

Genesis 16

In the last chapter, Abram had offered Eliezer as the heir to his estate and the promise of God. God said, “No. It will be someone from your own body.” God continues to promise (15:4-5, 13, 18), but He also continues to delay the fulfillment. We do not know how much time elapsed between chapter 15 and chapter 16, but it has been ten years since the first promise of children in chapter 12 (16:3). We have also not seen a polygamist since Lamech in 4:19. The text says that Hagar was given to Abram as a “wife” (16:3) and, in that culture, this brought some legal issues for Sarai, Abram, and Hagar. Aside from the patriarchs, there are seven men who had multiple wives / concubines in the OT. Four of them were kings. Some passages will distinguish between a “concubine” and a wife; here, Hagar is identified as a wife.

God will bless Hagar and her son, but the promised seed will not be through Hagar. Abram will have to wait longer, and trust more, before the promise is finally fulfilled. The physical options are being exhausted. Abram will have to depend on an act of God (a miracle) before he and Sarai will become parents (cf. 1 Cor. 1:29).

TRANSLATION - 16:1-6:

1 Now Sarai, the wife of Abram, had not given birth for him and to her [was] a female slave, an Egyptian, and her name [was] Hagar. **2** So Sarai said to Abram, “Behold, please, Jehovah has prevented me from giving birth. Come, please, to my female slave; perhaps I will build [a house] from her.” So, Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. **3** Then Sarai, the wife of Abram, took Hagar the Egyptian, her female slave, after ten years Abram [had been] dwelling in the land of Canaan and she gave her to Abram, her husband, for a wife. **4** So he came to Hagar and she conceived and saw that she was pregnant and she despised her mistress in her eyes. **5** Then Sarai said to Abram, “My wrong [is] on you; I, myself, gave my female servant to your embrace and she sees that she got pregnant and I am despised in her eyes. Let Jehovah judge between me and you.” **6** Then Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, Your female slave [is] in your hands. Do to her the good in your eyes.” And Sarai treated her harshly and she fled from her face.

WORDS:

“Female slave” (verse 1) is used 63 times. “Prevented” (verse 2; 46 times) can mean “hold back, restrain, hinder.” “I will build” (377 times) was first used in 2:22 when God “built” the woman from the side of Adam. Here, it carries the idea of establishing a family or fulfilling the promise of the seed. “To be despised” (verse 4; 82 times) means to be “small or insignificant, to make light of, treat with contempt, or despise.” “Mistress” is the female form of the word “mighty man” or “warrior” (cf. 6:4). The word will carry the idea of a “queen” or “queen mother” in 1 Kings (11:19; 15:13), 2 Kings (10:13), and 2 Chronicles (15:16) as well as Isaiah 47:5, 7 and Jeremiah 13:18; 29:2. “It was wrong” is the word translated “violent” in 6:11, 13. “Embrace” (verse 5; 38 times) can mean “bosom” or “lap.” “Treat harshly” (verse 6; 79 times) means to be “afflicted, humbled, or violated.” God had promised Abram that his descendants would be treated this way and the word is also used for the Israelites being treated by the Egyptians in Exodus 1:11-12.

COMMENTS:

We were told in 11:30 that Sarai was barren and had no children and Moses reminds us in verse 1 that Sarai still was childless. After ten years, it is easy to get frustrated, even desperate, and either give up or try anything at one’s disposal. Hagar, the Egyptian slave, was at Sarai’s disposal. We do not know if Sarai obtained Hagar while they were in Egypt or from some other source, but that is not relevant. With Eliezer being from Damascus (15:2) and Hagar from Egypt, we see that Abram’s household was multi-cultural!

We are not told by Moses, only by Sarai, that Jehovah God had prevented Sarai from becoming pregnant. Notice the entreaty on Sarai’s part, using “please” twice, and hoping

(notice the “perhaps”) that Hagar would get pregnant. Abram listened to Sarai’s suggestion. We could criticize Abram and ask why he did not approach God and ask Him, but Abram’s knowledge of God was new and shallow. According to several documents from the second and first millennium B. C., Sarai’s suggestion to Abram was according to legal precedent: the Law Code of Hammurabi, the texts at Nuzi, Assyrian, and Babylon. The child would be raised as Sarai’s and Abram’s son. That is the significance of Sarai suggesting she will “build” (a house) through Hagar’s pregnancy. Notice in the text that Hagar has the legal status as a “wife” (16:3), albeit the second wife.

So, Abram “came” to Hagar, implying a sexual relationship, and she became pregnant. Rather than being jubilant, as perhaps everyone expected, Hagar despised Sarai. When other polygamist relationships have one wife get pregnant rather than the other, jealousy or feelings of superiority always results. It happens here with Hagar, as well. Sarai may be blaming Abram: “my wrong on you.” So, Sarai calls on Jehovah God to motivate Abram to do something about it.

