

GENESIS

A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY

THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

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HAGAR AND ISHMAEL (*GENESIS 16*)

At this point we have a brief but significant interlude in the story of the Covenant in which Abram, instead of following God's lead, decides to take matters into his own hands. The results of this lack of faith will have far-reaching consequences throughout history.

Abram has been worried for a number of years that time was running out. If the LORD intended to give the Treasures of Heaven to him and his Family, there has to be a Family to receive it. But Sarai couldn't conceive children.

What Abram had to learn, however, is that this work is of God's doing from first to last. Of course he expects his people to do their part, when the time comes. But some things can only be done by God. There has always been a spiritual element to the Covenant, which means the Spirit of God must bring power from Heaven, and a specific spiritual reality from God's world, and "inject" it into this physical world to make it go where it otherwise would and could never go. In other words, Abram needed a miracle from God, whether he knew it or not. The things that God will give him and his family *require* a miraculous foundation in order to stand solid in a fallen world.

The pressure for a son – I think we have to assume that Abram was the one putting on the pressure to have a son, more so than Sarai. If we take the first two verses as strictly a "new" idea from Sarai, as if Abram hadn't been particularly worried about this problem, then what Sarai says later in verse 5 is nearly incomprehensible. It would look as if *she* set up her husband with a bad idea in the first place, and then blames *him* unfairly for the whole problem when the idea backfires.

Rather we can assume that it was Abram who was worried about this matter. We already saw in the previous chapter that this problem was at the top of his prayer list. (Genesis 15:2-3) So in an effort to please her husband, Sarai suggested a solution that certainly would be humbling for her, in light of the fact that she couldn't have any children and that this son by Hagar would only be legally hers, not true kin. She knew she wouldn't feel any maternal affection for

the boy, but at least this would solve her husband's dilemma.

One thing we have to keep in mind is what Peter says about Sarah:

For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. (1 Peter 3:5-6)

It's the usual problem of judging Old Testament characters (especially those of Genesis!) by modern standards, and drawing the wrong conclusions. Sarai is going to do several perplexing things that look as if she's the very opposite of obedient to her husband. But we have to guard against conclusions that contradict the Apostles – they are our hermeneutical guides to the Old Testament.

At any rate, this puts the responsibility of a bad idea back where it belongs – on Abram himself.

A son by Hagar – And it was a very bad idea. For one thing, Abram violated a fundamental rule about true faith: we don't try to accomplish God's will ourselves. We have to wait on him. Of course he was getting old; of course he was worried that his whole estate would go to his chief servant. But he did have God's explicit promise (backed up by the oath of the Covenant, chapter 15) that God would take care of this problem. I guess when you're 95, the impossibility of the thing is staring you in the face and you begin to wonder that perhaps God expects *you* to do something to help things along – like tying your own shoelaces. How else could he account for the fact that God hadn't done anything after all this time?

It's true that we have no record that God had promised that Sarai would be the mother of the promised son. Perhaps that's why there is no stern rebuke against Abram for his "solution." But we who know the story already are aware of two huge realities: *first*, this son by Hagar would be a problem for all history – both he and his descendants. Both their character and their connection to Abram are going to cause unsolvable complications in the future.

Second, the LORD didn't want Abram to solve this problem on his own; he intended to do a miracle to produce a son. Anything less than this would lead us to believe that it wasn't really God providing the Covenant blessings for Abram and his Family.

The birth of the Heir in particular must be a spiritual act, not a natural one. The character of God's children require the work of the Spirit, who alone can work the miracle of changing a heart of stone into a heart of flesh, and bring a dead soul into life, and form us into the

image of the Son of God in righteousness and holiness. The task to be done, in other words, requires a certain kind of birth.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God ... unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. (John 3:3,5)

Even more – because God intends to create more sons in the image of his own Son, there are higher requirements to fulfill, stricter and more exacting standards to meet. The sons must know the mind of God, they will rule with him from his throne in glory, they will deal with Heaven's treasures, they will be God's spokesmen. Obviously for this kind of life, they must be "born of the Spirit," by the hand of God.

We know now that many, too many of Abram's descendants fell short of this high ideal, the goal of their birthright. They lived in God's presence and supposedly trained for this special calling, but many never did connect with the spiritual world of God – they either rebelled outright or they were completely satisfied with the physical level of the lessons. A few, however, had their forefather Abram's faith and walked in the spiritual world that God trained them for. When the story moves to the New Testament and the Church, of course, the physical drops away completely and we now see the point of this whole thing: that in Christ, believers are Spirit-born (which qualifies them as God's children, otherwise they would have no birthrights at all) and competent to live in the Spirit.

