

The Attack on the Seed of the Covenant

Genesis 16

Three times the LORD had spoken about Abram's future: he would become a *great nation* (12:2); then that nation is called his *seed*; and still later this is accentuated when the LORD speaks of a son who would *come forth out of Abram's own bowels* (Genesis 15:4, KJV), to confirm that this posterity would not come from a stranger who was *made* an heir, but from his very own son. We know that right from the start this was the intention, also as Abram and Sarai understood it.

However, time went on, and no child was born in Sarai's tent.

They had been in Canaan now for ten years; by this time Abram was eighty-five, and Sarai was seventy-six years old. Considering their age it was not yet impossible—in those days people became significantly older, and as a consequence their prime was extended—but . . . let's be truthful, hope disappeared because faith in the promise declined. Unless the child should be born of another woman. The LORD had not, after all, specifically pointed out the mother.

And now we see how, as Abram once believed that his servant Eliezer would become his heir, this time Sarai sought the solution in advancing her personal slave, Hagar, the Egyptian. It was Sarai's initiative and Abram agreed. Just as Adam fell by the temptation of a woman, so did Abram. At the heart of the matter we can see here a demonic trick to bring God's work to nought, something which neither Abram nor Sarai saw.

Sarai gave Hagar to Abram as a wife. This was not uncommon in those days. According to Babylonian law (codified in the laws of Hammu-

rabi—a younger contemporary of Abram, or who perhaps lived a short while later) a childless woman was allowed to give her maidservant to her husband, her children then being reckoned to be those of the legal wife. Also, the husband could take a concubine in such a case, who, however, never attained the status of the legal wife. At every marriage a contract had to be made. For the rest though, marriage was monogamous (one husband and one wife). These laws then, were obeyed by Abram, who, coming from that country, will have been acquainted with them.

But human laws or custom cannot be the basis for justifying such an action. The divine institution of marriage cannot tolerate such exceptions. The purpose may have been to bring forth the promised seed, but this did not justify the means, especially because they were implemented in unbelief. Abram and Sarai should have waited for God's time. Look at the examples of Hannah and Mary. Besides, this was a strange case, the legally unprotected slave is given to Abram as a wife, but her children would be taken from her and given to the legal wife, who would thus form her family out of someone else's children. It is not surprising that this led to chaotic situations.

When Hagar became pregnant and thereby came to occupy a place of honour, which she let everyone notice, Sarai, who undoubtedly was jealous, felt herself so despised that she addressed strong complaints and accusations to her husband. Though she was conscious of the fact that she had given her slave to Abram, she unfairly blamed Hagar's attitude on him. The result was that Abram gave Hagar back to Sarai, demoting her to the position of a slave, which Sarai let Hagar feel as humiliatingly as she could. Though one cannot excuse Hagar's attitude toward Sarai, it must be admitted that she was being unjustly treated.

And then she fled. She no longer wanted to accept this unfair treatment.

At this point God intervened.

He finds her by a spring not far from Kadesh-Barnea, along the way to Shur, in Egypt. When we read that it was the angel of the LORD, we have to think of the Son of God Who, perhaps in human form, spoke

to her by the spring and inquired as to where she came from, and where she was going.

When Hagar had confessed that she was fleeing from her mistress Sarai, she was ordered to return to her lady and to submit herself under her hands. Furthermore, He revealed to her her future in her posterity in the same manner as He had already done to Abram. Firstly, that it would be a very numerous posterity, and then that she would receive a son. That He spoke of her pregnancy in this context shows, in my opinion, that her innumerable descendants would come forth out of *this* child. Worthy of note is that in this promise, just as in the one made to Abram, the primary thing was the *people*, and that the *son* was secondary. In the first place came the promise of a numerous posterity, and not the birth of a son, who actually would only be the first link in the process of creating a nation. Thus the important thing was *not* just having a “child.”

The name of Hagar’s son would have to be Ishmael, which means: God hears. For He has heard her affliction . . . not just *seen* it, but *heard* it. This points to her sighing and plaintive cries to God because of her oppression.