What else could Abram do? He gave Hagar into the hands of Sarai, to “do good.” But Sarai treated her harshly. So harshly, that Hagar fled from her masters, toward her homeland, Egypt. Moses’ audience will be reversing the action as they are treated harshly in Egypt and flee to Canaan.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - It is easy for Christians to criticize Abram for not asking God about Sarai’s suggestion. A pensive Abram could reflect on the repercussions of this decision, once everything plays out and could learn from his mistake. But, troubles happen frequently when man tries to help God fulfill His plans, instead of being patient and waiting for a word from Jehovah God (cf. 15:1).

Contemporaries of Moses’ day - As we mentioned above, Moses’ audience will be reversing these behaviors in the sense that they will be leaving Egypt and its harsh treatment of them, and traveling back to the Promised Land. The text will explain to Israel the origin of the Ishmaelites. Like other nationalities, these, too, were relatives of Israel. God will warn the Israelites about treating slaves harshly since they were harshly treated in Egypt (Exo. 22:20-24).

Later Hebrew writers - We do not know if the wise man had this incident in mind, but he warned of the dangers of having multiple wives (Prov. 30:21-23).

NT writers - Paul uses this whole text, but primarily Genesis 21, as an allegory to set up a contrast between those who are “children of promise” versus those who are not, in Galatians 4:21-31.

TRANSLATION - 16:7-12:

7 Then the angel of Jehovah found her by the well of water in the desert by the well on the way to Shur. **8** And he said, "Hagar, the female slave of Sarai, From where did you come? And where are you going?" Then she said, "From the face of Sarai, my mistress, I, myself, am fleeing." **9** So the angel of Jehovah said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit yourself under her hand." **10** Then the angel of Jehovah said to her, "To increase I will increase your seed and he will not be counted, [he will be] a multitude." **11** Finally, the angel of Jehovah said to her, "Look! You are pregnant and you will give birth to a son and you will call his name Ishmael because Jehovah has heard your suffering. **12** And he himself will be a wild donkey of a man. His hand [will be] against all and the hand of all [will be] against him. And from the face of all his brothers he will dwell."

WORDS:

“Angel of Jehovah” (verses 7, 9, 10-11) is found 58 times in the OT; “angel of God” is found another 11 times. The most interesting accounts are found in Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, and Judges. “Submit yourself” (verse 9) is the same word, but the reflexive form, of the word translated “treat harshly” in verse 6. “Suffering” (verse 11) is from the same word

family as “treat harshly” and “submit” used earlier in verses 6, 9. “Donkey” (verse 12) is found ten times; the point here is that it is a wild animal.

GRAMMAR:

“To increase I will increase” (verse 10) translates the Hebrew emphatic expression of an infinitive absolute (*hiphil*) followed by the same verb in the imperfect.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

“Shur” (verse 7) appears to have been close to the border of Egypt, suggesting Hagar was on her way “home.” The Ishmaelites are found in Genesis 37:25, 27-28; 39:1; Judges 8:24; 1 Chronicles 2:17; 27:30; and Psalm 83:6.

COMMENTS:

Who is this “angel” of Jehovah? The challenge in identification is that He is, in the same context, often identified with God but differentiated from Him. The word translated “angel” means a messenger. If he is a *human* messenger, he is often identified as a prophet. If he is a *divine* messenger, he is often identified as an angel. In 48:16, He is identified as the One who has brought redemption, an idea which is echoed in Exodus 23:20-23. Several different possibilities have been suggested:

1. He is a human form of God Himself.
2. He is a “type” or figure of Jesus Christ.
3. He is simply an angel.
4. He is Christ, before He came in the flesh. The argument for this idea is that in John 8:58, Jesus refers to the burning bush event, which includes an “angel of Jehovah” and Jesus identifies Himself as the Speaker. We must admit that a decisive position is not possible.

Jehovah God appears, apparently in a unique way, to this woman who is not even a blood-relative of Abram nor descended from Shem. This point argues that the author of Genesis was not a Jew nor a “diehard” Israelite from later generations. It is not likely that such an individual would have had a “angel of Jehovah” appear first to someone outside of the chosen nation.

This messenger knows Hagar’s name and her situation. Therefore, His questions are likely simply to illicit conversation with her and reflections from her. Hagar responds that she was fleeing from her mistress, Sarai. Observe how frequently Moses states the “angel of Jehovah” speaks to Hagar (4 times). One statement is in verse 9: “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” Apparently, this was required by the laws of that culture. Statement number two is in verse 10: “Your son will have a multitude of children.” This was the promise given to Abram (most recently in 15:5). Abram’s promise will be fulfilled through Isaac, but here God gives the same promise to Hagar’s son. It also shows God fulfilling, through Ishmael, His command given to all humanity in 1:28.

