



## Genesis - Chapter Sixteen

### **II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)**

#### **II.a Genesis 11:27-25:18 - Abraham (continues)**

##### **Summary of Chapter Sixteen**

This chapter deals with the birth of Abram's first son but he is not conceived by Abram's wife Sarai. Rather than trusting in the promises of God and being patient for him to act, Sarai persuades Abram to take matters into their own hands by having a child through the servant girl Hagar. The consequences of their actions cause a lot of distress within the family.

#### **II.a.viii Genesis 16:1-16 - The Birth of Ishmael**

Impatient for an heir, Sarai seeks to resolve the problem of her barrenness by having her maidservant Hagar bear a child on her behalf, a custom mentioned in other ancient Near Eastern texts. Subsequent tensions between Sarai and Hagar cause the latter to run away. By sending an angel-messenger, the Lord persuades Hagar to return, probably thus leading Abram to think that the child soon to be born, Ishmael, might indeed be the promised son. Theologically, this episode emphasises the hearing and seeing nature of God, and his mercy. It also reiterates the need to trust God to fulfil his promises and not to act purely according to human will.

<sup>1</sup> Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, <sup>2</sup> and Sarai said to Abram, 'You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

## Genesis 16:1-2

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. Sarai was one of several key women in the bible who appeared to be barren and yet God eventually allowed to bear a child. Being unable to have a child was considered to be a failing in woman in the culture and often seen as a curse from God, and Sarai indicates that it was God's intervention that stopped her from becoming pregnant: You see that the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Yet the Scriptures offer hope to such women: <<*Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout, you who have not been in labour! For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married, says the LORD*>> (Isaiah 54:1).

Hagar, as an Egyptian slave-girl, was probably part of what Abram received during his time in Egypt (12:16).

Go in to my slave-girl; it may be that 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.

Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. The Hebrew idiom implies that Abram obeyed Sarai. Abram is possibly criticised here for conceding too readily to his wife's request, see v.6.

Ginzberg quotes a Jewish tradition saying that before they came to live in Canaan, Abram and Sarai regarded their childlessness as punishment for what they had done in Egypt. But now they were in the land for ten years, and they still had no children. Sarai probably felt it was time to do something about the situation. Perhaps she thought along the lines of old unbiblical proverb 'God helps those who help themselves.'

<sup>3</sup> So, after Abram had lived for ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife.

## Genesis 16:3

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. 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 thirteen years until the child of promise came.

When people impatiently try to fulfil God's promises through their own efforts, 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 arrange the fulfilment of God's promise to get his father's blessing. Moses had to tend sheep for 40 years in the desert after he tried to arrange the fulfilment of God's promise by murdering an Egyptian.

As a wife. Hagar's status within Abram's household is changed from servant to wife, although this does not place her on a par with Sarai; refer also to the comments made on 25:5-6. While the OT records occasions when particular individuals have more than one wife, such instances are almost always fraught with complications and difficulties. The taking of multiple wives is never encouraged in the Bible: <<*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh*>> (Genesis 2:24), <<*And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself*>> (Deuteronomy 17:17); and usually arises out of peculiar circumstances.

<sup>4</sup> He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

#### Genesis 16:4

He went in to Hagar, and she conceived. Abram certainly acted according to his own power and wisdom when he agreed to inseminate Hagar and did not trust in God's ability to provide an heir through Sarai. However, this was not 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.

She looked with contempt on her mistress. Hagar's ability to conceive causes her to look down on Sarai and dramatically changes the natural relationship between the two women.

<sup>5</sup> Then Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl 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!' <sup>6</sup> But Abram said to Sarai, 'Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

#### Genesis 16:5-6

Sarai initially directs her anger at Abram, who acquiesces in the situation, permitting Sarai to deal harshly with Hagar. The human solution to Sarai's barrenness creates new problems, souring relationships.

**May the wrong done to me be on you!** and **May the LORD judge between you and me!** Although it was clearly Sarai's idea, she blames the outcome on her husband and thus the seeds of strife are sown into their relationship. This may be seen as the way that Satan likes to disrupt the will of God or it may simply be part of the human sinful condition.

**She looked on me with contempt.** Hagar's contempt for Sarai may be seen as the start of the problem, it was really the actions of Abram and Sarai that were the cause. She could not resist displaying an inappropriate haughtiness, thinking her pregnancy somehow showed her to be better than Sarai.