At any rate, in light of this calling, it's always been important *how* the son is born. The son born naturally has no part

of this spiritual life; he has no rights to it, nor is he capable of it (nor even interested!).

But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise ... born according to the Spirit. (Galatians 4:23, 29)

Problems between the women – One would certainly expect the circumstances to generate friction in the camp: Sarai, Abram's wife, can't have a son and has to let her handmaid provide a son for her husband. It would be humiliating for any woman to be "set aside" for a younger competitor. We can detect Sarai's sensitivity to this predicament in her reaction to Hagar's very unwise insolence to her mistress. Sarai, of course, refused to be shoved into second-place in the family.

But I believe that there's a deeper issue here. Sarai was never comfortable with this answer. It's true that having a son by Hagar was her idea; but as we saw above, it was no doubt a result of the rising stress between husband and wife concerning the inheritance rights. Moving all the way from Mesopotamia to be wanderers and aliens in Canaan no doubt brought a lot of stress in itself to the family. And the move was because of God's promises to Abram; they were out here because Abram believed that his new God would give him something unique to mankind, something for future generations as well as for himself. The whole thing was a spiritual experiment of sorts, something new to everyone, and they were all trying to figure out what was going on. No doubt it was a continuous and hot topic around the dinner table. And as time went on,

everyone started looking at Sarai to do her part. The stress went even higher.

So when Hagar started acting as if she was the "favored wife," Sarai finally boiled over. If she had to put up with another woman's child for her husband, she at least wasn't going to put up with her insolence anymore. And so Abram (to maintain the peace) gave her leave to deal with Hagar as she deserved.

Mistreating Hagar – The Hebrew word here means to humiliate, or to afflict. Remember that we are dealing with a foreign culture, 4000 years ago, and they wouldn't have shared our modern notions of labor laws. It was a routine matter to punish slaves for their actions. And particularly when the slave was acting as if she was the privileged consort of the head of the clan, Sarai rose up in righteous indignation and was determined to put her slave back into her place of subjection, one way or another.

Now let's go to a deeper level. Sarai may have understood something fundamental: there was something inherently wrong with the slave woman's son inheriting the Covenant Promises. Hagar's character was wrong, her attitude was wrong – besides the fact that she was an Egyptian, not part of the family from back in Haran. Sarai didn't know what the right answer was, but this answer just didn't feel right. The Apostle tells us later what the problem was.

The son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. (Galatians 4:23)

The *slave* should not have the inheritance of the free son. We moderns have to step aside from all the events that have transpired in human history in

the last couple of hundred years in order to see what Sarai understood very clearly. Slaves have no rights; slaves should never be in the position of the freeborn. And if it helps us to grasp this fundamental truth, let's move it right away into the spiritual realm.

You once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness. (Romans 6:19)

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. (Ephesians 2:1-2)

Now it's easy for even us to see what the problem is: a *slave to sin* has no right to the Treasures of Heaven, indeed it is highly inappropriate and offensive to the holy God. That slavery – that unquestioning, lock-step obedience to the forces of darkness, that determination to be free of God's control (which attitude, of course, gives the stench of death to one's character) doesn't fit in Christ's Church. We're not looking here at the natural rights of every human being, but the stench of death of every human being. We've given away our rights by rejecting God. God owes us nothing; we have no rights in his eyes. We are willing slaves to his enemy who are just as intent on causing trouble as Ishmael was. What Sarai did to Hagar was nothing compared to what God intends to do to sinners – even though we all act as if we deserve better from him.

Sarai took disciplinary measures against Hagar, but only because (in that day) the mistress had the right and responsibility to keep the slaves in line

according to the rules of the family. What she was (justifiably) incensed about, though, was that Hagar was trying to assume the rights of the freeborn wife in the family.

The angel and Hagar – The angel (Hebrew מַלְאָךְ *mal'ak*, messenger) found Hagar on the way to Shur, which was on the east side of Egypt. This makes sense: where else would a runaway slave go but back home?

The problem was that God didn't want Hagar to go back home. He sent his angel to stop Hagar and deliver a message: Go back to your mistress.¹

This is a remarkable aspect of the story, because angels rarely showed up to speak directly with unbelievers; they almost always went to God's people. For example, an angel confronted Balaam later in the book of Numbers in order to prevent him from cursing the Israelites. Just because a person receives a direct communication from God obviously doesn't mean that they are part of the faithful.

Hagar no doubt expected more bad treatment from Sarai if she did go back, but God taught her what he expected of her. He gave her wise counsel that would make her return to Sarai more bearable: "Return to your mistress and *submit* to her." Here we get a deeper insight into the cause of the rift between the two women. Because Hagar had "looked with contempt" on Sarai, and now God is telling her to "submit" to her mistress, we gather that Hagar was completely at fault and Sarai had every right to be angry with her. Perhaps this

¹ No doubt our 21st century opinions would take issue with God's judgment here; so much for moralistic hermeneutics.

is where her son Ishmael will get his hostile character. Given the fact that Hagar returned, and continued to live in Abram's camp for the next thirteen years, she evidently changed her ways and learned how to be the slave she was.

The LORD has heard you – The angel told Hagar that God heard her complaint. Literally it reads, “The LORD has listened to your affliction.” Obviously this means that Hagar had been *praying*. We turn to God when we are afflicted, and we ask of him a solution for a problem that we can't solve.

The surprise comes when he answers us. Probably most of *our* prayers go unanswered, and we think that's a normal state of affairs. Perhaps we have not yet connected the dots to see the real picture: God answers us when *he* thinks the situation is a crisis. What we consider a crisis may not be reason enough for him to act yet – which accounts for the lack of answers.

So it's not just that Hagar was afflicted,² but that her afflictions represented a bigger problem in the scheme of things. God has yet to make plain to the world who is the rightful Heir of the Inheritance. Again, God will (for Abram's sake) take care of Hagar, but she has to go back according to God's terms and play the role she was chosen for, humiliating though it will be, and ultimately she would be rejected.

The One who sees me – Let's go back to that idea of the discussion around the

² Again, this warns us against teaching that God will also help us in our afflictions when we pray, whatever they may be. This story about Hagar is not a moralistic lesson but a doctrinal one. It's not that God addresses our afflictions, it's that God addresses his Kingdom issues. There's an inheritance at stake here.

family dinner table. As noticed above, life in Abram's household centered around the Covenant. That's what brought everyone out here to Canaan; that's what everyone was following in the desert, this hope of fulfillment of the Inheritance from God himself. In fact, the whole discussion about God has taken a new turn: their old gods back in Mesopotamia had been lifeless idols that gave them nothing; this God however had appeared in person and had great plans for the Family. They had already experienced significant events. There was always the expectation in the air about being in on something big.

Now we begin to see the thinking in Hagar's mind: she would naturally feel antagonistic against not only Sarai but the entire camp of Abram. Everyone here was excited, passionate about, obedient to a God she couldn't see nor did she appreciate. She was raised in Egypt with those false gods that the Family despised. The promises weren't given to her, only to Abram's descendants. Why should she be excited about the Covenant when she had no rights to the inheritance that everyone was talking about? Why indeed should she give in and worship this God she knew nothing about, who wasn't going to give her anything anyway?

And now that Sarai was virtually driving her away from the camp, and nobody seemed to care about Hagar as she wandered alone in the desert, she was experiencing what Paul would later describe as “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” (Ephesians 2:12)

Therefore she was stunned when this God came to talk to her in the

wilderness. “Truly here I have seen him who looks after *me*.” We all feel that we are important, and that what we are doing is important; but Hagar learned in fact that she and her son were extremely important to God, enough that he came in person to talk to her about the situation. What she learned probably wasn’t what she was expecting to hear, or how she herself necessarily saw things; but the fact that God took special note of her and promised to take care of her gave her a new lease on life. God’s personal support can give us the strength and determination to go back into the battle.

She even gave God her own name for him: “You are a God of seeing,” (in Hebrew, *Beer-lahai-roi*) – meaning that, far from being alone, God is watching over her every step.

Hagar’s descendants never did inherit the Covenant promises. Later in chapter 21 Hagar is again driven out of the camp, this time for good. We don’t know what Hagar’s position really is in the Kingdom of God. But there’s something intriguing about God coming to this woman in her distress, her insight into the true God, the vision she had of the essence of God and his care for her who bore Abram’s first son, the powerful influence of Abram that would automatically benefit whoever he associated with, and the new name that she gave God showing her insight and appreciation for him, that just may qualify her as the first Gentile who saw God in *faith*.³ We know that God didn’t turn away from her later either, but continued to care for her and bless her

³ Perhaps a parallel to the story in Matthew 15 about the faith of the Canaanite woman overriding her exclusion from the children’s blessings?

for Abram’s sake. But if so, it was also the first example of how faith is *not* passed down through the physical family line. Her descendents were excluded.

Ishmael’s descendants – Everything that Abram did grew into historical proportions. Even when he had a son by Hagar who would not inherit any of the family property, the son prospered and multiplied into twelve nations. Such a thing doesn’t happen to ordinary people.

The descendants of Ishmael would eventually cover the entire territory from Assyria in the north to the border of Egypt in the south – inhabitants mainly of the desert regions. They were the direct ancestors of the peoples we now know as the Arabs.

Add to the race’s hostile character a religion that is naturally confrontational, aggressive and often pursuing a warlike agenda, and you end up with an antagonistic personality with religious zeal. Without going into the details of a situation that we are all familiar with, the history of the Arabs has presented major problems for not only the descendants of Isaac but for the whole world. But the hostility between “brothers” as this passage mentions has been an abiding reality. For example, notice that the Arabs tried to stop Nehemiah and the Jews from rebuilding Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2, 4, 6).

Ishmael’s character – Whether Hagar wanted to hear this about her future son or not, the LORD made it plain to her what kind of a man he would be: a “wild donkey of a man,” and always at war with everyone around him.

It’s obvious that Ishmael would be missing the very riches that makes Isaac’s inheritance so sought after by present-day Christians: the character of

Christ, the purity of holiness and righteousness, the love for God and man. Not that every Israelite was like that either; but at least the possibility of God's grace was open to them, through faith, whether they took advantage of it or not. Here, in spite of the fact that Ishmael was Abram's firstborn son, the possibility was never there for him. That's the real tragedy of Ishmael's birth.

While Israel later came back to Canaan as a united Nation under God and settled down in the rich land of Canaan to experience God's blessings, Ishmael's descendants were a desert people, wandering tribes and nomads, driving herds and making war on anybody they came across. This was so characteristic of them that the Prophets use them as a stereotype in their sermons – for example, Isaiah says that God intends to destroy Babylon so completely that “no Arab will pitch his tent there; no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there.” (Isaiah 13:20)

God's prophecy came to Hagar while *she* was cast out and wandering in the desert wilderness. Later she will once more (with her son) be thrown out into the desert. The beginning of the race seems to be destined to wander in dry places, physically and spiritually. See Paul's allegory about Hagar's son and the present Jews who also follow a dry (without the Spirit) religion. (Galatians 4:25)

The eldest son of Abram – Abram now had a problem on his hands. In that age, the firstborn son had the inheritance rights. Like it or not, Ishmael was Abram's firstborn son. Sarai didn't like Hagar or the situation; Abram still seemed to think that this situation was workable. Hagar was the only one (that

we know of at this point) who *knew*, by revelation, that Ishmael would not inherit Abram's estate.

What we are set up for here is the concept that the Inheritance doesn't necessarily go to the first *physical* descendant. In fact, sometimes a believer's children can end up being a real embarrassment, spiritually speaking, and obviously not an heir of the treasures of Heaven that the parents are looking to. To see this concept right at the very beginning of Israel's history should make us stop and think. We are so used to looking at the Israelites as being heirs solely because of their genetic ties back to Abram that we forget that Abram himself had no such hopes.

Sometimes difficult situations in families are the parents' fault (as in this case with Abram's “solution”) and sometimes they aren't. We are all born sinners; we don't need our parents' help to offend God. But nothing can change the fact that God's Spirit alone can give life, and he doesn't give it to whoever *we* want to receive it. This has always been the case; it has been a foundation stone in the Covenant from the very beginning.

The Point – Having a son by Hagar was Abram's answer to meeting his needs, not God's answer. It accomplished nothing; all it did was create more problems not only for himself but also for his descendants.

Faith, as Abram was about to learn, requires waiting on the LORD to do what only he can do. The situation which God calls us to requires spiritual resources, and spiritual powers to get us to the goal. If we really believe that, then we *won't* do anything to help the process along because we know we

can't. Faith has to get hold of the concept of the unique wisdom and power of God.

We can't know, of course, what God will do nor how he will accomplish it. Abram at this point probably wasn't thinking in terms of God miraculously enabling Sarai, at her age, to have a baby. But that's the very point about faith: we need to stop, face the situation, and understand the necessity of God's hand doing something that will be beyond our ken, something totally unexpected from a unique direction. After this episode, through which he learned more about true faith, he evidently returned to his hope in God alone.

He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:19-21)

Nonetheless, God will use even our lapses and failures for his own ends. Hagar's son is not going to be the Heir of the Covenant, but he will have a part to play in the crises that were coming up in the Family history. It won't be pretty: our unbelief leads to trials and troubles; but in the end these hardships train us and bring us back to the faith that God expects of us.

As far as Sarai is concerned, her fierce defense of her status as Abram's wife, and partner of the Covenant Promises, actually better reflects what

God had in mind for a solution to Abram's problem. She of course didn't know that she would become pregnant by miracle, but she knew Hagar and her son were not the answer. And she was right. God and Sarai are agreed on that point at least.

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