

Genesis 16 – Abram and Hagar

Review

Last time, we looked at God’s covenant with Abram in which He promised to reward Abram with a son of his own from whom God would bring forth a great multitude and promised to give all the land from the Nile to the Euphrates to Abram’s offspring. We noted that Israel has yet to possess this entire territory, so God’ fulfillment of this entire covenant must remain for the future. Abram believed these promises and God credited Abram’s faith to him as righteousness. We noted that the use of animal sacrifices to formalize this covenant models the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to establish the new and final covenant in Jesus’ blood. Furthermore, we saw that just as God credited Abram’s faith as righteousness Jesus also clothes us in His righteousness in response to our faith in His Gospel.

Abram and Hagar

*¹Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar [הָגָר *hāgār* - flight]- ²And Sarai said to Abram, “Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.* Genesis 16:1-2 (ESV)

The name of Sarai’s Egyptian maidservant הָגָר *hāgār* means flight. In Genesis 16:6, Hagar lived up to her name when she ran away from her mistress.

In our [study of Genesis 15](#) we learned that God promised Abram he would have a son of his own to be his heir.

^{4b}...your very own son shall be your heir.” Genesis 15:4b (ESV)

Furthermore, recall that Abram believed God’s promise and God credited Abram’s faith as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

Oftentimes, we criticize Abram for his lack of patience in awaiting fulfillment of God’s promise and we take the disastrous results reverberating through history of Abram’s liaison with Hagar (namely Ishmael and his descendants) as an object lesson for us to remain steadfast awaiting God’s fulfillment of His answers to our prayers. But if we read carefully, we don’t see God promising Abram that his heir would come from his wife Sarai, just that the promised son would come from Abram’s body. The Hebrew translated as “your very own son” in this verse - אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִמִּטְעִיךָ - *'āšer yāšā' mē'ê* literally means “**who** [will] **come out** [your] **internal parts**.”

ASIDE – I find it intriguing that both Abram and Sarai seem to have unquestioningly concluded that their infertility was due to Sarai’s inability to conceive, not even partially due to Abram’s inability to impregnate her. It seems to me that this assumption, which could not be supported by any medical evidence at all in Abram and Sarai’s day, remains a foregone conclusion in our society regarding infertile couples even today. It reminds me of the story in John 8 of the woman caught in the act of adultery whom the Jewish leaders brought to Jesus to see whether He would obey the Law which said she should be stoned to death. Certainly, if she was caught in the very act of committing adultery, she must have had a man with her who should also have been stoned under the Law. Yet the leaders didn’t bring the man before Jesus, just the woman.

We often think of the concept of surrogate motherhood as a modern invention, but we see the idea right here in Genesis 16:2. Later in our study of Genesis we will see that Jacob’s wife Rachel gave

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Jacob her maidservant Bilhah so that Rachel could have Jacob's children through Bilhah (Genesis 30).

Infertility and God's response to it is a recurring theme in God's Word. We have already mentioned Sarai and Rachel. Samuel's mother Hannah was so distraught in her prayer for God to bring her children that Eli the priest thought she was drunk (1 Samuel 1). Jesus' cousin John the Baptist was conceived by his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth when they both assumed they were past the age that having children would be possible for them (Luke 1). In our society, we consider having children something totally natural – as easy as falling off a log. But the Bible makes clear that God Himself determines when and if couples can conceive children.

3Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward. Psalm 127:3 (ESV)

We also find the concept of adoption throughout God's Word. Moses himself was raised by Pharaoh's daughter as her own son although she knew he was one of the Hebrew boys her father had decreed to be killed (Exodus 2). Joseph raised Jesus as his own son although he knew that he was not Jesus' father by blood. As Christians, we ourselves are eternally adopted sons and daughters of God apart from our human parentage.

3:28There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. 4:1I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, 2but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. 3In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. 4But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. 6And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" 7So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. Galatians 3:28-4:7 (ESV)

3So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. 4And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

Genesis 16:3-4 (ESV)

Recall that God called Abram to leave Haran and journey to Canaan when he was 75 years old (Genesis 12:4). So, if he had lived in Canaan for 10 years after that, Abram would have then been 85 when he "went in to" Hagar.

