

Exegetical Notes – Genesis 16:1-16
“Abram Tries to Help God”

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Verses 1-4a

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; ² so she said to Abram, “The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; 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 slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. ⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

- This chapter must be read in the context of chapter 15. Abram was distressed because he had no natural heir. In response, YHWH told Abram that he would have natural descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abram trusted God’s promise and God counted Abram’s faith, his trust in God’s promise, as righteousness.
- But, ten years after God’s promise to Abram, Sarai, Abram’s only wife did not conceive. Sarai took her barrenness as God’s will for her and developed a plan to solve the problem. She suggested that Abram sleep with her maid, Hagar.
- Since Hagar belonged to Sarai, the child conceived between she and Abram would also be Sarai’s property. Thus, Sarai could claim the child as her own and build a family for Abram through this child. The plan assumed that God needed help in fulfilling His promise to Abram.
- Abram agreed to Sarai’s plan. He slept with Hagar at least until she became pregnant with his child.

Verses 4b-5

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 slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me.”

- After Hagar became pregnant she envied Sarai's place as his wife. Hagar thought that since she was carrying Abram's baby, she should have a greater position in Abram's family than Sarai.
- This led to problems between the two women and Sarai complained to Abram about the situation. She said it was all his fault. Since he had slept with her maid, he should do something to fix the problem he had caused. She told him that she had taken the matter to YHWH and asked Him to deal with the situation too, implying that she did not trust Abram to handle the matter well.
- While the plan had come from Sarai, Abram was responsible for taking her suggestion and sleeping with her maid. He had not trusted YHWH to be faithful and had sought a way to get what he wanted, an heir, outside of the plan of God. He had failed to trust God and to obey God. He should have told Sarai "no" when she suggested this idea to him.

Verse 6

⁶ "Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

- Once again, Abram tried to sidestep his responsibilities in this matter. He told Sarai to do what she wanted to do to resolve the situation between she and Hagar.
- Sarai "mistreated" Hagar. Sarai treated Hagar so badly that Hagar decided to run away.
- Sarai was right. Abram did nothing to resolve the matter. However, her behavior toward Hagar was entirely wrong. Two wrongs never add up to a right.

Verses 7-14

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, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

⁹ Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." ¹⁰ The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."

¹¹ The angel of the LORD also said to her:

***“You are now pregnant
and you will give birth to 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
toward all his brothers.”***

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.” ¹⁴ That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

- Hagar did run away from Sarai to escape Sarai’s abuse. But an angel, a messenger from God, found her near a desert spring and asked her what she was doing there. She explained to the angel that she was running away from her mistress, and the angel told her to go back to Abram’s household. The angel told Hagar to be submissive to Sarai. YHWH was not unaware of what was happening.
- The angel then told Hagar about her future. She would have a son and she would name him, Ishmael. The Hebrew words mean “God hears.” The name would be a reminder that God heard her and had compassion on her because she suffered.
- The child she bore would be like a wild donkey. He would be stubborn and unable to live in peace with Abram’s family. There would always be animosity between Ishmael and the rest of Abram’s descendants. This animosity continues between the descendants of Abram through Hagar and the descendants of Abram through Sarai to this very day.
- It is important to note that Abram’s faith in YHWH has not invaded his household. Hagar does not know YHWH. She gives the god who sent the angel to her a name, “the god who sees me.” She does not know YHWH as the one supreme god, or perhaps at all. The place where all this happened is named “Beer Lahai Roi.” The Hebrew words mean, “Spring of the Living One who sees me.” While it is YHWH who sees her, she does not know Him.

Verses 15-16

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.

- Hagar shows herself to be the faithful one. Without knowing Him, she trusts YHWH and obeys Him. She returns to Abram's family. In time, she did bear Abram's child and she named the boy, Ishmael.
- Abram was 86 years old when Ishmael was born.

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