Statement number three is in verses 10-11: God promises that Hagar will have a son and she should name him “Ishmael,” which comes from the Hebrew verb: “He hears,” to remind Hagar and Ishmael that God heard her prayer, her suffering, and responded. God also predicts that Ishmael will largely live isolated, like a wild donkey, and his life will be antagonistic towards others. “From the face” of his brothers suggests hostile relations (25:18). The expression is used by Satan in Job 1:11, stating Job will “curse to the face” Jehovah God (cf. “before” in the context of Deut. 21:16). It is easy to see modern Arabs and Muslims as a fulfillment of this prediction, but we would caution against applying a prophecy in a way that an inspired writer has not applied it. We should always wait for a “thus says the Lord” before we speak on God’s behalf. It seems to this writer, it is safest to interpret 25:18 as the fulfillment of this prophecy and leave it at that. There is no conflict between Israelites and the Ishmaelites in the Bible.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - We have mixed emotions about Hagar. After all, she apparently despised Sarai first. She did not want to be used, perhaps, as a “baby factory.” Yet, her response to Sarai precipitated Sarai’s response in return: harsh treatment, which motivated Hagar to flee. She went to the only place she would know to go: home. The fact that God appeared to her in the form of this angel of Jehovah shows that God cared for her and He gives her a unique promise and a unique prophecy. For the most part, such promises and prophecies were confined to Abram’s family.

Contemporaries of Moses’ day - Israel would know that the Ishmaelites’ growth and numbers were predicted by God. But, after Genesis, there are not many references to the Ishmaelites (Judg. 8:24; 1 Chron. 2:17; 27:30; Psa. 83:6). See “Archaeology” above.

NT writers - An “angel of the Lord,” at least one named Gabriel, is seen in the NT: Matt. 1:20, 24; 2:13, 19; 28:2; Luke 1:11; 2:9; John 5:4; Acts 5:19; 8:26; 12:7, 23.

TRANSLATION - 16:13-16:

13 So she called the name of Jehovah, the One speaking these things to her, “El Yireh,” because she said, “Even here I saw after the Seeing One.” **14** Therefore she named the well, “Beer-Lahai-Roi.” Behold, [it is] between Kadesh and Bered. **15** So Hagar bore to Abram a son and Abram called the name of his son after Hagar gave birth, Ishmael. **16** Then Abram [was] the son of eighty-six years old when Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, for Abram.

WORDS:

“El Yireh” (verse 13) is translated “God sees.” He saw Hagar in her suffering and her thankfulness and praise motivates her to give God a “new” designation. However, He is not identified by the name again. “Called” (verse 13) is the same verb translated “named” in verse 14.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

“Beer-Lahai-Roi” (verse 14; 24:62; 25:11) is located between Kadesh and Bered. We know where Kadesh is, sixty miles south of Beersheba. We do not know where Bered is. “Beer” is the Hebrew word for “well.”

COMMENTS:

Other than “Jehovah” and “God,” this is now the second designation for Jehovah God, the first being “God Most High” (Gen. 14:18-22). We do not know the origin of that term, but here, it is a non-Israelite, non-Hebrew, non-Jew who designates God as “El Yireh,” “God sees.” In fact, she is the only person who gives God a specific name in the whole Bible. Hagar identified Him this way because He “saw” her suffering and responded. She then designated that place where she saw God, “The Well of the One who Sees Me.” It was located, Moses tells us, between Kadesh and Bered.

Hagar evidently returned home to Abram and Sarai, although the relationship between the three is going to turn sour again in chapter 21. In the last two verses (16:15-16), “Hagar” is mentioned three times; “Abram” is mentioned four times; Sarai is not mentioned at all. Hagar gives birth to a son and Abram, either informed by God or by Hagar, names the son “Ishmael.” Until later, Abram will likely believe that Ishmael will be the son of promise. Abram is now 86 years old, eleven years after he left Ur (12:4). As far as the record is concerned, Jehovah God will not appear to Abram again for another thirteen years, when God will, again, set the record straight relative to who the son of promise will be.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Out of a sense of gratitude, Hagar names God “the One who sees.” She then obeyed God, returning to Abram and Sarai, submitting to Sarai’s leadership and gave birth to a boy, as God promised, and named him Ishmael, as God commanded.

NT writers - Again, Paul uses the story of Hagar and Ishmael as an allegory to illustrate the difference between Jews, after the flesh, and spiritual Jews, children of promise, in Galatians 4:21-31.