

## **Genesis 16 - Hagar and the Birth of Ishmael**

A. Sarai gives her servant girl Hagar to Abram.

1. (1-2) Sari proposes a child for Abram through Hagar.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her." And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai.

a. **She had an Egyptian maidservant:** Hagar was undoubtedly part of what Abram received during his time in Egypt (Genesis 12:16).

b. **Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her:** Sarai encouraged Abram to take part in what was essentially a "surrogate mother" arrangement in that day. According to custom, the child would be considered to be the child of Abram and Sarai, not Abram and Hagar.

c. **And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai:** Sarai did something that goes against the nature of wives - to give another woman to her husband. She probably did this because she knew the promise of God (that Abram would be the father of many nations), yet she thought she was the problem with God's promise being fulfilled. So in an effort to "help God out," she allowed her husband make her servant pregnant.

i. Before they came to live in the Promised Land, Abram and Sarai regarded their childlessness as punishment for not living in the land. But now they had been in the land for ten years, and they still had no children. Sarai probably felt it was time to do something. After all, doesn't "God help those who help themselves"?

ii. Even though this early form of "surrogate motherhood" was common and accepted in that day, it doesn't mean it was *right*. God is clearly not leading Abram and Sarai.

2. (3-4) Abram agrees with Sarai's suggestion.

Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes.

a. **After Abram dwelt ten years in the land:** It had been more than **ten years** since the promise was made regarding Abram's descendants. By most accounts, **ten years** seems like a long time to wait for the promise of God.

i. The long waiting for the promise discouraged them and made them vulnerable to acting in the flesh. Yet, even after this, it would still be more than 13 years until the child of promise came.

ii. When we impatiently try to "help God out" in the flesh, it accomplishes nothing and may even prolong the time until the promise is fulfilled. Jacob had to live as an exile for 25 years because he thought he had to "help God out" to get his father's blessing. Moses had to tend sheep for 40 years in the desert after he tried to "help God out" by murdering an Egyptian.

iii. It is much better to receive God's help than to try and help Him out in the flesh. "Those who are truly zealous for God frequently reach for fruit without first dying. Unfortunately much Christian work is done in this way, and while there is conception, the child that is born can never be the heir. Christian work that is done merely through the zeal of human effort without counting the body as dead, and Sarai as good as dead, may produce great revival campaigns with but a few genuinely saved, large church memberships with many tares among the wheat." (Barnhouse)

b. **So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived:** Abram was certainly in the flesh when he agreed to inseminate Hagar and not trusting in God's ability to provide an heir through Sarai. But this wasn't a matter of a sensual romance. According to the custom of the day, Hagar would actually sit on the lap of Sarai as Abram inseminated her, to show that the child would legally belong to Sarai, as Hagar was merely a substitute for Sarai.

i. We understand this from the similar occasion of using a servant as a surrogate mother in the case of Rachel's giving of Bilhah to Jacob when Rachel was barren. In that context, Genesis 30:3 reads: *So she said, "Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, and she will bear a child on my knees, that I also may have children by her."*

ii. The phrase "bear a child on my knees" refers to the ancient practice of surrogate-adoption. Some believe that the phrase refers only to a symbolic placement of the child on the knees of one who adopts it. Others believe that it refers to the surrogate sitting on the lap of the adoptive mother during both insemination and birth. For example, referring to Genesis 30:3 the Twentieth Century Bible Commentary says: "These words are probably intended literally, and not merely as figurative adoption."

iii. We should not regard the idea that Hagar was inseminated and gave birth "on the knees" of Sarai as a certainty - we don't know enough about the ancient practice, and even if it were an ancient custom it doesn't mean that it was followed in every case. But it certainly is a reasonable possibility.

c. **And she conceived:** Then the worst thing from Sarai's perspective happened - Abram succeeded in inseminating Hagar. This proved beyond all doubt the problem was in Sarai, not in Abram, and it also could make people think Hagar was "more of a woman" and more blessed than Sarai.

3. (5-6a) Sarai's anger towards Hagar.

