

Comments on Genesis 16

1 NOW Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name [was] Hagar. 2 And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. 3 And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.

v1-3 Sara bears no children (v. 1), so she instructs Abram to take her handmaid as concubine and raise up children to herself. Abram consents (v. 2) so Sara gives Hagar to him (v. 3).

Overall, the text is guarded in its presentation of Sarai, but negative suggestions do appear. This would be an example, as she is not exercising her faith (e.g., "the Lord hath restrained me", it is His fault as far as she is concerned, since He has actively restrained her) in believing she will have a child, as also occurs in 18:13-15. Instead, she chooses the practical means of having her servant foster mother her child, within her legal right (cf. D&C 132:34). However, she is not as zealous as one might hope. After Hagar conceives, Sarah becomes jealous of her and angry with Abram, and subsequently "dealt hardly with her" (the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) Torah Commentary (TC) states regarding this, "The Hebrew verb used here implies that Sarai subjected Hagar to physical and psychological abuse. It carries with it the nuance of critical judgement of her actions.").

See Nahum Sarna's Understanding Genesis, pages 128-129, for a discussion of the ancient social institution of concubinage.

4 And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes. 5 And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong [be] upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the LORD judge between me and thee. 6 But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid [is] in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face.

v4-6 Hagar conceives and looks down on Sarai because of it (v. 4). Sarai gets angry at Abram and blames him for the affront Hagar has given her (v. 5). Abram resolves the situation by effectively dismissing Hagar and putting her into Sarai's hands to do as she sees fit, and Sarai takes out her frustrations on her by beating her. So much so that Hagar flees (v. 6).

In verse 6, Abram is turning the concubine Hagar back over to Sara to serve as handmaid again. Note in v. 8 the angel

addresses her "Sarai's maid" not "Abram's wife/maid/concubine".

7 And the angel of the LORD found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur. 8 And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. 9 And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands.

10 And the angel of the LORD said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. 11 And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Behold, thou [art] with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the LORD hath heard thy affliction. 12 And he will be a wild man; his hand [will be] against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.

13 And she called the name of the LORD that spake unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me? 14 Wherefore the well was called Beerlahairoi; behold, [it is] between Kadesh and Bered. 15 And Hagar bare Abram a son: and Abram called his son's name, which Hagar bare, Ishmael. 16 And Abram [was] fourscore and six years old, when Hagar bare Ishmael to Abram.

v7-16 Hagar flees into the desert and ends up at a pool of water, where she is confronted by an angel (v. 7). The angel questions her concerning the propriety of her fleeing and what her plans are. She only responds as to why she is running away (v. 8), clearly having no plans. The angel then instructs her to return and submit to Sarai (v. 9), the alternative clearly being death in the wilderness given her present lack of resources.

The angel then informs her concerning the importance of her survival and the survival of her son (v. 10-11), who will be in conflict with his brothers (v. 12). This belays any fears on her part that Sarai will be so abusive to her or her child that it will be life-threatening. Albeit ambiguously, it also informs Hagar that Ishmael will have brothers.

Hagar memorializes the location of the visitation where the Lord saw her plight and spared her (v. 13-14), and returns to Abram and Sarai. Hagar gives birth to a son, as predicted by the angel, and Abram names him Ishmael (v. 15), as predicted by the angel, clearly suggesting inspiration on Abram's part.

v9 While Sarai's abuse is inexcusable, the situation Hagar finds herself in is somewhat of her own making, since she slighted Sarai in v. 4. The angel is telling Hagar to go and face up to the situation she has, at least in part, created herself.

v12 "wild man", modern translators typically render it something like "a wild-ass of a man", on the "wild ass" terminology, cp.

Gen. 49:22, Isa. 1:3-4, Hosea 8:9, Mosiah 8:20-21, Mosiah 17:17.

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