It is no coincidence that Hagar was an Egyptian. Recall from our [study of Genesis 12](#) that Egypt symbolizes worldliness in God's Word. Sarai's plan to overcome her family's childlessness was based purely on her human understanding. It wasn't an evil or sinful scheme, per se, but God's plans for Abram's family were much larger with eternal implications not just for their family, but for the entire world. Even if Abram had a glimmer of the meaning of God's promise that through Abram's offspring

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all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3), he had not communicated that understanding to Sarai. Even more likely, Abram believed that God would fulfill that promise through Hagar rather than Sarai. So, Abram and Sarai concocted this plan to “help God along” in fulfilling His promise, not knowing that God’s own plan was much, much better. I believe that God placed this story into His Word, as an encouragement and a caution for us to trust in God’s promises and await His own fulfillment of them in His own way and at the perfect time.

***5Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not lean on your own understanding.
6In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*** Proverbs 3:5-6 (ESV)

Here in verse 4, we read that after she had conceived, Hagar looked with contempt upon Sarai. Many other translations say that Hagar despised Sarai. A few say that Sarai became insignificant or of little account to Hagar. This regrettable tendency of the fertile to look down on the infertile continues until today. Women in particular who are unable to conceive are tacitly deemed by many of those around them to be of diminished value as human beings, even in cases where the medical evidence shows the inability to conceive resting with the male partner. Childless couples are the objects of pity, and such couples often have lowered expectations and opinions of themselves and their partners despite their other blessings and God-given talents and strengths.

This despicable, traditional attitude needs to be ejected from our society forever. God doesn’t base His judgments of people on such things or indeed upon any human characteristic or action whatsoever. God judges us solely on whether we accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ and declare His lordship over our lives. We who call ourselves Christ followers need to adjust our own attitudes to reflect His. Thank God that we don’t make such changes of heart on our own but do so by the power of His Spirit dwelling inside us. But let’s move on...

5And Sarai said to Abram, “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!” 6But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her. Genesis 16:5-6 (ESV)

I feel a little sorry for Abram here. He did as his wife requested when she blamed God for not giving her children, and then she blamed Abram when he successfully conceived a son by Hagar just as Sarai had demanded. Furthermore, when I read that Sarai said, “***May the Lord judge between you and me!***” I think, “Be careful what you ask for, Sarai!”

But then all my pity for Abram evaporates when he just throws up his hands and doesn’t come to Hagar’s defense. Mr. Standup failed yet another woman, just as he had failed his own wife when they went down to Egypt fleeing the famine in Canaan, and Abram convinced Sarai to lie and say she was Abram’s sister (Genesis 12). None of the broken people in this sordid little tale acted honorably – not even Hagar who was prideful about her own ability to conceive a child and contemptuous rather than compassionate of her mistress’ inability to do so.

There’s another lesson in this for us. God didn’t treat any of them (and doesn’t treat any of **us**) with the contempt warranted by their (our) behavior – quite the contrary! Abram believed God’s promise

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of an heir to come, and God credited his faith as righteousness. Similarly, we believe God’s promise of eternal life for those who believe in His Gospel, and God credits our faith to us as righteousness. God had already determined to bring forth from Abram and Sarai His chosen people Israel, and through them to bring forth Jesus their **מָשִׁיחַ** *māšîaḥ* for the salvation of all mankind. Furthermore, God has set us apart to Himself in response to our faith for good works which He prepared for us before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 2:10).

***⁸The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
⁹The LORD is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.*** Psalm 145:8-9 (ESV)

***⁷The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness,
the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And 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.” ⁹The angel of the LORD said to her,
“Return to your mistress and submit to her.” ¹⁰The angel of the LORD also
said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be
numbered for multitude.”*** Genesis 16:7-10 (ESV)

Here in Genesis 16:7 we find the first instance of the phrase “***The angel of the LORD.***” This phrase is found 56 times in the Old Testament and once in the New Testament. The Hebrew word translated as “angel” in the 56 Old Testament instances where we find this phrase is **מַלְאָךְ** *mal’āk*. It means messenger or representative. The Greek word translated as “angel” in the single instance where we find this phrase in the New Testament is **ἄγγελος** *angelos*. It also means messenger or envoy.

It is sometimes difficult to discern whether the “angel” in one of these specific instances is one of God’s servant angels such as Gabriel and Michael or whether the “angel of the LORD” is a manifestation of God Himself. Sometimes the context makes the answer clear, sometimes it does not.

For example, in the single New Testament occurrence of the phrase in Matthew 1:20-25, we see in verse 20 that “***an*** angel of the LORD...” appeared to Joseph in a dream. Then in Matthew 1:24 we read that Joseph did as “***the*** angel of the LORD” had commanded in the dream. Clearly in this case, the angel was not God Himself but one of His created servant angels sent to Joseph by God as a messenger.