Concerning the son that would be born, the angel of the LORD revealed that he would be a wild ass of a man, in other words, one who could not be tamed, and would not allow himself to be pushed away; everyone’s hand would be against him, and his hand against everyone. Nevertheless, he would continue to live in the presence of his brothers.

Hagar’s eyes were opened to the fact that she had been allowed to meet God, Who answered her. And she called Him by His Name: “Thou art a God of seeing.” For she said: “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing God, Who, also in this desert, looks after me?” It is a question of surprise then, that God, so far from Abram’s tents, would see to her. For this reason the well was called Beer-lahai-roi, in other words, the Living One Who sees me.

Then Hagar retraces her steps. And after a few months she bears Abram (not Sarai) a son. And Abram (not Sarai, who had relinquished it) gave it

the name Ishmael according to the divine commandment to Hagar. That she herself did not give the name is a result of her servitude. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him. This is once again particularly mentioned.

The Importance of This Portion of Scripture

Here a fragment of history is revealed to us that is of great importance, as we will point out further when we discuss Genesis 21.

Now we wish to make a few remarks which have a direct relationship to Genesis 16.

In the first place we see God's triumph over Satan, who tried to make God's promise to Abram powerless and to make God's work of no effect. Once again there was an attempt to destroy Abram's marriage, worse than in Egypt (Genesis 12). Now it is done by misleading Abram and Sarai, in letting the promise *appear* to be fulfilled by *substituting another seed*, namely, that of a slave. We shall speak of this again when discussing Genesis 21. That was *the sin*, both of Abram and of Sarai, though they will not have recognized this evil, at least not at that point. Nevertheless it did originate in unbelief. And sin gives birth to sin. Abram, whose seed would once be oppressed (Genesis 15), became himself an oppressor of Hagar, to please Sarai. From the words of the angel of the LORD it becomes clear into what misery this slave girl was thrown.

Then we see *how simple the solution* was that God gave. Hagar had to return to being Sarai's slave. Also in this respect the given order had to be maintained, that freedom is a gift, and not to be stolen (Ephesians 6:5-9; Philemon verses 12-17). And as far as Sarai is concerned, she had to relinquish her claim to the other's child. God promised it to the rightful mother.


The description of Ishmael's descendants sufficiently shows that he was not the true seed, and that he *could not* be it. The whole history of his posterity, in conformity with Ishmael's own character, shows that in them God's promise that the seed would be a *blessing* to all generations of the earth could never come to pass. *From Ishmael, Christ could never be born in*

the flesh. What is worth nothing is that not just an angel, but the angel of the LORD, God's Son Himself, intervened to clear the way for His birth and the salvation of His people. And at the same time we also see then that God's Word to Hagar merely concerned an earthly future, not a *promise of salvation*, although there would be children of Ishmael who, along with people of all generations, would be saved, however few there may be. Much more do we see the antithesis between the seed of Ishmael and the seed of Abram by way of Isaac.

Indeed, Hagar had quite a bit to relate when she had returned, and Abram had quite a bit to think about, as far as knowledge of that occurrence in the desert went within the limits of God's revelations at that time. Not of Hagar, but of Sarai would the seed spring, at God's time. Abram now knew the first of these two facts. The rest would be revealed later. Also at God's time. Abram has been led back to the promise.

Questions

1. Why did God not reveal everything to Abram at once?
2. (Re: 16:2) Name an example showing that this happened more often.
3. What examples illustrate that a polygamous marriage caused misery and trouble?
4. (Re: 16:9ff.) What shows that this angel was the Son of God?
5. (Re: 16:12) What group of nations can we count as descendants and spiritual heirs of Ishmael?
6. (Re: 16:12) Does this word of God still apply?
7. What was the purpose of God's appearing to Hagar and not in other situations of conflict?
8. Why especially did God send Hagar back?

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9. Why did God so fully reveal Hagar's future? Does this relate to Genesis 15?
10. What was the actual motive for Sarai's wanting to be propagated through Hagar?
11. Isn't current legal adoption unnatural? Wouldn't it be better to take a foster child, recognizing the parents' rights and duties? What do people have in mind when adopting a child? What if God should later grant repentance to the natural mother?