

Genesis 16:1 – 16

¹ Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. ² So Sarai said to Abram, 'Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³ After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. ⁴ He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight. ⁵ And Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me.' ⁶ But Abram said to Sarai, 'Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight.' So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence. ⁷ Now the angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸ He said, 'Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?' And she said, 'I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.' ⁹ Then the angel of the LORD said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority.' ¹⁰ Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, 'I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count.' ¹¹ The angel of the LORD said to her further, 'Behold, you are with child, and you will bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has given heed to your affliction. ¹² He will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand will be against him; and he will live to the east of all his brothers.' ¹³ Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are a God who sees'; for she said, 'Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?' ¹⁴ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered. ¹⁵ So 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 him.

Historical and Cultural Background

- *Sin Confirms and Repeats the Fall*: Sarai acts like Eve. 'The woman... took... and gave... to her husband' (Gen.3:6), just as something similar happened to Sarai in Egypt: Pharaoh's official 'saw her... and the woman was taken' (Gen.12:15).
- *Hagar as Surrogate Mother* (Gen.16:2): This was a legal and culturally accepted practice at the time. 'It was a serious matter for a man to be childless in the ancient world, for it left him without an heir. But it was even more calamitous for a woman... ignominious failure. So throughout the ancient East polygamy was resorted to as a means of obviating childlessness. But wealthier wives preferred the practice of surrogate motherhood, whereby they allowed their husbands to 'go in to' their maids, a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The mistress could then feel that her maid's child was her own and exert some control over it in a way that she could not if her husband simply took a second wife. So Sarai here expresses the hope that she may 'have sons through her.'¹
- *A Wild Donkey* (Gen.16:12): Probably referring to his freedom, politically and militarily.²
- *Beer-lahai-roi* (Gen.16:14): means 'well of the Living One who sees me'

¹ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16 – 50* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1994), p.7. For an example of such a case in ANE law codes see Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), p.128.

² The Jewish Midrash *Devarim Rabbah* 5:8 applies the wild donkey image to Israel: 'The Holy One Blessed is He said to Israel, 'My children, I had intended that you be free from kingship... like a wild donkey in the desert that has no fear of man on it, so had I intended that you should not have the fear of kingship on you... But you did not want that.' See discussion by Warren Goldstein, *Defending the Human Spirit: Jewish Law's Vision for a Moral Society* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 2006), p.38.

Questions

1. The focus in this story shifts from Abram to Sarai. Why do you think that is? And what do we learn about Sarai – what was she thinking and feeling?
2. So what was her response to her circumstance?
 - a. Emotionally, she despairs. How is despair a sinful emotion? It is to lose hope in God's word and character.
 - b. What could she have remembered? Recall, however, that God had protected Sarai in Egypt in Gen.12, and implicitly, the marriage of Abram and Sarai as well. In promising Abram and Sarai a child and heir, God was also teaching them about His original design for marriage from Genesis 1 – 2. Abram had learned that lesson, although he falters here. Sarai needs to learn this as well.
 - c. Sarai could have prayed. Abram could have prayed for Sarai as well. The fact that they do not converse with God about this is telling.
 - d. So Sarai falls back on a practice that was legally and culturally acceptable to her society, but not to God. There are many things that are legally and culturally acceptable, but not to God...
 - e. Does the phrase, 'Took...and gave...to her husband' in Gen.16:3 sound familiar? It is a phrase that is repeated from Eve and Adam's fall in Genesis 3:6
 - f. What does this suggest about Sarai's action? This is a very sinful act. The fact that Abram 'listened to the voice of Sarai' is also an echo of Adam's fall in Genesis 3.
3. Why does Hagar despise her mistress Sarai?
 - a. Competition of motherhood, taps into emotions of security, identity, youth vs. age, blessing vs. lack of blessing
 - b. Competition for Abram's affection and appreciation?
 - c. Why is despising a sinful emotion? What happens in us when we despise someone else?
4. How do Sarai and Abram respond to Hagar's disdain?
 - a. Sarai complains to Abram and blames him. This is a lot like Adam blaming Eve, but the gender roles are reversed here. It confirms that human beings can be very evasive about their own sinfulness and responsibility!
 - b. Sarai 'afflicts' Hagar. The Egyptians will later 'afflict' the Israelites in Egypt.
 - c. Sarai asks for the LORD to judge between them. He will do that here...
 - d. Abram abdicates responsibility. He becomes really passive, like Adam was passive in receiving the fruit from Eve and taking a bite. Instead of mediating between these two women, Abram says, 'Do to her what is good in your sight.' That is an echo of the consequences of the fall, where people think they can define good and evil from within themselves. We cannot. That is why Sarai treats Hagar harshly, probably ordering her around, making her do extra work, etc.
5. When Hagar runs away, why do you think God interrupts her?
6. Who is 'the angel of the LORD'?
 - a. This is the first appearance of this being.
 - b. Angel means 'messenger.' So sometimes human beings are called 'angels' in that sense in the New Testament.
 - c. Later, Hagar says that she has been seen by God, and saw God Himself. So Hagar equates 'the angel of the LORD' with the LORD Himself.
 - d. Some (myself included) believe that this being is the Son of God before he took human nature to himself and became Jesus of Nazareth. That is a possible view, but not necessitated by the text, and I wouldn't insist on it.
7. What do you think about God's interaction with Hagar?
 - a. God speaks Hagar's name. Previously, Sarai and Abram referred to Hagar without her name. They said, 'My maid' or 'Your maid.' God pays Hagar the compliment of using her actual name.
 - b. His first word is a question (16:8). Notice that this also is like what God did in Genesis 3 – 4 in asking questions of Adam and Eve, then Cain.
 - c. Why does God tell Hagar to go back to Sarai? Isn't that unfair?
 - i. It's a chance for Hagar to not despise Sarai but have compassion. All of God's redemption involves a little bit of 'dying to self' in order to have life and impart life to others. Notice that this is very much like what Abram needed to understand from Gen.15: life comes out of death, because that is who God is.
 - ii. It's a chance for Sarai and Abram to change the way they relate to Hagar