Then Sarai said to Abram, "My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me." So Abram said to Sarai, "Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please."

a. **I became despised in her eyes:** Hagar's contempt for Sarai started the problem. She couldn't resist displaying an inappropriate haughtiness, thinking her pregnancy somehow showed her to be better than Sarai.

b. **My wrong be upon you!** Sarai blamed the whole situation on Abram, and for good cause. He should have acted as the spiritual leader and told his wife God was able to perform what He promised, and they didn't need to try to "help God out" in the works of the flesh.

c. **Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please:** Abram seemed to make a bad situation worse by turning the situation over to Sarai and not taking care of the child he is father to. Yet, in this, he also puts his relationship with Sarai first, and that is good.

i. These terribly complicated and difficult situations often arise out of our sin. All in all, it is much easier to live life trusting in the LORD. God wants to spare us from these difficulties.

B. Hagar flees from Abram and Sarai.

1. (6b-9) The Angel of the LORD appears to Hagar and instructs her.

And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence. Now the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. And He said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai." The Angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand."

a. **She fled from her presence:** As Hagar escaped this difficult situation **the Angel of the LORD** (here, the pre-incarnate presence of Jesus) met her by a spring of water in the wilderness.

i. We can assume that this was God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, appearing to Abraham before His incarnation and birth at Bethlehem. We assume this because of God the Father it says, *No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him* (John 1:18), and no man has ever seen God in the Person of the Father (1 Timothy 6:16). Therefore, if God appeared to someone in human appearance in the Old Testament (and no one has seen God the Father) it makes sense the appearance is of the eternal Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, before His incarnation in Bethlehem.

b. **Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand:** God tells Hagar to do something very difficult: go back to her terrible situation and to submit herself to Sarai. We can suppose that Hagar might get very different counseling from many counselors today.

2. (10-12) The promise of the Angel of the LORD to Hagar.

Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, "I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude." And the Angel of the LORD said to her: "Behold, you are with child, and you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has heard your affliction. He shall be a wild man; his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren."

a. **I will multiply your descendants exceedingly:** God has great plans for Hagar's child. He will become a great nation. Indeed, Ishmael will become the father of all the Arabic peoples.

- i. Today's battle between Jew and Arab is nothing new. Both Jews and Arabs are descended from Abram by two half-brothers: Ishmael and the son to come later from Abram and Sarai, to be named Isaac.
- ii. The entire conflict can be traced back to Abram's decision to "help God out" in the flesh, both when he agreed to inseminate Hagar, and when he went to Egypt to begin with. The effects of our sin may reach far beyond what we ever imagined.

b. **He shall be a wild man; his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him**: Her child's life will not be easy, but God will still bless and sustain him. God's dealing with Hagar gives us hope. God sees our suffering and desires to touch our life when we suffer.

### 3. (13-16) God's blessing and protection of Hagar and Ishmael.

Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, **You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees**; for she said, "Have I also here seen Him who sees me?" Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; observe, it is between Kadesh and Bered. So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

a. **You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees**: Hagar knew this was no mere angel who appeared to her. The **Angel of the LORD** was also **the-God-Who-Sees**, the same One watching over Hagar and Ishmael.

- i. Ishmael is the first man in the Bible to receive his name before he was born.

b. **So Hagar bore Abram a son**: Apparently, Hagar did return with a submitted heart. She told the whole story to Abram and Sarai, and Abram named the child **Ishmael**, just as instructed in the meeting with the Angel of the LORD Hagar described.

- i. Hagar might have returned and said, "I fled from you all because I was so miserable and thought I could not continue here. But the LORD met me and told me He would see me through. He told me to come back and submit to you, so that is why I'm here." After meeting with *El Roi*, (**You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees**), Hagar knew that if God could be with her in the wilderness, He would be with her in having to submit to Sarai also.

- ii. "If we seek to change our circumstances, we will jump from the frying pan into the fire. We must be triumphant exactly where we are. It is not a change of climate we need, but a change of heart. The flesh wants to run away, but God wants to demonstrate His power exactly where we have known our greatest chagrin." (Barnhouse)

**Another Meaning** "There are many times when there are multiple meanings in the Bible": Paul tells us in Galatians that Hagar is like the Law that brings us into bondage, and Sarah is like New Jerusalem, which is free. The New Jerusalem is free due to Jesus' death on the cross. We all have a tendency to go back to our carnal ways, to the Hagers of our lives, but they only bring bondage, like the Law and sin. But Christ wants us to be born of Heaven, to be born of Sarah, to be children that are Free.

References:

*David Guzik*  
Donald Grey Barnhouse, Th.D