**Your slave-girl is in your power; 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 put his relationship with Sarai first, and that was good. These terribly complicated and difficult situations often arise out of human sin. All in all, it is much easier to live life trusting in and obedient to God, who wants to spare his people from these difficulties.

<sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.

#### **Genesis 16:7**

**The angel of the LORD.** The Hebrew word for angel may also be translated 'messenger.' There is an element of mystery about this figure. In 19:1 the two angels who arrive at Sodom resemble human beings and, indeed, in 18:2 they are referred to as 'men'.

When **the angel of the LORD** speaks, his words are perceived as being God's words. Therefore, the impression is given that the angel is identical with God. On this basis some Christians believe that **the angel of the LORD** is a theophany, an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ. Others, however, hold that the reference here is to an angel who has been commissioned to speak as God's representative, and so the angel's words are God's words.

**The spring on the way to Shur.** Hagar's flight takes her in the direction of Egypt, her homeland. The location of the spring or well is clarified in v.14, when it is named 'Beer-lahai-roi.'

<sup>8</sup> And he said, 'Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?' She said, 'I am running away from my mistress Sarai.'<sup>9</sup> The angel of the LORD said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit to her.'

### Genesis 16:8-9

Return to your mistress, and submit to her. Hagar is commanded by God to transform her attitude toward her mistress Sarai; instead of despising her, she is to submit to her authority in accordance with the traditions of servanthood.

<sup>10</sup> The angel of the LORD also said to her, ‘I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.’

### Genesis 16:10

I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude. By way of encouragement, the angel of the Lord promises Hagar that she too will have numerous descendants; this is confirmed in 17:20 and 25:12-18. Hagar would become the matriarch of the Arab nations.

<sup>11</sup> And the angel of the LORD said to her,  
‘Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;  
you shall call him Ishmael,  
for the LORD has given heed to your affliction.’

### Genesis 16:11

You shall call him Ishmael. This not the only time that God gives instruction as to what the child shall be called: <<*She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins*>> (Matthew 1:21), <<*But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John*>> (Luke 1:13).

Ishmael means ‘God hears.’ Hagar’s harsh treatment by Sarai has not gone unobserved by God.

<sup>12</sup> He shall be a wild ass of a man,  
with his hand against everyone,  
and everyone’s hand against him;  
and he shall live at odds with all his kin.’

### Genesis 16:12

He shall be a wild ass of a man. The angel promises Hagar that her son will become a strongly independent person. Unlike his mother, he will not need to be servile toward others, but he will live a life of hostility toward others.

Wild donkeys are frequently referred to in Scripture as analogies for other situations, such as: <<Like wild asses in the desert they go out to their toil, scavenging in the waste-land food for their young>> (Job 24:5), <<You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst>> (Psalm 104:10-11), and: <<For they have gone up to Assyria, a wild ass wandering alone; Ephraim has bargained for lovers>> (Hosea 8:9).

<sup>13</sup> So she named the LORD who spoke to her, ‘You are El-roi’; for she said, ‘Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?’

#### Genesis 16:13

Hagar is impressed by the perceptiveness of God as revealed through his angel-messenger. This is seen in the name she gives to the Lord; she calls him God of seeing, Hebrew El-roi.

Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him? Although this could imply that Hagar actually saw God himself, her remarks may also be interpreted as denoting an inner perception; she perceives that God sees or ‘looks after’ her. It was also known that anyone who actually saw God face to face would die: <<‘But’, he said, ‘you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live’>> (Exodus 33:20), <<And Manoah said to his wife, ‘We shall surely die, for we have seen God’>> (Judges 13:22). That is what Hagar feared here.

<sup>14</sup> Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

#### Genesis 16:14

Beer-lahai-roi means ‘well of the Living One who sees me.’

<sup>15</sup> Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.

#### Genesis 16:15

Abram named his son. By naming Ishmael, Abram publicly acknowledges him as his son and heir.

<sup>16</sup> Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

#### Genesis 16:16

Eighty-six years old. Ishmael is born 11 years after Abram settled in the land of Canaan. It would be another 14 years before he would father his son Isaac with Sarai. Refer to Abraham’s Timeline in the Supplementary Material on the website.