- iii. It's probably better for Hagar and her child-to-be, Ishmael, to be raised in the safety of a family as opposed to being a single mother alone in the wilderness
 - iv. Plus, God also extends to Ishmael some of the creational blessing from Genesis 1:28, renewed to Abram and Sarai in Genesis 12:1 – 3, of being fruitful and multiplying. Hagar is moved by this.
 - d. God promises Hagar that her son will be fruitful and multiply. So the blessing of descendants will apply to Hagar.
 - i. God says that Hagar will name her son. Naming her son is a sign of authority.
 - ii. Her descendants will be prosperous, although they will apparently be nomadic ('wild donkey' is probably not pejorative but simply indicative of being a nomadic Bedouin, as wild donkeys roamed around in packs) and their lifestyle will lead them to be 'against' their neighbors.
 - iii. God therefore leads Hagar to be a 'matriarch.' She is the only woman to whom God gives the blessing of descendants. Every other person is a man, although the wife is named implicitly as part of the marriage union (e.g. starting with Adam and Eve in Gen.5:1 – 3). Nevertheless, Hagar is the only woman who God singularly blesses in this way. In this sense, she is literarily and thematically close to the 'seed of the woman' prophecy of Gen.3:14 – 15. Her proximity to Abram and Sarai have brought her close to God's redemptive story. She probably signed up to be Sarai's maid when Abram and Sarai went to Egypt in Gen.12. This brought her close to the God they worshiped, and she is blessed for it.
- 8. What does Hagar's response to God suggest?
 - a. How is the theme of 'sight' reversed here? Like with the fall into sin and its consequences, sight figures prominently in this passage. Sarai was 'despised in her *sight*' (16:4) because Hagar 'saw that she had conceived' (16:5). The terms refer to the focus Hagar has: herself and Sarai. Hagar's spite comes out of seeing and focusing on a human comparison; she does not see God's blessing and patience. Sarai 'saw' Hagar's spite in v.4 – 5. Then, Abram had said to Sarai, 'Do what is good in your *sight*,' surrendering to human sight and Sarai's moral relativism and vindictiveness, which of course comes out of the fall itself. After Hagar encounters the angel of the LORD, however, she knows that God *sees* her, and she has *seen* Him (16:13)! That is a stunning turnaround of the theme of sight.
 - b. Hagar is the only person to ever name God, in the Bible. What does naming mean? It means to see the true nature of someone or something else. Adam named the animals. Adam named his wife Eve, through the promise of God and his faith, the mother of all living. Now Hagar names God.
 - c. That God is the one who redeems us from our own sin, but it involves going through a death into life.
 - d. Illus: my dating story, trying to rush God or force His hand, then breaking up. The next day, I was supposed to teach on Romans 8:26 – 39 at a church I had decided to go to because of her. It was really tough. But then I saw my good friends Andrew and Jeanny Chai right after the service. They were visiting out of the blue. I took it as a sign that God saw me. He was redeeming me. But I had to continue at that church even though I wanted to leave because I had given my word that I would teach Sunday School there for another year. It led to more of God's redemption in my life, however. Like Hagar, and like with Abram and Sarai, I had to learn that God's life comes through a dying to myself.
 - e. Why do you think the author of Genesis includes the story of Hagar in the midst of the story of Abram and Sarai? Why are we drawn to sympathize with Hagar here? Because God is already showing how He wants to bless all people through Abram and Sarai, even when they screw up. Even when a Gentile woman screws up, her proximity to God's purposes is a blessing.