However, when we read in 2 Kings 19:35 that “***the angel of the LORD went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians,***” we are left with an open question whether this was a killer angel sent by God to destroy the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem or whether it was God Himself. In this case the context doesn’t make the answer clear.

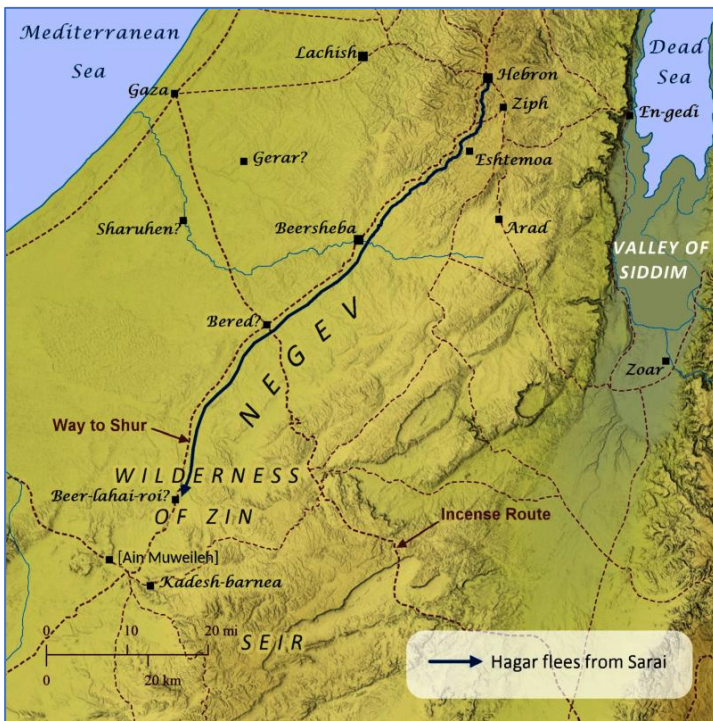
Here in Genesis 16:7 though, “***the angel of the LORD***” was clearly God Himself. How can we be sure of this. First, the “angel” promises to do something only God can do when He says “***I will surely multiply your offspring...***” As we have seen, children are a blessing that only God can bestow. Can you imagine how horrifying this fallen world would be if our great enemy – himself a created angel – had the power to bring forth children of his own? Furthermore, as we shall see Hagar herself clearly recognized God when she saw Him – and this even though she was an Egyptian, not a Hebrew!

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In most instances, we can use three general rules of thumb to determine whether “*the angel of the LORD*” is one of His created messengers or is God manifesting Himself to someone as He did here to Hagar.

1. If the “angel” does or promises something that only God can do as He did here to Hagar, then obviously the “angel” is none other than God Himself (assuming the promise is eventually fulfilled).
2. The reaction of the person to whom the “angel” appeared can also give us a clue. As we shall see shortly, Hagar clearly recognized that the “angel” was God – the Living One who saw her.
3. Often, the person to whom the “angel” appears will worship the “angel.” If they were allowed to continue in this worship, then the “angel” was God Himself. But if they are admonished not to worship, then the angel is one of God’s created servants, not God Himself.

In truth it isn’t critical for us to know the answer except if we are tempted to worship the “angel” we read about. Our worship **must** be reserved for God alone. We must **never** worship created angels, particularly our great enemy. We must never forget that he is also one of God’s angels, and consequently immortal and imbued with power that we can’t even imagine. On the other hand, we needn’t fear him. We have the greater power of God’s Spirit dwelling within the hearts of all who believe the Gospel and call on the Name of the Lord Jesus for salvation.



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The exact location of the spring where the angel of the LORD appeared to Hagar is unknown. Genesis 16:7 tells us that it was somewhere along the way to Shur and evidently was still commonly known when Genesis was written. Since Abram was then living by the oaks of Mamre near Hebron and Shur was in the northeast of Egypt, the spring where God appeared to Hagar must have been somewhere in the southern Negev or in Sinai.

God’s command for Hagar to return to Abram’s household and submit to Sarai must have been a tough pill for Hagar to swallow. Nevertheless, God’s promise to multiply Hagar’s offspring surely served to lighten the blow. Notice the similarity between God’s promise to Hagar and His promise to give the childless Abram and Sarai a multitude of children. Like Abram, as we shall see shortly, Hagar believed God’s promise (although God’s Word stops short of saying that

God credited Hagar’s faith as righteousness). Recall that Hagar was Egyptian. Consequently, she very likely worshipped the Egyptian gods in her youth. It is certainly possible that Abram and Sarai instructed her and her son Ishmael in the ways of the one true and living God while they were living in their household. Hagar’s reaction to God’s visitation indicates that she certainly knew it was God Himself speaking to her.

