

Gen 16:1-16; 21:8-21 – Hagar/Ishmael

There are four main characters in this passage: An exploited slave, a barren woman, a passive man, and a mysterious friend.

1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. 2 And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 3 So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife.

This passage occurs right after the high point of the covenant where God offers his assurance that Abraham's offspring would be as numerous as the stars (which as we previously discussed is fulfilled in Christ as we are considered Abraham's offspring – see Gal 3) and that he and his descendants would receive the Promised Land.

The focus here in verses 1-3 is on the promise of children. Abraham has received assurance from God but after 10 years of living in the land (v3) "Sarai had borne him no children" (v1)

Now, a solution to the problem is presented and for once it's not Abraham's solution but Sarah's – and the solution she comes up with involves Hagar.

In verse 2 Sarah says "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children." Note that Sarah fully acknowledges the sovereignty of God but you get the sense that she is blaming God for her plight. Instead of remaining patient she hatches a plan and tells her husband to "Go in to my servant; (a euphemism for sex) it may be that I shall obtain children by her."

Why does Sarah suggest this? In Ancient Near Eastern culture the family came before the individual. That is why we see arranged marriages where the group decided who you would marry based on what would be best for the family and the worthiness attributed to women in that culture was the ability to bear children. What Sarah suggests was actually legally and culturally acceptable. Hagar's children because she is a slave would legally be Sarah's children. Hagar belongs to Sarah as her property and so her children would also be her property.

There is a Neo-Assyrian text from the 1st millennium BC that speaks to this: "If Subetu does not conceive she may take a maidservant as a substitute. She (Subetu) will thereby bring sons into being and the sons will be her sons. If she loves the maidservant she may keep her. If she hates her she may sell her."

The treatment of the maidservant in that text is very similar to what we see unfold in this passage, which we shall cover shortly. But Sarah's suggestion seems to go against the promise in 15:4 that Abraham would have a real son, with the

implication that it would be through Sarah his wife, not an adopted one. Paul picks up on this in Gal 4 where he presents the two women as two different ways to the blessing: One is that blessing (children) comes through Sarah, i.e., trusting in God's promises and his timing; the other is that the blessing comes through Hagar, i.e., the blessing is achieving through works.

At the end of verse 2 we see that "Abraham listened to the voice of Sarah." These are the exact same words used in Gen 3:17 with regard to Adam who also listened to the voice of his wife. Also in verse 3 Sarah took Hagar and gave her to Abraham, her husband, which is the same sequence as in Gen 3:6. Also it is not only the terminology but the actions that are similar. Remember we saw similar parallels to Gen 3 while Abraham was in Egypt and the incident of Sarah committing adultery with Pharaoh. It is ironic that just as Abraham gave Sarah to Pharaoh, now Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham. And again the allusions to Gen 3 are suggesting that Sarah's plan, which Abraham agrees to, is not a good one. Just like in the garden when Adam and Eve doubted that God had their best interests at heart and so they took the initiative upon themselves (after all the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eye and that it would make one wise, which are all good things), Sarah is also taking the initiative here in order to bring God's good promises to pass.

Look at the results of Sarah's actions:

4 And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. 5 And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" 6 But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

In one sense the plan works, Hagar conceived. But there are always unintended consequences, just like in Egypt when Sarah ended up in Pharaoh's harem. Here we see that "Hagar looked with contempt on her mistress." That translation is a little misleading. It's not that Hagar hated Sarah but more that she now has some status in the family because she is bearing Abraham's child and so she is no longer acting subserviently.

There is an Ancient Babylonian text, Hammurapi's Code, which speaks to this. This code dates to 2500 BC and remember that this is the culture in which Abraham grew up.

"When a free man married a priestess and she gave a female slave to her husband and she has then borne children, if later that female slave has claimed equality with her mistress because she bore children, her mistress may not sell her; she may mark her with the slave-mark and count her among the slaves.

