

STRIFE IN THE FAMILY

Genesis 16:1-16

Abram (as he was then called – God didn't rename him Abraham until Genesis chapter 17 verse 5) was married to a woman named Sarai, who seemed infertile and unable to bear him children, and this in spite of God's promises to them, recorded in Genesis chapter 15, that Abram would found a dynasty with enormous numbers of descendants. The reality and disappointment of at least 10 years of childlessness (Genesis 16:3) makes it difficult for both Abram and Sarai to trust in God regarding this issue. This chapter 16 is a real roller coaster ride for both Abram and Sarai.

Verse 1 sets the scene for the sin they are about to commit as a result of their lack of trust in God's promises to them. Lets look at that verse 1:

“Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar;” (Genesis 16:1 NIV)

This Hagar is about to enter the narrative in a powerful but sinful way.

Look at verses 2 and 3:

“2 so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. 3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.” (Genesis 16:2-3 NIV)

No reason is given for Sarai's inability to conceive, although in the book of Genesis this is often a sign of divine displeasure or punishment. Under the rules applicable in these times, Abram would have been entitled to marry another wife and after ten years of barrenness of Sarai, Abram would have been entitled to divorce her. Note that Sarai can't bring herself to refer to Hagar by name, she just refers to her as her maidservant. Even Abram avoids using her name.

Although this behaviour seems completely amoral and repugnant to us, it was quite common in ancient times as Nuzi texts and Assyrian marriage contracts make clear. It's not clear what Hagar might have thought of all this, but given the importance of male progeny to maintain the family line in that era, I'm inclined to believe that her childbearing role was at least expected of her and indeed was probably obligatory.

Of course, Abram had already delivered his wife into the arms of Pharaoh and now she delivers her husband into the arms of Hagar. Instead of waiting patiently for God's promise to materialise, Sarai and Abram take matters into their own hands with disastrous consequences. How often do we fail to wait for God and try and help things along and miss God's best for our lives?

In any event Abram has intercourse with Hagar and she has no difficulty in conceiving see verses 4 and 5:

“4 ¶ He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me."” (Genesis 16:4-5 NIV)

So as soon as she becomes pregnant, Hagar despises Sarai and Sarai blames Abram in spite of the fact that the whole idea began with Sarai. I think Sarai is upset that Hagar has become pregnant so easily and this makes Sarai feel even more inadequate. Sarai no doubt sees her position as wife and companion of Abram as being threatened – remember Abram would have been entitled to divorce Sarai after ten years of barrenness. Sarai's feelings about Hagar are made clear by the fact that she never utters Hagar's name or speaks directly to Hagar.

Abram seems unable to resolve the situation and rather weakly tells Sarai to do with Hagar as she sees fit – look at verse 6:

““Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai ill-treated Hagar; so she fled from her.”
(Genesis 16:6 NIV)

Note that Abram does not permit Sarai to mistreat Hagar. Jewish Law provided for the fair treatment of foreigners. Abram says “do whatever you think best. Predictably Sarai ill treats Hagar and she runs away – look at verse 7 and 8:

“7 ¶ The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" "I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.” (Genesis 16:7-8 NIV)

This always happens when we stop trusting God. We do wrong. We say God caused it to occur. Then, when our plans go sour, we blame either God or others for the outcome. The difficulty is not with God. The sin is in ourselves. The fault is in our own bad choices. We may attempt to run away from our problems, but we can't escape ourselves and we can't run away from God. The Angel asks Hagar where she's coming from, this reminds us of Elijah running away after his defeat of the prophets of Baal when God asks Elijah what are you doing here. Hagar says that she is running away from her mistress, but she never answers the second part the Angel's question as to where she is going. Maybe she had no destination in mind and was wandering aimlessly, or perhaps she didn't want to admit that she was going home to Egypt. The text, however, says she was headed towards Shur. Shur was a wilderness region in northwest Sinai, situated between southwest Canaan and the northeast border of Egypt; it was near the border of Egypt through which the Israelites travelled at their Exodus from slavery in Egypt. How strange that Hagar is escaping from her slavery by heading into Egypt.

