

The Book of Genesis

Lesson 17

Chapter 16

As chapter 15 ended, the LORD had just promised Abram a rightful heir to all his wealth and a future posterity as the father of many nations. About 2078 years had passed since the creation of Adam; therefore, we can safely say that Sarai was not the first to take matters into her own hands instead of waiting for the movement of God to fulfill His promises in His time; however, this is the first time the matter is specifically recorded in the Bible!

Sarai's Intervention - Hagar

Genesis 16:1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no *children*, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. ² So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing *children*. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³ And after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife.

Sarai had an Egyptian maid named Hagar. Where and when did Sarai get Hagar? We cannot be sure; most likely she received Hagar while she was with Abram in Egypt. Women who were put in a harem were assigned a maid to prepare them for their meeting with Pharaoh. The maid served the woman a special diet, moisturized her skin with special lotions, prepared her clothing, applied her makeup and designed her hair each day. The maid belonged to that woman. When Pharaoh ousted Abram and Sarai, most likely he no longer wanted Hagar, so he sent her with the departing group.

As a 75 year old woman who had never been able to give birth to a child, Sarai began to think of a way to fulfill the LORD's promise and Hagar was her answer. She owned Hagar outright and she could ask her or force her to do anything she required. Sarai decided to give Hagar to Abram "as his wife." We do not know when such a custom became acceptable, but we find this same act occurring in Jacob's life about 150 years later when Leah and Rachel cannot bear children; both of them give Jacob their maids to bear him children. In the custom that will become prevalent near this time, and afterwards for certain, when the barren wife could not give birth to a child, a maid was given to the husband as a new wife. The child born to the second union was then considered the child of the barren wife even though it was not her biological child. Was Hagar then a true wife of Abram? Absolutely! We must not forget that the word "marry" in Hebrew means to unite in a sexual bond to become one flesh. Abram did become one flesh with Hagar.

Sarai's Jealousy

Genesis 16:4 And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight. ⁵ And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms; but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me." ⁶ But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence.

Sarai's desire to fulfill the LORD's will had gone awry. Hagar was pregnant and her attitude toward Sarai was contemptible. To be exact, the Hebrew word translated "despised" actually means "trifling" which means having little value or importance. In other words, Hagar no longer made Sarai the center of her life and duties even though she was still Sarai's maid.

Sarai, blamed Hagar's attitude on Abram. In fact, it seems that Sarai blamed the whole wrongdoing on Abram. Abram deflected the problem back to Sarai by reminding her that Hagar was hers to do with as she pleased. What did Sarai do to Hagar? She treated her harshly. What did Hagar do? She ran away! Did Sarai send her away? No. Succinctly, Sarai had started the problem with Hagar and it was time for the LORD to intervene.

The LORD's Words to Hagar

Genesis 16:7 Now the angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸ And he said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" And she said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai."

Hagar knew where she was going; she was going home to Egypt. Shur was on the way to Egypt at a location where the Egyptians had built a wall to protect its eastern border from the Canaanite tribes. "Shur" means "wall." The wall eventually extended from Pelusium to Heliopolis. Hagar was not just a few miles away when the LORD found her; she was far away from Abram and Sarai but she had gone in the wrong direction.



Map 22: Wall of Shur

Notice the LORD called her "Hagar, Sarai's maid." The LORD still considered her a part of Sarai's family. Hagar's answer indicated that she knew she was still the maid of Sarai, her mistress or queen, the person to whom she was personally responsible. Hagar knew her proper

place and she was far from where she was supposed to be, at least several days out from Sarai and Abram.

The LORD's Instruction to Hagar

Genesis 16:9 Then the angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority."

Here we find one of the hard lessons in life. Directly from the mouth of the LORD, the Creator of the Universe, Hagar's instruction was to return to the one who had authority over her. She no longer belonged to anyone in Egypt or herself, she belonged to Sarai.

The LORD's Promise to Hagar

Genesis 16:10 Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they shall be too many to count."

Notice the authority with which the angel of the LORD spoke to Hagar. Notice that the promise was from the angel of the LORD. He would "greatly multiply" the descendants of Hagar. Who was the angel of the LORD? None other than God! The LORD God! The pre-incarnate Christ Jesus, the Creator of everything. Jehovah!

The LORD's Name for Hagar

Genesis 16:11 The angel of the LORD said to her further, "Behold, you are with child, And you shall bear a son; And you shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has given heed to your affliction. ¹² "And he will be a wild donkey of a man, His hand *will be* against everyone, And everyone's hand *will be* against him; And he will live to the east of all his brothers."

At that time, in the wilderness of Shur, the LORD named Hagar's son and foretold the kind of man that he would one day become. His name would be "Ishmael." The Hebrew actually says, *El Yishmael* which means "God hears." God had heeded the affliction of Hagar. He promised her a blessing and as a result, she would enjoy being the mother of a nation of descendants too many to count.

Ishmael will be a "wild donkey." The only description of a wild donkey that we have in Scripture is found in Job 39:5-8. It describes Ishmael well.

Job 39:5-8 "Who sent out the wild donkey free? And who loosed the bonds of the swift donkey, ⁶ To whom I gave the wilderness for a home, And the salt land for his dwelling place? ⁷ "He scorns the tumult of the city, The shoutings of the driver he does not hear. ⁸ "He explores the mountains for his pasture, And he searches after every green thing.

The LORD's prophecy tells that Ishmael will one day "live to the east of all his brothers." The Genesis story will later tell of Hagar and Ishmael's leaving the care of Abram and Sarai. Hagar will choose an Egyptian girl to be his wife and they will occupy and multiply in the Arabian Desert, east of where Abram and Sarai lived. Notice that the LORD's prophecy indicates that Ishmael will have other brothers. When Ishmael was 14, his first half-brother was born, Isaac. But, after the death of Sarai, Abram will take another wife and he will have more sons as recorded in Genesis 25.

Hagar's Response

Genesis 16:13 **Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "Thou art a God who sees"; for she said, "Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?"**

Hagar had not called out for the LORD to come to her, but after He did, after He gave her the great promise, she believed. The LORD had seen her in her need and He intervened. She had seen the LORD. It is interesting that for the first time in the Scripture we see the idea of seeing God and living to tell the story. Did Hagar know she had encountered the LORD? No. She did not use the name *Yahweh*, she said the Hebrew, *El*; she called Him "God." *Yahweh* means LORD. Many have seen the LORD and lived, but no one has seen "God the Father," the "ancient of days," and lived. To see God the Father would mean to be consumed by His glorious presence. So what did Hagar mean? Many translations exist for **"Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?"** A literal Hebrew translation says, **"Even here have I looked behind my Beholder?"** The literal translation provides a better understanding. Hagar could now see past the immediate need to the wonderful future that her Beholder had shown her. At that moment she knew God's plan for her and her son. She could return to Abram and Sarai without fear.

Birth of Ishmael

Genesis 16:14 **Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered. ¹⁵ So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶ And Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him.**

"Beer-lahairoi" means "the well of him that liveth and seeth me," or "the well of the living One Who sees me." The LORD has identified the place of this Divine encounter. It was at the edge of the rugged mountains between Kadesh and Bered. About 500 years after this story, the tribal descendants of Jacob will be camped at Kadesh where they make the fatal decision and fail to trust the LORD. Two years out of Egypt and ready to enter the Promised Land, the Israelites voted unanimously not to proceed into the land. The LORD punished them for that vote by making them wander in the wilderness until every male over 20 years of age had died.

Hagar returned to Abram and Sarai and in the next year, when Abram was 86, Ishmael was born. It was 2079 years after the creation of Adam.

Chapter 17

Between chapters 16 and 17, thirteen years had passed. Abram was now 99 years old. Hagar had returned from running away and Ishmael had been born thirteen years earlier. The two had remained in Abram's family and Hagar was still under the authority of Sarai.

Abram at Ninety-Nine

Genesis 17:1 Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless."

When the LORD appeared to Abram, He said, "**I am God Almighty.**" When we hear the word "Almighty," we think of power, but that is not intention of this word; it means all sufficient. Abram understood that the LORD is the One Who abundantly pours out all blessings. Abram was the recipient of the LORD's blessings. The LORD told Abram to "Walk ...blameless." We need to tie the correct definition to the word "blameless"; it means "perfection." The LORD was expecting Abram to live a life of perfection under the LORD's all-seeing eye. When we tie all the words of the LORD back together we find that the all-sufficient LORD God would pour out on Abram all that he needed to live a perfect life. Can anyone live a perfect life? Did the LORD really expect Abram to be perfect in his daily life? Yes. We forget that our salvation does two things for our lives. First, we are protected from our sins and guarded by the LORD from the just eternal penalty of punishment. Second, we are provided with the provisions needed to be sinless and promised by the LORD the gift of the eternal reward of bliss.

The LORD's Covenant Continued

Genesis 17:2 "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you, And I will multiply you exceedingly." ³ And Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying, ⁴ "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, And you shall be the father of a multitude of nations.

About fourteen years had passed since the last mention of the LORD's covenant. The last time the LORD spoke with Abram, he and his wife took matters into their own hands and sought to fulfill the covenant through Sarai's maid, Hagar. The result was a tragedy. Their actions led to conflict and disharmony in the family. Their intentions led to sin. What kind of sin? Abram sinned in taking a second wife at the bidding of his first. Hagar sinned because of her attitude toward her owner, Sarai. Sarai sinned in the way she treated Hagar. No sin was placed on the life of the baby, Ishmael. A baby may be born a sinner, but Ishmael would one day be responsible for his own sin, not those of his father, mother and step-mother.

