

Genesis 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 16. Now Sarai, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abraham, Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go into my servant. It may be that I shall obtain children by her.

And Abraham listened to the voice of Sarai. So after Abraham had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abraham's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abraham, her husband, as a wife. And he went into Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abraham, May the wrong done to me be on you. I gave my servant 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. But Abraham said to Sarai, Behold, your servant is in your power. Do to her as you please. And Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her. The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to shore. And he said, Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going? She said, I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai. The angel of the Lord said to her, Return to your mistress and submit to her. The angel of the Lord also said to her,

I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude. And the angel of the Lord said to her, Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him. And he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen. So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her. You are a God of seeing. For she said, Truly here have I seen him who looks after me. Therefore the well was called Beelahairoi.

It lies between Kadesh and Bered. And Hagar bore Abram a son. And Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

Reading passages such as Genesis chapter 16, there are great rewards for paying attention. The first thing to notice here is that Hagar is introduced to us as an Egyptian maidservant. We've already had one Egyptian experience in the story of Abraham back in chapter 12. He was in Egypt and Sarai was taken and in the house of Pharaoh. Pharaoh was plagued and then he was sent away with many gifts with sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys and camels, etc. Presumably Hagar was one of these female servants. So we've had an Egyptian experience and now there is another.

[3 : 0 4] Presumably one of the Egyptian maidservants received during that sojourn in Egypt is the main player within this particular chapter. And her nationality is significant where she comes from. She's first of all someone who has come from this particular earlier story but also there is an anticipation of later period in Israel's history where they will be the servant in the house of the Egyptians.

It is important to read this passage against the backdrop of the passage that immediately preceded it. Perhaps some of you as we are reading through that passage noticed a pattern. Abram brings together a number of animals and then he's placed into a deep sleep. We've seen that pattern before.

In Genesis chapter 2 God brings the animals to Adam to name and after naming the animals he is placed into a deep sleep and the woman is taken from his side and brought to him. It's an unusual word that we see for deep sleep. A word only found in Genesis chapter 2 and Genesis chapter 16 within this book.

This deep sleep is followed by meeting the woman and at the beginning of chapter 16 the woman comes on the scene. There is however a problem. Sarai, Abram's wife, is barren. She is not having any children.

And so a supposed solution is proposed. That Sarai give Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant, to Abram and that Hagar would have children for the sake of Sarai. Now there's a pattern here that we should notice. It continues the pattern that we saw in Genesis chapter 2 and Genesis chapter 15.

[4 : 45] The woman is brought to the man and now we see a full pattern playing out. The woman brought to the man but now the woman takes, gives to the man. The man listens to the voice of his wife which is an echo of the language of Genesis chapter 3. This is a warning sign time.

We're seeing these words cropping up, these expressions recurring. It's a sign that something is very wrong. There's nothing wrong of course with listening to your wife but the language is charge language. It's language that reminds us of some time previously in the story where things went very badly awry. And what happens after the man takes what is given to him by the wife and listened to her voice? Eyes are opened. He goes into Hagar. She conceives. And when she saw that she had conceived, received the fruit perhaps, her mistress became despised in her eyes. Her eyes are opened and she despises her mistress. And then Sarai blames Abram. Such a cycle of recrimination might remind us of what we see in Genesis chapter 3 as there's a blame shifting between the man and his wife and then the man blaming God as well and then his wife, the woman, blaming the serpent. If we look at the text carefully, it says that Sarai gave Hagar to be his wife. Now I'm not sure that that's what Sarai's intention was.

Sarai wanted Abram to raise children through Hagar for her. She wasn't expecting that Hagar would be an equal wife alongside her. She wanted to be built up through Hagar. That language of being built up is significant language. It's the language that we see for the formation of Eve in Genesis chapter 2. Eve is built out of the side of the man. It's a building up and she wants to be built up through Hagar. And Hagar is given to her husband but then she realises this was not what she wanted. After conceiving, Hagar looks at her mistress in a different way, seeing herself as an equal, a wife alongside her, not just a maidservant, a wife of Abram with a child of her own. And in some ways the text would seem to back her up. There's a validation of her new status. And this shift is very reminiscent of the forbidden fruit story.

She feels deceived or Sarai feels deceived. She didn't know that this was going to happen. And her eyes are opened and she feels naked. She feels judged. And she no longer has the same status as she once did. This child is now going to be raised not as hers but by this independent woman who was once her maidservant. Hagar is going to stand independently of her. And so she blames Abram.

And this movement to a judgment scene is seen as Abram gives Hagar over into the hands of Sarai saying, you do what's pleasing in your sight. And the language of sight continues throughout this passage.