In any event, the Angel tells Hagar to return to Abram and Sarai and to submit to Sarai – look at verse 9:

“Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her.”” (Genesis 16:9 NIV)

This is the first reference to the “angel of the Lord” in the OT. Certainly this would have been very difficult advice for Hagar to receive as she’s in effect being told to accept her mistreatment by Sarai. Bravely and faithfully Hagar offers no words of dissension or argument. When we’ve made bad choices in our lives, we need to repent and return to the issues we failed to confront and start all over again.

However, the Angel now gives Hagar hope for the future in verses 10 to 12:

“10 ¶ The angel added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count." 11 The angel of the LORD also said to her: "You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. 12 He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility towards all his brothers.” (Genesis 16:10-12 NIV)

So Hagar is promised many offspring before she has even given birth to her first child. There are several passages in Genesis where a man is promised numerous offspring (e.g. Abraham and Isaac), but this is the only passage in Genesis where such a promise is made to a woman. The continued reference to the “Angel of the Lord said” make it clear that this is not a dream or a vision but God’s revelation to and for Hagar. It’s interesting that at no time does Hagar respond either positively or negatively.

Hagar is told to name the child she is carrying Ishmael, which means something like “Yahweh has been attentive in your humiliation”. She’s also told that Ishmael will be a wild donkey of a man and that everyone’s hand will be against him. A strong hint that Ishmael and his descendants will live a nomadic lifestyle in the wild and desert places. He’ll both give and receive some crushing blows.

Hagar then intervenes for the first time and tells the Angel that she has a name for the God who has been speaking to her – see verse 13:

“She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."” (Genesis 16:13 NIV)

I believe that this part of the narrative qualifies and does justice to verse 9. The explicit revelation to Hagar that she is bearing a child with a manifest destiny means that even her return to Sarai (commanded of her in verse 9) cannot be for nothing. Especially, Hagar need not fear that Sarai will abuse her to the extent that she might lose the child she is carrying.

Hagar is delighted that she has seen God and perhaps even more excited that God has seen her. Hagar revels not so much in the son she is carrying, but in the fact that she has received a divine revelation. She is fascinated more by the origin of the revelation than by the content of the revelation. Her attitude here is remarkably different from that in the beginning of the chapter. No longer is she gloating over her procreating abilities or her role as a mother.

Are you aware that God sees you? Right where you are? He does. He sees you as you are and where you are. He sees where you have come from and where you are going. He sees what you need and what you do not need. Above all, he sees what he wants to make of you and how that final, glorious product is to be achieved. You cannot see it. But it is precisely for that reason that you must lay your own wisdom aside and return to the path God has given you to walk in.

It’s interesting to note that she doesn’t call on the name of Yahweh, but rather that she confers a name of her own devising on God. She’s the only person in the whole of the OT either male or female who does that. OT characters often confer names on family members or sacred sites and places, but never is that done to God – save by Hagar in this one instance. This is even more surprising in that Hagar is not an Israelite but an Egyptian.

Let’s move on to look at the last few verses of this chapter and of our reading, verses 14-16:

“14 That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered. 15 ¶ So Hagar bore Abram a son, and

Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.” (Genesis 16:14-16 NIV)

Here Hagar and Abram are mentioned by name several times, but Sarai is conspicuous by her absence. Although Hagar had been told what she must name her child, it's Abram who actually bestows the name Ishmael on him. The OT has examples of a mother naming a child, of the father naming the child and of both parents naming the child with different names. Apparently Hagar's testimony after she had returned to the camp convinced Abram that the God who had revealed himself to him so many times before had now also appeared to her. So Abram stood by her in accepting the new revelation. The one who has really seen God will have little trouble convincing other believers of this reality. There is no escaping the one who has been sought out, seen, and changed forever by the one true God, the God of Calvary. Let's live out our lives confident that God sees us and works in us and in our circumstances for our good, as Paul wrote in Romans chapter 8:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28 NIV)

God will keep His promises to us, as he eventually did with Abram. But we need to wait upon the Lord. What a pity Abram couldn't bring himself to wait for God to fulfil His promises of a child through his wife Sarai. Father, give us patience to wait for you to fulfil your promises to us in Your perfect timing.