite Isaac’s birth, Ishmael is still in the household. Whether or not Ishmael will be able to maintain his position as heir remains to be seen.

C. THE ENDGAME OF THE ISHMAEL STRATEGY: THE EXPULSION OF ISHMAEL (21:8-21)

Ultimately the scheme of Sarai to have Hagar bear a surrogate son for her comes from a failure to wait on God to fulfill his promises. The end result of that failure to wait is the conflict within the family which the birth of Ishmael caused and ultimately results in the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael. The text is ambiguous as to whether Ishmael’s descendants are destined to become enemies of Isaac’s descendants or not. But Ishmael’s expulsion does not mean that he is condemned to hell.² He also is under God’s blessing. But his role in the working out of God’s purposes is a minor one. This passage, along with the genealogy in 25:12-18, explains the ultimate long-term consequences of the scheme.

²While I would not want to endorse his entire project, Joel Kaminsky’s recent work on election [*Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), chs. 7-8] helpfully distinguishes between the nonelect and the antielect. Only the latter are under God’s judgment. Ishmael’s descendants fall under the “nonelect” category.