It was time for the announcement of Abram's son who would fulfill the LORD's plans. The LORD had not dismissed His covenant because of Abram's sin. This time, the LORD expects Abram to walk before him perfectly according to His abundant provision and not according to the plans of Abram.

Abram Becomes Abraham

Genesis 17:5 **"No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; For I will make you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶ "And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come forth from you. ⁷ "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. ⁸ "And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."**

It was time for Abram to have a new name; it was time for Abram to be a new person; it was time for Abram to see the beginning of the LORD's blessing in his life. No longer would he be Abram; from then on he would be Abraham. His name means "father of a multitude." At ninety-nine years old, Abraham would see the beginning of the heir who would eventually give him descendants within many nations. The nations would have kings and their posterity would lead to an everlasting God and an everlasting plot of land. Through the next son, through the kings in his line, an heir would be born one day, the earthly form of the everlasting God, the LORD in human flesh.

Abram Required to Keep Covenant - Circumcision

Genesis 17:9 **God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰ "This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ "And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² "And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a *servant* who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. ¹³ "A *servant* who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ "But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."**

Until this point in the story, the LORD's covenant was one-sided, from the LORD alone; Abraham needed to do nothing. Things changed with this intervention of the LORD; He now required an earthly sign to symbolize the Divine connection between both parties of the covenant, circumcision. After the initial circumcision of all the members of Abraham's clan, the practice will be performed on all baby boys on the eighth day of life. Regardless of how other males came into the families of the line of Abraham, regardless of their age, they, too,

immediately underwent the procedure, as a sign of the covenant. The procedure was an act of obedience; the procedure provided a permanent mark of identification to all the other nations of the world of the heritage that began with the LORD's covenant with Abraham.

Sarai Becomes Sarah

Genesis 17:15 Then God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. ¹⁶ "And I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be *a mother of nations*; kings of peoples shall come from her."

Sarai's name was changed too! From that point on, Sarai would be Sarah which means "princess of multitudes." Just to be clear, the LORD proclaimed to Sarah the same promise He announced to Abraham.

Abraham Laughed

Genesis 17:17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, "Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear *a child*?" ¹⁸ And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!" ¹⁹ But God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him."

Abraham was struck with uncontrollable joy at that moment. Will it really happen? Will Sarah really have a child? Abraham did not ask the questions in doubt; he asked them in amazement. Sarah was ninety years old; giving birth to a child would be a miracle, and rightly so! It was a miracle.

Abraham had one son and now he would have another. Abraham wanted Ishmael to be part of the promise, too. "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!" But the LORD God told Abraham no. The everlasting covenant would not come through Hagar and Ishmael; it would come through Sarah and her son Isaac. Ishmael's line will not lead to the Savior; Isaac's will.

Promise for Ishmael

Genesis 17:20 "And as for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation."

We must wonder what Hagar had told Abraham when she returned from the wilderness of Shur after she had run away from the family before Ishmael was born. The LORD sent her back to the family with the promise that her son would be the father of many nations. In this passage, we

discover that he would be the father of “twelve princes” but none of them would be the lines that lead to the birth of the all-sufficient Savior. Genesis records the names of the twelve princes.

Genesis 25:12-16 Now these are *the records of* the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's maid, bore to Abraham; and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: **Nebaioth**, the firstborn of Ishmael, and **Kedar** and **Adbeel** and **Mibsam** and **Mishma** and **Dumah** and **Massa**, **Hadad** and **Tema**, **Jetur**, **Naphish** and **Kedemah**. These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their camps; twelve princes according to their tribes.

Promise for Unborn Isaac

Genesis 17:21 **"But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year."** ²² **And when He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.**

The LORD God made sure that Abraham understood the plans of the covenant for which the sign of circumcision was attached; even though Ishmael and his descendants would forever continue the practice of circumcision, the promise was for the line of Isaac.

Notice that the LORD tells Abraham that Sarah will have Isaac during the same season in the next year. Each season lasts about 13 weeks or three months. With this promise from the LORD, Sarah was most likely not pregnant yet; ten to 12 months still remained until Isaac's birth.

Circumcision of the Family

Genesis 17:23 **Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all *the servants* who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him.** ²⁴ **Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.** ²⁵ **And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.** ²⁶ **In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son.** ²⁷ **And all the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.**

We do not know the exact day of this ceremony of obedience, but we can be assured that it occurred in one day. How many men were circumcised on that day? We do not know; however, it included Abraham, age 99, Ishmael, age 13, the 318 trained men who, fourteen years before, were over the age of 20, all the younger men born in his house and all the Egyptians men given him by Pharaoh. With the use of flint knives, we can be assured that those men and boys never forgot the painful procedure.