

Genesis 17:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation.

Analysis

And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and w... This passage is part of the Abrahamic narratives which shift from universal human history to God's particular covenant people. The Abraham cycle (Genesis 12-25) demonstrates God's sovereign election, covenant faithfulness, and the development of faith through testing and promise fulfillment.

Central themes include God's unconditional covenant promises (land, descendants, blessing to nations), the call to faith and obedience, the testing of faith through delays and impossibilities, the contrast between divine promises and human schemes, and God's gracious persistence despite human failures. Abraham emerges as the father of faith whose trust in God's promises becomes the model for all believers (Romans 4, Galatians 3, Hebrews 11).

Theologically, these narratives establish:

1. salvation by grace through faith rather than works
2. covenant as God's gracious initiative binding Himself to His people
3. the necessity of patient trust when promises seem impossible
4. the consequences of attempting to fulfill God's promises through human effort
5. the pattern of divine testing producing mature faith.

The Abraham cycle foreshadows Christ as the ultimate seed through whom blessing extends to all nations (Galatians 3:16).

Historical Context

The patriarchal narratives (Genesis 12-50) reflect the cultural, social, and legal customs of the ancient Near East during the Middle Bronze Age (2000-1500 BCE). Archaeological discoveries including the Mari tablets, Nuzi tablets, and Egyptian records confirm many details: nomadic pastoralism, covenant-making ceremonies, marriage customs, property laws, and international travel patterns described in Genesis.

The cultural practices reflected include: treaty/covenant forms (Genesis 15), bride-price customs (Genesis 24, 29), inheritance laws favoring firstborn sons (Genesis 25, 27), adoption practices (Genesis 15, 30), levirate-type arrangements (Genesis 38), and Egyptian administrative systems (Genesis 41, 47). These parallels confirm Genesis's historical reliability while showing how God worked within ancient cultural frameworks to accomplish His purposes.

For later Israelites, these narratives established their identity as Abraham's descendants, explained their claim to Canaan, justified their possession of Joseph's bones (Exodus 13:19), and provided models of faith despite imperfection. The patriarchs' failures and God's faithfulness encouraged Israel that covenant relationship depended on God's grace rather than human merit. The movement from Mesopotamia to Canaan to Egypt set the stage for the Exodus and conquest narratives.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does this verse contribute to the biblical doctrine of creation, fall, or redemption?
2. What obstacles prevent us from living out the truths presented in this verse?
3. How does this verse fit into the broader biblical story culminating in Christ?

Interlinear Text

וְיִשְׁמָעָל	שִׁמְעָתִיב	הִנֵּה הַ	בְּכָתִי	אַתָּה
And as for Ishmael	I have heard thee	H2009	Behold I have blessed	H853
H3458	H8085		H1288	
וְהַפְּרִית	וְהַרְבֵּת	אַתָּה	מְאֹד	
him and will make him fruitful	and will multiply	H853	him exceedingly	H3966
H6509	H7235	H853		H3966
מְאֹד	וְעַשְׁרָנִים	נְשִׁיאָם	וְיָלִד	וְגַדְלָת
him exceedingly	twelve	princes	shall he beget	and I will make him
H3966	H6240	H5387	H3205	H5414
גָּדוֹלָה	לָגָן			
nation	a great			
H1471	H1419			

Additional Cross-References

Genesis 21:18 (Parallel theme): Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation.

Genesis 21:13 (Parallel theme): And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed.