

Sarai Took Hagar and Gave Her to Abram to be His Wife

16: 1-6

DIG: Of the three main characters in this story, Abram, Sarai and Hagar, which do you like the most? The least? Why? Why would Sarai come up with such a plan? Why did the LORD reject it? How did Abram deal with the conflict between Sarai and Hagar? Was he wise? Why or why not?

REFLECT: Where have you been waiting "ten years" for the LORD to fulfill a promise? How do you cope with such delays? Can you follow the laws of the land and get yourself in serious trouble with ADONAI? How can you prevent this from happening? When is your self-will more present than God's will?

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. Sarai was still barren despite God's promise of a son to Abram (15:4). But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar (16:1) that Abram received from Pharaoh while in Egypt (12:16). **The rabbis teach that Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter. They teach that when she saw the miracles that were brought on behalf of Abram and Sarai, she said, "I would rather be a servant in their house than a mistress in my own house."** Her name is Hebrew and means *to flee or to be a fugitive*. That means that her name was given to her either by Abram or Sarai, because they had to flee from Egypt. Unable to bear children herself, Sarai follows the common practice of the day. Notice that she never addresses or talks of Hagar by name, but only by label or role.

So she said to Abram, "ADONAI has kept me from having children (11:30). Go sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her" (16:2a). Literally it reads: *I shall be built up*. This arrangement was in keeping with the laws of that day. Legally, the child born of that union was regarded as the wife's. But if a wife was barren, she was obligated to provide to her husband a maidservant through whom he could have children. In this way his seed would not die out. Abram came to the conclusion that God could use a little help. We laugh at Abram, but at some time or another, we all do that. At any rate, Abram listened to, and agreed to what Sarai had said (16:2b). This was also a lack of faith on Abram's part. This is similar language to 3:17 where Adam listened to his wife and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17, 3:17). Both ended up with negative consequences, but more importantly, ADONAI did not approve of this at all.

Most people reading the Bible today are sure to experience culture shock sooner or later. Repeatedly, the ancient culture presents us with customs that were acceptable at the time, but seem bizarre and immoral today. In the ancient Near East, polygamy was a legitimate way to prevent childlessness. The Bible offers numerous examples where a man added a second **wife** to overcome **his wife's** barrenness. From a biological standpoint, this solution often worked. But the human dynamics within a polygamous family were predictably disastrous. One only has to read about **Jacob's** life with **Rachel** and **Leah** to see how dysfunctional a family can get (**29:15** to **31:55**). What a mess!

Outside of the book of **Genesis**, seven men are said to have had **concubines**. The first of these was **Caleb**, who followed **the LORD** wholeheartedly (**First Chronicles 2:46** and **48**). Second, there was the courageous warrior **Gideon** (**Judges 8:31**). Third, there was the unnamed Levite (**Judges 19** and **20**). Fourth, we have **Saul** (**Second Samuel 3:7** and **21:11**). Fifth, even **King David** had concubines (**Second Samuel 5:13**, **15:16**, **16:21-22**, **19:5**, **20:3**, and **First Chronicles 3:9**). The sixth person, **Solomon**, had **seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines** (**First Kings 11:3**). I guess he was quite the busy guy. And the seventh person was **Rehoboam** (**Second Chronicles 11:21**). In all of these instances, with the exception of the unnamed Levite, reference is made to wives. So there is a clear distinction between wives and **concubines**. **Wives** were legal spouses who were to produce **children**, and **concubines** were for sex.

But here, **Hagar** was used to produce **children** because **Sarai** was unable to do so. Although this was in keeping with the laws of that day, but it was contrary to **God's** way of doing things. We get the wrong impression if we think that just because something is written in the Bible, **ADONAI** approves of it. The Bible is inspired in that it is an accurate record, but there are many things **God** does not approve of that are written in **His Word**.²⁷⁰

Abram and **Sarai** had been living in **Canaan ten years**. That meant that **ten years** had passed between **Chapters 12** and **16**. **The rabbis taught that when a woman has been childless for ten years, her husband must marry another woman**. They had been married far more than **ten years**, but it had been **ten years** since **the LORD** had promised **a son** to **Abram**. It was during those many **years** that **Abram** and **Sarai** evidently began to lose hope that **God** would fulfill **His** promise. We can all say that **they** did not really trust **ADONAI** as **they** should have, but have you ever waited **ten years** for something? Didn't it seem like it would never come? So we can all relate to **their** impatience. At that time **Abram** was eighty-five years old and **Sarai** is seventy-five years old. So **they** took matters into **their** own hands, with devastating results.