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***11And the angel of the LORD said to her,
“Behold, you are pregnant
and shall bear a son.***

***You shall call his name Ishmael* [ישמעאל] *yīšmā ‘ēl – God will hear*,
*because the LORD has listened to your affliction.***

***12He shall be a wild donkey of a man,
his hand against* [בִּי] *everyone
and everyone’s hand against* [בִּי] *him,
and he shall dwell over against* [עַל־פְּנֵי] *‘al pānîm – in the face of or in the presence of* ***all his
kinsmen.***” Genesis 16:11-12 (ESV)**

Much has been made of this little poem. Most often it is touted as a prophecy against Ishmael in the light of the hostile nature of the relations between Ishmael’s present-day descendants the Arabs and their neighbors – particularly Israel. But I find the Hebrew in this passage very difficult to parse. This is reflected in the wide variance among the English translations. The Hebrew for the portion of Genesis 16:12 usually translated as “his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him” literally reads “hand everyone hand everyone בִּי.” There isn’t even a Strong’s entry for the last two letters of this portion of the verse! I won’t even attempt to recommend which (if any) English translation renders the passage most accurately.

All I can say with any certainty at all is that the last occurrence of “against” in many English translations of Genesis 16:12 is a rendering of an entirely different Hebrew phrase **עַל־פְּנֵי ‘al pānîm** meaning “in the face of” or “in the presence of.” Therefore, I think it’s safe to say that the NIV rendering of the end of Genesis 16:12: “***...he will live in hostility toward all his brothers***” and the NLT rendering: “***...he will live in open hostility against all his relatives***” are incorrect. Interestingly, the NASB changed its tune on how it renders this portion of the verse between 1995 and 2020 flipping from “***...to the east of all his brothers***” to “***...in defiance of all his brothers.***” But I must reemphasize that in my almost total ignorance of Hebrew, I am unqualified to express even as much opinion on the translations of this verse as I already have!

One thing about this verse, however, is without controversy. Ishmael’s brethren and kinsmen are the Israelite descendants of Abraham and Sarah’s son Isaac. Here in Genesis 16, Hagar fled from Sarah. But later, in Genesis 21 when Ishmael was about 15 years old, Abraham cast both Ishmael and his mother Hagar out of his home even though Ishmael was a circumcised Hebrew as we shall see in Genesis 17. Although Ishmael was the first-born brother, Abraham provided Ishmael no inheritance at all, much less the double portion traditionally allotted to the firstborn. The consequent hostility between the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Isaac has continued from that time until today. Thus, the prophecy God pronounced about Ishmael while he was still in his mother’s womb has been and continues to be fulfilled.

13So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing,”* [אל רֹאֵי] *‘el rō’î – God who sees* ***for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” ***14Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi;* [בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאֵי] *‘er laḥay rō’î – well of the Living One seeing me* ***it lies between Kadesh and Bered.*** Genesis 16:13-14 (ESV)****

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Clearly, Hagar the Egyptian recognized that the One True and Living God had appeared to her. Thus, we can definitively conclude that the “angel of the LORD” who appeared to her at this spring was God Himself, not one of His created angels. Note that the location of Kadesh is well-established along the road from Beersheba to Shur. However, the location of Bered is not. Therefore, the location of the spring where God appeared to Hagar remains a mystery.

¹⁵And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. Genesis 16:15-16 (ESV)

Traditionally in Hebrew society, the father – not the mother – was responsible for naming a child. Certainly, the mother had a voice in the matter, but the final decision rested with the father. We see this in the story of Jacob’s youngest son Benjamin whose mother Rachel died giving birth to him. Rachel wanted to call the boy Ben-oni, but Jacob overrode his wife’s dying wish and called the boy Benjamin (Genesis 35:18). Later when John the Baptist was circumcised, his mother told those performing the ceremony that the child was to be called John in accordance with the command her husband Zechariah had received from the angel Gabriel. But the officials questioned her and would not name the baby until the father confirmed what she said (Luke 1:59-63).

Clearly, Abram believed Hagar’s story about God appearing to her at **בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי** *er laḥay rō’î*. So, Abram named his son Ishmael as God had commanded.

Looking Ahead

Next time, God willing, we’ll look at God’s appearance to Abram when he was ninety-nine in which God changed Abram’s name to Abraham, established the covenant of circumcision with Abraham and his descendants – Israel, and promised Isaac’s birth in the following year.