We see this responsive action play out here:

In verse 5 Sarah claims she is suffering (“the wrong done to me”) and blames Abraham, even though she came up with the plan. “I gave my servant to your embrace” is actually “put my servant in your lap” or “between your legs,” which is very raw imagery. Sarah voices the complaint that “when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt.” Again Sarah sees her rights as Abraham’s wife being threatened because of the status that Hagar is now able to claim. Note the similar attempts to shift blame in Gen 3.

We see Abraham’s response to Sarah’s complaint in verse 6: “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” Abraham is essentially saying “treat her as a slave.” Although this was culturally acceptable (as we saw in the example of the Neo-Assyrian text), Abraham appears at best weak or passive and at worst callous. And so Sarah does just that (“Sarai dealt harshly with her”). Here we see the same word that is used to describe what the Egyptians did to Hebrews – in other words Sarah beat her. In this sense there is an ironic foreshadowing of what Sarah’s offspring would later experience.

Based on what we have seen so far, who is the hero of this story? Is it Abraham? We have talked about this before, Abraham is presented to us in Scripture as an example to follow but here, as before, we see him complicit with a plan that the text by using the language of Gen 3 is commenting is akin to the fall. In fact the hero of this story is actually the mysterious friend who comes to Hagar and turns her life around.

7 The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 8 And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.” 9 The angel of the Lord said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” 10 The angel of the Lord also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” 11 And the angel of the Lord said to her, “Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction. 12 He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.” 13 So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing,” for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” 14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. 15 And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

This part of the story is set in the wilderness on one of the roads to Egypt. Here we see Hagar encountering “the Angel of the Lord.” Angels appear often in Scripture but they always clearly state that they are created beings. Here we see one Angel who promises in v10 that “I will multiply your offspring.” He is talking like God (note this

is the same promise that God had given to Abraham) and so we should take this as God himself appearing in human form. The Church Fathers identified this angel with the preincarnate Christ.

The Angel tells Hagar in verse 9 to “go back and submit.” On the one hand this appears harsh because it means going back to a life of suffering. But through this suffering we see in v10 and following that Hagar will be blessed. Through her suffering and obedience her offspring will be numerous. In addition to the promise of offspring, her son Ishmael is pictured as a free man (a wild donkey of a man), despite the problems the text indicates that would bring about. God recognizes Hagar’s desire to be free and will bring it to fruition. As a fugitive slave Hagar has no hope and no future. The best-case scenario is that she would always be running and looking over her shoulder. The worst case is that she would be caught and killed or sold into slavery again. So she goes back and God protects her, she has Ishmael and in cpt 21:8-21 when Sarah’s jealousy arises again, Abraham sends her and Ishmael out. This time they leave free in fulfillment of the promise. We should note that the only reason Abraham sends them out is because of divine reassurance (21:11-13). His attitude there is very different to what we see here. And even though they become separated from Abraham and the promises (in Gen 17 we will see that Abraham’s descendants will be named through Isaac) neither of them are beyond the mercy, care and protection of God. God reassures them that that Ishmael will become a great nation and he provides water for them in the wilderness.

The scene comes to a climax with Hagar recognizing that the Angel is in fact God himself. In verse 13 she comments that “you are God who sees me” and “Truly I have seen him who looks after me.” In her moment of greatest distress Hagar, the oppressed slave woman, discovers God’s concern for her. Here we see that God is concerned for the afflicted no matter who they might be.

Contrast Hagar’s experience with Abraham’s in Gen 15. Theophanies are usually traumatic with darkness and dread, smoke and fire. Here God is approachable, at first glance ordinary. How is it possible that Hagar is still alive after being so close to God? How is it possible that the Creator of the universe dialogs with a slave woman? The answer is that only in Christ can the glory of God come near in grace.

Note that in verses 15 and 16 at the end of the story where we see Hagar back with Abraham, there is no mention of Sarah. The child Hagar bore was intended to be Sarah’s but her absence here and the threefold repetition that “Hagar bore” raises the question – is this the son of promise? This provides the backdrop for the ratification of the covenant and the climax of the promises that we shall see in chapter 17 next week.