So Sarai, Abram's wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife (16:3). Clearly this was Sarai's frantic last-ditch effort to salvage her honor as a woman and maintain a foothold to the promises of God (15:4). But just as Abram gave Sarai to Pharaoh because of their circumstances, now Sarai gives Abram to Hagar because of their circumstances. The moral implications that you and I read into this are not quite here in the biblical record. Abram and Sarai were brought up in Ur of the Chaldeans where this was a common practice, and it seemed an appropriate thing to do under the circumstances. But the wrong that they committed by Abram taking Sarai's maidservant Hagar was a sin, and ADONAI treated it as a sin. But the real root of the sin was unbelief.²⁷¹

Tragically, without seeking God's direction, as Adam followed Eve (see Bf - **Your Desire Will Be For Your Husband and He Will Rule Over You**) so Abram followed Sarai's plan and slept with Hagar, and she conceived. Hagar became a disposable pawn in the scheme, and Sarai's faith hit an all-time low. The outcome was a disaster for Sarai and literally spread her pain to others. **This is the third of four tests where Abram failed miserably.** First, he stayed in Haran when he should have gone to the Promised Land (11:31b). Secondly, here, he left the land of Canaan and went to Egypt. Thirdly, here, Abram listened to his wife instead of waiting on the LORD, which resulted in the birth of Ishmael and untold problems (16:1-16). And fourthly, his lapse of faith continued as he refused to trust ADONAI for his and his wife's safekeeping when he lied again to Abimelech (20:1-18).

Sometimes the brutal honesty of the Bible can be very troubling. These dark chapters from Sarah's life can make us uncomfortable. It is difficult to see people like Sarah and Abraham, whom we consider to be giants of the faith, topple like giant oaks by the winds of desperation, anxiety and fear. Yet how disheartening would it be for us if we only read about their successes? Would we ever understand how important the hard parts of life really are? Sarah, who in the Renewed Covenant is pictured as a woman of great faith, reminds us here of how hard it is to trust ADONAI when everything seems to be going wrong and hope is drained from us. Walking with the LORD doesn't spare us from hard choices, nor does it guarantee we will always make the right choice. The devil continues to stalk like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour (First Peter 5:8 CJB). But in the end, Sarah's faith will be stronger and have deeper roots because of all she suffered. Hopefully, ours will also.

Sarai could have left us with a powerful example of a woman guided by her faith in ADONAI, even though it meant taking a hard stand or letting go of her personal hopes and dreams. But she didn't. Both Sarai's strategy to produce and heir by Hagar and Abram's plot to protect himself from Pharaoh (12:10-20) and King Abimelech (20:1-18) were pragmatic and faithless. God did not approve and the results were predictable.

Sarai's plan to gain a child through **Hagar** backfired horribly. Instead of a baby, **she** received **Hagar's** scorn. **When she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress (16:4)**. In biblical days, few women were more despised than a barren woman (**First Samuel 1:6-7**). Here, **Hagar** did not want to share **Abram** or **her** child with **Sarai**, so **she** despised **her**. The Hebrew word for **despise**, is the same word that is used for **cursed** in **12:3**. One of the authors of **Proverbs** understood this concept very well. He wrote: **Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up (30:21)**. The fourth thing was a **maidservant who displaces her mistress (30:23b)**. In the final analysis, **Hagar** ended up cursing **her mistress** and exalting **herself** over **Sarai**, who exploded with years of pent up outrage and pain.

Sarai blamed **Abram** and said to him, **"You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering; I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May ADONAI judge between you and me" (16:5)**. Human nature being what it is, in the garden of Eden the man blamed the woman, but here the woman blames the man. **Sarai's** sinful plan backfired on **her** and resulted in bad spiritual fruit (**Galatians 5:19-21**).

Abram didn't act like the head of his family, and stayed clear of those two angry women. **"Your servant is in your hands," Abram said, "Do with her whatever you think best."** **Hagar** was still officially **Sarai's** possession and **she** could legally return **her** to slave status any time **she** wanted to. **Then Sarai**, who wanted to make life miserable for **Hagar**, **mistreated her**. **She** was so abusive to **Hagar** that the young slave girl literally feared for **her** life. The Hebrew word that is translated **mistreated** here, is the same word used of the Egyptian *oppression* of Israel in **Exodus 1:11-12**. The irony here is that the Jewish woman is *oppressing* the Egyptian. In the book of **Exodus** the tables will be turned. But the final result was that **Hagar fled to the desert from her mistress Sarai (16:6)**. Perhaps it was to this scene that Solomon wrote: **Better to live in the desert than with a quarrelsome and ill-tempered wife (Proverbs 21:19)**.

However worthy and unselfish may have been the motives of **Abram** and **Sarai**, and perhaps even of **Hagar**, in carrying out this plan, it was bound to create problems. **God's** creative purpose included only monogamous marriage, and anything else was bound to fail. There are many instances recorded of polygamous marriages in the Bible, which **The LORD** allowed because of mitigating circumstances at the time (Jacob, Moses and David for example), but none of a happy and peaceful polygamous marriage.²⁷²

When the child was born everything came unraveled. He was described as **Abram's** son, not **Sarai's**. **Abram** accepted Ishmael as the child of promise, and the door of hope slammed shut in **Sarai's** face.