[7 : 49] The play on the theme of sight and seeing is important. See that the fruit is good. The eyes are open. They see that they are naked. They're hiding from sight in Genesis chapter 3. And these sorts of themes recur in Genesis chapter 16. Sarai sees that she's not bearing children. The handmaid is given to Abram. And she sees that she conceives. And then she looks at her mistress and despises her. And then Sarai's eyes are open to the situation that she is despised in Hagar's eyes. She's then handed over to Sarai to do what is pleasing in her eyes. Then Hagar flees from the sight of her mistress. The angel then finds her by a spring or literally an eye of water in the wilderness by the eye on the road to shore.

And he asks her what's going on with her. Again there are sight themes here. And these are things that we see within the fall. Adam and Eve hid from the presence of God and God judged them. God came and said, where are you to Adam? Adam was hiding because he was naked. Who told you that you were naked?

And here we have a similar thing. Hagar flees from the presence and sight of her mistress. And as she flees the angel of the Lord comes. And the angel of the Lord asks essentially the same question as God asked to Adam. Where are you? Why are you here? From where are you going? Why have you hidden? Why have you fled? The angel of the Lord instructs her to return to her mistress and submit herself under her hand. A very similar thing that we see in the judgment on the woman in verse 16 of chapter 3 at the end of the story of the fall. There the woman is told that her desire will be for her husband and her husband will rule over her. It's a breaking down of the reciprocity in that relationship.

It becomes fraught. It becomes a relationship of subjugation rather than a healthy one. And here Hagar is told to return to an oppressive relationship with her mistress. It's not what we might expect.

But the theme continues. She returns to her mistress. It's connected with the theme of the judgment upon Eve. But there is a redemptive tone. As she returns to her mistress she is told that her descendants will be multiplied exceedingly so that they cannot be counted for the multitude.

[10 : 07] In Genesis chapter 3 Eve is told I will multiply your conceptions. And here there's something similar but not just the pain of conception. But the number of children that are to be born in a way that is more emphasising blessing rather than judgment. There are a series of statements made by the angel of the Lord here. So the angel of the Lord said. Then the angel of the Lord said. And then the angel of the Lord said. In verses 9, 10 and 11. These might be successive speeches. Each of them answered by silence on the part of Hagar until finally she speaks. Return to your mistress and submit yourself under her hands.

And then the response of silence. I will multiply your descendants exceedingly so that they shall not be counted for multitude. And then the response of silence. And then finally behold you are with child and you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has heard your reflection.

Note the shift from seeing to hearing. He shall be a wild man. His hands shall be against every man and every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.

And at this point she responds. And her response draws upon the theme of sight again. You are the God who sees. And she comments upon the fact that God has seen her. This is the first time that we see God named by a human character or given a title. And it's significant that this is the character of Hagar.

Not Sarai or Abram. Not some other significant character in the narrative that we might expect to name God. Someone like Noah or maybe Seth or some other character like that. It's Hagar. The Egyptian bond servant. And so we see they're playing out of a story of the fall. And Sarai and Abram are on the wrong side of this in many ways. They're playing out the pattern of Adam and Eve. And Hagar plays out something of the pattern of Eve but in a more redemptive sense. Another thing to notice here is that Hagar is associated with Egypt. As I mentioned at the beginning this is an important detail to notice.

[12 : 20] There is a servant in the house of Abram and Sarai. The chosen people of God. And they're mistreating this Egyptian maid servant. She's described as being afflicted. God hears her affliction. Her name might even suggest the stranger. God has said in the previous chapter your descendants will be strangers in a land not their own. And they will serve them. And they will afflict them 400 years.

And in the very next chapter we see an Egyptian who's afflicted as a stranger within the house of Abram himself. And here I think we're having an anticipation of the exodus. An exodus twisted and perverted.

The afflicting party is Sarai, the wife of Abram. It's not Pharaoh. Rather it's the people of God. The descendants of Abram are going to have to be servants in the house of Pharaoh. And now we see this ancestor. Their great ancestor as the one who's afflicting an Egyptian. There will have to be a reversal of this. Israel is going to have to enter into the experience of Hagar and redeem that experience.

The story is going to have to be reversed. And Abram had an account of all of this beforehand in his vision. told that his descendants would be in the position of Hagar. That they would be servants and afflicted in a house not their own. And in his own household we are seeing these things playing out.

It's a fall pattern. It's an exodus pattern. As God meets the person fleeing from affliction in the wilderness and shows grace to them. And so within this story we have a preview of some of the greater themes that will be developed towards the end of the book of Genesis and then into the book of Exodus.

[14 : 11] A question to meditate upon. The story of Genesis at this point seems to be the story of Abram and Sarai. And yet in chapter 16 the story seems to focus, place its spotlight upon not Abram and Sarai, but this seemingly unimportant Egyptian maidservant. She becomes the central figure in the story. She becomes the character who's blessed, who God appears to and shows grace to. She even gives God a title, declares God's name to be the God who sees. What can we learn about God's character? That the figure of Hagar receives the sort of attention that he receives in this chapter? What does it say about God's purpose in the formation of his people? And how does the way that God tells this story help us to understand its broader purpose and destination?

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